

## Everyman

### *General Introduction*

In this chapter, we shall attempt a detailed study and analysis of the medieval English morality play *Everyman* – the text, the context and the reason why it continues to be one of the most important texts in English literature even today.

Medieval English drama was, mostly, allegorical in nature. Beginning with mysteries and miracles, drama as a literary genre gradually evolved to address the lives of the people directly. What started as an enactment of religious episodes from the Bible, slowly became secularized and moved into the hands of the people themselves, away from the confinement of the church. Morality plays, unlike the miracles, did not represent Biblical stories but the conflict between the good and evil forces over the soul of man. Inspired by *Psychomachia*, they portrayed the vices and virtues as individuals on stage, in conversation with a representative human figure, embodying humankind. Emerging towards the end of the 15th century, the moralities dealt with abstractions and therefore, represent a more sophisticated audience, who were able to relate to this abstract concept of the journey of human soul. Their prime significance lies in preparing the English society for the Elizabethan theatre, as drama, in the hands of masters such as Shakespeare and Marlowe, would continue to explore the subject of human nature and the tussle between good and evil in the renewed light of changing circumstances and the Renaissance spirit.

### *The social context*

It is difficult to determine a certain fixed frame of time when the medieval plays developed from mysteries and miracles, into moralities. However, a survey of the mystery cycles provides a glimpse of the emerging originality in the writing of these plays, though within a limited scope. While the occasion and the society did not lend much opportunity for innovation to the writer of the mysteries, yet the touch of a genuine sense of art and dialogic finesse is found in the plays attributed to the Wakefield master.

Especially, in *Secunda Pastorum*, his handling and shaping of native characters like Mak and Gyll, the conversation between the three shepherds reflecting the social picture of the contemporary times and the conclusion of the play on a lighter note as Mak is tossed on a blanket, reflect the writer's ability to comprehend the layered complexities of social life and portray the same on stage. At the same time, the popularity of the play also implicates that the expectation of the audience had begun to look for a mirror of their own existence in drama as a form of entertainment.

The subject matter, therefore, started shifting from the Biblical stories and episodes to allegorical narratives of the soul of man. The Christian doctrine of sin and redemption still held strong in these plays, but the manifestation of the same was in the form of microcosmic representation of human life and the struggle between the good and evil forces to possess the human soul. Allegory was much familiar to the medieval society, and drama, too, in moving towards the morality tradition, adopted the allegorical approach of depiction.

Proper names of the protagonists stood replaced by characters such as Humanum Genus, Rex Vivus, Wisdom and Everyman, while the antagonists were represented by characters such as Pride, Flesh, Mischief and Goods. The individual was presented as a symbol for the universal, and in this manner, allegorization became a medium for the universalization of the Christian doctrine and views of human life.

### *Everyman – the text*

The morality play *Everyman* is dated around 1495 and ascribed to an anonymous author. It is said to have been derived from a Dutch play of the same time, entitled *Elckerlijck*. Whether the play is a translation of the original Dutch version, remains a highly debated issue; however, the content of the play, very different from the other moralities, perhaps retains an equal significance as food for thought, even in these changed times and spaces, across the centuries.

The play begins as a messenger comes and addresses the audience about the content of the play. This forms a sort of prologue to the play, as the messenger reminds one and all that life is a short journey through fleeting times. It, thus, needs to be lived in a virtuous manner. He adds, that sin is tempting; but all that human beings indulge in though the span of their lives as sinful pleasures, finally fade off as the soul embarks upon the ultimate journey towards the almighty.

*Messenger.* I pray you all give your audience  
And hear this matter with reverence,  
By figure a moral play:  
The *Summoning of Everyman* called it is  
That of our lives and ending shadows  
How transitory we be all day.  
This matter is wondrous precious,  
But the intent of it is more gracious,  
And sweet to bear away.

