

A character of the old man in the pardoner's tale

[Literature](#), [Books](#)



The old man in 'The Pardoner's Tale' is a strange character, there are many different ideas as to who, or what, he is. Old age in Chaucer's time wasn't something that many people would live to, so there are questions raised about how this man came to be so old. Nonetheless the encounter between him and the Revellers allows both Chaucer and the Pardoner to explore the morality of their characters and add to their tales.

One of the most obvious answers as to who death is is given by the Revellers themselves. They see the old man as being "his aspye," or even that the old man is actually death himself, something which many people think might be true. Some of the evidence for this comes from the events which befall the three brothers after they have finished talking with the old man. The man tells the three Revellers where to go to look for death, leading them right to a massive hoard of "tresor" which in the end allows all three of them to 'find death'. The fact that the man is old is also strange, as mentioned earlier old age wasn't all that common, so a man walking around asking to swap his old age for somebody else's youth. This is peculiar, as it isn't possible to physically do this, unless of course you had special powers like the personified character of death might have done. One problem with the idea that the old man is death is the fact that he seems to be seeking death himself, yet he directs the three brothers to him, although that may all have been part of his devious plans.

As a way of moving the plot forward the old man is useful without having to have any deeper meaning, but he is so well crafted as a character that Chaucer can't have used him out of mere convenience. He manages to craft the deaths of three brothers. One wonders if he, were death personified,

carried his treasure around to use it to snare those he could and add to the gold as he went. The old man helps Chaucer, and possibly the Pardoner to show the audience that everybody has the capability to be and bring death to others, and that in seeking him one may find oneself.

If the old man were to simply be a plot device why does he seem to be so powerful, in terms of the final outcome? The old man, if he were just that, is entirely justified in wanting to be rid of the three revellers. After all, they have been extremely rude and offensive to him, even going as far as to threaten him. "Tel Wher he is, or thou shall it abyen." It would seem entirely possible that an old man wandering around hoping to die would want to be rid of the three loutish men he encountered, were it not for the fact that he directs them away exactly towards a huge hoard of "tresor."

If the huge hoard of tresor did belong to the old man it seems a reasonable assumption that it would have taken quite some time to accrue. Possibly more time than a real old man would have lived for, ergo there are more theories about the old man being a mythical character. One such character is 'the Wandering Jew.' A man who taunted Jesus on his way to crucifixion and must now wander the earth until the second coming, this seems ample time to collect a hoard of tresor. This theory also explains the man's desire to die, "Ne deeth, allas! Ne wol nat han my lyf..." Having explained the tresor and the "greet age" of the old man, this theory also explains why the Wandering Jew/Old Man leads the three men to their deaths. Having taunted Jesus the Jew has learned his lesson, having had hundreds of years to consider it, and

so teaches a lesson to the three men after they treat him as badly as he treated Jesus.

The old man could also represent simple age, experience and wisdom, which manages to overcome youth and mindless enthusiasm with ease. If this is true then it probably makes, not only the three brothers represent youth, but also the boy in the tavern, who also believes death to be a figure who can be hunted and eventually killed. The gold has a physical presence in the tale, but could also be taken to metaphorically represent the wisdom of experience, which the old man uses to dupe and outwit the young and unwise. The path that the old man sends the three Revellers down, being a “croked” “wey” could represent the sins of the three brothers, or those of all mankind.