The Canterbury Tales
“The Pardoner’s Prologue and Tale”

Literary Analysis: Exemplum
An exemplum is a short anecdote or story that illustrates a particular moral point. Developed in the late Middle Ages, this literary form was often used in sermons and other didactic literature. One famous example is Chaucer’s “The Pardoner’s Tale,” which focuses on the subject of greed. As you read the selection, pay attention to the actions of the characters and to the narrator’s description of his own practices.

“The Pardoner’s Prologue”
1. What is a pardoner?
2. Were all pardoners ethical? Explain.
3. Translate “Radix malorum est cupiditas…” from line 8, and then explain what it means.
5. In lines 16-22, in what way is the Pardoner’s choice of the topic of avarice for his tale a sign of his corruption?
6. Define castigate.
7. Review lines 39-47. Why does the Pardoner tell his moral stories? Explain how his motive is ironic, or different from what you might have expected.
8. In lines 50-57, why does the Pardoner admit his own corruption?

“The Pardoner’s Tale”
9. Where are the three men? What are they doing?
10. What did they hear going through the street?
11. To what plague does the story refer? How many people in Europe were killed by this plague during the mid-14th century?
12. Many characters in moral stories are allegorical – that is, they stand for abstract ideas, such as virtue and beauty. Identify the allegorical character presented in lines 72-89. Who fears him? Why?
13. What do the rioters decide to do?
14. What qualities of the three men does Chaucer emphasize in lines 93-107? What do you think may happen to them as a result of these qualities?
15. Who do the men meet along the road? How do they treat the person that they meet? What does this reveal about the men?
16. A foil is a character who provides a striking contrast to other characters. In what way does the old man serve as a foil to the three rioters?
17. What purposes do the story of his life and his views about death serve?

18. Lines 141-143 say, "It says in holy writ, as you may read, / Thou shalt rise up before the hoary head / And honor it." Explain what these lines mean.

19. To best illustrate a moral point, characters in an exemplum are usually good or evil. To which category does the gambler seem to belong? Explain.

20. Where does the old man tell them to find Death?

21. What do they find there? What is its worth?

22. In what way is the discovery the rioters make ironic, or different from what you had anticipated?

23. Why do they draw lots?

24. How do you think the three men will react to the challenge of sharing their treasure?

25. A parley is generally a discussion or a conference between opponents. In what way is this conversation a parley?

26. In lines 207-229, is the rioters’ corruption surprising? Explain.

27. Explain the irony in lines 221-222: "'Trust me,' the other said, 'you needn't doubt / My word. I won't betray you, I'll be true.'"

28. What plan do the two remaining rioters make?

29. Which details in lines 236-242 tell you that greed is the subject of this moral story?

30. In lines 243-259, how does the youngest rioter’s level of corruption compare to that of his friends?

31. An apothecary is a person who prepares and sells drugs or compounds for medicinal purposes, a chemist or pharmacist. What does the young rioter buy from him?

32. What happens to the young man after he returns from town? What happens to the two remaining rioters?

33. Moral stories usually straightforward plots, where events happen in quick succession. In what way does the story’s conclusion fit this pattern?

34. How does the rioters’ end support the lesson that the desire for money is the root of evil?

35. Do the rioters get what they deserve?

36. In what way does the Pardoner reveal his corruption in the end?

37. Is the Pardoner being serious or facetious ("not meant to be taken seriously or literally") at this point?

38. Why do you think Chaucer decided to have a corrupt narrator, the Pardoner, relate this tale?
Chaucer is widely admired for his skillful use of irony – the discrepancy between what appears to be true and what actually is true. For each type of irony, provide an example from “The Pardoner’s Tale.”

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<th>Irony</th>
<th>Example(s) from “The Pardoner’s Tale”</th>
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<td>39. Verbal irony occurs when someone one thing and means another.</td>
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<td>40. Situational irony is a contrast between what is expected to happen and what actually happens.</td>
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<td>41. In dramatic irony, the readers know more than the characters do.</td>
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42. After completing the chart, how essential is irony to the meaning of the story?

43. During the mid-14th century, the Black Death – a massive epidemic of the bubonic plague – swept through Asia and Europe. In Europe alone, one-quarter of the population died. In what way might these circumstances have made people vulnerable to the tricks of the Pardoner and other unscrupulous clergymen?

44. What theme, or central message, about corruption do you think Chaucer conveys in this story? How does it still hold true today?