Notes on *Everyman*

**Plot Summary**
Adapted from Michael J. Cummings

The author introduces the play with the following announcement:

*Here beginneth a treatise how the high Father of Heaven sendeth Death to summon every creature to come and give account of their lives in this world, and is in manner of a moral play.*

A messenger of God then admonishes readers to play close attention to the play, for it reminds them that a day will come when they will be called to a reckoning.

“Ye think sin in the beginning full sweet,” he says, “which in the end causeth the soul to weep when the body lieth in clay.”

God then speaks. As he felt pre-flood, He laments that his creatures live preoccupied with worldly prosperity, blinded to what is really important. “Drowned in sin, they
know me not for their God.” He summons a messenger, Death, and tells him to inform Everyman that his time on earth has ended and that he must now give an account of his life.

Everyman says he needs more time, but Death refuses to grant it.

Everyman then attempts to muster acquaintances to support him. When he begs Fellowship to help him with a problem, the latter pledges assistance. However, when Fellowship learns that Everyman wants him to testify in the land of death, Fellowship says he would normally accompany Everyman everywhere—to eat, drink, make merry, and pursue the pleasures of lust. He would even help Everyman commit murder. But to go with him to the afterlife and help him give an accounting of his life, that is out of the question. Under no circumstances would he undertake such a fearsome journey.
Everyman then seeks help from those related to him, Kindred and Cousin. But they, too, refuse to take part in the perilous journey. Sorely distressed at their unwillingness to support him in his time of need, Everyman now thinks that the material possessions he has stored up may enable him to buy his way into heaven. He calls out to Goods, saying “money maketh all right that is wrong.” Goods answers that he cannot stir from his position, for he is a heap of chests and bags and sacks.

“But if thou had me loved moderately,” Goods says, giving part of Goods to the poor, “then shouldest thou not in this dolor be.”

Desperate, Everyman turns to Good Deeds:

\[
\begin{align*}
I \text{ pray you, help me in this need} \\
Or \text{ else I am forever damned indeed;} \\
\text{Therefore, help me to make reckoning} \\
\text{Before the Redeemer of all things.}
\end{align*}
\]

Because he has been long neglected, Good Deeds is in a sorry condition. Although he is willing to go with Everyman, he cannot muster the strength to do so—at least not at the moment. However, he introduces Everyman to his sister, Knowledge, who says she can help him by taking him to Confession. Everyman weeps for joy.
Confession tells Everyman he will give him a precious jewel, penance, if he confesses his sins. Everyman calls on the Lord to forgive his grievous offenses, acknowledging that he is a “sinner most abominable,” and calls on the Virgin Mary to intercede with her Son on his behalf. After Everyman completes his confession, Knowledge informs him that his friend Good Deeds is healthy and whole once again. Good Deeds himself then comes forth and says Everyman is now prepared for eternity. Knowledge outfits Everyman with a robe of contrition, signifying his repentance.

Good Deeds introduces Everyman to Discretion, Strength, his Five Wits, and Beauty and asks them to accompany Everyman on his journey. Knowledge then tells him before he leaves he must receive the last sacraments of the church—Holy Viaticum (a special name for Holy Eucharist or Holy Communion when given to anyone about to die) and anointment with an oil.

Discretion = judgment, discernment

Five wits = common wit, imagination, fantasy, estimation, and memory

After he receives the sacraments, Beauty, Discretion, Strength, and the Five Wits go with Everyman to his grave but refuse to accompany him to the afterlife. Disheartened, Everyman cries, “O, Jesus, help! All hath forsaken me.” However, Good Deeds says, “Nay, Everyman, I will bide with thee.” Knowledge remains a while longer: “I will not from hence depart / Till I see where ye shall be.”

Everyman then prays that the Lord will receive him, saying “Into thy hands, I commend my spirit.” Knowledge hears angels singing. One of them invites Everyman into the heavenly regions. Only Good Deeds accompanies him.

Title

The complete title of the work is The Summoning of Everyman, but over the years it became known simply as Everyman.
Type of Work

• *Everyman* is a morality play, an allegorical drama that teaches a lesson about how Christians should live and what they must do to save their souls.
• A morality play is, in effect, a sermon that is acted out.
• The characters of a typical morality play include personifications of:
  • virtues (such as hope and charity)
  • vices (such as pride and sloth)
  • other qualities
  • personifications of objects (such as money)
  • activities (such as death or fellowship).
• In addition, God and angels may appear as characters, as they do in *Everyman*.