(*Everyman*, Ernest Rhys)

The introduction of the messenger is followed by the speech of God. He speculates upon the existence of humankind who live their life lost in worldly pleasures and forsake their Creator. He grieves the deterioration of the soul of mankind and anticipates a day when, guided by the “seven deadly sins damnable”, they will “become much worse than beasts” and “one would by envy another up eat”. He concludes that such deviation from the path of virtue occurs because man lives his life without any fear, and summons Death, his “mighty messenger” to go to Everyman, the protagonist. He asks Death to tell Everyman that he must take a pilgrimage in his journey through life, and prepare himself to meet God at the end of it.

Death, then, spots Everyman lost in the web of “fleshly lusts and his treasure”, and asks the latter “Hast thou thy Maker forget?” In the conversation between Death and Everyman, which follows, Death asks Everyman to keep an account of his life ready for presentation before God. He introduces himself as the one who “no man spareth” and warns Everyman to be prepared for his turn. Entrapped in the glory of sinful existence, Everyman tries to bribe Death with a thousand pounds, asking him to “defer this matter till another day”.

It is now that Death reminds Everyman that the life given to him by his Creator is a short journey. All the material wealth he acquires during his span on earth is transient in nature. He tells the latter that Death is the power who comes to take away all human beings, irrespective of class and position, when summoned by God. His way of striking is sudden, and life is a journey of no return. Everyman pleads Death to allow him a companion in this journey. To this Death replies that he may do so only if someone agrees to accompany him.

Having thus warned Everyman, Death leaves him alone on stage. Speculating upon the nature of the crisis and the little time he has in hand, Everyman tries to think of a probable companion, and decides to approach Fellowship, in whom he had placed all his trust. A dialogue between Fellowship and Everyman follows. The former asks the protagonist the reason for his sorrow and tries to comfort him with promises of togetherness, even in a journey to hell. Everyman believes him and reveals the situation to Fellowship. On learning the reality of Everyman having been summoned by Death, Fellowship forsakes him forever. He states that he would accompany Everyman, only in attaining worldly pleasures that last through life.

*Everyman.* Indeed, Death was with me here.

*Fellowship.* Now, by God that all hath bought,  
If Death were the messenger,  
For no man that is living to-day  
I will not go that loath journey —  
Not for the father that begat me!

*(Everyman)*

Having been thus forsaken by Fellowship, Everyman turns to the assistance of Kindred and Cousin. They, too, refuse to accompany him in this journey. While Kindred tells him that he must undertake the journey alone, Cousin states “Trust not to me, for, so God me speed, / I will deceive you in your most need”. Left alone on stage, as Everyman mourns his misfortune that made him place his trust in these people he had held so dear, he is reminded of another possible entity he might ask for company.

Everyman recollects that all his life he had “loved riches”, and therefore, decides to approach his Goods and riches to now assist him in this hour of need. He is certain that Goods would not

refuse him, as all his life, he has pursued only his love for them. However, in the dialogue which follows between the two, Goods makes it clear that he would keep the company of Everyman only in this world. He cannot help Everyman settle his accounts in front of God because the love for Goods is contrary to the love for the Creator. It is not that it dawns upon Everyman that he had acquired no introspection throughout his life and thus, in this hour of need, had no companion from whom he could seek help.

*Goods.* What, weenest thou that I am thine?

*Everyman.* I had wend so.

*Goods.* Nay, Everyman, I say no.

As for a while I was lent thee;

A season thou hast had me in prosperity.

My condition is man's soul to kill;

If I save one, a thousand I do spill.

Weenest thou, that I will follow thee?

Nay, not from this world, verily.

*(Everyman)*

Submerged in despair, Everyman grieves his way of life so far. At this moment, the thought of his Good Deeds occurs to him and he goes to her in order to ask her to accompany him in this journey in which everyone else has turned him away. Good Deeds, he recollects, “is so weak/ That she can neither go nor speak”, owing to his negligence towards her. In the dialogue which follows between Everyman and Good Deeds, the latter responds to Everyman “from the ground”, and adds “Thy sins hath me sore bound, / That I cannot stir”.

