

Life and death themes in the sandbox and everyman

[Life](#), [Death](#)



Research Paper - Life and Death Themes in The Sandbox and Everyman
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Themes in The Sandbox and Everyman This paper explores the perception
and treatment of death at points in history some 500 years apart by using
two dramatic plays as a portal into their respective time periods.

The anonymously written 15th century play Everyman and the 1959 Edward
Albee play, The Sandbox provide two extreme points of contrast to
demonstrate the significant changes and similarities in man's living
conditions and his perceptions and treatment of death. An overview of life in
medieval England about the year 1500, and life in America in 1959 is
provided up front to establish the realities of the time period in which to
review each play.

Both plays will be examined by referencing research regarding their
respective authors, the works themselves and by incorporating other
materials that provide insight into their significance and meanings. The
paper will conclude by providing a summary of insights and points of interest
regarding the perception and treatment of death during both eras. Life in
16th century medieval England was considerably different than American life
in 1959.

In addition to the substantial difference in day to day living conditions, such
as a roof over ones head or heat and light, life in medieval England was
brutal by today's standards. Many aspects of daily existence that we take for

granted in modern American cities such as sanitation, nutrition and medical care were mostly non-existent in a medieval English city. The limited availability of health and basic services, contributed to high rates of disease which reduced the average life expectancy to approximately 40 years old.

According to Carolyn Freeman Travers, a Research Manager with Plimoth Plantation, the rate of infant mortality and death from childhood disease was much higher during that time period than it was in 1959 (1). Travers points out that many people did live to be older than the 40 year average, but it was only if they survived childbirth and then navigated the disease prone childhood years to make it to adulthood (1). By comparison, life in America in the late 1950's was much easier, as is reflected by the life expectancy statistics.

According to the U. S. Department of Health's, Life Tables for 1959, the average life expectancy in the United States in 1959 was approximately 70 years of age (76). This 30 year or so difference in life expectancy, although significant on its own, when combined with the medieval childhood death statistics and the fact that death most often occurred within one's home, the average medieval adult would have likely had a great deal of personal experience with death, likely within their own families.

This is not the case in 1959 America where death often happened in a hospital setting or where the mature funeral business quickly whisked a body away from the home setting. Another interesting reference point for the two time periods is religion, and the level and significance of participation in organized religion. According to Chris Trueman, a British

historyteacherreligious participation has changed dramatically during the past 500 years. The Medieval Church played a far greater role in Medieval England than the Church does today.

In Medieval England, the Church dominated everybody's life. All Medieval people - be they village peasants or towns people - believed that God, Heaven and Hell all existed. From the very earliest of ages, the people were taught that the only way they could get to Heaven was if the Roman Catholic Church let them. Everybody would have been terrified of Hell and the people would have been told of the sheer horrors awaiting for them in Hell in the weekly services they attended. (1) (Trueman, Chris. " The Medieval Church. History Learning Site. N. p. , n. d. Web. 14 Dec. 2009.) Although accurate estimates for religious participation in the United States in 1959 were not readily available, it is likely that between 80% - 90% of Americans participated in regular religious activities during that period of time. Even though this participation number is not significantly lower than the medieval participation number, it is evident that organized religion no longer plays the dominant role in the daily life of western culture that it did during medieval times.

It seems that even though the majority of people continue to participate in organized religion, that adherence to traditional Christian based beliefs, rituals surrounding death, personal morals and family values all have deteriorated significantly in western culture since medieval times. An example of this change in family values is evident by the way in which we care for elderly parents today and how in many cases parents are treated

with the out of sight out of mind mentality which is very pervasive in western society today.

This trend is highlighted by the significant increase in the number of old age homes springing up across America. As Ruiping Fan reported in *The Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* in 2007, " Across the world, socio-economic [sic] forces are shifting the focus of long-term care from the family to institutional settings, producing significant moral, not just financial costs (1). Fan goes on to discuss the increasing move away from filial piety (respect and responsibility for parents), which had been a staple in eastern culture, towards more western oriented cultural norms, which includes institutional care for elderly parents (2).

Fan explains the reasons for these cultural changes saying, " It is just not feasible for most of us to undertake family care in today's society because most of us are living in a household where both husband and wife are working to support the household" (7). In looking at how the author of *Everyman* perceives and treats death, one must keep in mind that the primary purpose of medieval morality plays was to communicate the religious message of the day to the mostly uneducated and illiterate population.

In this case the play's author demonstrates the high significance of his message regarding death by immediately and dramatically introducing death in *Everyman*. He accomplishes this by quickly and specifically orienting the audience to the play's theme of death and by introducing the Death character to the audience. The introduction of Death takes place at the end

of God's speech where He calls upon death by saying " Where art thou, Death, thou mighty messenger? " (line 63). This is somewhat unusual for a play of this time as Allen Goldhamer notes in his 1973 journal article where he says: In order to understand the play's greatness, one should bear in mind that Everyman's presentation of death is highly unusual. The dramatization of death usually occupies the latter portion of the final act of a play and is often handled sensationally or sentimentally. In Everyman the hero begins to die near the opening of the play, and the focus of the drama is on a man involved in the stages of death. (87) (Goldhamer, Allen D. "Everyman: A Dramatization of Death" *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 59. 1 (1973): 87. *Communication; Mass Media Complete*. EBSCO. Web. 10 Dec. 2009.) For those attending a circa 1500 performance of Everyman, the dramatic delivery of this play combined with the pertinent messages of redemption and salvation along with the death theme would have both captivated the audience and instilled extreme fear in them. As noted by Dennis Moran in his 1972 paper on " Everyman," in speaking about the play's character Death, he notes that ". . .

