



Everyman

Study Guide by Course Hero



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👁 Book Basics

AUTHOR

Anonymous

PUBLISHED

15th Century

GENRE

Allegory, Drama, Religion

ABOUT THE TITLE

The title *Everyman* is a reference to the title character of the play. He represents all of humanity, who must leave behind worldly concerns and make a moral accounting before God.

📍 In Context

Morality Plays

Morality plays, along with mystery plays and miracle plays, were a transitional form of drama in medieval Europe. In the 10th and 11th centuries, Christian clergy began to dramatize scenes from scripture at religious festivals as another way to impart religious lessons to parishioners. By the 13th century these had evolved into vernacular plays (morality, mystery, and miracle plays), which were a part of most festivals. They were performed by troupes of professional or semiprofessional nonecclesiastical (not churchly) actors and included more elements of farce, comedy, and cultural reference than their completely religious predecessors. In the 16th and 17th centuries, drama would transition toward the completely secular. English playwrights Christopher Marlowe (c. 1564–93) and William Shakespeare (c. 1564–1616), for instance, specialized in comedies and histories. This is not to say there were no traces of these earlier traditions left. Marlowe draws on them in his play *Doctor Faustus* (published 1604, but performed earlier), in which a scholar sells his soul for knowledge.

Mystery plays dramatized biblical subjects such as the creation of the world, the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden, and the last judgment at the end of time. Miracle plays depicted the lives of saints, often including their martyrdom and the miracles performed after their deaths. The Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus, was a particularly popular miracle play subject. So was Saint Nicholas, who was noted for his generosity to the poor and widows and would later become incorporated into the figure of Santa Claus.

Unlike the other two vernacular play genres, morality plays centered on flawed human characters. Morality plays dramatized the struggle of humanity to choose between sinful,

worldly concerns and the path to salvation. The plays were heavily allegorical, featuring characters who stood for abstract concepts such as vices and virtues and figures who, like [Everyman](#), stood for all humanity. Significantly less evidence exists of the performance of morality plays than miracle plays, suggesting they may have been produced far less often. There are, for example, no records of *Everyman* being performed in the 16th century, when its English editions were produced.

Morality plays often include comedic elements. Performed at festivals, they would have needed to capture the attention of an audience with other activities available to them. Everyman's conversations with a frustrated [Death](#) are exaggerated to the point of comedy. So are his friends' and family's rapid abandonment of their promises to be with him even if he has to walk through Hell. Another morality play, the Dutch *The Miraculous Apple Tree*, revolves around a pious couple who are given a tree by [God](#). Anyone who touches the tree without permission becomes inexorably stuck to it with humorous effect.

This mix of allegory, spiritual lesson, and accessible comedy is particularly evident in the play *Everyman*.

Allegory

Allegory is a literary device in which a specific character, place, or situation stands in for a broader concept. Allegory may be more or less direct. For example, Greek fabulist (creator of fables) Aesop's fables use animal allegory to represent different modes of living. In "The Tortoise and the Hare" the tortoise represents diligence in the face of difficulty, while the hare is naturally gifted but lazy. The tortoise wins in the end. By contrast, British author George Orwell's (1903–50) *Animal Farm* (1945) is an allegory for the Russian Revolution (1917). Different animals can represent specific political figures. For instance, individual pigs represent both Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky (1879–1940) and Premier of the Soviet Union Joseph Stalin (1878–1953). Animals can also represent broad categories of people. For example, the horse can be read as the loyal revolutionary workers, who are swindled in the end by the pigs. Narrative beats stand for real-life historical events, such as the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact (the political alliance between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany prior to World War II, 1939–45). Allegory allows an author to dramatize moral and political questions in simple, easily consumed forms.

The play *Everyman* uses allegory on multiple levels. The larger narrative is an allegory for the path to salvation: a person must do good works and receive the blessing and sacraments of the church. Within this framework each character also has an allegorical role. Everyman, as his name implies, stands for all of humanity. Other characters are named for relationships, things, and abstract concepts, such as Kindred, Goods, Beauty, and [Good-Deeds](#). Everyman's personal relationship with these allegories as characters is meant to illustrate his spiritual relationship to them in his life. Thus, virtue characters like Discretion and Strength, once they are found, stay with Everyman to the end of his life but depart as he is dying.

15th-Century Concepts of Salvation

The Christian religion began in the Middle East. It developed as an offshoot of Judaism around the figure of Jesus, whom Christians believe to be the Messiah promised by the prophets of Abrahamic tradition. According to Christian tradition, Jesus was executed by crucifixion by the Roman state somewhere between 30 and 33 CE in Golgotha (Calvary). The pain and sacrifice of this act allowed for the redemption of all human souls. Three days later, Jesus returned to life, imparted a final mission to His disciples to spread His gospel, and ascended into Heaven. Christianity existed as a minority religion, often persecuted, within the Roman empire, until the 4th century, when Emperor Constantine the Great made it the official state religion. Roman politics meant there were two major centers of Christian power: Rome and Constantinople, both of which endured the fall of the Roman empire. In 1054 the Western church, centered in Rome, broke with the Eastern Church, centered in Constantinople, in what is known as the Great Schism. This produced the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches respectively. The Roman Catholic church held intense, virtually unchallenged religious, cultural, and political sway over most of Europe until the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century. Religious minorities, such as Jewish people, were segregated, and their movement and employment circumscribed. Interpretations of Christian doctrine not approved by the Church, such as the Cathar movement, were actively suppressed. The official language of the Catholic Church was Latin, regardless of the language spoken by its parishioners.

Roman Catholic doctrine at the time of *Everyman's* publication stated that God exists as a holy trinity—three coequal, indivisible, but distinct entities in one being:

- the Father
- the Son (Jesus)
- the Holy Spirit

God created humanity, but Adam (the first man) and Eve (the first woman) disobeyed Him in the Garden of Eden. Therefore, every human soul was burdened with original sin and so could not ascend to heaven after death (salvation). Jesus took a mortal form and died a torturous death by crucifixion as a sacrifice that would overcome the power of original sin. Faith in Jesus, together with a virtuous life, would grant salvation. Souls that were not saved might end up in hell, a place of eternal pain and damnation. They might also find themselves in purgatory, where they could do penance that would eventually make them fit for heaven, aided by the prayers and donations of the living. Though it was not official church doctrine, many Christians also believed souls could go to limbo, a realm without punishment. Limbo was reserved for infants who died before they could sin and for God's prophets and patriarchs who had lived and died before Jesus redeemed them. The Catholic Church traced its authority to Jesus's disciple Peter, who was by tradition its founder and first Pope. Jesus is said to have given Peter the keys to Heaven, which are still prominently featured on the crest of the Vatican.

By the time of the play, faith in Jesus was codified into seven distinct sacraments, administered by the church. Any given person could achieve six of them within their life. The sacraments were

- baptism, a ritual immersion in water. In early Christianity, baptism had been reserved for adult converts. However, in medieval Christianity it was performed on infants as early as possible to avoid children dying before it was administered. Baptism was seen as a covenant with the church.
- confirmation, which was the acceptance of the worshiper into the church. In the middle ages, confirmation was often performed early, sometimes in conjunction with baptism. This rite often involved unction, or the application of holy oil.
- communion, also known as the Eucharist or the Lord's supper, in which a priest performed a ritual echoing Jesus distributing bread and wine to his disciples before his crucifixion and telling them to eat it, as it was his body and blood respectively. Church doctrine at the time *Everyman*

was written held that God granted priests the power to literally transform an offering of bread and wine, a miracle known as transubstantiation. This is referenced in the play.

