The Pardoner’s Tale: A guide for AQA LITB 3 at Slough Grammar School

INTRODUCTION:

This guide is targeted at students in Yr13 studying the Pardoner’s Tale for Lit B 3. In this syllabus, the General Prologue is not indicated and it will feature only briefly in my writing. My aim is to introduce and stimulate discussion on key elements of the Tale whilst ensuring that students are still required to undertake significant amounts of independent research and thought. I am not intending to offer model essays or similar responses. The text I am using is the Oxford Student Text and any line references refer to this edition (Chaucer ed: Croft, 2006). Further material will be published on the Slough Grammar School VLE and on my blog: www.jwpblog.wordpress.com

AQA LITB 3

Students will be reading this text as part of the Elements of Gothic strand. It is worth noting, however, that when reading this text the priority should be to engage with the text per se, rather than being sidetracked by the notion of Gothic implied in the title. The Gothic elements will be discussed in due course, but the questions in Part A require a close understanding of the text first and foremost and the titles of the essays demand a clear focus on the named texts rather than a general discussion of Gothic elements applied to a text in a scattergun manner.

A useful guideline should be the AQA descriptors for each mark band, outlined below:
This grid has proven very useful to me when assessing essays. The descriptors give a good guideline for basic grading. Obviously nothing is in fallible, but by using this to attach an essay to a particular level at the outset, it has been moderately straightforward as I have become more experienced, to place essays in their respective bands. I particularly like the “Some understanding” band for those essays which move between focused thought and paragraphs of irrelevance.

Obviously when a range of marks is awarded against the AOs that reflects a range of Bands, a best fit approach is employed. Running through the whole process is an understanding that in awarding marks, the question has been answered.

I think this is the area that is most frustrating and one that I shall be reinforcing all the time next year. Many of the papers I mark simply do not make their responses relevant to the question. Students seem to have a great deal of knowledge about genre, historical contexts, critical theory, contexts of authorship and so on. Sadly, these ideas seem to be used to pad out essays rather than to help to focus the response. Thus in an essay about the potential attractiveness of the Gothic Villain (June 2012), a student is struggling to make a clear link between the title of the essay and paragraphs focusing, among other things, on the industrial Revolution, James I, characters (especially female) who are not villains.
In fact many essays simply set out to write the essay they have practiced and take little notice of the thrust of the essay that is set.

This is often most noticeable in Section A where the insistence on focusing on “elements of the Gothic” makes a focused response on the text difficult to maintain. The key word is “elements”. No one is pretending that The Pardoner is a Gothic text, but there are elements in the themes and motifs of the tale which could be said to reflect those ideas which some 500 years later will be grabbed by Gothic writers. Students must remember what the intention of the author was and also be aware of contemporary circumstances, such as the Black Death, which have to colour Chaucer’s writing.

THE PARDONER

I will look at character later in the discussion. At this stage the General Prologue description should be considered.

Lines 675–715 of the General Prologue contain the physical description of the Pardoner. Chaucer, in the voice of one of the pilgrims, paints a clear image his hair, “as yelow as flex” hangs lankly down and spread over his shoulders in “colpons oon and oon”. He is vain in his clothes, trying to wear his hood “al of the newe jet”. The sense is one of vanity and almost female attention to his outward appearance. Certainly, The Pardoner has moved away from the restrictions placed upon clergy at the time. The description moves on to his bulging eyes – again, at the time such staring was considered a sign of general licentiousness and a far cry from what was expected of the clergy. Perhaps the most interesting line comes at 691: “I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare”. Here Chaucer introduces the twin ideas of eunuchry and femininity. I will not digress into a long discussion of potential homosexuality, but draw attention to the twin descriptors. There is more here than a need to fill up a line and students should have this at the back of their minds. The Pardoner boasts of having a “joly wenche in every toun” (Tale 167), but this is unlikely in the light of the description. Indeed the insistence on the padding out of his “lappe” with his various relics suggests boasts born of an inability to partake of such
pleasures. The Host has no doubts about this as we read at the end of the tale where he wishes to enshrine the Pardoner’s testicles in “an hogges toord”. Perhaps he regrets that the Pardoner has none to treat this way, rather than suffers from an outburst of good manners. Any student wishing to follow this further should look at Carolyn Dinshaw’s essay: Eunuch Hermeneutics (Dinshaw, 1997).

