

Literary Text • *Everyman*

Anonymous

The play begins with God looking down from his heavens on Everyman. He sends Death with a message for Everyman asking him to prepare an account of how his life on earth has been spent.

Everyman, understandably, does not wish to leave life on earth. He says that he is not ready and first offers Death money to spare him. When he refuses, Everyman looks for someone to accompany him. Good Deeds and Knowledge, who advise him also to take Discretion, Strength and Beauty and, as counsellors, his Five Senses, all accompany him to the grave. Everyman receives the Last Sacrament and sets out on his journey with these companions. But when he actually reaches the grave, Beauty leaves him, followed by Strength and the others. Only Knowledge and Good Deeds remain by his side. Good Deeds accompanies him to the heavenly realm to plead his cause before his Maker, and Knowledge, remaining behind, hears the joyful songs of the angels.

Everyman is an **allegorical** religious drama, perhaps of Dutch origin, which derives from oral tradition and dates from around the end of the 15th century. In *Everyman* the characters represent **universal ideas and qualities**. Everyman (a symbol of humanity in general) is called by Death to appear before God and asks for the support of his 'friends'. All have allegorical names and are personifications of various virtues and aspects of human life, including Fellowship, Beauty, Goods and Good Deeds. Yet although Everyman is supposed to represent humanity in general, his situation is that of a particular class of people. He is a city dweller whose life seems to revolve around worldly pursuits such as making money and having a good time. As a morality tale, the play revolves around the Biblical notion that 'all is vanity', that we cannot take any of life's comforts with us when we die. Within the Christian framework of the play, only our Good Deeds can save us from perdition.

In the following extract we see Everyman trying to convince his Worldly Goods (material possessions and money) to accompany him on his last journey.

- 1 Come hither,¹ Good, in all the haste² thou³ may,
For of counsel I must desire thee.⁴
GOODS Sir, and ye in the world have⁵ sorrow or adversity,
That can I help you to remedy⁶ shortly.
- 5 EVERYMAN It is another disease that grieveth me:⁷
In this world it is not, I tell thee so.
I am sent for another way to go,
To give a strait count general
Before the highest Jupiter⁸ of all.
- 10 And all my life I have had joy and pleasure in thee:
Therefore I pray thee go with me,
For, peradventure,⁹ thou mayst¹⁰ before God Almighty
My reckoning¹¹ help to clean and purify.
For it is said ever among,¹²
- 15 That money maketh all right that is wrong.
GOODS Nay,¹³ Everyman, I sing another song:
I follow no man in such voyages.
For, and I went with thee,
Thou shouldest fare much the worse for me;¹⁴
- 20 For because on me thou did set thy mind,
Thy reckoning I have made blotted and blind,¹⁵
That thine¹⁶ account thou cannot make truly –
And that hast thou for the love of me.
- 25 EVERYMAN That would grieve me full sore¹⁷

1 **hither**: here.

2 **haste**: speed, hurry.

3 **thou**: you (antiquated subject form).

4 **thee**: you (antiquated object form).

5 **ye... have**: you in the world who have.

6 **remedy**: resolve.

7 **grieveth me**: makes me sad.

8 **Jupiter**: God (note the invocation of the Roman pantheon of gods).

9 **peradventure**: perhaps.

10 **mayst**: may (antiquated form).

11 **reckoning**: account.

12 **ever among**: commonly.

13 **Nay**: no.

14 **Thou... me**: it would be worse for you if I was with you.

15 **blotted and blind**: marked with sin.

16 **thine**: your.

17 **grieve... sore**: make me very sad.

When I should come to that fearful answer.

Up, let us go thither¹⁸ together.

GOODS Nay, not so, I am too brittle,¹⁹ I may not endure.

I will follow no man one foot, be ye sure.

30 EVERYMAN Alas,²⁰ I have thee loved, and had great pleasure

All my life-days on good and treasure.

GOODS That is to thy damnation, without leasing,²¹

For my love is contrary to the love everlasting.

18 thither: there.

19 brittle: hard and fragile.

20 Alas: exclamation of despair.

21 leasing: loosing.

COMPREHENSION

- Who is Everyman speaking to in this extract? What favour does he ask of him? Which lines tell you this?
- Here are the main points of their conversation. Put them in the order they appear in the text:
 - Everyman is sorry that he has devoted his life to acquiring goods and money.
 - Goods says that he can resolve any trouble that Everyman may have in life.
 - Everyman wants Goods to accompany him because he has given him pleasure during his life and because he thinks money is the solution to everything.
 - Everyman says he has been called by God to account for his life.
 - Goods says that the love of him is the opposite of the love of God because it doesn't last.
 - Goods says that Everyman's case would be worsened by his presence.
 - Goods says that he is too fragile to go with Everyman.
 - Everyman says he must urgently speak with Goods.

ANALYSIS

- Look for examples of rhymes and half-rhymes.
- Although the text is translated into modern English, some antiquated forms are kept in order to give it a medieval flavour. Underline the examples you find.
- Look at lines 10 and 29-30, where Everyman talks

about having spent his life pursuing goods and money. How has his attitude changed by the second reference to this? Which word indicates the change?

- Remember that Everyman is a morality play. The reason for Everyman's despair expresses one of the morals of the play. What is the moral that is conveyed here?
- How would you define the language used in this play? Choose from the following:

colloquial • philosophical • archaic • abstract •
concrete • humorous • solemn • lyrical

DISCUSSION

- Work in pairs. Imagine you are asked to produce a modern version of this scene with some variations. Your contemporary Everyman or Everywoman is also sorry about having devoted most of their life to the acquisition of material goods, yet they don't want to be separated from them. Try to think of at least five goods/objects that a contemporary Everyman or Everywoman wouldn't want to leave behind and imagine the reasons why they would want to take these goods with them on their 'last journey'. Structure your ideas into a dialogue, using simple and informal language to give the text a modern flavour. Remember that Goods here is an abstract representation of the material world in general. Look at the example below:

EVERYWOMAN Please, Goods, allow me at least to take my ipod so that I can listen to some music...

GOODS Forget it! Anyway, you won't be able to hear anything. Besides, no batteries can last for ever!