- confession and penance. In confession a worshiper would privately confess to a priest the ways in which they had fallen short of the Christian ideal life. The priest would absolve the worshiper's sins and assign appropriate penance. Beginning in 1215, the Church required confession and penance at least once a year for every adult Christian. Depending on the seriousness of the sins and the means of the worshiper, penances assigned in the medieval period could take a variety of forms. These included
 - the recitation of specific prayers.
 - self-administered physical punishments.
 - monetary payments to the Church.
 - pilgrimage to holy sites (especially the holy city of Jerusalem).
 - participation in the Crusades (religious wars to conquer and hold Jerusalem).
 - ordination into the priesthood. Because it was required for priests to be celibate, this sacrament precluded marriage and vice versa.
 - marriage. Christian doctrine viewed marriage as a mirror of Jesus's relationship with the church, and divorce was forbidden except in cases of adultery.
 - extreme unction, or the anointing of the sick. Colloquially known as "last rites," extreme unction was accepted as a sacrament in the 8th and 9th centuries. It granted a final blessing and absolution to those near death.

The sacraments were considered essential to prepare and purify the soul for heaven and could only be administered by a member of the clergy. In *Everyman* Five-Wits's speech regarding the priesthood highlights the necessity of priests as God's actors on earth for the salvation of the mortal soul.

However, it is important to note that *Everyman's* advocate before God is his good works on Earth, which are ultimately required for his salvation. They are the criteria on which *Everyman* will be judged. The presentation of the character of Good-Deeds illustrates an important point with regard to the concept of salvation presented in the play. Good-Deeds will plead *Everyman's* case before God, but without the Church's intervention (Confession), she is too weighed down by his sin to make the journey. Within the spiritual world in which *Everyman* was written, both a virtuous life and the sacraments, in tandem, were considered necessary for salvation.

Author Biography

Unknown Author

No author is known for the play *Everyman*, and its history is the subject of some academic debate. A Dutch version of the play, called *Elckerlijc*, exists with a surviving printing dating from 1495. Four English editions of the work—two fragments and two editions with different word choices published by John Skot—have survived to the present. All four date from between 1500 and 1530. The scholarly consensus is that the English version of the play is a translation of the Dutch version. No author or translator is known for the English version; the information is lost to history. The Dutch version of the play is attributed in one of its translations to an author known only as Petrus from Diest. No further information about this person exists.

Interestingly, there are no records of *Everyman* being performed during the Middle Ages (5th century–13th century). This has led to speculation that it was never intended to be performed, only read. Support for this theory exists in its introduction, which states it is "An account of their lives in this world ... In the manner of a moral play" rather than a moral play itself. The play also contains 17 speaking roles—larger than troupes who performed other documented morality plays could have comfortably accommodated.

Although it may not have been performed in the Middle Ages, *Everyman* is considered the greatest of the English morality plays and is still performed today.

Characters

Everyman

Everyman represents all of humanity. He has lived a sinful life during which he sought out pleasure and accumulated wealth. He did not engage in charity, nor did he consider his immortal soul. When Death comes to him, he begs, stalls, and tries to bribe his way out of consequences. He is upset that his friends and family will not help him though it is clear in their position he

would do the same. Although Everyman begins the play afraid, confused, and hurt, he becomes calmer and braver through the faithfulness of Good-Deeds and the moral guidance of Knowledge. He is genuinely grateful for their friendship. Confession and communion soothe his soul, and by the end of the play, he is ready to die. He is distressed that his Strength, Beauty, Discretion, and Five-Wits will not come to the grave, but he is comforted by Knowledge and Good-Deeds. He ascends from the grave into heaven and is saved.

Death

Death travels at God's command. Death boasts about how he will "beset all who liveth beastly," with the implication that his power over the righteous is limited. Death will accept no bribery and chastises Everyman that he should have known Death would always come. Death is implacable (not able to be appeased) and repeats his unrelenting message. He comes for every person; this is his mission from God.

Good-Deeds

Good-Deeds is earnest and true. She is the only character who is willing and able to come with Everyman after death to plead his case before God. She wants to help Everyman even when she is too weak to do so. She directs him to her sister, Knowledge, who provides Everyman with the guidance to achieve salvation. The state in which Good-Deeds is introduced is an important moral feature of the play. Because Everyman has been miserly and wicked, she is too small and weak to move, and the weight of his sin crushes her down. As Everyman pursues penance and righteousness, she becomes strong enough to stand as his advocate. Without a proper religious life and the intervention of the Church, she would have been unable to help him.

Knowledge

Like Good-Deeds, Knowledge is a wise and virtuous guide for Everyman. She represents knowledge in the specific sense of knowing the difference between right and wrong, and she guides Everyman to religion and correct behavior. Though she cannot follow Everyman after his death, she stays with him when all his other earthly friends have left him. He responds to

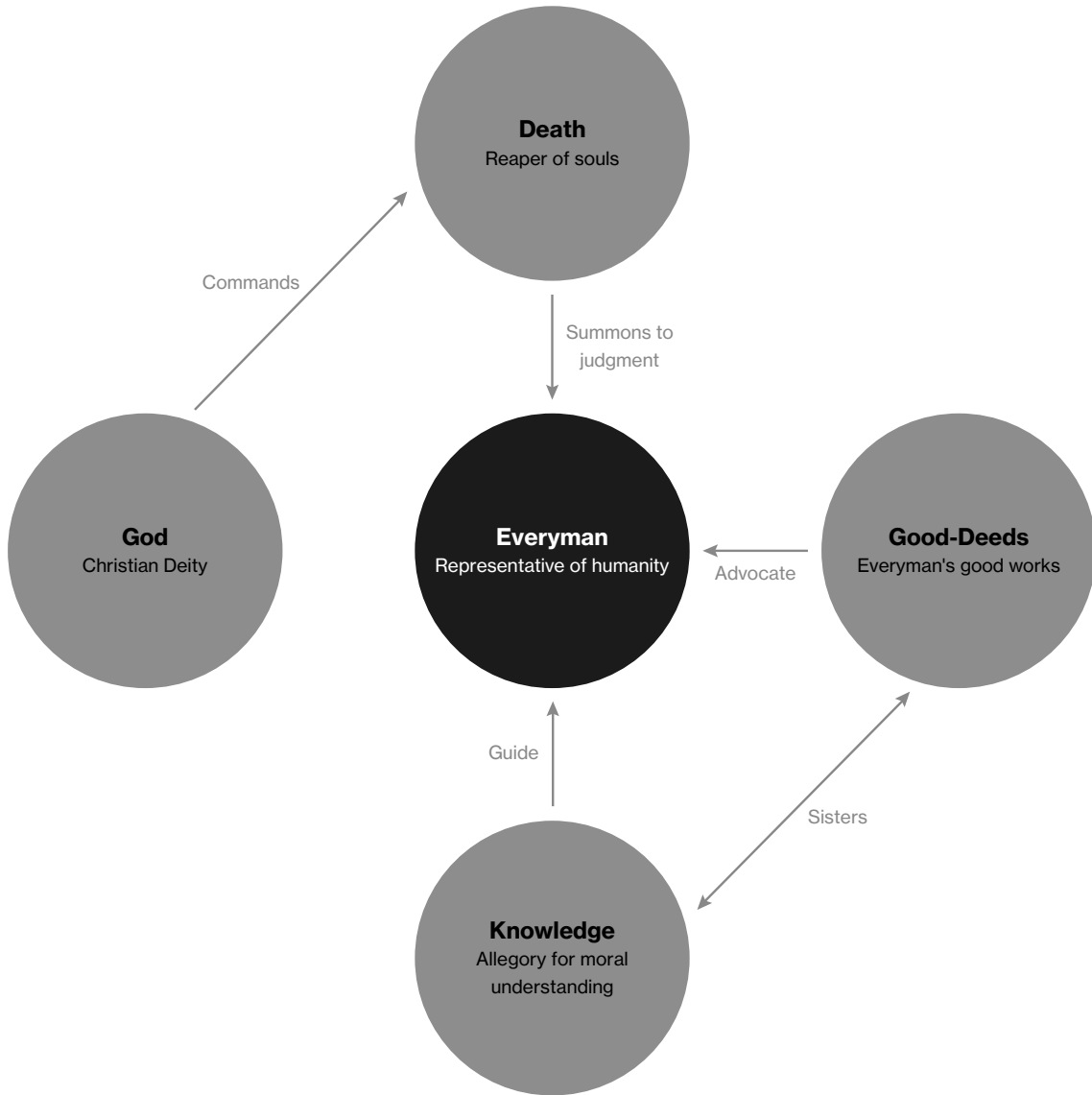
her with genuine gratitude, and she stays by his grave after he passes.