Date and Source

Everyman was written in the late 1400s; the source for it has not been established.

Language

The language of the play is Middle English, but publishers today generally print it in modern English unless an edition is intended for scholarly study.

Setting

The action begins in heaven when God sends Death to summon the main character, *Everyman*. Thereafter, the action takes place on earth. Since the author intended the main character to represent every human being, the action on earth could take place anywhere.

Characters

• Everyman: Typical human being who has neglected his spiritual life but repents his sins in time to be saved.
• God: Just but merciful Supreme Being.
• Death: Messenger commanded by God to summon Everyman.
• Fellowship, Kindred, Cousin, Material Goods: Earthly acquaintances of Everyman who abandon him in his time of need.
• Good Deeds: The only friend willing to accompany Everyman to the afterlife.
• Knowledge: Character that tells Everyman what he must do to obtain salvation.
• Confession: Character representing the sacrament of penance; Everyman confesses his sins to this character.
• Discretion, Strength, Everyman’s Five Wits, Beauty: Earthly acquaintances of Everyman who abandon him in his time of need.
• Angel: Creature that welcomes Everyman to the celestial realm.
• Doctor: Scholar who delivers words of warning at the end of the play.

End Rhyme

The dialogue contains varying patterns of end rhyme.

When God first appears, he speaks with alternating lines that rhyme:

   I perceive here in my majesty,
   How that all the creatures be to me unkind,
   Living without dread in worldly prosperity:
   Of ghostly sight the people be so blind.

Death, God’s messenger, often speaks in couplets:

   He that loveth riches I will strike with my dart,
   His sight to blind, and from heaven to depart,
   Except that alms be his good friend,
   In hell for to dwell, world without end.

Occasionally, there is no rhyme, as in the following lines spoken by Fellowship:

   Now, by God that all hath brought,
   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!

Theology

• Everyman presents a Roman Catholic point of view.
• The central character, representing every man and woman, earns his eternal reward through good works and reception of the sacraments of the church, such as penance (confession) and the Holy Eucharist.
• In Roman Catholicism, a person in danger of death receives Holy Eucharist given under the name “viaticum,” a term derived from Latin words meaning travel and road and loosely translated as provision for the last journey.
• He or she also receives extreme unction, a sacrament in which a priest anoints a person’s ears, eyes, nose, lips, and hands (which represent the five senses) with oil that was blessed on Holy Thursday.
• After confessing his sins, Everyman receives both of these “last rites,” as they are called, before he enters the afterlife.
Themes

Live for Tomorrow

Live for tomorrow—that is, prepare for life after death—by leading a holy and virtuous earthly life that includes doing good works. In the opening lines of the play, Death states this theme when he says, “Man, in the beginning, / Look well, and take good heed to the ending.” Everyman learns to “take good heed” before it is too late. He confesses and repents his sins and thus earns paradise on the strength of his contrition and the good works that he has performed.

The Deceptive Appearance of Sin

Man in his youth perceives sin as beautiful, like a spring flower, as Death says in the opening lines:

Ye think sin in the beginning full sweet,
Which in the end causeth thy soul to weep,
When the body lieth in clay.

But this flower fades and dies in the autumn and winter of life. Death warns the audience to take heed of this truth.
Material vs. Spiritual Gain

A man may gain a world of riches, but they are as nothing if he suffers the loss of his soul. God enunciates this theme near the beginning of the play:

*I perceive here in my majesty,*  
*How that all the creatures be to me unkind,*  
*Living without dread in worldly prosperity:*  
*Of ghostly sight the people be so blind,*  
*Drowned in sin, they know me not for their God;*  
*In worldly riches is all their mind . . .*

Everyman discovers the truth of the adage, “you can’t take it with you.” It, of course, is his store of material goods, a burden that encumbers his spirituality. Good Deeds tells him that he should have lightened this burden by giving possessions to the poor.

God’s Mercy

Humans snub God’s mercy. Caught up with the pleasures of life and the pursuit of material possessions, people neglect to petition the Lord to receive forgiveness for their sins, which He is ever ready to bestow. God calls attention to this human fault near the beginning of the play:

*I proffered the people great multitude of mercy,*  
*And few there be that asketh it heartily.*  
*They be so encumbered with worldly riches.*
Final Judgment

No human being can escape final judgment. God tells Death that the day will come when every person must undertake a final journey and give an accounting of his life before the Lord. No man can escape this task; every person will face a day of reckoning.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ge07cPl8X48