The Prologue is not wholly critical. The Pardoner is held as a fine example of all Pardoner. Not that this is huge praise. Pardoners had a reputation for dishonesty and hypocrisy. Although the Pardoner is a shining example, this may well be an example of the worst behaviour.

A final comment should be given to his voice. In the Tale we will see the Rhetorical skills that the Pardoner obviously has in great number, but this is somewhat undermined by having “a voys... as smal as hath a goot”. This seems to tie in with his lack of masculinity and also links the Pardoner to the animal associated with the Devil and with lechery.

This section is not part of the set text for examination but an awareness of ideas such as outlined above is vital as we begin to study the Tale itself.

**THE CHARACTERS**

In common with much writing of the 14th Century, the characters of the tale are not drawn with any suggestion of motivation or self-questioning. Often allegorical, characters are required to illustrate ideas behind the narrative and in this story the characters are the three Riotoures, the Old Man, The tavern boy and the Pardoner himself.

**The Riotoures**, “yonge folk” who resemble modern teenagers to a remarkable degree, are not differentiated beyond the briefest of descriptions. None have a name and are merely the “woorst”, the “proudeste” and the “yongeste”. Indeed there is no way of knowing whether the epithets are to be equally shared out. This does not matter. In the story they serve the purpose of illustrating the theme “radix malorum est cupiditas”.
The three are united by a holy oath which they immediately break when they decide to kill not death but one another. Indeed there is a gentle irony when “oon of hem spak thus unto that oother/Thou knowest wel thou art my sworn brother;” (Tale 521-2) thus acknowledging the pact they have sworn immediately before moving murder of the youngest. Not that the youngest is any better – he plans his murders with no prompting and is at pains to ensure that the bottles he borrows are “large bottles thre” (Tale 585) as though ensuring the maximum quantity of poison for his deed. Indeed it is important to the Pardoner that they have little to distinguish them from one another.

The vital thing for such an allegory is that they “types” are less clear than the message. Overt characterisation gets in the way. The one who speaks to the Old Man has a definite swagger and threatening bluster, but we do not know who he is other than that he is the “proudeste”. He responds to the Old Man roughly and with arrogance little suited to the old man’s gentle politeness and the respect conferred by age.

The Old Man is regarded by many as something of an enigma. He is caring and polite – he greets the Riotoures and as he departs wishes them well: “God be with yow... God save yow... and thee amende” (Tale 463-481). The proudeste riotour draws our attention to the fact that he is disguised in some way and invites the Old Man to tell his tale. Chaucer sets up the irony of the fact that the young men seek death to kill him whereas the old man longs to meet death in order that he himself might die. This serves to increase his melancholy air as he taps at his “mooder” earth and begs “leeve mooder, leet me in!” (Tale 445). This prayer has such a strong simplicity that we can only pity this character who seeks not to challenge and who moves out of the tale having pointed out the whereabouts of Death. Students should think carefully about the Old Man and consider Chaucer’s intentions: he may be an obvious contrast and no more – age confers wisdom and he is challenged by the proudest rioter thus increasing the contrast; he may represent death itself or even be death in disguise – he seems immortal and also ensures that the teenagers die a death that will ensure damnation and therefore possibly acts as some kind of judge over their morals; he might be seen to represent the idea of the “wandering Jew” – the stateless outsider who has travelled as far as “Inde” and is doomed to continue to do so, tapping at the earth in a constant reminder of his
enforced immortality; he shows no fear of the youngsters and still wishes them well. Students should consider whether there is a hint of irony here.

The tavern Boy has no great role in the story other than as a contrast to the young men. His role is brief, but in his dialogue Chaucer allows innocence to emerge as he talks of the contemporary scourge: the Black Death. He introduces the idea of the dead man being drunk as he died and the character gains sympathy by referring to his mother as he warns the youngsters to be “redy for to meet him everemoore” (Tale 398). Even his referring to the questioner as “maister” is calculated to suggest his youth and his innocence.

The Pardoner himself dominates his tale and he should be seen as a key character. After Chaucer’s introduction in the General Prologue, we are ready for vanity and arrogance. We are not disappointed. So arrogant is the character that his prologue openly admits to the Pilgrims that he is as guilty of the sins he is going to outline as are any of his characters. He lists his lying and cheating with a pride that even as he subverts the teachings and ideas of the church, leads us to find him engaging. He admits to adding “saffron” to his goat-like speech and shows the falsehood inherent in all his relics. He is clever, though, and we learn that he suggests the worst sins as being beyond his cure – consequently anyone not approaching him will be suspected of these same sins. This is market trading of the highest degree.

