

Example of everyman essay

[Experience](#), [Belief](#)



Abstract

This paper puts Everyman in the wider context of medieval drama and discusses the ubiquity of memento mori in medieval culture - in the visual arts and in drama. It goes on to examine the ways in which is presented as the catalyst for all the vents in t he play and demonstrates that the presentation of Death i s wholly consistent with Catholic doctrine - which is also examined in full. Death's interaction in the play with God and with Everyman is examined and finally there is reference to Shakespeare and his alleged debt to the Morality play tradition.

Key words: Death, mortality, catholic doctrine, Good Deeds, repentance, dance of death, Morality Plays

West European medieval drama consisted of three types of play: Mystery plays, Miracle plays and Morality plays. All three genres were related to religion and testify to the power and influence of the Church in Western Europe. In England, it was only in the 16th century that drama gradually became more secular and writers such as Shakespeare and Marlowe appear - although some experts see in their work the lingering influences of the plays of the medieval era - especially the Morality play. Despite the eponymous hero - Everyman - and the brief appearance of Death, it could be argued that Death is one of the most importnat characters in the play: he is certainly the catalyst for the play's plot and Everyman's journey to redemption.

Hundreds of morality plays exist from English, Flemish, Dutch and German medieval theatre. It was a very popular genre, Daniell points out the centrality of death by stating:

In morality plays, death is ever-present. It was accepted that Death was the penalty paid for the original sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.... Whether Death was sent by God, or the Devil, was unclear, with no universal agreement. (56),

However, in this version of Everyman, Death is subservient to God and visits Everyman on his orders. The Devil is not mentioned or alluded to once in this version. We must remember the relative fragility of human life during the medieval period and the lack of medical knowledge; life expectancy was very short. For this reason, the notion of the inevitability of death as the defining action of human life is omnipresent in medieval culture. Everyman has an extremely intense memento mori ("Keep death before your eyes") motif. (Cunningham, 195). Bruster points out that in the first extant printed copy of this play the woodcuts which are embedded in the text portray death as a "rotting corpse." (57) Buster goes on to describe one woodcut in more detail: "Death stands amongst bones in a graveyard, holding a coffin and pointing a finger of warning to Everyman." (58) Memento mori were ubiquitous in the iconography of the medieval era and Rosenberg assert that, "The Dance of Death [is] essential to the morality play." (9) The Dance of Death, or Danse Macabre) exists in hundreds of visual artefacts from the medieval period and they may give us an idea of how a Morality Play might have been staged,

although we know very little about the staging of such plays. (see Appendix One).

The presentation of Death in the play is wholly consistent with Catholic doctrine at the time - these plays date from well before the Protestant Reformation and there was no ecclesiastical challenge to Catholic orthodoxy. In fact, the play, according to Craig, is "shamelessly didactic," because it promulgates the catholic doctrine of salvation. In Protestant doctrine faith is central to salvation and this lead to the Protestant doctrine of predestination - the idea that we are already destined to go either to Heaven or Hell, and ther is nothing we can do to alter God's will. By contrast, Catholic doctrine was, and still is, that salvation is a choice and lies on the power of the individual believer.

Salvation, in Catholicism, rests on how we have conducted ourselves in life, as Summit puts it, "death is the fate of every man, and if our good deeds be few, we cannot hope to escape the everlasting fire. For after death we shall not have any of our faculties with which to make amends." (79). Good Deeds is the allegorical figure in the play that allows Everyman to achieve salvation, after he has renounced his worldly and sinful past in an act of repentance as Potter makes clear. The play starts, according to Potter, with a reminder of mortality - "It is mortality with which Death confronts the rich and unsuspecting Everyman." (46) - and moves relatively smoothly to its close: "In the world of Everyman, agents of repentance freely announce themselves, and a simple process of repentance on the hero's part clears his book of sin and restores Good Deeds. (157).