Unable to go with him, Good Deeds, however, does not abandon Everyman. She introduces him to her sister, Knowledge, who would accompany assist him in estimating the final account of his lifetime, to be presented to God. Knowledge, in turn, leads Everyman to the house of “the holy man”, Confession. Having learnt from Everyman that he had “come with Knowledge for my [his] redemption”, Confession hands him the “precious jewel” of penance. Accompanied by Knowledge, he is asked to scourge himself with the jewel of penance.

Confession assures him, that having completed this task with Knowledge and thus grieved for his own follies and sins, Everyman shall find his Good Deeds ready to accompany him in his journey. What follows is a long speech as Everyman performs the act of penance in the presence of Knowledge. He accepts and repents for all his misdeeds and begs for mercy from the almighty. He is now able to distinguish between the vices which lead one to hell, and the virtues, which enable man to reach the abode of God.

*Everyman.* In the name of the Holy Trinity  
My body sore punished shall be:  
Take this, body, for the sin of the flesh!  
[Scourges himself]  
Also thou delightest to go gay and fresh,  
And in the way of damnation thou did me bring,  
Therefore suffer now strokes of punishing.  
And of penance, I will wade the water clear,  
To save me from purgatory, that sharp fire.

*(Everyman)*

After the act of penance, the Good Deeds of Everyman acquires strength enough to rise up and walk up to him. Knowledge hands to Everyman a garment of contrition, wet with his tears, which will earn him the mercy of the almighty. His Good Deeds asks him to call upon “three



persons of great might” who would also go with him in this journey, namely, Strength, Discretion and Beauty, while Knowledge empowers him with his Five Wits as his “counsellors”. Strengthened thus, with a reformed self after having gone through penance for his previous sins, Everyman is now ready to undertake the pilgrimage Death had asked him to, at the beginning of the play.

Knowledge and Five Wits, then, ask Everyman to go to priesthood and seek “holy sacrament and ointment together”. This section of the play draws into it a contemporary debate regarding religion. While glorified by Five Wits as the only means to salvation, which “exceedeth all other thing”, the controversy of the corruption surrounding the church in the medieval times is also not left untouched. When Everyman goes to seek salvation of priesthood, Knowledge, in his absence, opines how the curse of God falls upon those people, who in the name of religion, indulge in trade for self-interest.

One may remember here the character of the Pardoner as portrayed by Chaucer in The Prologue to Canterbury Tales. A familiar picture in the medieval times in England, the author does not overlook the social fact. However, the sanctity of the religious doctrine is retained as the debate is summed up by the response from Five Wits, who ascertains that one who does not honour priesthood has no way to reach God. The Biblical image of the sheep and the shepherd is used in a new light as Five Wits observes of the priests: “We be their sheep, and they shepherds be/ By whom we all be kept in surety”. This section is kept short and comes to an end as Everyman re-enters the stage.

The play concludes as Everyman reaches his grave, which signifies the end of his journey through the world. As he is ready to leave, he is gradually abandoned by Beauty, Strength,



Discretion and Five Wits. Knowledge stays with him till the end of his life, but only Good Deeds accompanies him into the grave. The message intended, becomes clear. Though one may be blessed with qualities such as beauty, strength and power of discretion, all these disappear as man approaches the end of his life. It is finally the good deeds performed by a man which accompany man in his afterlife and enable him to present before God a justified account of his journey through life.

Towards the end of the play an angel announces that the soul of Everyman has reached “the heavenly sphere” because of his “singular virtue”. At the end of the play, enters a doctor to pronounce the moral of the play in the form of an epilogue. He emphasizes upon the transient nature of the worldly pleasures and reminds one and all how man should retain his good deeds and strengthen them through the journey of life, in order to be accepted by God within his kingdom and be blessed with his mercy and pity.