He is boastful throughout and is clear that although some people may be absolved, he has only one purpose – to make money. He will preach “radix malorum est cupiditas” from the position of being a sinner himself. Such openness and honesty can be rather persuasive and can serve to make the Pardoner something of an attractive rogue. He is clear in lines 161-75 that he subverts the church and the role of the clergy. He refuses to follow the model of the apostles and is even prepared to take “of the povereste wydwe in a village/Al sholde hir children sterve for famyne” (Tale 164-5). Students should read his prologue with care and note his boasts and claims. Many will return at the end of the tale when he seems to have forgotten who his audience is.
THE STRUCTURE OF THE TALE

- Prologue
- Sermon
- Tale
- Conclusion

The Prologue serves to outline the character of the Pardoner and ensures that any readers are fully aware of his own greed, lust and vanity. This is no bad thing in a sense. A man as full of sin as he can still deliver the moral tale requested by the host, and he does not disappoint. It is interesting that none of the Pilgrims interrupt or question him. Presumably the content of the introduction with its repetition of the “Radix Malorum...” tag comes as no surprise. He openly acknowledges himself to be a “ful vicious man” and launches into his sermon after showing the congregation his false relics. These relics are typical of the kind and the Pardoner reflects his usual audience with a focus on natural remedies for ill animals and so on. Behind this though, there is a constant reference to illnesses relating to gluttony and lechery. It should also be noted that the “horrible” sins mentioned in line 93 carry a much stronger taint than today and that the sexual sins suggested might link back to the possible homosexuality of the Pardoner himself (McAlpine, 1997).

The Sermon is based on the use of *exempla*. Here we see the rhetorical flourishes of the Pardoner in all their glory. Although clergymen were not encouraged to develop rhetorical skills, the Pardoner is a fine orator and uses this along with exempla drawn from the Bible and History to win over an audience.

The Pardoner’s descriptive skill is shown in the sequence describing the drunk: lines 265-273. He uses onomatopoeia to engage the senses with “Sampsoun, Sampsoun” being used to mimic snoring (as well as engaging with the fate of the Biblical character); he uses further sensory description to focus on the “sour” breath of the drunk and again uses a simile likening the drunk to a stuck pig to describe the drunken collapse. He is a clever enough speaker to link all these ideas with local colour since in his development he is able to refer to the great markets of Medieval London in Cheapside and to the idea that Attila the Hun was only brought down by drunkenness.
Another rhetorical device is that of exempla, and students should list each exemplum used and note the purpose of each reference.

His exempla are largely from the Bible and more often the old rather than the New Testament. He implies great knowledge for himself and relies and relative ignorance on his listeners, however. The story of Lot in the bible says nothing about his being drunk, for example. The eating of the apple becomes gluttony and he quotes a minor St. Paul on this same sin. His exempla serve as allusions rather than direct textual analysis of the sacred texts and as such raise his status in the eyes of any audience of lesser intellectuals than himself. This is best shown in the discussion of swearing where he sues the order of the Commandments themselves to justify swearing being a greater sin than murder!

Heightened language, in particular apostrophe, dominates much of the sermon. Lines 212-4 see the triplet of lines opening “O” as he cries out to his listeners. In Line 248 this becomes the glorious triplet “O wombe, O bely, O stinking cod!” as he again implores his audience to listen. The imagery is now replete with sensory revulsion as surely as when the host offers to “kysse thin olde breech” (Tale 662) which are shit stained and filthy. Students should remember that it is Chaucer, rather than his creation, who is writing this tale.

The Tale is not really introduced until line 375. Our anticipation has been heightened by the sermon and we are ready for what is a straightforward allegorical tale about the sins discussed at some length. The tale is dominated in the telling by Chaucer’s use of dialogue, serving to give character to the types he produces. There is little or no authorial comment here, whether by Chaucer or by the fictional storyteller.

The Pardoner’s voice is established in his sermon and now he moves his story briskly, allowing characters to be differentiated by their speech – the boy is innocent in contrast to the rough “Riotoures” who are again contrasted in the language of the old man who greets them “ful mekely”. There is a brutal energy to much of the rioters’ speech and this sense elf characters speaking directly to the audience is an important factor when seeking to engage.