The relationship in this play between God and the Devil is made clear by their conversation towards the start of the play. God summons Death: "Where art thou, Death, thou mighty messenger?" (line 63, 66). Death's reply demonstrates his total subservience to God: Death, in this morality play, only has power through the good offices of God: Almighty God, I am here at your will, God tells Death to take Everyman on a "pilgrimage" in order to prepare himself for the "sure reckoning" that awaits him - the decision on whether he should go to Heaven or Hell when he dies. Death's reply is consistent with catholic doctrine in that he stresses Everyman's obsession with "richesse" and that he "liveth beastly," but he also gives a hint that Everyman can be saved in line 78 on page 67 - "Except that Alms be his good friend": alms are acts of charity to the poor and are one of the good deeds that Everyman must turn to in order to escape the fires of Hell.

Death's initial encounter is ironic for the audience and proves the truth of Death's words - that Everyman is thinking about "fleshy lusts and his treasure" (82, 67). It is ironic because the audience knows who Death is and his purpose, but Everyman's pert and slightly confrontational questions when commanded to stop by Death - "Why askest thou?/Wouldest thou wit?" (87 - 88, 67). Even when Death explains he is on a mission from God, Everyman reacts with astonished disbelief - "What, sent to me?" Everyman finally gives in and asks, "What desireth God of me?" (97, 68), but when he realizes that God wants a "reckoning" he starts to make excuses and says he does not have enough time and that he is not ready. This is a central part of the play's didactic ideology - that Death can come wholly unexpectedly when we are least prepared for it and, therefore, it is best to act all the time

in a holy way because we never know when our reckoning may come.

Everyman then complains that he does not know who this divine messenger is; again this is a clear use of dramatic irony, since the audience know precisely who Death is. Still Everyman tries to avoid the issue, because he is not ready: O Death, thou comest when I had thee least in mind In thy power it lieth me to save. Yet of my good will I give thee, if thou will be kind - Yea, a thousand pound shalt thou have, And defer this matter to another day. (119 - 123, 69). But Death is unmoved by this attempt to bribe him and states that he treats every human being the same, regardless of material prosperity or worldly status and power: Everyman, it may not be, by no way. I set not by gold, silver, or riches, Ne by pope, emperor, king, duke, ne princess. (124 - 125, 69).

It is interesting to note at this point that despite the title of the play, which might suggest a very ordinary and humble citizen, the woodcuts of the first printed versions always depict Everyman as a wealthy merchant - the very sort of person who could afford to pay a bribe. At this Everyman begins to cry and moan and bewail his fate, but Death's answer is chilling in its reminder to us all of human mortality and its inevitable and unpredictable nature: Thee availeth not to cry, weep, and pray; But haste thee lightly that thou were gone that journey, And prove thy friends if thou can, For, whit thou well, the tide abideth no man, And in the world each living creature For Adam's sin must die of nature. (140 - 145, 69 - 70).

"The tide abideth no man" hints at this play's universal message and the mention of Adam's sin reminds us of the Catholic doctrine of Original Sin.

Everyman makes one final, impassioned plea to be spared until tomorrow, but Death is implacable - "no man will I respite." (178, 71).

Of course, Death's contribution to the play does not end when he exits after his conversation with Everyman. His proximity and certainty is what leads all Everyman's false friends to abandon him on the quest, thus emphasizing the necessity of the individual to face Death and God alone to make his final "reckoning." Fellowship and Cousin (often termed Kindred in some versions of the play) both assure Everyman that they will accompany him wherever he wants to go with them, but soon change their minds when they realize that he is going to his death and to his judgment by God.

Potter has an entire section in which he traces how some of the allegorical figures in Morality plays are transformed by Elizabethan theatre as allegory was abandoned and playwrights began to explore the psychological realism of their characters. He makes a convincing case for many of the allegorical figures of the Morality plays surviving as individual types of character - especially in Shakespeare's tragedies - but it is interesting that Death is not transformed into a particular character, but remains as part of the texture of the play, reflected in the imagery and often in the thoughts of the tragic protagonists, whose progress through the tragedy bears generic similarities with Everyman's journey to the grave.

In short, as Rosenberg writes, Everyman confronts its audience with "The inevitable fact of death and the immediacy of time." (11). It reminds its catholic audience that Death can strike when it is least expected and that the true path to salvation is through confession, repentance and good works.

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