UNIT 1: *EVERYMAN*

UNIT STRUCTURE

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1.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through the unit, you will be able to:

- provide a brief introduction to the Medieval play entitled *Everyman*
- explain the content of the play *Everyman*
- identify the personified characters in the play
- highlight the major themes that emerge from the text of the play
- analyse the style and language of the play
- appreciate the significant message that is evident in the play

1.2 INTRODUCTION

The present unit of the paper on English Drama introduces the learner to one of the widely anthologised plays titled *Everyman* (1510) which falls in the category of morality plays of the late 15th Century. The original translated title of Everyman was supposed to have been titled *The Somonyng of Everyman* (in old English) or *The Summoning of Everyman* which dwells on the significance of Christian piety, morality and good deeds that

accompanies man after death and transcendence into the other world. Let us then explore the text of the work and some of its significant aspects in more details.

1.3 READING THE PLAY *EVERYMAN*

The original version of *Everyman* is considered to have been written during the Tudor period (1485-1603) when the Tudor dynasty ruled England. The author of this play remains'anonymous' or in other words remains unknown till date. However, the English translation of the play is traced to the Dutch morality play titled *Elckerjic* by the medieval playwright Peter Van Diest written in around 1470 and printed in 1495. The following subsection attempts a summary of the text which will provide the learner a concise idea on the content and thereby highlight its thematic and stylistic aspects for study.

1.3.1 Summary of the Play

At the onset of the play, Everyman suddenly finds himself in great jeopardy. Christ Jesus calls on 'Death' to bring Everyman to Him for judgement. To Everyman's dismay, his pleading goes unheard and bribing goes unheeded in front of Death who hurries Everyman into preparing his accounts before he is summoned and presented in front of the High Judge. Everyman thus says, "Alas shall I have no longer respite? I may say Death giveth no warning: To think on thee, it maketh my heart sick. For all unready is my book of reckoning" (132-134) which brings into the picture the necessity of accountability and the 'Book of Account' that is supposed to consist one's life history and his or her entire deeds.

Everyman first approaches 'Fellowship' who without knowledge of the entire situation tries to offer help. However, when he learns that the matter concerns him accompanying Everyman on the 'journey', he shoots back the question thus, "And also if we took such a journey when should we come again?" (259-260). Thus, he refuses to accompany him and take the risk of presenting himself

in front of “the father that begat” him (269). Fellowship talks of help only in certain cases saying, “I wot well I said, so truly. And yet if thou will eat and drink and make good cheer or haunt to women the lusty company, I would not forsake you, while the day is clear” (271-274). However, the Bible records that Jesus warns through his fellowship saying, “‘Lets feast and get it drunk for tomorrow we die?’-Don’t be fooled by these who say such things, for the company corrupts good character come to your sense and stop sinning” (1 Corinthians 5:26). The remedy that Fellowship offers at this point is disheartening to Everyman as he says, “But and thou will murder, or any man kill, in that I will help thee with a good will” (280-282) which makes the latter realise that Fellowship has no remedy or help for his present problem at all. Everyman then decides to seek confidence in his blood relations namely ‘Kindred’ and ‘Cousin’. However, he again meets their refusal with the latter replying to him thus, “Also of mine an unready reckoning. I have to account; therefore I make tarrying, Now God help thee for now I go” (375-377) thus bidding farewell. This makes Everyman realise that man is ultimately alone on the day of his judgement. Having lived most of his life in the comfort of goods and riches Everyman then remembers “All my life I have loved riches” (388) with a sense of regret.

When he approaches his acquaintance ‘Goods’, Everyman finds him lying in a corner bound and piled high and locked in chests and packed in bags, without being able to stir. Now Goods wore the secret disguise of the evil Satan’s temptation and if at all could not accompany and hold Everyman in good stead. Infact he makes Everyman realise thus, “Thou shouldst fare much the worse for me. For because on me thou did set my mind Thy reckoning I have made blotted and blind” (417-419). Goods says, “This is my damnation without leasing. For my love is contrary to the life everlasting” (429-430) and further reminds Everyman, “But if thou had lived moderately during, as to the poor give part of me. Then shouldst thou not in this dolour be, nor in thou great sorrow care” (431-434) which brings

into the perspective the importance of Christian piety and charity. Goods therefore questions Everyman" "My condition is man's soul to kill, If I save one, a thousand I do spill, Weenest thou that I will follow thee?" (442-444). And only now Everyman realises the futility of being with a companion who had only temporary comforts to offer.

