
The Versatility of Chaucer's Pardoner

Chaucer is renowned for his psychologically intricate character portrayals. The Pardoner, an irreverent character in Chaucer's framework narrative *The Canterbury Tales*, is an excellent example of just such a complex character. Although alcohol may have been partially responsible for the Pardoner affording his companions such an introspective narrative, the insight into the Pardoner's character is intoxicating. Overwhelmed by a subconscious need to "pardon" or absolve himself of the guilt caused by a dishonest lifestyle, the Pardoner exploits his prologue and tale as vehicles of confession and edification.

The Pardoner begins by introducing himself to the reader as being a disingenuous purveyor of false relics. The insincere ecclesiast reveals, "I say in Latin some few words or so to spice my sermon; it flavors my appeal and stirs my listeners to greater zeal" (ls.16-18). Rather than incorporating the Latin text into the sermon in a manner that would prove advantageous to his parishioners, the Pardoner confesses that he simply utters the words for their euphonic and stimulatory effects. He later states, "Then I display my cases made of glass crammed to the top with rags and bones. They pass for relics with all the people in the place" (ls.19-21). The word "pass" connotes that the items the Pardoner has crammed into this aesthetically pleasing glass case are less than genuine relics. Then by divulging the absurd purpose of the bone relic to a now distrusting audience, the Pardoner intentionally incriminates himself further. The sheep shoulder bone is said to transform liquid into a type of blessed elixir that heals livestock and "cures jealousies." Lacking the authority that his pulpit commands, the Pardoner is undoubtedly cognizant of the negative light these bizarre accounts cast upon him; however, confession is not without consequence.

Later in the prologue, the Pardoner subjects himself to the criticism and scorn of his companions by relating a disturbing account of his profession and character. The Pardoner declares, "By such hornswoggling I've won, year by year, a hundred marks since being a pardoner" (ls.61-62). In other words, the Pardoner boasts that via specious tactics (such as renting relics) he has swindled a hundred marks out of his congregation each year. However, a hundred marks during the Pardoner's time would have been an unbelievable amount of money. Therefore, the Pardoner has exaggerated this sum in order to breed resentment and contempt for himself among his companions. The Pardoner intends for this masochistic act (deriving pleasure from self-degradation) to serve as a punishment for his inability to openly confess his sins. Next, he articulates that he condemns avarice (greed) in each of his sermons so that his parishioners feel "free in giving pennies." Nevertheless, the contrasting quote that follows truly describes the Pardoner's character: "My mind is fixed on what I stand to win and not at all upon correcting sin. I do not care, when they are in the grave, if souls go berry picking that I could save" (ls.75-78). Clearly, it is the Pardoner who is avaricious. Furthermore, he avers that after his parishioners die and are no longer able to contribute to his purse, their souls are of no consequence to him. The Pardoner willingly confesses his despicable views to his companions, yet he does so without remorse. Under the guise of a supercilious oration, the Pardoner cautiously confesses his guilt.

The final part of the Pardoner's prologue proffers the reader a more tame, forthright, and penitent Pardoner. At this point in the "sermon," it seems as if the Pardoner would lower his

voice, not for fear of being heard, but for emphasis. The Pardoner asseverates:

"But to put my purpose briefly, I confess I preach nothing but for covetousness. That's why my text is still and ever was Radix malorum est cupiditas. For by this text I can denounce, indeed, the very vice I practice, which is greed. But though that sin is lodged in my own heart, I am able to make other people part from avarice, and sorely to repent, though that is not my principal intent" (Is.95-104).

Essentially, the Pardoner claims the proverb "avarice is the root of all evil" as being his only guide to speak on covetousness. Utilizing this aphorism, the Pardoner has the ability to persuade his parishioners to repent and abandon their sin, while greed remains lodged in the clergyman's heart. The Pardoner's choice of words here contradicts his previously presented indifferent attitude towards his vice. The word "lodged" likens avarice to an unwelcome, forceful intruder that now resides in its conquest similar to a bullet being lodged in a leg. This potent verbalization signals the Pardoner's desire to purge himself of his vice and confess his guilt for maintaining a dishonest lifestyle.

After realizing the Pardoner's prologue and tale are both used as a means of confession, the analytical reader then discovers that both the Pardoner's confession and tale are instruments of instruction. By warning his companions of the evils of avarice in the prologue (ironically, using himself as an example), the Pardoner constructs a foundation for his tale. Although, the tale does not spotlight avarice as being the root of all evil, instead it fashions a more tangible relationship. "The Pardoner's Tale" correlates avarice and death. Following a lengthy discourse with the Old Man, the three "enlightened" gentlemen proceed in the suggested direction. The Pardoner continues, "Until he reached the tree, an there they found Florins of fine gold, minted bright ad round, nearly eight bushels of them, as they thought. And after Death no longer then they sought" (Is.87-90). It is implied that the gentlemen had found Death in the form of gold coins. Each man's greed results in his demise, thus allying avarice with death. At this juncture, the Pardoner has communicated his message directly (prologue), addressed his message by narrating a story meant to emphasize its morality (tale), and now will proctor an examination in an effort to ascertain whether his message was successfully conveyed.

The Pardoner isolates the Host as being "the man enveloped most by sin" and commences in taunting him in an obscene manner, subconsciously desiring the end result of the exchange. The Pardoner briefly attempts to reestablish the credibility of his pardons and relics and then offers absolution to any of his companions that would recompense him with authentically minted coins. The Pardoner implores, "Come, offer first, Sir Host, and once that's done, then you shall kiss the relics, every one, yes for a penny! Come, undo your purse!" (Is.159-161). The relics the Pardoner toted were located in a pouch situated over his groin. Hence translated, the Pardoner's ribald affronts direct the Host to kiss his gonads. By doing so, the Host would have been forced to unfasten/negate his purse/masculinity. The Host vehemently refuses, articulating his desire to enshrine the Pardoner's gonads in hog excrement. By refusing to accept the self-indulgent relics, the Host passes the Pardoner's test. Originally, mankind's natural avarice motivated the Pardoner to exploit the bogus relics in order to appease his own greed. Subsequent an explanation of how to effectively employ the sheep bone, the Pardoner states, "Out of this well, his [the renter of the sheep bone] cattle be brought to multiply...and his property increase" (Is.35-37). Additionally, by refusing the spurious relics, the Host is declining to accommodate the Pardoner's avarice, which subconsciously satisfies the confessed Pardoner.

Plagued by repressed guilt, the psychologically complex Pardoner uses his prologue and tale to confess his guilt while concurrently structuring a moral lesson from which his companions may benefit. The Pardoner's duplicitous nature certainly warrants an evaluation of the ethical validity of his character, however; this twofold temperament is a common trait among high ranking individuals in our culture. Whether it be in the home, in the church, or from the presidential lectern, society is instructed to "do as I say, not as I do."

gradesfixer.com