In the medieval church, a pardoner was a member of the clergy who had authority from the pope to grant indulgences—certificates of forgiveness for sin—to people who showed great charity. In practice, however, many pardoners were unethical and sold their certificates to make money for the church or themselves.

*from The Canterbury Tales*
*by Geoffrey Chaucer*

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,
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

10 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

15 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! …

"And thus I preach against the very vice
I make my living out of—avarice.

20 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

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!

"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.

50 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...."

from The Pardoner's Tale

It's of three rioters I have to tell  
Who, long before the morning service bell,  
Were sitting in a tavern for a drink.  
And as they sat, they heard the hand-bell clink

5 Before a coffin going to the grave;  
One of them called the little tavern-knave  
And said "Go and find out at once—look spry!—  
Whose corpse is in that coffin passing by;  
And see you get the name correctly too."

10 "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,  
And suddenly, last night, the man was slain,
Upon his bench, face up, dead drunk again.
15 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.
    And then Death went his way without a word.
    He's killed a thousand in the present plague,
20 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,
    Be primed to meet him everywhere you go,
    That's what my mother said. It's all I know."

25 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.
30 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.
35 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!
40 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
45 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,
    Tearing Christ's blessed body to a shred;
50 "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,
55 "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
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;
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!
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
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.
"But it dishonored you when you began
To speak so roughly, sir, to an old man,
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,
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."

"By God," the gambler said, "you shan't do so,
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 hereabouts.
And you're his spy, by God! You wait a bit.
Say where he is or you shall pay for it,
By God and by the Holy Sacrament!

I 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?"


1. As part of the frame story of *The Canterbury Tales*, "The Pardoner's Prologue"
   A heightens suspense.
   B provides comic relief.
   C offers moral guidance.
   D foreshadows the ending.

2. Which of the following best expresses the central idea of "The Pardoner's Prologue"?
   A The Pardoner believes that avarice is the root of all evil.
   B The Pardoner exploits others' piety to get wealth for himself.
   C The Pardoner hopes that his preaching helps people to reform.
   D The Pardoner chooses moral stories that appeal to simple people.

3. Which passage best supports the central idea of "The Pardoner's Prologue"?
   A Lines 1–8
   B Lines 16–20
   C Lines 31–34
   D Lines 41–43

4. The figurative comparison in lines 11–13 of the Prologue emphasizes the Pardoner's
   A delicacy.
   B timidly.
   C eagerness.
   D peacefulness.

5. Lines 18–22 of "The Pardoner's Prologue" show that the Pardoner
   A is fearful about the afterlife.
   B despises those whom he deceives.
6. From lines 23–24, the reader can infer that the Pardoner feels
   A hatred for those he defrauds.
   B troubled by his inconsistency.
   C envious of those richer than he.
   D no remorse about his livelihood.

7. Chaucer's characterization of the Pardoner in "The Pardoner's Prologue" allows the reader to infer that the medieval church
   A was mostly worldly in its effect.
   B had little effect on ordinary people.
   C was marked by piety and corruption.
   D was characterized by simple beliefs.

8. The description of his victims in lines 44–47 of "The Pardoner's Prologue" conveys the Pardoner's
   A callousness.
   B irreverence.
   C brilliance.
   D contempt.

9. Lines 1–3 of "The Pardoner's Tale" mark the transition between the
   A past tense and the present tense.
   B dialogue and the narrative voice.
   C setting and the story's rising action.
   D frame story and the Pardoner's story.

10. The opening of "The Pardoner's Tale" sharply contrasts the fact of death to the
    A time setting of morning.
    B place setting of a tavern.
    C youth of the three rioters.
    D lifestyle of the three rioters.

11. The figurative comparison in line 15 of "The Pardoner's Tale" emphasizes Death's
    A suddenness.
    B violence.
    C stealth.
    D greed.