At such a time he remembers 'Good Deeds'. Here, the character of Good Deeds symbolises all things good or done in goodness of thought and action, something that only in times of distress most sinful people remember. However, the good deeds of Everyman prove to be unrecognisable owing to his unfamiliarity with such deeds in his lifetime. This also points to how often we forget to remain committed to our good deeds, for it is believed that there are gifts and rewards that God reserves in heaven. The Bible too reiterates the significance of good deeds which are extremely valuable in life and more so when done in secret and in humility. Good Deeds then recommends her sister Knowledge (personified for knowledge which enables acknowledgement of sins) to accompany Everyman. When Knowledge is approached, she turns into a consenting guide and refers to the role of another character called 'Confession' saying "Now we go together lovingly, to Confession that cleansing river" (535-536). Confession's place was in the "the House of salvation (Church)" (540-541) and Confession here is addressed as Shrift, mother of Salvation, who already knows of Everyman's sorrow beforehand. Everyman thus receives a jewel named 'Penance'- voider of adversity with the reminder of Christ Jesus' sacrifice for mankind thus, "To remember thy Saviour was scourged for thee with sharp scourges and suffered it particularly" (563-564).

Thus, Knowledge directs Everyman towards the significance of the penance that he receives saying thus, "Everyman, look your penance that ye fulfill, What pain that ever it to you be, And knowledge shall give you counsel at will. How will your account you shall make clearly?" (577-580). Everyman now confesses to God seeking

repentance thus, “Though I be a sinner, most abominable, yet let my name be written in Moses’ table” (595-596) with the realisation- “now of penance I will wade the water clear, to save me from purgatory that sharp fire” (617-618). And it is only then that Good Deeds regains strength as in the beginning he is found weak and bound to the ground, being almost lost and forgotten. Good Deeds thus says, “ye have me made whole and sound, therefore I will bide by thee in every sound” (632-633).

Following this, Knowledge requests him to “put on this garment to [his] behoof (advantage) which [was] wet with [his] tears” (638-639). Everyman is then encouraged by Good Deeds and Knowledge to raise company with the characters namely: Discretion, Strength, Beauty and Five Wits. Good Deeds advises Everyman to keep the company of all these friends saying “you must have them ready at all hours” (664). And Knowledge advises him to take another measure saying” “Go to priesthood, I you advise. And receive of him in anywise. The holy sacrament and ointment together” (707-709) and therefore, Everyman does as he is told. Five Wits talks about priesthood exceeding all things, they who teach the Holy Scriptures, converted man from sin, directing them to heaven being invested with divine powers higher than any angel in heaven. Thus, it is emphasised that there is no other route to heaven other than approaching the ordained Priest. This also implies the significant role of the pastor in the church combined with one’s obligations to acknowledge the significant role of a pastor and thereby abide by the holy sacraments or rituals of the church.

However, Beauty in the end forsakes Everyman in his journey and so does Strength just as the qualities of beauty and strength leaves all human beings with age. Following this, Discretion to leaves discreetly along with Five Wits who eventually leaves his company without taking it too seriously. This is when it had dawns on Everyman that they were all in reality temporary companions and that he had to take up his own journey of life. Thus, with this realisation he

commits his spirit to God so that it is not lost and is accepted by the High Judge 'Christ Jesus' saying: “In manustuas of mights next forever commendo spritummeum” (886-887). Everyman thereby establishes and commits himself in the Lord’s hand.