### ***Everyman – A Critical Overview***

*Everyman* is one of the best known moralities of medieval England, the other four being, *The Castle of Perseverance*, *Mankind*, *Wisdom* and *The Pride of Life*. Though grouped together with the rest of the plays, *Everyman* retains distinct points of deviation from the traditional line of the morality play. Differences abound in treatment of the subject, as well as, the construction of dramatic action. What remains constant with the age, is the theme of the struggle of the human soul to attain divine mercy.

*Everyman* portrays the journey of the protagonist, Everyman, through life. Though dealing with the theological subject matter of salvation of the soul, it is interesting to note that unlike the other moralities, where the good and evil forces fight to gain control over the human soul, as for example, in *The Castle of Perseverance*, there is no such depiction of a tussle in this play. The attention of the audience is called for by the messenger at the beginning of the play, and then, God familiarizes them with the fallen state through which man survives in this world. This, in itself, serves to describe the deviation of Everyman from the spiritually upright path which leads to the almighty.

Therefore, when Death sees Everyman and approaches him, he is not projected as a specific individual having gone through manipulations in the hands of the seven deadly sins under specific circumstances. It is through this generalization of Everyman as any individual who lives his life without the fear of God and consciousness of Death, that the play acquires a universal appeal, right from the beginning.

Another significant deviation from the morality tradition surfaces in the fact that the fall of Everyman is not represented on stage. After being warned by Death about the journey he must undertake, Everyman seeks a companion in Fellowship, Cousin, Kindred and Goods, who refuse to accompany him. However, the assessment and analysis of the false fleeting nature of these, whom he had thought of as his genuine companions, is done solely by Everyman in the form of long speeches. There is no good angel or virtue who comes to his rescue; if he turns to Good Deeds, then that is his self-realization.

The progress of the play, as also the life of human being, is, therefore, projected to take place through self-criticism and introspection. It is here that the paradox of the play emerges clear. Literature, universally, has been dealing with the subject of the self-analysis of an individual in the light of introspection, since ages. This is the aspect which relates to life and, hence, even in the context of *Everyman*, may be seen as an approach more realistic than allegorical, in nature. Though emphasizing upon the theological beliefs and contexts of the medieval society, it is through this ability to analyze his situation and determine the path to be taken, that Everyman manages to overcome the barriers of time and space, and remains relevant to the readers, across centuries.

As Everyman finally comes to realize his folly in having placed his faith in Fellowship, Kindred, Cousin and Goods, he says, "...of myself I was ashamed, / And so I am worthy to be blamed; / Thus may I well myself hate". Read in an existentialist light, this is the moment of spiritual awakening of Everyman. When he believed in Fellowship, Kindred, Cousin and Goods, he made his choice. It is at this moment that he realizes the false nature of these transient beings. As he proceeds to Confession, accompanied by Knowledge, he is conscious of his sins. The emergence of Knowledge as a companion to Everyman, in the play, therefore, in a way, ushers in the realization of Bad Faith.

It is this situation of realizing futility and nothingness which marks the climax of the play. This is, indeed, the moment of crisis, which in the hands of later playwrights such as Shakespeare, would translate into a moment of heightened tragedy. One may recollect here the famous storm

scene in *King Lear*, where Lear having been turned away by his daughters Goneril and Regan, to whom he had entrusted his kingdom, realizes the nothingness resulting out of bad faith. He declares, “Pour on; I will endure” (*King Lear*, Act III, Sc iv). Everyman, dating back to the medieval times, does not attain such a heroic declaration; he, however, endures the pain in the form of repentance undertaken with “the precious jewel” penance, which Confession gives to him.

Read thus, the morality play *Everyman* emerges to be a blend of fiction, medieval theology and realism. As discussed earlier, the issues of importance, related to religion and priesthood, in the society of medieval England, find reference in the dialogue between Knowledge and the Five Wits. This may serve as an interesting social perspective as it forms a part of a play staged in England before Reformation. The values asserted here are, therefore, still Roman Catholic.

