

PREPARING to Read

from The Pardoner's Tale from The Canterbury Tales

Poetry by GEOFFREY CHAUCER
Translated by NEVILL COGHILL



Connect to Your Life

Roots of Evil "The love of money is the root of all evil," the Bible tells us. In a group discussion, share thoughts about the desire for money and the ways in which it influences human behavior. In what situations is the desire for money evil or harmful? When does the desire seem normal or legitimate to you?

Build Background

Begging Pardon Among the more memorable of the Canterbury pilgrims is the Pardoner, described in lines 689–734 of the "Prologue" (pages 131–132). Licensed by the church to grant indulgences (documents forgiving peoples' sins), pardoners were in theory supposed to grant them only to people who showed great charity. In practice, however, many pardoners simply sold their pardons to make money for the church or for themselves. To spur sales, unethical pardoners often threatened reluctant buyers with eternal doom. Chaucer's Pardoner encourages buyers with a story that illustrates the dangers of the love of money.

WORDS TO KNOW Vocabulary Preview

adversary parley
avarice saunter
castigate transcend
covetousness vermin
pallor wary

Focus Your Reading

LITERARY ANALYSIS MORAL TALE A **moral tale** teaches a lesson about what is right and wrong in human behavior. In a moral tale, good characters usually triumph and evil characters come to a bad end. These outcomes send a message, or **moral** (which is often stated explicitly in the tale). In "The Pardoner's Tale," the moral is the biblical observation that "the love of money is the root of all evil." The Pardoner states this moral in Latin, the language of the medieval Roman Catholic Church:

Radix malorum est cupiditas.

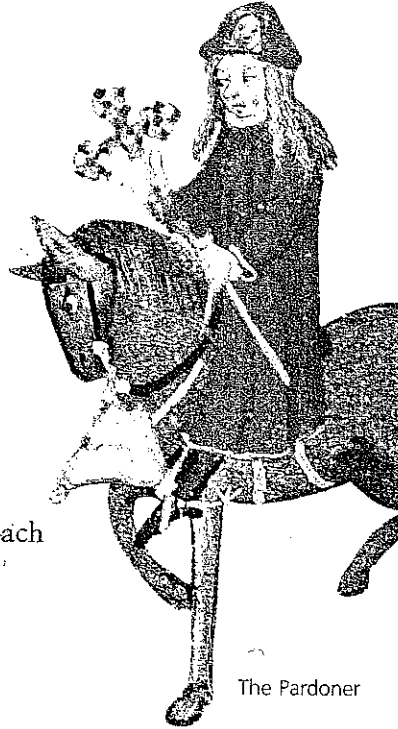
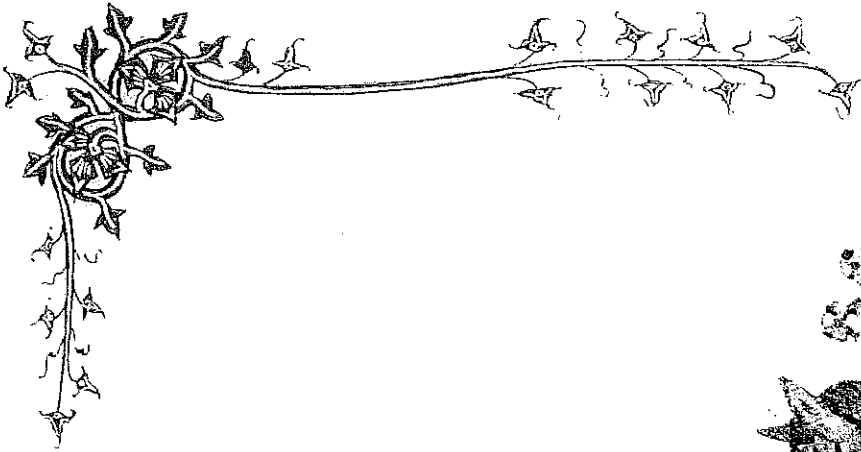
As you read this tale, pay close attention to the actions of the characters, as well as those of the Pardoner, the teller of the tale.

ACTIVE READING PREDICTING To make reasonable **predictions** about what will happen next and what will happen in the end, take the following into account:

- the characters, settings, and events presented in the story
- **foreshadowing**, or hints about what is going to happen
- your own knowledge of human behavior and experiences
- what you know of other literary works with similar characters, settings, or events

READER'S NOTEBOOK As you read, jot down your predictions in a chart like this one. Continue reading to see if the events match your predictions.

