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## Insatiability and Incongruity: The Psychology of the Pardoner and His Story

Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* introduces readers to several fascinating and dynamic characters. Perhaps the most fascinating of all is the Pardoner, whose prologue and tale are filled with irony. The Pardoner is a complex character whose blatant hypocrisy and spiritual atrophy serve to give the reader an understanding of the irony of his tale and his situation, as well as a glimpse into his inner self.

In the General Prologue the narrator introduces the Pardoner with a rather startlingly effeminate description: "This Pardoner hadde heer as yellow as wex, / But smoothe it heeng as doothe a strike of flex; / By ounces heenge his lokkes that he hadde, / And therwith he his shuldres overspradde" (677-680). Thus the pardoner is described as a beardless man with long, flowing yellow hair and a high-pitched goat voice. The reader also gets the sense that the Pardoner is either a eunuch or a homosexual from the narrator's comment: "I trowe he were a gelding or mare" (693). This image seems completely incongruous with a man of the Church, especially the suggestion that he may be gay. This allegation does not appear anywhere in the Pardoner's Tale, however, so it is never confirmed or denied. This description is significant because it is the beginning of the perpetual peculiarity and idiosyncrasy that is the Pardoner.

Equally incongruous is the narrator's description of the Pardoner's moral character. He is a lay officer of the Church who perverts his position for his own material gain. In charge of papal indulgences, the Pardoner forges pardons and cheats people out of their money. Perhaps his physical oddities and sexual ambiguity are a means of justifying the Pardoner's unusualness in moral character. Or perhaps the Pardoner is the author's criticism of the declining values of Church officers. Regardless, it is clear that the narrator dislikes the Pardoner, the evidence of which is seen in the narrator's puzzled attitude during the depiction of the Pardoner's physical appearance and also in the expos of his unscrupulous actions: "Upon a day he gat him more moneye / That that the person gat in months twaye; / And thus with feined flaterye and japes / He made the person and the peple his apes" (705-708). Thus the narrator describes the way that the Pardoner dupes innocent people out of their hard earned money. However, the narrator also admits that the Pardoner is a very good preacher, storyteller, and singer: "But trewely to tellen at the laste, / He was in chirche a noble ecclesiaste; / Wel coude he rede a lesson and a storye, / But alderbest he soong an offertorye" (709-712). Although the Pardoner may be a scoundrel, he is a talented scoundrel. Already, the reader has seen a fascinatingly complex character.

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As far as the narrator's description of the Pardoner's deceitful ways, the General Prologue is consistent with the Pardoner's depiction of himself in his autobiographical Prologue. He begins by explaining that the theme of his sermons "is always oon, and evere was: / Radix malorium est cupiditas [Greed is the root of all evil]" (45-46). He then goes on to accuse himself of being a practitioner of the very thing he preaches against. Thus a great irony comes when the Pardoner admits that his own vice is avarice, the very thing he preaches against so effectively that it moves people to repent. He admits that he would rather take money from a poor woman and her starving children than give up any of the luxuries that his lifestyle has afforded him. He claims that his only purpose in preaching is for his own profit: "For myn entente is nat but for to winne, / And no thing for correccion of sinne" (115-116). Thus the reader hears from the Pardoner's own lips that he is a scoundrel. He even admits that he does not care what happens to his patron's souls after death. This clearly illuminates to the reader that the Pardoner is spiritually empty; that the only thing he feels is the desire for more money.

The Pardoner's profession fits him perfectly, since pardons are a way of substituting money for spiritual accountability, just as the Pardoner has allowed money to deteriorate his spiritual state.

This prologue is similar to the Wife of Bath's where she endeavors to justify her lifestyle. The Pardoner, however, is not attempting to justify his avarice; on the contrary, he takes a perverse pride in the depth of his own deceptiveness. He is a creature of no conscience, completely beyond reproach. The question then arises as to why the Pardoner has chosen to reveal himself. Possibly it is because he does not expect to ever see these pilgrims again, so it does not matter what he says to them, or perhaps he is drunk, or maybe he is implicating those people who will believe anything without question. Whatever the reason, the reader becomes captivated by the Pardoner's brazen boasting and self-confidence, as well as the tremendous disconnect between who the Pardoner is and what the reader expects an officer of the Church to be. The Pardoner's Prologue thus serves as an ironic frame to the Pardoner's sermon-like tale by showing the reader the discrepancy between the tale and its teller.