God

God appears only once in the play to establish the moral state of humanity and to send Death for Everyman. Still, He is a constant presence in Everyman's quest for salvation.

Everything that happens in the play is set out by God's design. He has laid out the conditions of Everyman's redemption and the path by which redemption can be accomplished. He has given power to His earthly representatives, the clergy. In the end, Everyman's reward is to be with Him.

Character Map



- Main Character
- Other Major Character
- Minor Character

Full Character List

Character	Description
Everyman	Everyman is an allegory for humanity. Though he has lived his life sinfully, he is able to receive forgiveness and salvation through prayer, penance, and good works.
Death	Death is commanded by God to go to Everyman and bring him to judgment. Death takes pride in reaping all people, no matter how powerful, and is frustrated that Everyman hasn't considered his mortality more often.
Good-Deeds	Good-Deeds represents the good Everyman has done in his life. She is small, weak, and weighed down by his wickedness, but she stays with him throughout his journey to help plead his case to God.
Knowledge	Knowledge is the sister of Good-Deeds and represents the understanding of right and wrong. She brings Everyman to confession and instructs him to gather virtues about himself.
God	God is the Christian creator figure, who is a trinity composed of the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. He is frustrated by humanity's wickedness despite His patience and redeeming sacrifice.
Angel	The Angel is a heavenly being who announces Everyman has been saved.
Beauty	Beauty is an allegorical character who personifies earthly beauty. She is the first of Everyman's virtuous friends to leave him, as she would rot away if she followed him into the grave.
Confession	Confession is described as a holy man. He gives Everyman a penance that absolves his sins and frees Good-Deeds to go with Everyman before God.
Cousin	Cousin is Everyman's relative, who pledges his support but forsakes him when Everyman is called by Death.

Discretion	Discretion is an allegorical character who personifies Everyman's ability to make wise decisions. He leaves Everyman after Strength.
Doctor	The Doctor is a scholar who summarizes the moral of the play for the audience.
Fellowship	Fellowship represents Everyman's friends. He declares he will stand by Everyman through hell but is only interested in being Everyman's friend in good times and merriment.
Five-Wits	Five-Wits is an allegorical character who represents Everyman's ability to perceive and comprehend and who leaves him as he is dying. He serves as a foil to Knowledge, who helps Everyman understand his spiritual shortcomings.
Goods	Goods is an allegorical character who represents all of Everyman's wealth and possessions. Though Everyman loves him best, he reveals himself to be a force for damnation.
Kindred	Kindred represents Everyman's family. He promises to help Everyman but refuses to go with him to God.
Messenger	The Messenger opens the play by requesting the audience's attention and preparing them for the play's contents.
Strength	Strength is an allegorical character representing Everyman's physical strength. She leaves him when he dies.

Plot Summary

Visit from Death

In an introduction a Messenger asks for the audience's attention. The action begins with [God](#) complaining that men have become thoroughly wicked and have taken for granted everything He has given them. He summons [Death](#) and commands him to bring [Everyman](#) to accounting.

Death obeys and comes upon Everyman walking alone. He asks Everyman if he has forgotten God, and tells him he must make a pilgrimage to the afterlife to be judged. This will be a journey from which he can never return. Everyman stalls, begging for more time. He complains he was not expecting Death. An exasperated Death tells him he should have known better and gives him a brief time to prepare himself.

Earthly Friends

Everyman laments his fate. He asks Fellowship, who represents his earthly friends, for help. Fellowship declares he would walk through hell with Everyman. However, he quickly changes his position when he realizes the afterlife is actually where Everyman is going. He says he will be with Everyman if he wants to enjoy life, but he will not go on this journey with him. Everyman turns to Kindred and Cousin, who make similar promises, but also abandon him when they learn where he is going. Everyman calls out to Goods, who represents his wealth and worldly possessions, saying he loved Goods best of all. Goods says he can fix any earthly problem but will only hurt Everyman's case with God, as love of wealth is a trap that damns souls.

Everyman calls out to [Good-Deeds](#) to come with him and speak to God. She says she would if she were not so weak from the weight of his sin. She directs him to her sister [Knowledge](#), who will guide him. Knowledge brings Everyman to see Confession, who gives Everyman a penance to absolve his sins. Everyman performs his penance and prays to God for forgiveness. Once this is done, Good-Deeds is healed and able to come with him.

Knowledge and Good-Deeds advise Everyman to gather virtues to himself: Beauty, Strength, Discretion, and Five-Wits. The virtues urge Everyman to receive communion and extreme unction before he dies. Five-Wits and Knowledge discuss sacraments and how priests are God's actors on Earth, acknowledging the soul cannot receive salvation without their vital work. Everyman returns from the sacraments ready to go to his grave, but his earthly virtues—Beauty, Strength, Discretion, and Five-Wits—leave him as he dies. Knowledge stays with him until the end, but she cannot follow him after death. However, she hears the angels sing and knows Good-Deeds has gone with Everyman to heaven, where he has been saved.

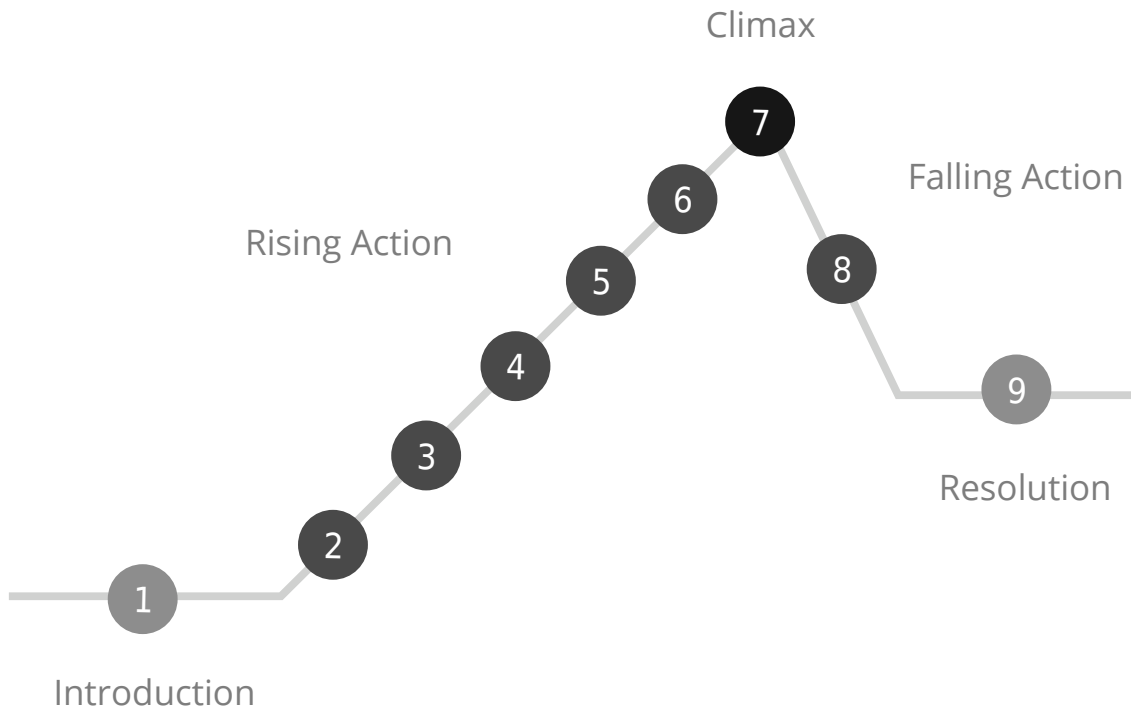
Salvation

An angel affirms that Everyman has been saved, and a Doctor reiterates the lesson of the play:

- Only Good-Deeds and no earthly possession, relation, or virtue may stand with a person's soul before God.
- Good-Deeds must be robust enough to stand God's scrutiny.