My Prediction	Lines It's Based On	Actual Outcome



The Pardoner

from **The Pardoner's Prologue**

"My lords," he said, "in churches where I preach
I cultivate a haughty kind of speech
And ring it out as roundly as a bell;
I've got it all by heart, the tale I tell.
5 I have a text, it always is the same
And always has been, since I learnt the game,
Old as the hills and fresher than the grass,
Radix malorum est cupiditas.



I preach, as you have heard me say before,
10 And tell a hundred lying mockeries more.
I take great pains, and stretching out my neck
To east and west I crane about and peck
Just like a pigeon sitting on a barn.
My hands and tongue together spin the yarn
15 And all my antics are a joy to see.
The curse of avarice and cupidity
Is all my sermon, for it frees the pelf.
Out come the pence, and specially for myself,
For my exclusive purpose is to win
20 And not at all to castigate their sin.
Once dead what matter how their souls may fare?
They can go blackberrying, for all I care!



GUIDE FOR READING

8 *Radix malorum est cupiditas* (ră'dīks mā-lôr'əm è tās'): Latin for "The root of all evil is the root of all evil" from the Bible (1 Tim. 6:10)

10 mockeries: false

16 *cupidity* (kyōō-p): excessive desire for especially for money

17 *pelf*: riches, esp. those that are acquired dishonestly

18 *pence*: pennies.

19–22 What is the attitude toward the Pardoner to him preach?

WORDS TO KNOW
avarice (ăv'ə-rĭs) *n.* an excessive desire for wealth; greed
castigate (kăs'tĭ-gât') *v.* to criticize harshly



And thus I preach against the very vice
 I make my living out of—avarice.
 25 And yet however guilty of that sin
 Myself, with others I have power to win
 Them from it, I can bring them to repent;
 But that is not my principal intent.
Covetousness is both the root and stuff
 30 Of all I preach. That ought to be enough.



“Well, then I give examples thick and fast
 From bygone times, old stories from the past.
 A yokel mind loves stories from of old,
 Being the kind it can repeat and hold.
 35 What! Do you think, as long as I can preach
 And get their silver for the things I teach,
 That I will live in poverty, from choice?
 That’s not the counsel of my inner voice!
 No! Let me preach and beg from kirk to kirk
 40 And never do an honest job of work,
 No, nor make baskets, like St. Paul, to gain
 A livelihood. I do not preach in vain.
 There’s no apostle I would counterfeit;
 I mean to have money, wool and cheese and wheat
 45 Though it were given me by the poorest lad
 Or poorest village widow, though she had
 A string of starving children, all agape.
 No, let me drink the liquor of the grape
 And keep a jolly wench in every town!

39 kirk: church.



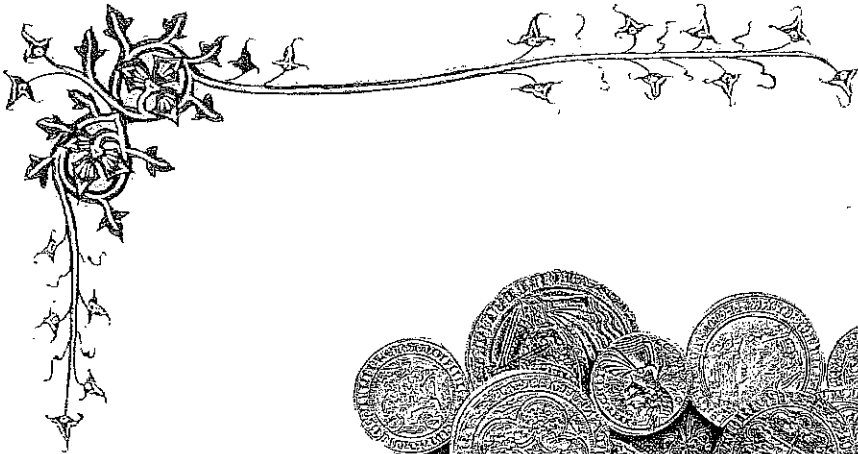
50 “But listen, gentlemen; to bring things down
 To a conclusion, would you like a tale?
 Now as I’ve drunk a draft of corn-ripe ale,
 By God it stands to reason I can strike
 On some good story that you all will like.
 55 For though I am a wholly vicious man
 Don’t think I can’t tell moral tales. I can!
 Here’s one I often preach when out for winning. . . .”

WORDS
 TO
 KNOW

covetousness (kŭv’Y-tēs-nĭs) *n.* an excessive desire for wealth or possessions

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from **The Pardoner's Tale**

It's of three rioters I have to tell
 Who, long before the morning service bell,
 60 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!—
 65 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,
 70 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.
 75 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,
 80 Be primed to meet him everywhere you go,
 That's what my mother said. It's all I know."