The play reaches the end at this point with the learned Theologian, here called ‘Doctor’ makes an appearance as the last character reiterating the fact that good accounts alone stand one in good stead on the final day of judgement failing which one would be doomed for eternity as noted in these lines, “For after death amends may no man make. For then mercy and pity do him forsake” (912-913). Thus, the play holds the core message that good deeds are important in man’s life and Christ shall always be faithful in all His dealings. Eventually it is Everyman’s goods virtues that eventually reveales him in good light before the High Judge, Christ Jesus and thus, he transcends to the heavenly sphere for he had lived well as a Christian soul. Even Lady Peace or Mother Mary is seen to be implored by Everyman during redemption and contrition. Death in the beginning had told Everyman thus, “On thee thou must take a long journey. Therefore, thy book of count with thee thou bring (103-104) and this Everyman had presented well reflecting his hope in the Lord and the conscious effort of saving his own soul at the end of his life. Thus, the text implies the Christian regard and reverence for the Holy Covenant while highlighting the belief that adhering to the same assures that those who die in the Lord will be Blessed for ever more. Everyman’s jeopardy or trouble is thus greatly saved by his own efforts and the benevolence or mercy of the High Judge or God and His son Christ Jesus.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. Name the category of plays and the century to which the play *Everyman* belongs.

Q2. What was the original title of the play *Everyman*?

Q3. When was the original version of *Everyman* considered to have been written?

Q4. Who is the author of the play *Everyman*?

Q5. Why does Everyman suddenly find himself in great jeopardy?

Q6. What did the Book of Account consist?

Q7. Whom does Everyman approach first?

Q8. What does Everyman realise in the day of his judgement?

Q9. What is the virtue that ultimately holds Everyman in good stead?

Q10. Name some of the personified characters revealed in the text of the play.

Q11. What does the adherence to the great covenant assure to a Christian soul?

1.3.2 Personified Characters

As already mentioned in the summary, the interesting characters in *Everyman* are personifications of human qualities to which one can easily relate to and they are namely: Everyman, Messenger, God, Death, Fellowship, Kindred, Cousin, Goods, Good Deeds, Knowledge, Confession, Beauty, Strength, Discretion, Five Wits, Angel and Doctor. Everyman is the main protagonist of the play who learns that his Judgement day has arrived and sets out on a pilgrimage to redeem himself in the eyes of the High Judge Christ Jesus by preparing an account of his good deeds. He represents the condition of the larger humankind and the accountability of their deeds through their lifetime.

The Messenger's role is to spell out the prologue at the beginning of the play. God here refers to the most powerful of the Christian Trinity i.e. God the Father, the Holy Spirit and Son of God, Jesus Christ. As God is disappointed with the way that Everyman spends his life on earth, He sends his death as His messenger to summon him for the day of Judgement. Although Fellowship is the

first to accept Everyman's proposal to undertake a pilgrimage together, yet he changes his mind and instead of being his company prefers to indulge in his own pleasures. The next person Everyman approaches is Kindred who again forsakes him much like Fellowship. Kindred in a way represents one's kith and kith or in other words one's family and close relatives to show how even the near and dear one's play little role in one's personal pilgrimage and accounting of deeds in life. Similarly, Cousin who happens to be Everyman's friend decides to leave him on his own.

The same episode is repeated by Goods who is representative of the material goods that define our life and bind us in various degrees through temptation, longing and our desires. However, Good Deeds is true to Everyman and unlike his other friends accompanies him till the end of his journey. Also Knowledge is enlightened enough to lead Everyman to Confession in front of whom he opens his heart and admits his past mistakes. The other personified characters like Beauty, Strength, Discretion and Five Wits (representing the five human senses i.e. sight, smell, touch, taste and hearing) all of them forsake him. However, the sincere efforts of Everyman to redeem his soul find a reflection in Good Deeds company and finally his soul is escorted by Angel who arrives with the Book of Reckoning. Finally, the play ends with an epilogue spoken by the Doctor. Thus, it is with the help of Good Deeds that Everyman gains salvation in the end.

1.4 MAJOR THEMES

Some of the major themes that are reflected in the text of the play are as discussed below:

The Christian Faith: The Bible makes a profound statement that points to the possibility of transcending death by way of unwavering faith and good practice thus, "And the last enemy to be destroyed is death"- (1 Corinthians 5:26).Christianity much like all other religion is a way of living.

