

The pardoner's tale by geoffrey chaucer: structure, themes, and language

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Geoffrey Chaucer uses exemplums within The Pardoner's Tale to show that greed is the root of all evil. An exemplum is a story within a story that typically teaches a lesson, Chaucer uses several so that the Pardoner can emphasize the dangers of greed. Before he begins his tale he attempts to sell 'holy relics' to the pilgrims and states that he cannot do anything for the sinners beyond redemption, though they may try. The Pardoner's exemplums are sermons about the effects of greed and drinking in an attempt to scare the pilgrims into repenting before Death gets them. The beginning part of the Tale is of drunken fathers laying with their daughters. The second half of the Tale is about three drunken men who go looking for Death but instead find gold leading them to their deaths. Greed overtakes the men and they plot against each other, greed ultimately leaves them dead.

The prologue is broken up into 3 sections, "first section of his 'confession' is devoted to expounding his techniques; the second, to making quite clear what his 'entente' is in preaching — to make money, or if the going gets rough, to 'spitte out venym', but certainly not to save souls; the third section extends his avarice to cover his whole way of life, and also relates his vice to the processes of storytelling" (Cooper 262). The structure of The Pardoner's Tale is highly controversial because defining the relations of the Tale to a medieval sermon comes from assuming that the sermon was created uniquely which cannot be determined (Bloom 125). The type of medieval sermon it is, is still unclear, some say it's a bad joke rather than a sermon and others say it's a typical medieval sermon, saying that structurally it is but rhetorically it isn't (Bloom 125). The qualifications to be medieval sermon were theme, protheme, the introduction to the theme, the

division of the theme, the subdivision, and the discussion (Bloom 127). Many many use these ideas of a 'modern' sermon to argue a lack of formal structure in the Pardoner's Tale (Bloom 127).

The structure of the Tale is hard to separate from the prologue because the theme of avarice and evil is expounded there in the Pardoner's own practices (Cooper 266). Within the structure the Pardoner explains his own faults then goes onto blaming others for their own. Though the Pardoner is not holy he is recognized as the clergy group, so Chaucer uses a sermon for his tale, "The sermon, then and now, is a major part of the Christian liturgy" (Hallissy 213). The Pardoner's main focus throughout the tale is that greed is the root of all evils, working it into his prologue and exemplum's (Hallissy 213). The Pardoner's sermon seems to be in manuscript fragment which differs from the other tales. In the Tale a grim and secret force that punishes evil springs naturally and with a mysterious rightness from wicked deeds themselves (Bloom 43).

One of the themes of the tale is greed and how it effects someone's ability to make certain decisions. The Pardoner sets the precedent for the entire tale by himself being a greedy man and attempting to sell his holy relics and pardons so that they are prepared for Death, "The ritual of pardon-selling becomes a habitual fraud, and this becomes a compulsion" (Bloom 49). The Pardoner deliberately uses his homiletic skills to persuade his audience to demonstrate their ability to overcome their sins by buying pardons from him to be safe (Hallissy 214). In the prologue he shares his grievances and

asserts the fact that he and others can help repent for money, " I can bring them to repent; but that is not my principle intent" (Chaucer 243).

Another theme that is easily missed is that drinking leads to bad judgement and death. In the prologue the Pardoner was sharing his flaws because he had to much to drink and in the tale them men were all drunks (Bloom 50). We see this in the first exemplum, " Look how the drunken and unnatural lot lay with his daughters, though he knew it not, he was to drunk to know what he was doing" (Chaucer 245). In the second exemplum if the rioters had not been drunk, they would not have set out upon their quest to kill death in the first place. If they had not been so greedy they might have they might have been more serious with their covenant and might have paid more attention to it rather than die (Bloom 12).

The language and diction used is in a very well and thought out way in The Pardoners Tale. When reading it's obvious that Chaucer uses names for the first exemplum but none for the second, we no more learn the dead man's name than we learn the name of the servant himself or the names of the rioters, the taverner, the old man or the apothecary (Bloom 14). This could be simply because the Pardoner was drunk or It could be that the first story was a personal one. In the tale the Pardoner uses very little detailed characterization, there is really only one character described with detail, the old man under the tree (Bloom 13). It would have been simpler and more convenient for Chaucer if he had given to the various members of his trio personal names(Bloom 14). The Pardoner is very ironic, " The Pardoner's Tale has often been praised for its dramatic irony, its concentration and the

sense of awe that it engenders; it has more than once been described as one of the best short stories in English" (Bloom 12). It has often been remarked that much of the tale consists of dialogue and that this is mainly responsible for its dramatic quality that also is the fact that we so seldom hear the narrator speaking in plain narrative that is all the more arresting and telling (Bloom 16). When the rioters encounter the old man, a courteous figure, he only invokes the name of God three times all with invocation that's solemn and deliberate (Bloom 17). The men are so drunk that the name of God has become so slurred in their mouths and rings in their ears.

Chaucer uses many different tools to get across his version of the Pardoner, " Yet the imagery the Pardoner uses about and around the supposed relic — sheep, holy Jews, devouring worms, life-giving wells—seems insistently to imply much more" (Bloom 81). There is a superficial idea of imagery in the Prologue that masks and expresses a deeper perversion, part of the Pardoner's success lies in the fact that he deals in the everyday concerns of rural life in a world of material fact, not religious doctrine (Cooper 262).

The critics views on Chaucer's " Canterbury Tales" has given me a new ways to look at pieces of literature and understand them. Reading and examining the Tale while reading Critics views about structure, theme, and language help me comprehend Chaucer's hidden meanings. I've come to the conclusion that Chaucer doesn't put just anything into his work, each word is there for a reason and it's important to know the meaning of those words. I also learned from the tales two themes and the meaning itself, greed really is the root of all evil and that alcohol can change an outcome.

Work Cited

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