58 rioters: rowdy people; revelers

61–62 hand-bell . . . grave: In Chaucer's time, a bell was carried beside the coffin in a funeral procession.

63 tavern-knave (nāv): a serving boy in an inn.

72 privy (prīv'ē): hidden; secret

72–81 Death is personified as a thief in the night, who slays his victims and then flees. Bubonic plague killed at least a quarter the population of Europe in the mid-14th century.



WORDS TO KNOW **wary** (wār'ē) *adj.* cautious; on one's guard
adversary (ăd'ver-sēr'ē) *n.* an enemy; opponent



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,
Page in the household, children—all there were.
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.
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!
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.
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,
Fearing Christ's blessed body to a shred;
'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,
They came upon a very poor old man
Who humbly greeted them and thus began,
'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?"

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

82 publican: innkeeper; tavern owner.

86 page: boy servant.

99–107 How might the rioters' drinking be affecting their judgment and behavior?

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



120 Village and city on my pilgrimage,
One who would change his youth to have my age.
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;
125 So, like a wretched prisoner at strife
Within himself, I walk alone and wait
About the earth, which is my mother’s gate,
Knock-knocking with my staff from night to noon
And crying, ‘Mother, open to me soon!
130 Look at me, mother, won’t you let me in?
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
135 So long, for yours! Aye, for a shirt of hair
To wrap me in!’ She has refused her grace,
Whence comes the pallor of my withered face.

129 The old man addresses the earth as his mother (compare the familiar expressions “Mother Earth” and “Mother Nature”).

135 **shirt of hair:** a rough shirt made of animal hair, worn to punish oneself for one’s sins.



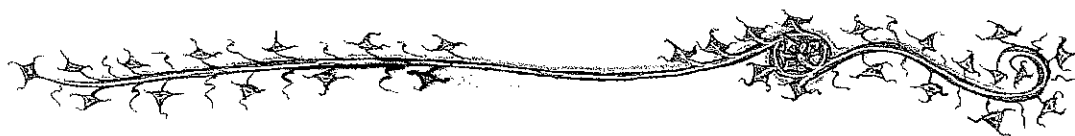
“But it dishonored you when you began
To speak so roughly, sir, to an old man,
140 Unless he had injured you in word or deed.
It says in holy writ, as you may read,
‘Thou shalt rise up before the hoary head
And honor it.’ And therefore be it said
‘Do no more harm to an old man than you,
145 Being now 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.”

142 **hoary:** gray or white with age.



“By God,” the gambler said, “you shan’t do so,
150 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.
155 Say where he is or you shall pay for it,
By God and by the Holy Sacrament!

WORDS
TO
KNOW **pallor** (păl’ər) *n.* a lack of color; extreme paleness



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 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.
"Brothers," he said, "you listen to what I say.
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
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?
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.
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

154–158 What accusations against
the old man does the young man
make?

169 florins: coins.

178 "Fortune" here means "fate."
Do you think the young men will
be blessed by Fortune?



*The Three Living, from the Psalter and Prayer Book
of Bonne of Luxembourg, Duchess of Normandy.*



To fetch us bread and wine—but keep things dark—
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,
200 All three of us, wherever we have planned.”

196 **keep things dark**: act in secret without giving away what has happened.

He gathered lots and hid them in his hand
Bidding them draw for where the luck should fall.
It fell upon the youngest of them all,
And off he ran at once towards the town.

205 As soon as he had gone the first sat down
And thus began a parley with the other:
“You know that you can trust me as a brother;
Now let me tell you where your profit lies;
You know our friend has gone to get supplies
210 And here's a lot of gold that is to be
Divided equally amongst us three.
Nevertheless, if I could shape things thus
So that we shared it out—the two of us—
Wouldn't you take it as a friendly act?”

215 “But how?” the other said. “He knows the fact
That all the gold was left with me and you;
What can we tell him? What are we to do?”

“Is it a bargain,” said the first, “or no?
For I can tell you in a word or so
220 What's to be done to bring the thing about.”
“Trust me,” the other said, “you needn't doubt
My word. I won't betray you, I'll be true.”

“Well,” said his friend, “you see that we are two,
And two are twice as powerful as one.
225 Now look; when he comes back, get up in fun
To have a wrestle; then, as you attack,
I'll up and put my dagger through his back
While you and he are struggling, as in game;
Then draw your dagger too and do the same.
230 Then all this money will be ours to spend,

225–229 What does the young man's plan suggest about human nature and the desire for money?

