

ranging from a punishment from God to planetary alignment to evil stares. Not surprisingly, many people believed that the horrors of the Black Death signalled the Apocalypse, or end of time.

The effect was at its worst in cities, where overcrowding and primitive sanitation aided its spread. On November 1 the plague reached London, and up to 30,000 of the city's population of 70,000 inhabitants succumbed.

Over the next 2 years the disease killed between 30-40% of the entire population. Given that the pre-plague population of England was in the range of 5-6 million people, fatalities may have reached as high as 2 million dead.

One of the worst aspects of the disease to the medieval Christian mind is that people died without last rites and without having a chance to confess their sins. Pope Clement VI was forced to grant remission of sins to all who died of the plague because so many perished without benefit of clergy. People were allowed to confess their sins to one another, or "even to a woman".

The Pardoner at the end of the Tale offers pardons to ensure that the pilgrims will be in a State of Grace when they die by a fatal and unexpected accident. For Catholics it is important to die in a State of Grace – that is with all your past sins being absolved or pardoned. Usually this is achieved by confessing sins to a priest on your death bed. Catholics believe that if you die without being in a State of Grace, your journey to heaven is impeded.

Death was at the centre of the life in the Middle Ages due to many reasons:

- High rates of infant mortality
- Disease
- Famine
- War
- Lack of medical knowledge or care

*It was clearly a brutal part of daily life in the Medieval times.*

The attitude towards life in the Medieval Era was influenced by the people's beliefs of death. Christian tradition was that life was only a preparation for death and for eternal afterlife in heaven. Therefore to prevent one from going to hell, they had to carry out good actions and avoid sin.

➤ Therefore the Church played a large role in the lives of Medieval folk and parishes dominated England's landscapes as the Church was the centre of a Medieval community and the Church yard was the principal burial site.

The Church taught that the fate of a person's soul was not only determined by their behaviour in life but by the manner of how they died. Medieval people hoped for a 'good death' which was ideally at home, surrounded by family and friends and with a priest present to administer the Last Rites – the final forgiveness of sin. A sudden death would be viewed as a 'bad death' – it was greatly feared as it would increase the probability of going to Hell or spending a longer time in purgatory. It would mean that the person would not have had a final confession of sins or have received the Last Rites.

The Black Death, also known as at the time 'The Great Plague', 'Great Pestilence' or 'the Plague', and it peaked in Europe between 1348-1350. The effect of such a large shared experience on the population of Europe influenced poetry, prose, music etc, of this time period. It was one of the most devastating pandemics in human history. It killed between a third and a half of the population. The idea of death was very relevant to the common folk in Chaucer's day therefore making it easy for the Pardoner to sell his relics and pardons as death was imminent and unexpected so people wanted