**The Summoner’s Tale: Prologue**

When the Friar had finished telling his story the Summoner grew wild with anger and shook like an aspen leaf. He declared that he would now tell his tale to repay the Friar. It is hardly astonishing that the Friar is so familiar with hell since Friars are in league with fiends. The Summoner relates a story about a Friar who dreamt that he had been taken to hell by an angel. However he didn’t see any Friars there and asked the angel whether Friars always go to heaven. The angel then showed him the torture chamber of more than a million Friars in Satan’s arse. The Friar quaked in terror and awoke to his relief. The Summoner prayed for all the Friars except the damned Friar present among them.

**The Summoner’s Tale**

**Summary**

There lived a limiter in Holderness, a marshy region in Yorkshire, who used to go around preaching to people and begging for alms. One day after preaching his regular sermon to donate money for the masses of the dead, the Friar exhorted to the parishioners that instead of squandering it elsewhere they should contribute money for the building of sacred edifices. After his fiery sermon the Friar went around the parish begging for alms and wrote down the names of the contributors who had paid, promising to pray on their behalf. His servant accompanied him on these rounds carrying a sack to hold whatever contributions the people made. However as soon as the Friar got out of the parishioner’s door he would rub out every single name that he had written on the tablets earlier.

The Friar then came to the house of Thomas who had been bedridden due to illness. The sick man mildly criticized the Friar for not having called on him for almost a fortnight. The Friar falsely replied that he had been praying hard for Thomas’ salvation during that time. He told him that he had preached about the virtue of Christian charity in the parish church and then inquired about his wife.

The man’s wife soon came in and the Friar gallantly hugged her and kissed her sweetly while he praised her beauty. The Friar told her that he would like to preach to Thomas since it is his special skill. The man’s wife asks the Friar to talk to her husband about his mercurial temperament and crabbiness. Before leaving the good wife asked the Friar what he would like to have for dinner. The Friar hypocritically replied that he just wanted a simple homely meal but suggested a menu fit for a feast. The wife added one short word before leaving. She told the Friar that her baby had died two weeks earlier. Thereupon the Friar quickly replied that he had seen a vision of the baby being carried up to heaven within half an hour of his death. The other Friars had also seen this vision. They had then sung Te Deum and had also fasted. The Friar then proceeded to deliver a long lecture about the benefits of fasting and abstinence from worldly delights. He illuminated his lecture with the examples of Moses who fasted for 40 days, Aaron who fasted before offering prayers, and Christ who prayed and fasted for forty days. Thus he said the prayers of Friars who fast and lead a life of poverty are more acceptable to God than those offered by ordinary people.

|  |
| --- |
| http://thebestnotes.com/images/ad.gif |
|  |

Turning to Thomas the Friar launched into a didactic discourse praising the virtues of leading a life of poverty. He told Thomas that the prayers of such holy, chaste and poor Friars swooped upwards into God’s ears. He then told Thomas that their entire convent prayed for his health day and night. Therefore he should show his gratitude by donating some of his gold for the improvement of the convent. But Thomas was not impressed and bluntly replied that the prayers had not done him any good despite the fact that he had spent his entire money on all kinds of Friars.

The Friar immediately pointed out Thomas’ fallacy of seeking out all kinds of Friars. He tells him that the reason why his prayers didn’t have any noticeable effect was because he didn’t give him enough. He had diluted the effectiveness of the Friar’s prayers by giving a load of oats to one convent, twenty-four goats to another convent and a penny each to many Friars. Instead Thomas should have concentrated his donations to him alone in order to ensure efficacy. The Friar then proceeded to preach against anger. He tells him to be patient with his wife since innumerable men have lost their lives through quarrelling with their wives. An angry woman only desires vengeance. Moreover anger is one of the seven deadly sins and only spells destruction. He points out Seneca’s account of how an angry magistrate unjustly ordered three innocent Knights to be executed. Cambysses who had a choleric temperament betted with a Knight that excessive drink did not affect judgement. Accordingly he drank heavily and killed the Knight’s innocent boy. Similarly the Persian Cyrus drained the entire river of Gysen out of anger simply because his horse had drowned in it. And the wise Solomon had advised never to befriend an angry man. The Friar wound up his homily by telling Thomas to restrain his anger and instead make a confession. But Thomas replied that he had already confessed to the parish priest. The Friar then urged him to donate gold for building a monastery. This angered Thomas all the more. However he agreed to give something if the Friar promised to divide it equally among all the twelve members of his convent. The Friar readily agreed to do so. Thomas then told the Friar to reach down and feel beneath his buttocks for the gift. As soon as the Friar put his hand Thomas let out a thunderous fart. The Friar was enraged at being tricked and left vowing to take revenge.

The Friar then went to the house of the lord of the village. After having dinner he furiously relates how he had been tricked into accepting a fart that had to be divided among all the members of his chapter. The lord mulled over the impossibility of dividing the noise of the fart into twelve equal parts. He told the Friar to forget the mad fellow. However the Lord’s Squire, Jankin, who was standing near the table heard the entire incident and explained that the fart could be divided equally by seating 12 Friars around a cartwheel, each with his nose at the end of a spoke, and making the old man let off the fart from the center. The lord and lady, in fact everybody except the Friar, agreed with Jankin’s proposal and rewarded him with a new gown.

**Notes**

The Summoner’s Tale is an attack on his worst enemy the Friar. The Friars were an immensely despised lot of the fourteenth century England. Friars were mendicants and were supposed to live a life of poverty. They had to be dependent on the charity of the people and were in return expected to preach and set examples by doing good works. However Friars became corrupt and extracted money from the poor people by deceiving them. The Summoner exposes the true colors of the Friars through his retaliatory tale.

The Summoner describes a deceitful Friar in his tale who does not stop at anything to extract money from the people. He exposes the hypocrisy of the Friar through ironic portraiture. The Friar is shown to be insincere, perfidious, gluttonous, greedy, dissolute, terribly hypocritical and dishonest. For instance, while the Friar holds forth on the virtues of leading a simple life, he suggests a lavish menu for dinner in the same breath. He preaches to Thomas against anger but is himself thunderously angry when the latter tricks him into accepting a fart. He obviously does not think much about the monastic vow of celibacy and kisses Thomas’ wife passionately and praises her beauty. In brief, the Friar’s conduct violates all his monastic vows of poverty, religiosity and celibacy. He is only concerned about augmenting his own welfare and does not care the least about his patrons. He sweet - talks the people into giving donations but does feel obliged to pray for their souls. The Summoner has thus drawn the figure of an archetypal corrupt Friar in his tale. Chaucer has satirized the entire community of Friars through this tale.

It is evident that both the Friar and the Summoner hate each other passionately and wish each other to be damned. But while the Friar’s tale was subtler in its sarcasm, the Summoner’s tale is coarse and ends with a preposterously vulgar riddle about dividing a fart among the twelve members of the Friar’s chapter. This points out the Summoner’s grossness of character. However it is difficult to determine who is the worst among the two.