12. Which of the following best describes the function of the "very poor old man" met by the three rioters?
    A His age and poverty serve as a dramatic foil to the three young men.
    B He serves the plot by sending the three young men to meet Death.
    C He serves as a symbolic figure representing traditional wisdom.
    D He serves as a spokesperson for traditional wisdom.

Vocabulary

Directions Use your knowledge of context and the information in the dictionary entries to answer the following questions.
13. Study the following dictionary entry.

**lewd** (lood) **adjective**
1. preoccupied with sex; lustful
2. obscene; indecent
3. *archaic* wicked
4. *archaic* ignorant; stupid

Chaucer's original text for line 33 of "The Pardoner's Prologue" reads, "For lewed peple loven tales olde." Which meaning of *lewd* did Chaucer intend?
A lecherous
B erotic
C uneducated
D evil

14. Study the following dictionary entry.

**knave** (nav) **noun**
1. an unprincipled, crafty man
2. a male servant
3. a man of humble birth
4. *games* a playing card showing a servant or soldier and ranking below a queen

Chaucer's original text for line 6 of "The Pardoner's Tale" reads, "That oon of hem gan callen to his knave." Chaucer's use of *knave* refers to
A definition 1.
B definition 2.
C definition 3.
D definition 4.

15. Study the following dictionary entry.

**villainy** (vil'-uh-nee) **noun**
1. baseness of mind or character
2. viciousness of conduct or action
3. a treacherous or vicious act
4. *archaic* discourteous or abusive speech

Chaucer's original text for line 82 of "The Pardoner's Tale" reads, "To speken to an old man vilaninye." Which meaning of *villainy* did Chaucer intend?
A immorality
B rudeness
C treachery
D malice

16. Study the following dictionary entry.

**counterfeit** (*kaun-ter-fit*) **trans. verb**
1. to make a false copy, simulate
2. to pretend, feign
3. *archaic* to disguise
4. *archaic* emulate

Based on its context in line 43 of "The Pardoner's Prologue", the word *counterfeit* most likely means
A feign.
B simulate.
C disguise.
D emulate.

17. Study the following dictionary entry.
vicious (‘vi-shus) adjective 1. having the nature or quality of vice, immoral 2. marked by corruption or fault 3. characterized by dangerous or violent habits 4. malicious, spiteful

Based on its context, which definition corresponds with Chaucer's usage of vicious in line 55 of "The Pardoner's Prologue"?
A  definition 1  
B  definition 2  
C  definition 3  
D  definition 4

18. Study the following dictionary entry.

riot (ry-ut) verb 1. a violent and disorderly gathering 2. legal a disturbance of the peace enacted by three or more persons 3. something or someone that is marked by a high level of humor or enjoyment 4. archaic excessive revelry, debauchery

Based on these definitions of riot, the word rioters in line 1 of "The Pardoner's Tale" most likely means
A  rebels.  
B  criminals.  
C  pranksters.  
D  partiers.

Revising and Editing

Directions Read the essay and answer the questions that follow.