The symbolic aspect of the text takes us straight into the heart of the seven Divine sacraments expected from the Christian way of life i.e. baptism, confirmation, priesthood; marriage, holy unction and penance (723-25). The Christian life in God is symbolic of a religious and spiritual journey or better still a 'pilgrimage' that was central tothe Medieval thought, which was widely popularised by Augustine in his *De Civitate Dei* or *The City of God* (426 A.D) where he wrote that travelling towards God's Kingdom was a"peregrination" or rather a long journey or expedition as discussed in the article "Everyman: The Theological Background of Everyman" by Ankur Barua in the text referred for the unit.

The Christian faith is built on the Good News of eternal life that has resulted from the simple yet strong belief in Jesus Christ, son of God, the Saviour and the blessed one. The learner may be aware that the Bible is divided into the Old and the New Testament. The 'New Testament' of the Bible is the new covenant of which the God the father talked of at the end of the'Old Testament' that reads thus, "The day will come, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant" (Hebrew 8:7-8). In the New Covenant of which the God's promise is fulfilled as is proved by the coming of Jesus Christ to save all His believers into eternal life, to destroy death in an entirely new way. The new covenant thus puts an end to animal sacrifices which were meant to appease God and practiced in the earlier times of the Old Testament. God sent his ordained son Jesus Christ to sacrifice His life and die for his believers as the living example. Thus, this 'Good news' seals the promise through the prophesies and the words of God. The medieval life had its rising commercial transactions or interactions but people of this time who lived in the constant fear of death, from war or bubonic plague were also dependent on religion and greatly feared the 'Judgement Day'.

Accountability of Good Deeds: Here the Christian theological perspective of "the beginning and the end of times" is emphasised. It brings into light Birth, Re-Birth i.e. to be born again in this lifetime and Death which is followed by Eternal Truth. After death comes the significant Day of judgement and this is what the Bible reads, "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter Fear God and keep His Commandments for this is the

whole duty of man. For God will bring every work into Judgement including every secret thing whether it is good or whether it is evil" (Ecclesiastes 12: 13-14). The Bible promises eternal life to the followers in Christ and emphasises the accountability of good and bad deeds, heaven and hell, Christ and Satan with the final purpose of life being 'Salvation' alone.

The fall of man or Adam itself shows the inevitability of punishment for one's sinful deeds. It reflects the tendencies of man as a born sinner and highlights the importance of renewing oneself. Some of these divine sacraments that is advised with good deeds are as follows: Eucharist or Holy Communion of bread and wine in remembrance of Christ Jesus; an active life of faith in good deeds; fasting and prayer with thanksgiving; repentance and penance along with confessions; and most importantly carrying one's cross or burden in remembrance of Christ Jesus. The 'anonymity' of *Everyman* in way can also be read as a representation of the collective Medieval thought and preaching. The Bible declares thus, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must put aside your selfish ambition shoulder your cross and follow me" (Matthew 16: 24) and in the unpredictability of death the medieval man acted in accordance to this Biblical belief. To quote a relevant example from the scriptures- "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure that a man discovered hidden in the field. In his excitement, he hid it again and sold everything he owned to get enough money to buy the field- and get the treasures too!" (Matthew 13: 44) which can be related to Everyman's journey and thereby concludes with the hope of the hereafter in the Kingdom of God which is significant to the believers in Christ.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q12. What is fulfilled in accordance to the New Covenant?

Q 13. Whom does the Bible promise eternal life?

1.5 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

One finds that the text of the play is laden with religious terms and connotations which are very closely harps on the teachings of the Bible. The character of Everyman in responding to the call of God represents the larger mankind. While reading the text, it is important to read between the lines and note that the text of the play contains 'allegorical' meaning. In simpler words, allegory refers to the deeper meaning that remains hidden under the surface of the literal meaning evident in any form of text. Thus, at one level it is the apparent meaning which the reader comes across at first i.e. interaction between characters within a narrative structure and another level, it reveals the broader meaning which extends beyond the frame of the narrative to imply its relevance to the larger context of life. The use of personification makes the characters all the more interesting as it imparts human-like characteristics on abstract ideas.