The Pardoner's Tale is an ironic story dealing with the devastating effects of gluttony and greed, the sins that the Pardoner himself is most guilty of. The irony is evident from the very start, for in the Prologue the Pardoner has just finished drinking ale to prepare to tell his story, and then he goes into a bitter condemnation of drunkenness in his tale. His blatant hypocrisy becomes evident as he goes on to reprove gluttony, gambling, and swearing - transgressions that he himself has admitted to or has been seen to commit. Just as the Pardoner finishes his denunciation of swearing, he swears his own oath: "Now for the love of Crist that for us dyde, / ...now wol I telle forth my tale" (370-372). Such patent hypocrisy seems almost too ridiculous to be real, but it fits perfectly with the picture of the Pardoner that the reader has already been given. The Tale does not directly reveal anything about the Pardoner's character, except that he is a skilled orator.

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A greater hypocrisy is revealed in the Epilogue where the Pardoner invites the travelers to receive absolution through offerings to his pardons. He seems to have forgotten that his audience already knows about his fake relics. Perhaps he is so arrogant in his own abilities that he thinks his sermon has had the same effect on his listeners that is usually does, and he therefore expects the pilgrims to be repentant. Or maybe he merely wants to show off to the pilgrims how his bogus operation works. Or more likely, he is just going through the motions of putting on another performance, and so it must come to this logical end. The reader must also reflect on the purpose of the Pardoner's Tale. It may merely be a ploy by the Pardoner to get money, or maybe he is trying to impress the company with his erudition in an attempt goad them into recognizing their own shallowness. By answering this, the reader sees the motives behind the character of the Pardoner, which may or may not be what he has professed it to be: for money.

The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale together explore the complexity of the irony. The Pardoner has created a tale so moving and deep in moral value that it moves the hearts of those who hear it. Yet he himself is wholly unaffected by it. He is completely entrenched in the opposite of the values of which he preaches, as he himself has admitted. He is a brilliant performer, putting on a dazzling show which over time has become like clockwork to him. More significant than the assertion that he is physically sterile, the Pardoner is spiritually sterile. He is able to remain detached from his preaching because he is morally and emotionally vacuous. He never mentions what he thinks or what he feels - he only comes alive in his routine performances.

His morality has undergone atrophy, and he is left as a soulless, unfeeling creature with no inner consciousness. Truly, the only sign of humanity seen anywhere is in the character of the old man in the Tale. The old man is the only thing that is spiritually alive, as evidenced in his speech toward the young men: "God save you, that boughte again mankinde, / And you amende" (477-479). Although the men in the story are unduly cruel to him, the old man still blesses them and shows his loyalty to his faith. Clearly, the only time that the Pardoner can display moral qualities is in the performance of his rehearsed sermons. He has no capacity for change or personal insight, yet he is able to move so many to contrition. He is at the height of depravity and hypocrisy. But a close look at this man's character begs the question of how he became what he is. Did he enter his profession planning to corrupt what is supposed to be a venerable office, or did he enter into it with noble intentions and then become disheartened by what he saw as the corruption of the church. We may never truly know.

The reader is thus left with the question of whether an action can be deemed good if it is done with evil intentions; whether the Pardoner's Tale can be moral if it is told for sinful purposes. The Pardoner himself seems to think so, recognizing this irony in his own Prologue where he states, "For though myself be a ful vicious man, / A moral tale yit I you telle can" (171-172). It is up for each reader to make this decision for himself, although it may be deliberately ambiguous. The

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picture that is painted of the Pardoner throughout Canterbury Tales is that of a societal outcast, isolated both physically and spiritually from the rest of humanity. Perhaps the blatant immorality and hypocrisy are an attempt by the Pardoner to appear normal, since avarice is a common fault, because he feels different from everyone else. If this is true, that the Pardoner is attempting to connect with society through the demonstration of his cynicism, then he truly is to be pitied.

The constant irony associated with the Pardoner serves to shed light onto the hollowness of this man's character, and it shows us that the Pardoner is a character of constant contradictions. It is also probably a condemnation of those people who choose to believe anything without question. The Pardoner's final irony is that although he does recognize his own hypocrisy, his moral vacuity leaves him unable to fully comprehend it, and he is therefore unable to grasp the significance of his sins and the damnation that they entail. Thus as he describes in his tale men who must face the consequences of sin, he fails to realize that he is talking about himself.

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