WORDS
TO **parley** (pär'lē) *n.* a discussion or conference
KNOW



ded equally of course, dear friend.
1 we can gratify our lusts and fill
day with dicing at our own sweet will.”
s these two miscreants agreed to slay
third and youngest, as you heard me say.

233 **dicing:** gambling with dice.

234 **miscreants** (mī's'krē-ənts):
evildoers; villains.

The youngest, as he ran towards the town,
t turning over, rolling up and down
in his heart the beauty of those bright
7 florins, saying, “Lord, to think I might
e all that treasure to myself alone!
ld there be anyone beneath the throne
od so happy as I then should be?”

And so the Fiend, our common enemy,
given power to put it in his thought
there was always poison to be bought,
that with poison he could kill his friends.
en in such a state the Devil sends
ights of this kind, and has a full permission
re them on to sorrow and perdition;
his young man was utterly content
ll them both and never to repent.

243 **Fiend:** the Devil; Satan.

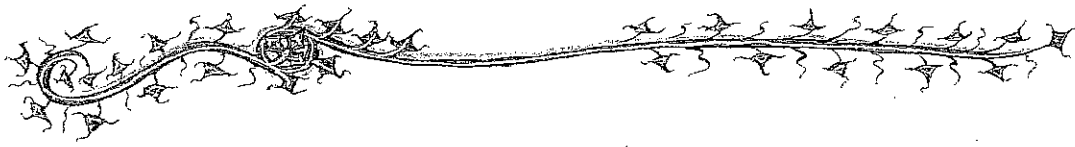
249 **perdition:** damnation; hell.

243–251 Why does the Devil have
influence over the young man?

And on he ran, he had no thought to tarry,
to the town, found an apothecary
aid, “Sell me some poison if you will,
a lot of rats I want to kill
here’s a polecat too about my yard
akes my chickens and it hits me hard;
I get even, as is only right,
vermin that destroy a man by night.”

he chemist answered, “I’ve a preparation
you shall have, and by my soul’s salvation
living creature eat or drink
thful, ere he has the time to think,
h he took less than makes a grain of wheat,
see him fall down dying at your feet;
e he must, and in so short a while

WORDS
TO **vermin** (vūr'mīn) *n.* small animals that are destructive or carriers of disease
KNOW



You'd hardly have the time to walk a mile,
The poison is so strong, you understand."

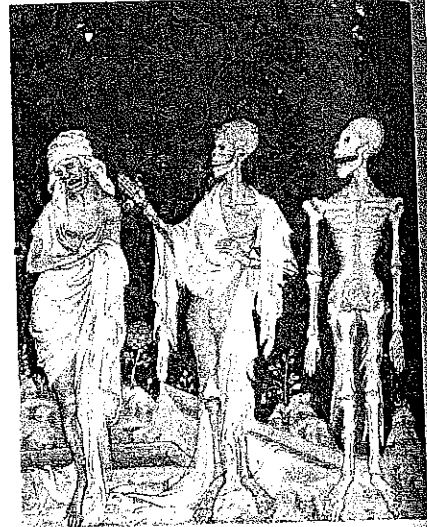
270 This cursed fellow grabbed into his hand
The box of poison and away he ran
Into a neighboring street, and found a man
Who lent him three large bottles. He withdrew
And deftly poured the poison into two.
He kept the third one clean, as well he might,
275 For his own drink, meaning to work all night
Stacking the gold and carrying it away.
And when this rioter, this devil's clay,
Had filled his bottles up with wine, all three,
Back to rejoin his comrades sauntered he.

280 Why make a sermon of it? Why waste breath?
Exactly in the way they'd planned his death
They fell on him and slew him, two to one.
Then said the first of them when this was done,
"Now for a drink. Sit down and let's be merry,
285 For later on there'll be the corpse to bury."
And, as it happened, reaching for a sup,
He took a bottle full of poison up
And drank; and his companion, nothing loth,
Drank from it also, and they perished both.

290 There is, in Avicenna's long relation
Concerning poison and its operation,
Trust me, no ghastrlier section to transcend
What these two wretches suffered at their end.
Thus these two murderers received their due,
295 So did the treacherous young poisoner too.

O cursed sin! O blackguardly excess!
O treacherous homicide! O wickedness!
O gluttony that lusted on and diced!

300 Dearly beloved, God forgive your sin
And keep you from the vice of avarice!



The Three Dead, from the Psalter and Prayer Book of Bonne of Luxembourg, Duchess of Normandy (14th century), fol.322r. Grisaille, color, gilt, and brown ink on vellum (4 15/16" x 3 9/16"). French, Paris. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The Cloisters Collection

288 **nothing loth**: not at all unwilling.