There will be no chance to change after death. Those found wanting will be cast into eternal damnation and those who are righteous will be crowned in heaven.

Plot Diagram



Introduction

1. God dispatches Death.

Rising Action

2. Death summons Everyman.
3. Everyman's friends and family abandon him.
4. Everyman's wealth laughs at him.
5. Good-Deeds cannot walk under the weight of Everyman's sins.
6. Knowledge directs Everyman to Confession.

Climax

7. Good-Deeds regains strength and goes with Everyman.

Falling Action

8. Earthly virtues join Everyman but leave as he dies.

Resolution

9. With only Good-Deeds beside him, Everyman is saved.

Timeline of Events

Same Day

Death tells Everyman he must make a pilgrimage from which he can never return.

Same Day

Everyman asks Kindred and Cousin for help, but they offer excuses.

Same Day

Good-Deeds says she would go with Everyman if she were not weak and weighed down by sin.

Same Day

Everyman gathers Beauty, Strength, Discretion, and Five-Wits to live virtuously.

Same Day

Beauty, Strength, Discretion, and Five-Wits leave

One Day

God sends Death to summon Everyman to judgment.

Same Day

Everyman asks Fellowship to come with him, but Fellowship refuses.

Same Day

Everyman asks Goods for help, but Goods reveals himself to be working toward Everyman's damnation.

Same Day

Knowledge directs Everyman to Confession, and penance frees Good-Deeds.

Same Day

Everyman receives the sacraments of Communion and anointing, becoming ready to die.

Everyman as he goes to his grave.

Same Day

With Good-Deeds to speak for him, Everyman is saved.

Same Day

Knowledge stays with Everyman until the end, and Good-Deeds follows him to judgment.

Section Summaries

The text of *Everyman* does not have acts or scenes. The text has been broken into sections based on character and plot for the purposes of summary and analysis.

Section 1 (Prologue)

Summary

The Messenger addresses the audience directly and asks that they listen "with reverence" to *The Summoning of Everyman*, which takes the form of a morality play. He promises it will show how brief life is and that, while life is precious, salvation is greater still. The audience should not be so happy in life that they neglect spiritual matters, or they will regret it after death. Strength, Pleasure, and Beauty will fade away from them. God will call Everyman to account of his life, and the audience should listen.

God speaks, complaining that people live without fear of the eternal in a world of prosperity and never think of Him. They have forgotten the law He has given them and His sacrifice when He died on the cross. He has suffered to his utmost capacity for humanity, but they have forsaken Him for deadly sins of the flesh. Pride, envy ("covetise"), wrath, and lechery (sexual indulgence) are prized on earth. God concludes the more leeway He has given them, the worse humanity has become. Therefore, He will call Everyman to account. He is concerned if He does not act, humanity will become worse than beasts. God had high hopes for Everyman, but humanity has taken for granted the things God has given them: pleasure, life, and divine mercy. They are so weighed down by worldly riches that God must judge them. He summons Death and dispatches him to take Everyman on an inescapable pilgrimage to his reckoning.

Death agrees and speaks of how he will cut down every man that lives outside God's laws. He will deliver the rich, who love money more than God, to hell.

Analysis

As a morality play, whether it was intended to be performed or merely read, the purpose of *Everyman* is to morally educate its audience. That's why many of the lessons within the play are not particularly subtle and are repeated multiple times by multiple characters. The idea is to make the lessons as easy to understand as possible. Additionally, the audience would have been illiterate, and a performance would likely have taken place during a festival. Repetition helps the audience to understand and remember the content and to hold their attention in the middle of distractions. The play is bookended by the Messenger and the Doctor, characters who do not appear anywhere else in the play. They draw the audience's attention explicitly to the lessons of the text. *Everyman* prioritizes its message and takes pains to minimize ambiguity or possible alternative explanations of its events.

The Messenger and the Doctor speak directly to the audience. However, other characters in the play do so as well, notably Everyman himself. This technique is known as *breaking the fourth wall*. The expression comes from the traditional proscenium arch stage, in which there are three visible walls: the back and the two sides. The "fourth wall" is an invisible one between the characters and the audience. In plays characters generally interact with one another as if the audience did not exist. However, for various reasons, a character can suddenly pause in this interaction and speak directly to the spectators. When this happens, the invisible fourth wall is broken. Characters often break the fourth wall to comment on the story, their thoughts and feelings, or their intentions. Despite its name, the practice long predates the use of the proscenium arch. In fact, it was very common in medieval and Renaissance theater. In *Everyman*, breaking the fourth wall allows characters to emphasize an important moral of the play.

The prologue also reinforces the play's foundation in Christian theology, which would have been familiar to the audience at the time. Throughout the play, God is explicitly the trinity. He is listed in the character list as Adonai, but He also references the crucifixion of Jesus using the pronoun "I" ("to get them life, I suffered to be dead / I healed their feet, with thorns hurt was my head."). He also explicitly states that His sacrifice was meant to save all humanity ("thereto I had them all elect"), a notion that is not present in every type of Christianity. God's frustration with humanity's sin and ingratitude reinforces the scriptural point that humans have been given free will. They all

have the capacity to be saved, but whether or not a person achieves salvation is a consequence of their own actions and choices. God also watches constantly and takes an active hand in the instruction of humanity. He does not send Death to punish Everyman but to instruct him because he has forgotten more spiritual matters. He uses the phrase "Everyman living without fear," which to a modern ear sounds positive but within the spiritual understanding of the play is potentially ruinous. As the Bible says, "fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge" (Proverbs 1:7). In order for Everyman to be saved, he must be spurred to consider his mortality and the judgment afterward.

The play is written mostly in end rhyme of various syllables and patterns. The Messenger's speech, for example, is written in a regular rhyme pattern of AABCCBDDBEEBFFBGGGBHBB, with the "ay" sound of the B lines repeating throughout (play, day, away, gay, clay, May, say) to give it a consistent through line. However, God, the next character to appear, speaks in more complex rhyming patterns, for example ABABCBCEFEFGG ("I perceive" to "hurt was my head"). Death, when he appears, speaks in rhyming couplets, though later in the play he adds more variation. The loose rhyming pattern adds interest and memorability to the text without overly constraining what the characters can say.

Section 2 (Death)

Summary

Death spots Everyman walking happily, without a thought on his mortality, his mind consumed with lust and money. Death speculates that this life will cause Everyman pain when he stands before God's judgment. He asks Everyman where he's going in such a good mood and if he has forgotten God.

Everyman asks why he asks. Does he want to know? Death replies he's come to show Everyman where he's going, sent by God Himself. Everyman seems surprised that Death has been sent for him. Death replies that Everyman may have forgotten God, but God has not forgotten Everyman.

Everyman asks what God wants with him. Death says he will show Everyman, but they must go now. Everyman tries to stall for more time, saying he isn't sure what's going on. Death insists. Everyman must come and tally his many bad deeds against his very few good ones and answer for how he has

wasted his life. They must go now, and Everyman must defend himself. No one may speak for him.

Everyman says he isn't ready and asks to whom he is speaking. Death says he is Death, who comes to all people, and God has given him dominion over all men. Everyman pleads with Death. He was not prepared and Death has the power to spare him. He tries to bribe Death with 1,000 pounds to wait. Death replies he has no use for gold. He's taken popes, emperors, and other royalty, and no one can make an offer that would stay his hand.

Everyman complains Death came on him without warning. His moral accounts were not in order. If he'd had another 12 years, he's sure he could have set his life in order so he would not fear death or judgment. He asks for the extra time. Death scolds him to stop crying and hurry up.

