

Learning Objectives

For pages 19–38

In studying this text, you will focus on the following objectives:

Literary Study: Analyzing irony.

Reading: Analyzing tone.



from The Pardoner's Tale

by Geoffrey Chaucer

from *The Pardoner's Tale*

Connect to the Poem

"The Pardoner's Tale" is about greed—an exaggerated and desperate need or desire for money. Check the following statements you agree with.

- Greed makes people selfish.
- Having a lot of money is always a good thing.
- If you have a lot of money, you should help your friends.
- Many students will agree with the first and last statements only.

Build Background

Underline key words and phrases as you read the following list.

- "The Pardoner's Tale" is part of *The Canterbury Tales*, a collection of stories in poem form that Geoffrey Chaucer wrote in the 1300s. This collection begins with "The Prologue," which is set in a tavern near London.
- In "The Prologue," Chaucer describes the chance meeting of about thirty diverse strangers (including the pardoner). These characters agree to compete in a storytelling contest while traveling to Canterbury.
- Their trip is a pilgrimage—a religious journey to a holy place. Today, people from a variety of religions continue to go on pilgrimages. For example, many Muslims make an annual pilgrimage to Mecca. We may also associate the pilgrims' journey to Canterbury with the modern "road trip."
- Following "The Prologue," each pilgrim tells his or her tale. This creates a **frame story**—a plot structure based on the telling of a story within a story.
- A church representative called a pardoner tells the following story. This pardoner is corrupt; he charges people money on behalf of the church for divine forgiveness and then keeps the money for himself. His tale is an **exemplum**—a brief story that teaches a lesson about how to behave.
- Chaucer ran out of time to complete *The Canterbury Tales*. He didn't write about the pilgrims' return journey or say who won the storytelling contest. However, the work remains an incredible literary achievement.
- Not written in Latin (the language of religion and scholarship) or Norman French (the language of the court), *The Canterbury Tales* helped develop English as a literary language. It also helped establish the London dialect of English—rather than a regional dialect (such as that of the *Gawain* poet)—as the dominant form of English.

Set Purposes for Reading

Read to find out what happens when greed drives a group of friends to betray one another.

Literary Element Irony

Irony is a contrast or difference between what is expected and what actually happens. It produces a darkly humorous effect. **Situational irony** occurs when a character expects one thing but the opposite, or something totally different, happens. **Verbal irony** occurs when a character says one thing but means another. **Dramatic irony** occurs when the reader knows something that the characters don't. Write an *S* next to the item below that is an example of situational irony, a *V* next to the item that is an example of verbal irony, and a *D* next to the item that is an example of dramatic irony.

_____ Mike never studies for tests, and his teacher is always telling him to work harder. One evening, Mike decides to change his ways, and studies very hard for the next day's test. However, when he comes to class, he finds that the teacher has canceled the test to give everyone a break.

_____ The narrator of a story has revealed that the main character will soon die. A few pages later, the main character says, "I feel invincible, like I could live forever."

_____ When no one in English class is able to answer a question about the assigned reading, the teacher grins and says, "Well, it's nice to know that everyone was paying attention."

Reading Strategy Analyze Tone

Tone refers to a writer's attitude toward a subject. It is conveyed through word choice, sentence structure, and figures of speech. When you read literature, think about the tone that characters use as they speak. For example, do they sound angry? hopeful? confused? You can also hear a tone in the narrator's voice. For example, the narrator may be laughing at, judging, or surprised by the actions of the characters. Write the tone, or attitude that would come through in your voice, in each of the following situations.

Situation	Tone	Situation	Tone
talking to a scared child		praying for a good outcome for a best friend's operation	
urging your favorite team on to victory at a playoff match		talking with a parent about a problem you caused	

Vocabulary Context Clues

You can use context clues to find a word's meaning. Look at the following lines from the selection: "It's of three rioters I have to tell/Who, long before the morning service bell,/Were sitting in a tavern for a drink." Context clues in this sentence help tell you that *rioters* are, at minimum, drinkers—and not just any drinkers, but ones who show up before the tavern has even opened. As you read, look for context clues for the vocabulary words that you encounter.