(1) Geoffrey Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales is a collection of stories told by pilgrims who are journeying to the shrine of St. Thomas Becket at Canterbury. (2) Such pilgrimages were common in the Middle Ages. (3) They often served to bring people from different backgrounds together. (4) Chaucer's pilgrims, who form such a heterogeneous group, include representative medieval social classes, but they are also presented as real people with real biographies. (5) Chaucer's pilgrims are introduced to the reader in "The Prologue" of The Canterbury Tales. (6) By describing people from all walks of life, the narrator of "The Prologue" paints a picture of fourteenth-century England. (7) The Canterbury Tales displays the entire range of medieval society: the nobility, clergy, learned professions, skilled workers, tradesmen, and laborers. (8) Each pilgrim represents a group. (9) Perhaps that is why the narrator does not refer to them by their names. (10) He instead identifies the pilgrims by their class, like the Knight; or by their occupation, like the Merchant; or by their situation in life, like the Wife of Bath. (11) The first pilgrim the narrator introduces is the Knight. (12) The treatment of this nobleman is a good example of how the narrator combines the general and the particular. (13) He starts by describing the Knight as a "worthy" man. (14) This quality might seem ordinary to a modern reader. (15) One modern translation renders this term as "excellent" and another as "most distinguished." (16) Some of the other qualities the narrator attributes to the Knight, such as chivalry, are also indefinite to a modern reader. (17) But the narrator doesn't stop with these rather generic qualities; he also presents the Knight as an individual. (18) This nobleman becomes much more than a mere fact of
social history. (19) The narrator describes the Knight's military career in very specific
detail. (20) He mentions all the foreign places where the Knight has fought, both near
and far, such as Spain, Egypt, Turkey, and Russia. (21) The narrator also depicts him
fighting fiercely in tournaments, which were a knight's dangerous recreation, and in
which the Knight "always killed his foe." (22) However, despite all his soldiering, this
tough, deadly fighter has remained as "meek as a maiden." (23) In this way, the Knight
becomes more than a mere role model for chivalrous behavior. (24) He starts to exist as
a real person with a full biography.

19. Which is the best way to connect sentences 2 and 3 with a subordinating conjunction?
   A Although such pilgrimages were common in the Middle Ages, they often served
to bring people from different backgrounds together.
   B Because such pilgrimages were common in the Middle Ages, they often served
to bring people from different backgrounds together.
   C Until such pilgrimages were common in the Middle Ages, they often served to
bring people from different backgrounds together.
   D If such pilgrimages were common in the Middle Ages, they often served to bring
people from different backgrounds together.

20. How might you revise the syntax of sentence 4 for a more engaging effect?
   A Chaucer's pilgrims form such a heterogeneous group. They include
representative medieval social classes, but they are also presented as real
people with real biographies.
   B Chaucer's pilgrims form such a heterogeneous group, and include
representative medieval social classes, and are also presented as real people
with real biographies.
   C Chaucer's pilgrims form such a heterogeneous group and include representative
medieval social classes. However, they are also presented as real people with
real biographies.
   D Chaucer's pilgrims form such a heterogeneous group. They include
representative medieval social classes. They are also presented as real people.
They have real biographies.

21. Choose the best way to revise sentence 5 by adding a more specific adjective.
   A By describing people from all walks of life, the narrator of "The Prologue" paints
a comprehensive picture of fourteenth-century England.
   B By describing people from all walks of life, the narrator of "The Prologue" paints
a good picture of fourteenth-century England.
   C By describing people from all walks of life, the narrator of "The Prologue" paints
an interesting picture of fourteenth-century England.
   D By describing people from all walks of life, the narrator of "The Prologue" paints
a detailed picture of fourteenth-century England.

22. Which is the best way to revise the syntax of sentence 7 using parallel structure?
   A The Canterbury Tales displays the entire range of medieval society. These
include the nobility, clergy, learned professions, skilled workers, tradesmen, and
laborers.
   B The Canterbury Tales displays the entire range of medieval society—from the
nobility and clergy, to learned professions and skilled workers, to the tradesmen
and laborers.
   C The Canterbury Tales displays the entire range of medieval society. The reader
meets the nobility, clergy, learned professions, skilled workers, tradesmen, and laborers.

D The Canterbury Tales displays the entire range of medieval society. There are the nobility and clergy. There are learned professions and skilled workers. There are tradesmen and laborers.

23. How might you revise the syntax of sentence 10 for a more informal effect?
A He instead identifies the pilgrims by their class, like the Knight; occupation, like the Merchant; or situation in life, like the Wife of Bath.
B He instead identifies the pilgrims by their class (the Knight), by their occupation (the Merchant), or by their situation in life (the Wife of Bath).
C He instead identifies the pilgrims by their class like the Knight. Or occupation like the Merchant. Or situation in life like the Wife of Bath.
D He instead identifies the pilgrims by their class, like the Knight. Or he identifies them by their occupation, like the Merchant. Or he identifies them by their situation in life, like the Wife of Bath.