Everyman asks if he can come back once they're done, and Death says never. Everyman begs God to let him take friends on this journey. Death says if he can find anyone who will go with him, he may, but he must hurry. He asks if Everyman thought his life and his worldly goods were actually his own. Everyman says, yes, he did. Death says these things were merely lent to him and will belong to someone else after he is dead. Death chides him for not having the sense to know death would come and live accordingly. Everyman begs for one more day, but Death denies him and tells him to make ready for their journey.

Analysis

Death finds Everyman alone, walking happily in a state of sinful ignorance. His insistence and Everyman's obliviousness make for a comedic back and forth that is only enhanced by the device of Everyman finishing several of Death's rhyming couplets. Everyman's attempts to stall Death are exaggerated to the point of farce. For example, when Everyman asks for more time to settle his moral accounts, he asks for 12 years. Whether he is intending to negotiate down or merely naively greedy, it is an exorbitant sum of time compared to the immediate death being offered. Everyman also appears ignorant of basic points of Christian doctrine, such as that his life and fortunes were lent to him by God rather than possessions he owned. He attempts the fruitless endeavor of bribing Death. These attempts show Everyman to be cowardly, greedy, opportunistic, and dishonest.

Death explicitly mentions the Genesis story of Adam and Eve: "And in the world, each living creature/ For Adam's sin must die of nature." In the theology of the play, God created Adam and Eve as deathless, perfect humans. However, first Eve then Adam fell to temptation and ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge, which God had specifically forbidden. After this, Eve conceived children and bore them painfully, Adam had to work the fields for nourishment, and both would eventually die. Moreover, all their descendants would carry the stain of their original sin of disobedience and suffer permanent death, unable to enter Heaven. Within the theological understanding presented by this play, this original sin was overcome by the sacrifice of Jesus. Numerous references exist in the play to Jesus overcoming and defeating Death, whose power derives from this sin. One example is when Everyman prays to God as "the ransomer and the redeemer."

Death and Everyman are two of the play's most important allegorical characters. Everyman represents, as his name implies, all of humanity. He stands in for the multitude, and his flaws are instructively exaggerated tendencies common to many people. He does not think about death and is distressed when he is suddenly confronted with it. He enjoys a comfortable life and does not want to give it up. Though he is comedically broad, his central motivation in these early scenes—fear of death—is easily comprehensible to anyone in the audience.

By contrast the character of Death is the personification of an event. Aspects of the character coincide with an understanding of death. He may come suddenly with no warning and cannot be bribed away from his duties. This gives the concept of death a voice to speak and points to argue, making it more easily understandable. It also allows Everyman to plead for his life, not to an uncaring universe, but to something that looks like another person. It condenses a universal experience into a single target. This allows an actor on the stage to respond with physical exaggerations of more subtle, internal emotions. It also allows the character on the page to make a coherent argument, when in reality such feelings might be hard to put into words.

Section 3 (Fellowship, Kindred,

and Goods)

Summary

Everyman frets that he must go on this journey alone and he is completely unready. He is afraid and upset, but it does not help. He does not know what to do. He sees Fellowship, with whom he has spent so much companionable time, and decides to ask him for comfort. Trusting Fellowship will come and will listen to his woes, he hails him. Fellowship asks Everyman what's wrong and promises to help, declaring he will never forsake Everyman. He insists it hurts him to see Everyman in pain, and he'll avenge himself on anyone who has wronged Everyman even if it costs his life. Everyman is reluctant, saying it would hurt worse to open up to Fellowship and then get no help, but Fellowship is adamant. He declares even if Everyman must go to hell, Fellowship will be there with him. Everyman confesses he must journey before God to face judgment, and when Fellowship asks, adds that they will never return to the mortal world.

Fellowship says that sounds terrible and he will not go. Everyman points out that Fellowship literally said he would go to hell for him just a few seconds ago. Fellowship says he wouldn't take a journey with Death for his own father. Still, if Everyman wants to have a good time eating, drinking, and chasing women, Fellowship will gladly have his back. Everyman suspects Fellowship is a good deal more interested in having fun than being his friend in a time of need. Fellowship counters he would help Everyman kill someone, if that was what he was going to do, but he won't go with him. He leaves Everyman to God and departs.

Everyman complains it's easy to find friends when everything is going well, but they desert a person in need. He decides he will seek help from his family. He calls for Kindred and Cousin, and they come, declaring he may rely on them because their fortunes are bound up together.

Everyman explains an important king's chief officer has commanded him to go on a pilgrimage. He can never return and must give an accounting of all his works and deeds. He says a great enemy is working against him. He asks if Kindred and Cousin will come with him. Cousin says he'd rather eat nothing but bread and water for five years. Kindred tells him to cheer up but declines to go with him. Cousin says he can't go

because his toe has cramped up, and he would slow Everyman down. Kindred says he'll lend Everyman his maidservant for the journey if she'll agree to go.

Everyman complains that his family are no better than Fellowship, and he has little time left. He turns to the thing that he loved all his life: his riches. He calls out to Goods to come to him. Goods points out that he is locked in chests and bound in bags, and he can't move. Still, he is certain there is no trouble in the world he can't remedy. Everyman says what troubles him isn't of this world. However, he wants to bring Goods with him to his reckoning with God because it's often said money can fix any problem. Goods says he won't go with him, and even if he could, he would hurt Everyman's case more than help it. Goods explains that if Everyman had loved him a bit less and given part of him to the poor, he'd be in a much better position. Goods says he was only lent to Everyman, and he's a poison for the soul that reveals its evil guise once a person has died. He will not go with Everyman. Everyman rails at Goods for his treachery, but Goods points out Everyman brought this on himself and laughs at him.

Analysis

The characters in this segment of the play represent the worldly pleasures and pursuits in which Everyman has invested his life to date. All of them have been bad influences on him. Fellowship indulges in gluttony and lust. He tells Everyman "yet if thou wilt eat, and drink, and make good cheer / or haunt to women, the lusty company / I would not forsake you while the day is clear." Goods, meanwhile, nourishes Everyman's greed and confesses he does so in order to damn souls. Kindred and Cousin are cowards. Each of them, in his own way, lies to Everyman. Not only are they incapable of going on the journey with him; they make wild excuses. While Everyman's motives are selfish—he is afraid to die and does not want to go alone—his companions in this section come off worse for their duplicity. They promise Everyman support and that they can fix his problems, but they are worse than no help at all.

Like Everyman in his conversation with Death, the companions of this section are exaggerated to a comedic degree. Fellowship in particular makes lavish declarations, including, in a moment of dramatic irony, his willingness to walk with Everyman into hell if that is called for. The audience is aware that this is basically what Everyman is about to ask him, but Fellowship is not. The extreme nature of his proclamations

makes his refusal mere seconds later to follow through on them an opportunity for comedy. This is especially true because Everyman is able to point out Fellowship's hypocrisy. Likewise, Cousin's excuse that he cannot go with Everyman because he has a cramp in his toe is humorously small in comparison to the task. Kindred's cowardly offer to send his maid in his place because she likes to travel is enough to occasion a chuckle. So is Goods's point that he cannot journey with Everyman because he is locked in a chest. The humor and hyperbole of these interactions allow a release of some of the tension inherent in the play's premise: the mortality of all people.

Goods is, as an allegory, very self-aware. He tells Everyman, "A season thou hadst me in prosperity; / My condition is a man's soul to kill; / If I save one, a thousand do I spill." Although Goods reveals he is always a moral peril, the play makes clear it is not owning wealth that has been Everyman's problem, but hoarding it. Had he given more to the poor, he would be in better stead with God.