However, an element of skepticism is introduced, in the form of this dialogue, to address the familiar social reality relating to ecclesiastical corruption. In fact, it provides the only instance of particularization in a play which, otherwise, universalizes. The debate comes to an end as Knowledge pronounces the punishment ordained for the corrupt priests.

*Knowledge.* Therefore Saint Peter the apostle doth say  
That Jesu’s curse hath all they  
Which God their savior do buy or sell  
Or they for any money do take or tell.  
Sinful priests giveth the sinners examples bad;  
Their children sitteth by other men’s fires, I have heard;  
And some haunteth women’s company  
With unclean life, as lusts of lechery:  
These be with sin made blind.

(*Everyman*)

Adhering to a distinct storyline, which follows the medieval concern, regarding the soul of the man, the play meets the expectation of the audience by ending on a note of optimism. The angel

declares that the soul of Everyman has reached heaven, and thus faith is reinstated in the Christian virtues of confession and redemption. Nevertheless, the spirit and theme of the play continues to be universal.

### ***Everyman – a brief performance history***

Universal in its appeal, the play *Everyman*, has not remained confined to the history of medieval English literature. It has been staged repeatedly in the completely altered contexts of plurality in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Having moved through the realms of Renaissance, Enlightenments, Modernism, Colonialism and all such realities which marked the progress of the people and their lives, this morality play did not lose its relevance. A look at a few instances of 20<sup>th</sup> century productions of the play will substantiate the point in question.

The first recorded modern performance of *Everyman* is by William Poel in July 1901. A noted English actor, well known for his adaptation of Shakespearean classics, Poel, turned to *Everyman* when he was mourning the recent death of his mother. In his adaptation of the morality play, the role of the protagonist is played by a woman, while Poel himself plays Adonai, as an old man with gray beard. Death, in the hands of Poel, lost his traditional dart, and was, instead equipped with a trumpet and a drum, to assert its existence as universal.

In a much later production of the play during 1974-75 at the Guthrie theatre in Minneapolis, the role of Everyman was distributed to each of the actors in turn, in order to signify the fluidity of the character of the protagonist, essentially human. Yet another production by Frank Galati in 1994-95 at Chicago portrayed Death as a woman who embraced Everyman.

Such differences in the history of performance highlight the scope of interpretation which this morality play of the medieval times, continued to present to the readers and critics throughout the century. A very interesting instance of re-interpreting *Everyman* on stage is provided by the adaptation *Everyman in the Mall*, produced at Santa Monica Place Mall, Los Angeles in 1994, as an attack on American consumerism.

It would be interesting to recollect that the closing decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the era which witnessed the greatest expansion of American consumerism and looked forward to a global Americanization of markets and cultures. *Everyman in the Mall* provides an instance of critiquing this social reality. Performed in a mall, backdrops used in the play were real shops. Kindred and Cousin were portrayed as two clowns who, placed on the down escalators, could never manage to reach Everyman for assistance, while the main action of the play represented multiple Everymans, male and female, dealing with the diversity of multiple Deaths as the universal finality of finite existence.

### **Conclusion**

A brief glimpse at the performance history of *Everyman*, thus, reveals, the validity of the content, even in today's world. It is, perhaps, not right to suggest that the importance of this play as a morality lies only in anticipating the advent of the glorious ages of drama in English literature. From Poel, who turned to *Everyman* during a phase of personal loss and mourning, to the final adaptation of *Everyman in the Mall*, which dwells upon the subject of the materialistic charm engulfing the individuals at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the play, justifiably, stands out as a

masterpiece in its own right. It is this universal appeal which lends to it an extremely important position in the history of English literature, and makes it an essential read for the students across generations and nationalities.

**Module prepared by:**

Dr. Gargi Talapatra  
Assistant Professor  
Department of English  
The Bhawanipur Education Society College  
Kolkata