Vocabulary

adversary (ad' vər ser' ē) *n.* opponent; enemy

prudent (prōōd' ənt) *adj.* cautious; careful

gratify (grat' ə fī') *v.* to satisfy; indulge

deftly (deft' lē) *adj.* skillfully; nimbly

from The Pardoner's Tale



Reading Strategy

Analyze Tone This story is set in a time when a plague, or widespread disease, was killing many people in England. When a coffin passes by, the conversation turns to Death. Note that the characters refer to death with a capital *d*, as if it were a powerful person. Reread the serving boy's answer to the question of whose dead body is going by. With the above information in mind, decide what his tone is.

- a. delighted and enthusiastic
- b. worried and anxious
- c. matter-of-fact and objective

Would you talk about a dead body passing by in the same tone of voice?

It's of three rioters° I have to tell
Who, long before the morning service bell,°
Were sitting in a tavern for a drink.
And as they sat, they heard the hand-bell clink
Before a coffin going to the grave;°
One of them called the little tavern-knave°
And said "Go and find out at once—look spy!—
Whose corpse is in that coffin passing by;
And see you get the name correctly too."
"Sir," said the boy, "no need, I promise you;
Two hours before you came here I was told.
He was a friend of yours in days of old,
And suddenly, last night, the man was slain,
Upon his bench, face up, dead drunk again.
There came a privy° thief, they call him Death,
Who kills us all round here, and in a breath
He speared him through the heart, he never stirred.
And then Death went his way without a word.
He's killed a thousand in the present plague,°
And, sir, it doesn't do to be too vague
If you should meet him; you had best be wary.
Be on your guard with such an **adversary**,
Be primed to meet him everywhere you go,
That's what my mother said. It's all I know."
The publican° joined in with, "By St. Mary,
What the child says is right; you'd best be wary,
This very year he killed, in a large village
A mile away, man, woman, serf at tillage,°

Vocabulary

adversary (ad' vər ser' ē) *n.*
opponent; enemy

Vocabulary Skill

Context Clues Look at the way *adversary* is used in context. Underline the context clues that help you determine its meaning.

- 1 **rioters:** people given to unrestrained revelry and debauchery.
- 2 **long before . . . bell:** long before 9 A.M.
- 4-5 **hand-bell . . . grave:** During this time, a bell was rung next to the coffin in a funeral procession.
- 6 **tavern-knave:** serving boy.

15 **privy:** secretive.

19 **killed . . . plague:** In 1348 and 1349 at least a third of the population of England perished from the plague called the Black Death.

25 **publican:** a tavernkeeper or innkeeper.

28 **tillage:** plowing.



Read and Discuss

With a partner, take turns rereading what the serving boy and the publican say about Death. Then fill out this organizer with story details about Death.

Who
Where
When
What
How

from The Pardoner's Tale



Literary Element

Irony What is ironic, or opposite of expectations, about a decision to kill Death? Write your answer on the lines below.



Read and Discuss

With a partner, reread lines 51–73. Then summarize what happens when the rioters meet the old man. Write your summary on the lines below.

How do you feel about the rioters in this meeting? How do you feel about the old man? Discuss these questions with your partner.

Page in the household, children—all there were.
 50 Yes, I imagine that he lives round there.
 It's well to be prepared in these alarms,
 He might do you dishonor." "Huh, God's arms!"
 The rioter said, "Is he so fierce to meet?
 I'll search for him, by Jesus, street by street.
 55 God's blessed bones! I'll register a vow!
 Here, chaps! The three of us together now,
 Hold up your hands, like me, and we'll be brothers
 In this affair, and each defend the others,
 And we will kill this traitor Death, I say!
 60 Away with him as he has made away
 With all our friends. God's dignity! Tonight!"
 They made their bargain, swore with appetite,
 These three, to live and die for one another
 As brother-born might swear to his born brother.
 65 And up they started in their drunken rage
 And made towards this village which the page
 And publican had spoken of before.
 Many and grisly were the oaths they swore,
 Tearing Christ's blessed body to a shred;^o
 70 "If we can only catch him, Death is dead!"
 When they had gone not fully half a mile,
 Just as they were about to cross a stile,^o
 They came upon a very poor old man
 Who humbly greeted them and thus began,
 75 "God look to you, my lords, and give you quiet!"
 To which the proudest of these men of riot
 Gave back the answer, "What, old fool? Give place!
 Why are you all wrapped up except your face?
 Why live so long? Isn't it time to die?"
 80 The old, old fellow looked him in the eye
 And said, "Because I never yet have found,
 Though I have walked to India, searching round
 Village and city on my pilgrimage,
 One who would change his youth to have my age.
 85 And so my age is mine and must be still
 Upon me, for such time as God may will.
 "Not even Death, alas, will take my life;
 So, like a wretched prisoner at strife
 Within himself, I walk alone and wait
 90 About the earth, which is my mother's gate,^o
 Knock-knocking with my staff from night to noon
 And crying, 'Mother, open to me soon!
 Look at me, mother, won't you let me in?"