Section 4 (Good-Deeds, Knowledge, and Confession)

Summary

Everyman takes stock of his situation. Fellowship and Kindred both pledged their support but abandoned him immediately. His worldly wealth told him directly it dragged men to hell. Changing strategies, he considers his good deeds, which are small and weak. Still, he calls to Good-Deeds, who answers, saying she knows Everyman's situation and will come with him if he asks. However, Good-Deeds is too weak to stand, crushed under the weight over Everyman's misdeeds. She asks Everyman to look at the book where his good deeds are written, but Everyman doesn't see a single letter. Good-Deeds says she would go with Everyman if she were able. She tells Everyman to go see her sister, Knowledge, who will go with him.

Knowledge says she will go with Everyman and be his guide. Everyman is delighted. Good-Deeds says if he goes before God with Knowledge and Good-Deeds, it will be a happy journey. Knowledge declares they will go see Confession.

Everyman asks where Confession lives. Knowledge explains he is in the house of salvation, and Everyman should kneel before him. Everyman does so and begs Confession to wash him clean, as he repents his sin and has come with Knowledge to be redeemed. Confession says he knows Everyman's troubles and will give him the jewel of penance. Penance will be unpleasant, but Confession reminds Everyman that Jesus suffered terribly for him and endured it with patience. Everyman must do so, too. Confession tells Knowledge to guard Everyman on his journey, and Good-Deeds will join them. He says Everyman must ask God for forgiveness, but he is sure Everyman will receive it. Everyman says he is ready to begin his penance.

Everyman praises God and prays to Him for forgiveness. He says while he knows it is very late to be praying and he has lived his life poorly, he wishes genuinely to be saved. He is ready to accept bodily punishment as a penance. The penance heals Good-Deeds so she can join him on his journey. Knowledge and Good-Deeds tell him to rejoice because he will be saved and they will not leave him. Knowledge gives him a garment wet with his tears to wear before God; it is made of his sorrow and contrition. Everyman thanks her and says they should go at once.

Analysis

The juxtaposition of Goods and Good-Deeds provides a narrative turning point in the play. Everyman, having been betrayed by what he loved most, turns to that which he most neglected. Both Goods and Good-Deeds understand the spiritual implications of their relationship to Everyman. Whereas the powerful Goods is a malicious presence, Good-Deeds is well-meaning but weak. Everyman knows this when he calls on her. This is the first time in the play Everyman begins to worry about spiritual concerns, and Good-Deeds is the first virtuous companion to whom he reaches out. Like Goods she represents a more material interaction with the world than, for example, Knowledge or Discretion, but she is a bridge to more abstract virtues.

Knowledge's allegory requires some unpacking for the modern audience. Today the term *knowledge* might be understood as a collection of facts. However, the *knowledge* of the play is a moral understanding of good and evil. The medieval conception of knowledge of the world, particularly as influenced by Thomas Aquinas (1224–74), began with faith and

scripture as the beginning of truth. They served as the foundation for all other intellectual pursuits. There was no divide between a secular capacity to understand and a spiritual comprehension of the world. This helps explain why "Knowledge" is the name chosen for this character.

Confession is described in terms of flowing water, as both a river and a fountain. Although he is explicitly an allegory for the sacrament of confession, these allusions link him thematically to the purification ritual of baptism. They also link him to the broader idea of washing clean what is dirty. The water symbolism also links Confession to the third person of the Trinity: the Holy Spirit. The Bible several times refers to the Holy Spirit in terms of water and emphasizes both its cleansing nature and its ability to bring humanity closer to God.

The question of the relative importance of good works versus faith in a soul's salvation is a recurring one in Christian theology. There is general agreement that without the sacrifice made by Jesus, salvation is impossible. In some branches of Christian theology, this is interpreted to mean only faith in Jesus's sacrifice and divinity are necessary for salvation. However, the doctrine at the time and as expressed in the play is that Good-Deeds will be the criterion on which Everyman's soul is judged. Yet, as long as she is weighed down by his worldly sins, Good-Deeds cannot speak on Everyman's account. It is the power of the church to absolve these sins through confession and other sacraments that allows her to speak for him. Thus, both Everyman's own moral choices and his participation in the Church are necessary for him to go to heaven.

Section 5 (Discretion, Strength, Beauty, and Five-Wits)

Summary

Good-Deeds says they should bring Discretion, Strength, and Beauty with them, and Knowledge tells Everyman to bring his Five-Wits as well. Everyman asks how he should gather them, and Knowledge says he only needs to call. Beauty, Strength, Discretion, and Five-Wits answer his call. They declare they will never leave Everyman. Everyman gives half his goods to charity, and Knowledge tells him to go to a priest for his

sacrament. Five-Wits agrees, saying the lowest priest has a higher commission from God than any king or emperor because he holds the keys to heaven. He reminds Everyman of the seven sacraments:

- baptism,
- confirmation,
- priesthood,
- Communion (the consumption of bread and wine that have been ritually transformed into the blood and flesh of Jesus),
- marriage,
- unction (the anointing of the sick, especially the dying),
- penance.

Everyman says he would like to take Communion before he goes on his pilgrimage. Five-Wits goes on to say the priesthood is the best thing in the world. Priests teach scripture, save souls, perform the Eucharist (the ritual transformation of the bread and wine), and administer the sacraments, thereby saving human souls. They are even above angels in these respects.

Knowledge says that's true, but there are also priests who abuse their office for financial gain or indulge in lust and vice. Five-Wits responds he trusts God will not allow them to encounter any such and that they ought to honor the priesthood. Everyman returns, having received Communion and extreme unction. He thanks those who advised him to take the sacraments first and declares he is ready to go. Strength and Discretion declare they will not leave him. Everyman feels weak and says he must go into his grave. Beauty is distressed that she will rot in the grave, and so she leaves, ignoring any calls to stay. Everyman is hurt because she promised she would stay with him. Strength goes as well, saying she has carried Everyman far enough. Everyman reflects men should not trust to their strength, as it will abandon them. Discretion follows strength, saying she always does. Everyman begs her to come with him to the grave, but she will not. Five-Wits joins the others. Everyman cries out that he thought Five-Wits was his best friend, but they leave regardless.

Everyman despairs that everyone has abandoned him, but Good-Deeds and Knowledge stay with him, though Knowledge says she must go when he finally dies. Only Good-Deeds may follow where he is going. Everyman, Good-Deeds, and Knowledge reflect on how transitory both earthly things and earthly virtues are. Everyman prays one last time, commending his spirit to God, and dies.

Analysis

While Strength, Beauty, and Discretion explain themselves to a modern audience by their names, Five-Wits may require some clarification. This character represents Everyman's ability to perceive and understand. The five wits are traditionally defined as common sense (or "wit"), imagination, fantasy, estimation, and memory. The term is related to the phrase "to have one's wits about them." In later works the term *five wits* was also used to refer to the five senses.

While Everyman is receiving Communion, Five-Wits and Knowledge talk very generally about the role of the clergy. Their conversation is an interesting digression in the play. While this is important to Everyman's salvation, they are not instructing Everyman but engaging in a debate. Five-Wits asserts that priests, in their unique and God-given capacity to perform the rituals that will allow human salvation, are greater than angels. This is countered by Knowledge's point that priests as humans are sometimes as wicked and sinful as their parishioners, if not more so. She lists a series of their offenses, including selling offices and indulgences, using their position to extract personal wealth, and breaking their vows of celibacy. Criticism of clergy on such charges was frequent, and such offenses were contributing factors to what would be the Protestant Reformation. However, it is worth noting that Knowledge claims never to have met any such wicked priests, only heard of them. Thus, the text seems to side with Five-Wits's position that the clergy ought to be respected unless definitively proven unworthy of that respect.

That this argument about the clergy exists within the play implies that if Knowledge did not raise the criticism, the audience might have. No medieval audience would have been unaware of the ways in which some church officials placed worldly goods above heavenly rewards. After all, it was not a new complaint. In fact, in *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1342–1400), several of the pilgrims are members of the clergy who engage in such misdeeds. It is clear from the interactions among the pilgrims that such characters were based on behaviors already very familiar in the 14th century.