24. Choose the best way to connect sentences 11 and 12 with a coordinating conjunction.
A The first pilgrim the narrator introduces is the Knight, and the treatment of this nobleman is a good example of how the narrator combines the general and the particular.
B The first pilgrim the narrator introduces is the Knight, but the treatment of this nobleman is a good example of how the narrator combines the general and the particular.
C The first pilgrim the narrator introduces is the Knight, yet the treatment of this nobleman is a good example of how the narrator combines the general and the particular.
D The first pilgrim the narrator introduces is the Knight, so the treatment of this nobleman is a good example of how the narrator combines the general and the particular.

25. How would you clarify sentence 14 by adding more specific adjectives?
A This quality might seem general and uninteresting to a modern reader.
B This quality might seem bland and boring to a modern reader.
C This quality might seem everyday and ill-defined to a modern reader.
D This quality might seem common and indefinite to a modern reader.

26. Which is the best way to clarify the meaning of sentences 14 and 15 with a subordinating conjunction?
A This quality might seem ordinary to a modern reader, because one modern translation renders this term as "excellent" and another as "most distinguished."
B This quality might seem ordinary to a modern reader, if one modern translation renders this term as "excellent" and another as "most distinguished."
C This quality might seem ordinary to a modern reader, although one modern translation renders this term as "excellent" and another as "most distinguished."
D This quality might seem ordinary to a modern reader, while one modern translation renders this term as "excellent" and another as "most distinguished."

27. Choose the best way to clarify sentence 16 by adding a more specific adverb.
A Some of the other qualities the narrator attributes to the Knight, such as chivalry, are also puzzlingly indefinite to a modern reader.
B Some of the other qualities the narrator attributes to the Knight, such as chivalry, are also simply indefinite to a modern reader.
C Some of the other qualities the narrator attributes to the Knight, such as chivalry, are also largely indefinite to a modern reader.
D Some of the other qualities the narrator attributes to the Knight, such as chivalry, are also probably indefinite to a modern reader.

28. How could you revise the syntax of sentence 20 to use parallel structure?
A He mentions all the foreign places where the Knight has fought. They are both near and far, such as Spain, Egypt, Turkey, and Russia.
B He mentions all the foreign places where the Knight has fought. He has fought both near and far. He has fought in Spain and Egypt. He has fought in Turkey and Russia.
C He mentions all the foreign places where the Knight has fought. The Knight has fought both near and far, such as Spain, Egypt, Turkey, and Russia.
D He mentions all the places where the Knight has fought. He talks about the foreign places both near and far, such as Spain, Egypt, Turkey, and Russia.

29. Which is the best way to revise the syntax of sentence 21 for a more engaging effect?
A The narrator also depicts him fighting fiercely in tournaments. The Knight "always killed his foe" in these dangerous recreations.
B The narrator also depicts him fighting fiercely in tournaments. These were a knight's dangerous recreation, and the Knight "always killed his foe."
C The narrator also depicts the Knight fighting fiercely in tournaments, which were a knight's dangerous recreation. He "always killed his foe."
D The narrator also depicts him fighting fiercely. In tournaments that were a knight's dangerous recreation, the Knight "always killed his foe."

30. Choose the best way to revise the syntax of sentences 23 and 24 using parallel structure.
A In this way, the Knight becomes more than a mere role model for chivalrous behavior, but starts to exist as a real person with a full biography.
B In this way, the Knight becomes more than a mere role model for chivalrous behavior. He starts to exist. He is a real person with a full biography.
C In this way, the Knight becomes more than a mere role model for chivalrous behavior, and starts to exist as a real person. He has a full biography.
D In this way, the Knight becomes more than a mere role model for chivalrous behavior. He starts to exist as a real person. He has a full biography.