Death physically quits the stage with four-fifths of the play remaining and the terror aroused by his summons almost wholly subsides with Everyman's return to sanctifying grace" (324). Speaking in today's terms, this would have translated into a prime time television commercial for the Roman Catholic Church, representing the only way in which one could access God's salvation, achieve eternal life and not be damned to hell. It is also interesting to note the evident Roman Catholic theme regarding Good Deeds

as the measuring stick of one's earthly life, the price for salvation and entry into heaven upon death.

This is highlighted when Good Deeds says " All earthly things is but vanity: Beauty, Strength, and Discretion do man forsake, Foolish friends, and kinsmen, that fair spake - all fleeth save Good Deeds, and that am I" (lines 870-73). As you read this play and visualize watching the play from the audience's perspective or maybe even being placed directly in Everyman's literal situation, one becomes aware of the specific knowledge the author portrays regarding the mental manipulation involved in dying.

This is evident as the play's author leads Everyman through the initial stages associated with his impending death, first where he demonstrates a lack of recognition of Death, then by asking Death for more time and then by attempting to bribe Death with ? 1, 000, all which happens before he starts to consider and then later accept his fate. As Goldhamer notes in his paper, this process closely parallel's modern psychological thinking on death as he alludes to when he says " There is no reason for us to assume that earlier ages possessed any less profound insight than our own in the matter of death" (88).

In complete contrast to Everyman is Edwards Albee's 1959 play The Sandbox, where death is turned into the farcical backdrop for this generational satire. The death of Grandma is used to highlight the absolute nonsense that goes on in many multi-generational family relationships, and highlights how elderly parents are often treated like children or even worse, like pets, by their own children. Unlike in Everyman, where death pursues

our protagonist based on God's command to do so, in *The Sandbox*, Albee uses the aggressive Mommy and the meek grumbling Daddy characters to drag Grandma to her death.

They bring her on stage against her will dumping her cockeyed in the sandbox where the Angel of Death is hovering near by. According to Mathew Roudane in his book about Albee, he notes Albee's use of death as a common theme in many of his plays and then adds that " Albee continually returns to exploring the darker side of the human soulscape" (6). Later Roudane makes reference to comments from an interview with Albee regarding his perception of death, here he recounts Albee as saying " how we lie to ourselves and to each other, how we try to live without the cleansing consciousness of death" (23).

Although one could interpret Albee's comments a number of ways, he is pretty clear that he feels death is an important theme in " *The Sandbox*" and in his other plays. It appears that he uses the death theme to tell people to wake up and live life completely, because life is short and ends abruptly with death. The life and death contrast he is alluding to is made evident in *The Sandbox* by how alive Albee makes the soon to die elderly Grandma character appear in contrast to the emotionally dead characters of Mommy and Daddy. Aside from the Angel of Death played by the young man, *The Sandbox* contains no directly visible religious references.

In a literal sense, Grandma's death is portrayed as strictly the physical act of dying, much like the treatment of death in modern American culture where rituals associated with death and the proceedings at some funerals appear to

be surreal. However, Albee has built additional metaphors into this play by using the somewhat simple stage setup including the background of sea and sky along with the sandbox and a few chairs. As Lucina Gabbard states in her 1982 review of *The Sandbox*: “ In this play, the sandbox is the entrance hall of life, the hospital dying room, and the grave.

It is located on a sandy beach near the sea, whose waters symbolize both birth and death” (28). Gabbard goes on to point out how the characters support these additional metaphors as she writes “ As the action of the play proceeds, the symbolism deepens. Mommy and Daddy, seated opposite the sandbox, perform two rituals simultaneously [sic]: baby-sitting and death-watching” (28). Albee stretches out the play’s climatic event, the death of Grandma, with extreme patience, all the while emphasizing each character’s role and thought processes.

For Grandma, she recounts her life from a serious perspective as a wife and mother when talking about living on the farm with her now deceased husband and then from a less serious perspective when she says “ I had to raise that big cow over there all by my lonesome” (1068). The offstage noises signal that Grandma’s death is looming closer, which causes the silly dialogue between Mommy and Daddy to increase, thereby focusing the audience on the contrived nature of Grandma’s disposal from the family.

Finally after Mommy and Daddy prepare to leave and Grandma is nearing her end, Mommy says “ We must put away our tears, take off our mourning . . . face the future. It’s our duty” (1069). The ending and ultimate death of Grandma incorporates the only noticeable moment of love in the

entire play, this kiss between the Angel of Death lets Grandma leave the world with a final contented line “ You’re . . . you’re welcome dear” (1069). In the end Albee treats the death of Grandma with the love and compassion you would hope for and expect in real life.

Although these two plays, *Everyman* and *The Sandbox* appear at opposite ends of the spectrum in many ways, they both deal directly with issues surrounding death and provide insight and a historical perspective of the prevailing culture. At the time that *Everyman* was first playing, the Roman Catholic Church held the monopoly on the rituals associated with death, and they were striving to educate the population on how to live within the context of honoring Church and God.

Although this is meant to be a very serious play, the dry humor and embedded entertainment value is made evident by how the plot and characters combine to ensure salvation for *Everyman*. At the other end of the scale, Albee establishes a very novel approach to communicate his message of abandonment and how American culture has evolved into a self-centered miserable existence for the masses. This play makes the point that without a purposeful, intentional life including thought and reflection regarding one's own death and even one's eternal life, that life itself can become an irrelevant meaningless struggle.

Both these plays hit the cultural mark of their respective historical periods by providing enlightening insights into death and other relevant issues of the day by incorporating some comedic value into the entertaining dramas.

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