The companions recommended to Everyman by Good-Deeds and Knowledge stand in contrast to his friends in the first half of the play. They promise him their loyalty, but only as long as they are genuinely capable. They do not mislead him. They represent the virtues of a good life and powers within himself rather than any dependent on the world outside. However, they

also have their limitations. None of them can follow him into death, and their departures mirror the decline of aging and sickness. One by one, Beauty, Strength, Discretion, and Five-Wits leave a dying Everyman to infirmity, incapacity, and dementia. This reinforces the transitory nature of all earthly things, and Everyman remarks on it specifically. However, Knowledge stays with him to the end and Good-Deeds accompanies him into the afterlife.

Section 6 (Epilogue)

Summary

Left behind, Knowledge says Good-Deeds will make sure Everyman is saved. She can hear heavenly angels singing. The Angel appears and declares Everyman's reckoning is clear: he may go to heaven. The Doctor delivers the final moral: all earthly strengths and pleasures abandon a person in the end. Only their good deeds stay with them, and these must be many and strong to make their case before God. People must clear their accounts in life, because there will be no chance to do so after death. Those who are judged wanting will spend eternity in hell, and those who are righteous will dwell in heaven with God.

Analysis

"Doctor" should be read not as a physician but as a learned character who possesses a doctorate. As most of the education available was conducted in Latin and through the Church, he should be regarded as both a worldly and a spiritual scholar. In the middle ages these two tended to be deeply intertwined. The Doctor is thus an authoritative voice in a good position to reiterate the message of the play.

Having opened with a monologue from God, it is interesting that the play does not show Everyman's ascension into Heaven and his meeting with God. Instead it serves a spiritual function to have his salvation presented to the audience only by report. God's existence and His plan would most likely have been seen by the audience as known facts already in place, but the question of their own fate after death would be uncertain. *Everyman* plays directly to this uncertainty, urging the audience to look to their own moral accounting. By allowing the audience

to view only the parts of Everyman's salvation that they themselves can achieve during their lives, the play offers worldly instruction while retaining some element of mystery regarding the hereafter. Rather than see it for themselves, the audience must put their faith in what is told to them regarding Everyman's salvation.

“” Quotes

"Here beginneth a treatise how the High Father of heaven sendeth Death to summon every creature to come and give account of their lives."

– Narrator, Section 1 (Prologue)

The prologue text announces the play as a treatise on how God sends Death to summon Everyman to judgment in the "manner of a moral play." An announcement of this sort would precede a morality play. It let the audience know the play was about to begin and what sort of play they could expect to see.

"For ye shall hear, how our heavenly king / Calleth Everyman to a general reckoning."

– Messenger, Section 1 (Prologue)

The messenger addresses the audience directly, begs their attention, and prefaces the play with the lesson that will be learned. The use of the word "everyman" serves two purposes. It introduces the main character and, in a play on words, makes clear the allegorical nature of the name.

"Of ghostly sight the people be so blind."

— God, Section 1 (Prologue)

God talks about humanity's fixation on the mortal world and their neglect of spiritual matters. Here the word *ghostly* does not refer to ghosts but is a synonym for *spiritual*. The statement touches on the theme of salvation and points out Everyman's need for moral instruction.

*"To get them life I suffered to be
dead; / I healed their feet, with
thorns hurt was my head."*

— God, Section 1 (Prologue)

In this couplet, God references the crucifixion of Jesus, referring to Jesus's suffering in the first person. This cements His identity within the play as the trinity version of God: The Father, the Son, and the Holy spirit in one. There are several contrasts in these lines. People's eternal life is contrasted with God's death. Their healed feet are contrasted with His hurt head. These juxtapositions emphasize the extent of His love and sacrifice.

*"The time passeth; Lord, help that
all wrought; / For though I mourn it
availeth nought."*

— Everyman, Section 2 (Death)

Confronted with the inevitability of his death, Everyman is despondent. He attempts to beg, plead, and bribe his way out of it, but Death will not be persuaded. Though Everyman begins the play as something of a comedic character, full of ignorance and cowardice, his fear of death is real and something the audience can empathize with.

*"For, in faith, and thou go to Hell, /
I will not forsake thee by the way!"*

— Fellowship, Section 3 (Fellowship, Kindred, and Goods)

In a statement full of dramatic irony, Fellowship declares he will do the very thing Everyman wants from him: to walk with him into the afterlife. Only a few lines later, Fellowship will refuse to do so, and Everyman will remind him of this declaration. It is a stark reminder of the lying nature of earthly "virtues."

*"Yet if thou wilt eat, and drink, and
make good cheer, / Or haunt to
women ... / I would not forsake
you, while the day is clear."*

— Fellowship, Section 3 (Fellowship, Kindred, and Goods)

Fellowship states he's only interested in accompanying Everyman through pleasant times, specifically citing drinking and chasing women. The phrase "I would not forsake you while the day is clear" literally announces him as a fair-weather friend. Fellowship is the first to forsake Everyman. His family—Kindred and Cousin—will also disappoint him.

*"It is said, in prosperity men
friends may find, / Which in
adversity be full unkind."*

— Everyman, Section 3 (Fellowship, Kindred, and Goods)

Everyman laments that those who have been quick to befriend him in his good fortune abandon him in his hour of need. This is a constant refrain for him throughout the play, and reinforces the theme of the transitory nature of worldly things. Friends will leave. Material goods have no spiritual value. Strength will depart. Life will end. Ultimately nothing in the material world is eternal. They do not offer salvation in the afterlife.

*"A season thou hadst me in
prosperity; / My condition is a*

*man's soul to kill, / If I save one, a
thousand I do spill."*

– Goods, Section 3 (Fellowship, Kindred, and Goods)

Everyman's wealth informs him that material goods are a temptation that damns people's souls. Goods speaks very frankly on spiritual matters. His confession that he has been a tempter to Everyman's soul is part of what prompts Everyman to look toward metaphysical solutions to his plight.

*"Till that I go to my Good-Deed, /
But alas, she is so weak, / That
she can neither go nor speak."*

– Everyman, Section 4 (Good-Deeds, Knowledge, and Confession)

Everyman has lived a miserly, selfish life, seeing to his own pleasure first, and he is aware of that. Because of his sinful ways, Good-Deeds is weak, weighed down by the load of his sins. This is one of the first important moments of self-awareness from Everyman that signals his moral growth.

*"To Confession, that cleansing
river."*

– Knowledge, Section 4 (Good-Deeds, Knowledge, and Confession)

Confession is described in terms of flowing water, linking him to both baptism and a more general sense of washing clean something that is dirty. He will metaphorically wash away Everyman's sin.

*"A precious jewel I will give thee, /
Called penance, wise voider of
adversity."*

– Confession, Section 4 (Good-Deeds, Knowledge, and Confession)

Penance is the mechanism by which Everyman may free himself and Good-Deeds from his sins. It appears not as a character but as a precious jewel given to Everyman by Confession. Everyman's acceptance of the penance shows his spiritual growth.

*"I had wend surer I should you
have found. / He that trusteth in
his Strength / She him deceiveth
at the length."*

– Everyman, Section 5 (Discretion, Strength, Beauty, and Five-Wits)

All of Everyman's earthly companions desert him as he is dying, except for Knowledge and Good-Deeds. Strength, Beauty, Discretion, and Five-Wits have been truer to him than Fellowship, Kindred, Cousin, and Goods. However, they are still aspects of the mortal world, and they cannot stay with him in death. Although Everyman is once again disappointed when these earthly virtues desert him, he comes to realize that people should put their faith in spiritual matters.

*"Take example, all ye that this do
hear or see / How they that I loved
best do forsake me."*

– Everyman, Section 5 (Discretion, Strength, Beauty, and Five-Wits)

Here Everyman breaks the fourth wall, addressing the audience to reiterate his point. The play relies heavily on repetition to make sure the lessons are not lost on those witnessing its events.