290 **Avicenna's (äv'ī-sën'əz) long relation**: a medical text written by an 11th-century Islamic physician; includes descriptions of various poisons and their effects.

294 Why does the Pardoner say that the young men "received their due"?

296 **blackguardly**: worthy of a scoundrel; villainous.

299 The Pardoner is now addressing his fellow pilgrims.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

saunter (sən'tər) v. to walk in a slow and leisurely manner; stroll
transcend (trän-sënd') v. to go beyond; surpass



My holy pardon frees you all of this,
provided that you make the right approaches,
that is with sterling, rings, or silver brooches.
Lay down your heads under this holy bull!
Come on, you women, offer up your wool!
I will write your name into my ledger; so!
For the bliss of Heaven you shall go.
For I'll absolve you by my holy power,
so that you make offering, clean as at the hour
when you were born. . . . That, sirs, is how I preach.
I bid Jesu Christ, soul's healer, aye, the leech
to every soul, grant pardon and relieve you
of sin, for that is best, I won't deceive you.



One thing I should have mentioned in my tale,
for all our people. I've some relics in my bale
and pardons too, as full and fine, I hope,
as any in England, given me by the Pope.
There be one among you that is willing
to have my absolution for a shilling
freely given, come! and do not harden
your hearts but kneel in humbleness for pardon;
if not else, receive my pardon as we go.
So that you can renew it every town or so
whenever you wish, provided that you still renew
it each time, and in good money, what is due.
It is an honor to you to have found
a pardoner with his credentials sound
who can absolve you as you ply the spur
for any accident that may occur.
For instance—we are all at Fortune's beck—
if your horse may throw you down and break your neck.
That is a security it is to all
to have me here among you and at call
to give you the pardon for the lowly and the great
when soul leaves body for the future state!
And I advise our Host here to begin,
the most enveloped of you all in sin.
Come forward, Host, you shall be the first to pay,
and kiss my holy relics right away.
I'll give you a groat. Come on, unbuckle your purse!"

304 bull: an official document from the pope.

311 leech: physician.

319 shilling: a coin worth twelve pence.

330–331 The Pardoner reminds the other pilgrims that death may come to them at any time. Why does he emphasize this point?

340 groat: a silver coin worth four pence.

Connect to the Literature

1. What Do You Think?

Discuss with a partner your reaction to the ending of this tale.

Comprehension Check

- Why are the three rioters looking for Death?
- What do they expect to find under the tree, and what do they actually find?
- What happens to the rioters?

Think Critically

2. **ACTIVE READING PREDICTING** Look back at the predictions you made in your **READER'S NOTEBOOK**. Were you surprised by the tale's ending? If not, explain what details led you to **predict** the ending. If you were surprised, explain what details led you to predict a different ending.

3. Why do you think the rioters set out to kill Death?

THINK ABOUT

- what they learn from the boy and the innkeeper
- their view of themselves
- other factors that may influence their judgment

4. In what sense is the old man's statement that the rioters can find Death under the oak tree true?

5. Why do you think the **character** of the old man is included in the tale?

THINK ABOUT

- the story of his life
- his views about Death
- his directions for finding Death

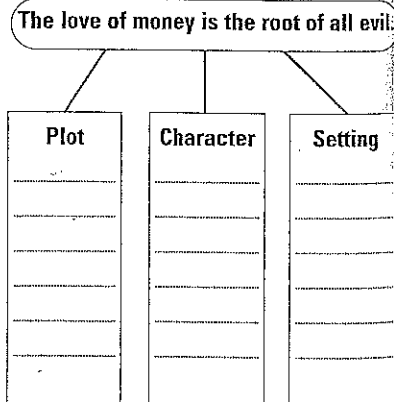
6. In the light of the Pardoner's true **motives**, as revealed in the "Prologue," why is the moral of this tale **ironic**?

Literary Analysis

MORAL TALE

"The Pardoner's Tale" is a **moral tale**, a story that teaches a lesson about good and evil or about what is right and wrong in human behavior. In it, the Pardoner teaches that "the love of money is the root of all evil" by showing how characters who suffer from the sin of avarice, or love of money, destroy themselves in the end.

Paired Activity Working with a partner, analyze how the story's elements work together to teach the moral. Among the elements to consider are the events of the plot, the personalities and motives of the characters, and the details of the setting. You might organize the elements in a chart like this one.



Extend Interpretations

7. **What If?** If the Pardoner hadn't revealed so much information about his practices, how might the other pilgrims have responded to his tale?

8. **Connect to Life** Do you think this story could serve as an effective warning against greed to people today? Why or why not?