49 **Tearing . . . shred:** Their swearing included such expressions as "God's arms" (line 32) and "God's blessed bones" (line 35).

52 **stile:** a stairway used to climb over a wall or fence.

70 **mother's gate:** the entrance to the grave.



Reading Strategy

Analyze Tone Read the highlighted lines. Underline the words and phrases that help you hear how sad, frustrated, and desperate the old man is.



Literary Element

Irony What is ironic about a person who wishes to die but cannot die? Write your answer on the lines below.



Reading Strategy

Analyze Tone Reread the highlighted lines. How does the old man's tone change here? To decide, first recall his tone earlier. Then write your answer on the lines below.

See how I wither, flesh and blood and skin!
Alas! When will these bones be laid to rest?
Mother, I would exchange—for that were best—
The wardrobe in my chamber, standing there
So long, for yours! Aye, for a shirt of hair^o
To wrap me in!' She has refused her grace,
Whence comes the pallor of my withered face.

"But it dishonored you when you began
To speak so roughly, sir, to an old man,
Unless he had injured you in word or deed.
It says in holy writ, as you may read,
'Thou shalt rise up before the hoary^o head
And honor it.' And therefore be it said
'Do no more harm to an old man than you,
Being now young, would have another do
When you are old'—if you should live till then.
And so may God be with you, gentlemen,
For I must go whither I have to go."

"By God," the gambler said, "you shan't do so,
You don't get off so easy, by St. John!
I heard you mention, just a moment gone,
A certain traitor Death who singles out
And kills the fine young fellows hereabout.
And you're his spy, by God! You wait a bit.
Say where he is or you shall pay for it,
By God and by the Holy Sacrament!

I say you've joined together by consent
To kill us younger folk, you thieving swine!"
"Well, sirs," he said, "if it be your design
To find out Death, turn up this crooked way
Towards that grove, I left him there today
Under a tree, and there you'll find him waiting.
He isn't one to hide for all your prating.
You see that oak? He won't be far to find.
And God protect you that redeemed mankind,
Aye, and amend^o you!" Thus that ancient man.

At once the three young rioters began
To run, and reached the tree, and there they found
A pile of golden florins on the ground,
New-coined, eight bushels of them as they thought.
No longer was it Death those fellows sought,
For they were all so thrilled to see the sight,
The florins were so beautiful and bright,
That down they sat beside the precious pile.
The wickedest spoke first after a while.

78 **shirt of hair:** usually a rough shirt worn as self-punishment; here, a shroud

85 **hoary:** white with age.

109 **amend:** improve.



Literary Element

Irony Situational irony occurs when the rioters find the gold. Why is finding gold ironic?



Literary Element

Irony Do you think the rioter is interpreting the presence of the treasure correctly? Or do you think the reason for finding the treasure might be the opposite of what the rioter thinks? Explain your answer on the lines below.

“Brothers,” he said, “you listen to what I say.
120 I’m pretty sharp although I joke away.
It’s clear that Fortune° has bestowed this treasure
To let us live in jollity and pleasure.
Light come, light go! We’ll spend it as we ought.
God’s precious dignity! Who would have thought
125 This morning was to be our lucky day?
 “If one could only get the gold away,
Back to my house, or else to yours, perhaps—
For as you know, the gold is ours, chaps—
We’d all be at the top of fortune, hey?
130 But certainly it can’t be done by day.
People would call us robbers—a strong gang,
So our own property would make us hang.
No, we must bring this treasure back by night
Some **prudent** way, and keep it out of sight.
135 And so as a solution I propose
We draw for lots and see the way it goes;
The one who draws the longest, lucky man,
Shall run to town as quickly as he can
To fetch us bread and wine—but keep things dark°—
140 While two remain in hiding here to mark
Our heap of treasure. If there’s no delay,
When night comes down we’ll carry it away,
All three of us, wherever we have planned.”

READING CHECK

Predict

Do you think the rioters will find Death? What clues help you make your prediction? Write your answer on the lines below.