"None excuse may be there for

*Everyman: / ... / For after death
amends may no man make."*

— Doctor, Section 6 (Epilogue)

The Doctor, a scholarly character, restates the point of the play for the audience at its close. Death may come unexpectedly, so, while those watching are alive, they should do their best to make sure their spiritual accounts are always settled. After death, they will have to face judgment no matter how ready or unready they are. It is the state they are in when they die that will determine if they are sent to heaven or to hell.

Symbols

Allegorical Characters

Everyman is a famously allegorical work. With the exception of [God](#), the Angel, the Messenger, and the Doctor, every character in the play should be read as standing in for a group of people or an abstract concept. Each of these characters is named for what they represent. [Everyman](#) himself, as his name states, represents every man or every member of humanity, with appetites, fears, and flaws common to all people. Some allegorical characters, such as [Death](#), [Good-Deeds](#), and Fellowship, are readily comprehensible to a modern audience, but others, such as Five-Wits, require slightly more explanation.

- Everyman represents all people.
- Death represents the end of life, which often comes suddenly and cannot be avoided or reasoned with.
- Fellowship represents Everyman's friends in life, who are quick to turn their back on him in hard times.
- Kindred and Cousin represent Everyman's family.
- Goods, who claims he can solve any worldly problem, represents Everyman's wealth and possessions. Though Everyman has loved Goods best, love of Goods is a moral trap that has led him toward damnation.
- Good-Deeds represents the good Everyman has done in life. At first she cannot move to help him plead his case before God because Everyman's sin weighs her down. She

alone can go with him to the afterlife and help him when facing God's judgment.

- [Knowledge](#) represents moral understanding of the difference between good and evil. She directs Everyman to a virtuous life and to the sacraments.
- Confession is described as a holy man to whom Everyman should bow. He represents the sacrament of confession, which allows for the absolution of sins.
- Beauty represents earthly beauty. While she is a good companion to Everyman, she will abandon him as he heads for the grave. Her choice represents the decline of aging.
- Strength represents physical strength. Like Beauty, she will not go with Everyman to death, and her absence represents frailty as death approaches.
- Discretion represents Everyman's ability to make wise decisions. Discretion departs after Strength, saying it is always so. His absence represents a lack of agency in one's twilight years.
- Five-Wits represents Everyman's ability to perceive and understand. The five wits are traditionally defined as common sense (or "wit"), imagination, fantasy, estimation, and memory. The term is related to the phrase "to have one's wits about them." Though Everyman loves him best of his new companions, Five-Wits also leaves, representing the difference between spiritual knowledge and worldly intelligence as well as the onset of dementia.

Pilgrimage

Throughout the play, [Everyman](#)'s impending death is referred to as a "pilgrimage." This term characterizes Everyman's death as a holy journey he undertakes rather than something that happens to him. The responsibility for the quality of Everyman's death and subsequent judgment is placed on Everyman himself. It also casts the event not in terms of tragedy or injustice but in terms of a holy penance or quest to become more virtuous before [God](#). In the play [Death](#) is not an end but a journey to another world. Though Everyman cannot return, he has emphatically not ceased to be. He has merely gone to be with God. The conceit (literary figure) also reminds the audience of the journey of life on which we are all embarked, encouraging us to consider our own journeys as pilgrimages.

Themes

Salvation

Salvation is both the central theme and the plot of *Everyman*. The story itself is an allegory for the path of a human soul to salvation. It is intended as moral and religious instruction for the audience.

[God](#)'s concern that [Everyman](#) has not yet earned salvation is the impetus for the play's action. The story follows Everyman as he turns away from mortal concerns toward heavenly virtues. When [Death](#) first finds Everyman, he is comedically ignorant of his spiritual obligations, having focused on pleasure and wealth throughout his life. He has not considered death or his soul.

Fear of death and of judgment spur Everyman to go to his worldly friends and possessions, but none of them will help him. Through this trial he comes to realize how much he has neglected spiritual matters. Goods in particular chides Everyman for the emphasis he put on wealth during his life. Goods says if Everyman had loved him less, Everyman would be in a better position with God. When Everyman accuses Goods of having betrayed him, Goods points out he could never have corrupted Everyman if Everyman had not been so greedy. This is a rude spiritual awakening for Everyman.

Everyman turns to his neglected spiritual side, seeking out [Good-Deeds](#), who is faithful and true but too weak to help him. However, her sister [Knowledge](#) guides him. He must show humility before Confession and endure his penance with patience and fortitude. Through this process, Everyman undergoes a spiritual evolution and finds himself genuinely glad where before he had been in mortal terror. Everyman gains earthly virtues and participates in the sacraments of the church. As he secures his soul and grows closer to God, he takes greater comfort in God's plan despite his mortality. Finally, he declares himself ready to die.

In the end, Everyman goes willingly to God, having cleansed himself of his wrongdoing, and is accepted into Heaven. Left behind on Earth, Knowledge rejoices in his salvation.

Throughout the play the moral is repeated to ensure the

audience gets the message: their souls are in the same peril as Everyman's unless they mend their ways. They will need to have their good deeds in order and the blessings of the church. If they have, through the mercy of God, salvation is available to every man.

Impermanence of Worldly Things

Everyman is ultimately a play about mortality. [Everyman](#) is initially motivated by his fear of [Death](#). However, he finds again and again that those mortal things he has relied on abandon him at the hour of death. "Take example," he says to the audience at one point, "all ye that this do hear or see / How they that I loved best do forsake me." This impermanence is always presented in contrast to the eternal rewards of heaven.

When death is discussed in the play, it is referred to as a pilgrimage rather than an end. Death talks about it as a journey from which Everyman cannot return. Throughout the play Everyman seeks something he can bring with him into the afterlife. The answer is only his [Good-Deeds](#), but the search illuminates many who will not or cannot join his voyage.

The first group of companions Everyman fails to bring with him are his worldly concerns: Fellowship, Kindred, Cousin, and Goods. All of these betray Everyman despite their proclamations of support and turn out to have been false friends. His friends and family refuse to join him in adversity, and Goods reveals himself to be a trap for mortal souls. Goods in particular addresses his relationship to a mortal and dying Everyman. He makes clear he will stay in the world after Everyman leaves it and go into new hands, just as he came to Everyman's.

As Everyman grows in his spiritual understanding through [Knowledge](#) and Good-Deeds, he gains new companions: Beauty, Strength, Discretion, and Five-Wits. These characters represent virtues Everyman possesses as a good man. However, in the end they must also leave him as his mind and body fail and he goes to his grave. Though it has been a good thing for him to earn their companionship, it cannot last. Everyman responds to this with hurt, much as he did with his worldly friends. He had come to trust them. Yet, they were

things of the world and will not pass into the afterlife.

However, in the end, Everyman can take nothing with him but the good deeds he has done. It is Good-Deeds who will argue for his salvation. Even Knowledge must stay behind.

more robust.

Though the play emphasizes the need for the audience to focus on good works as the path to salvation, it also acknowledges the vital importance of religion.

Importance of the Church

Though good deeds are the mechanism of [Everyman's](#) salvation, his redemption would be impossible without the Church. His redemption begins with Confession and penance and continues in the form of the holy sacraments. The power and obligations of priests are discussed at length by the two characters representing the ability to know and think. Five-Wits declares

*The priest bindeth and unbindeth
all bands,
Both in earth and in heaven;
Thou ministers all the sacraments
seven ...
No remedy we find under God
But all only priesthood.
Everyman, [God](#) gave priests that
dignity,
And setteth them in his stead
among us to be;
Thus be they above angels in
degree.*

By giving priests the power to administer the sacraments, God has made them the keepers of human souls. They are the only people who can absolve the sins that bind [Good-Deeds](#).

Though [Knowledge](#) comes to Everyman before he participates in religion, she directs him toward it with enthusiastic support. Without the work of the Church, Everyman would not have been able to get into heaven even if his good works had been