Jonathan Peel SGS 2012
The imagery of the sermon and tale is not used for comic effect but has the effect of heightening the potential Gothic elements of the writing. It serves to increase the sense of decay and rot which pervades much of the tale and will later be seized upon by 18th and 19th century writers. Much of this is best seen in the sermon and the exaggerated care to portray the grossness of Gluttony (Tale 238ff). All here is distended and stinking and even the cooks “stamp” “grind” and “knock” their food into submission.

In the tale proper the imagery is subtler – the old oak lies up a “crocked wey” (Tale 475) suggestive of the path chosen by sinners. Death is all around and treated with a degree of informality – “privee thief” and “false traytour” serve to reduce the figure to something manageable. That he is the ultimate victor serves to highlight the fact that the young men are seeking to move well beyond their boundaries in their action.

Chaucer uses metaphor widely and to good effect. Some examples are listed above, and students should look for this use and list the effect of the choice of language. Again the Gothic obsession with corruption is perhaps prefigured in the references to Christ’s body being ripped apart by oaths...

One technique employed widely is **Irony**.

The Pardoner is asked for a moral tale, but is himself deeply immoral and proud of the fact. This does not render him a bad teacher, but should alert us to the layers of irony that Chaucer employs in telling this tale. Since radix malorum est cupiditas, the Pardoner is portrayed ironically when he declares that his “entente is nat but for to wynne” (tale 118). This ironic structure helps to link the sermon to the tale proper and thus ensure that the audience remain truly engaged with the moral purpose of the telling.

- In lines 141-5 he is clear that he sees this irony himself and seems to revel in his underhand nature. Irony in the tale can be found in the oath sworn by the revellers - one of Chaucer’s “fals swering” which is the most serious form of the sin (Tale 346)- which is immediately broken once money has appeared (and is even referred to as a reason for the two to gang up on the youngest!).
- The revellers are enraged by death, yet, ironically, this rage immediately dissipates when the encounter money.
• The Old Man points out a “croked wey” that will lead to an encounter with death. The greed of the revellers enables them to forget the clear warning about following the sinner’s path.
• The revellers want to live long and well and seek death to obtain this wish. The old man points out their death whilst at the same time mourning his own inability to die.

A further irony might be seen in the Conclusion of the tale. Here, after a swift denouement, the Pardoner begins to forget himself and tries to sell to the company. He singles out Harry Bailey, the host, as one who is in greatest need of pardons. Bailey attacks him savagely threatening to cut off his testicles to create a new relic. It is ironic that having delivered the precise moral tale required, the pardoner falls foul of his own arrogance and vanity in this way.

The tale has ended swiftly because Chaucer has no need to develop the deaths in any way. These allegorical “types” have no family to mourn them or any life beyond that pictured. The message is the death that comes to them and the punishment for their sins. They are not characters in the modern sense and should not be viewed as such.

ELEMENTS OF THE GOTHIC

Handle with care! This year (2012) questions in section B that might have been used by students who had read this text in particular were:

• “Gothic writing warns of the dangers of aspiring beyond our limitations.” How far does your reading of gothic writing support this view?

• “How do you respond to the idea that gothic villains make evil seem attractive?”

The obsession question, whilst interesting, might also have been approached, though possibly through the Pardoner’s obsession with the sins he preaches against – a tricky ask. However there is enough here to put together ideas for the other two questions. Certainly the aspiration to kill death seems to be an apt aspiration, as might be the willingness to kill to obtain financial reward. In the other question, students might feel that the revellers are rarely attractive,
but what of the Pardoner himself? There is a genuine attraction in the dynamic and convincing clergyman which will eventually develop into The Monk (a Gothic novel by Matthew Gregory Lewis published in 1796). What we see is a man who uses rhetoric and fear to raise money and ensure some form of sexual satisfaction. His heavy use of irony can be seen as humour as he wins over his audience, and only his ill-judged attack on Bailey causes his story to fail. No other pilgrim seems offended. There is certainly room for discussion here.


To what extent do you agree with this view of the Pardoner’s methods?

Here the need might be to focus on “sinister” and to analyse the tale as a piece of writing. There is little need to introduce the “Gothic” as such, beyond reference in terms of imagery or mention of the idea of the perverted clergyman as being an element of many Gothic tales – this is a precursor to that tradition and interesting, but the response requires a focused discussion of the ideas enshrined in the question itself.

This should have given a brief overview of ideas and content as not intended as finite in any way. Enjoy reading the text and be sure to explore widely on your own!

Works Cited