The learner may note that the language employed in the play is Middle English which explains why it may be difficult to grasp many words in text. However, a couple of reading or a resourceful glossary will enable the learner to quickly identify the meaning of words in Old English. The sense of rhyme and rhythm as noted in the construction of dialogues are an equally important aspect. The writing style employed may seem simplistic and the story rather predictable. However, there is more than meets the eye and the text of the play bears a significant moral, spiritual and also religious message at its core. Thus, the text shows Everyman's transformation and highlights that even as others have a significant role in one's journey, each man is accountable or responsible for his journey in this world as well. Such is the equation of God and humankind according to this medieval text. The aspects of 'saved and not yet saved' or 'good versus evil' are also underplayed in the story of Everyman. The play concludes on an optimistic note and much like the trend of morality plays leaves the reader/audience with its characteristic moral lesson and hope in the hereafter in the Kingdom of heaven for believers of Christ.



1.6 LET US SUM UP

After going through the unit thoroughly, the learner will now be acquainted to the content and thematic aspects of the play *Everyman*. The play makes for an easy reading and yet by virtue of its allegorical meanings embedded in the text makes the work significant in terms of its core message. Although, it is a Christian play in essence, yet if we look beyond the religious frame, we will certainly find a significance of the moral message that is at the core of the work which clearly reveals the rewards of goodness and good deeds in our day to day lives for whether we are accountable to God or not, we are certainly accountable to our own conscience. Therefore, the play can be extended to a larger perspective which upholds the absolute importance of good humanitarian values.



1.7 FURTHER READING

1) Choudhury, Bibhash. (2004) *Everyman*. Guwahati: K.B. Publications

2) The New Testament-New Living Translation-Compact Edition. (1996) Wheaton Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers.

3) The Holy Bible-New King James Version. (2000) Madras: India Bible Publications

1.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q1: *Everyman* (1510) falls in the category of morality plays of the late 15th Century.

Ans to Q2: The original translated title of Everyman was supposedly *The Somonyng of Everyman* (in old English) or *The Summoning of Everyman.*

Ans to Q3: The original version of *Everyman* is considered to have been written during the Tudor period (1485-1603) when the Tudor dynasty ruled England.

Ans to Q4: The author of this play remains'anonymous' to date or in other words remains unknown.

Ans to Q5: Suddenly Everyman finds himself is in great jeopardy. Christ Jesus calls on 'Death' to bring Everyman to Him for judgement. To Everyman's dismay, his pleading goes unheard and bribing goes unheeded, in front of steadfast death which hurries him into preparing his accounts before he is summoned and presented in front of the High Judge.

Ans to Q6: The 'Book of Account' that is supposed to consist one's entire life history of deeds.

Ans to Q7: The first approach is to 'Fellowship', who without knowledge of the entire sitaution tries to offer help.

Ans to Q8: Everyman realises that man is indeed alone in his day of judgement in the end

Ans to Q9: It is virtue that eventually holds Everyman in good stead and thus, he goes to the heavenly sphere for having lived well before the day of doom, as a Christian.

Ans to Q10: They are namely: Everyman, Messenger, God, Death, Fellowship, Kindred, Cousin, Goods, Good Deeds, Knowledge, Confession, Beauty, Strength, Discretion, Five Wits, Angel and Doctor.

Ans to Q 11: It assures a deep regard for the covenant as well as its adherence assures and ensures that those who die in the Lord shall always be the Blessed for ever more. Everyman's jeopardy or trouble is thus greatly saved by the High Judge or God and His son Christ Jesus.

Ans to Q 12: In the New Covenant in which God's promise is fulfilled as is proved by the coming if Jesus Christ to save all His believers into eternal life, to destroy death in an entirely new way. It is a covenant which puts an end to animal sacrifices for pleasing God as was practiced in the times of the Old Testament simply because God sent his ordained son Jesus Christ to be a sacrifice and die for his believer and be the living example.

Ans to Q 13: The Bible promises eternal life to the followers in Christ and emphasises the accountability of good and bad deeds, heaven and hell, Christ and Satan being brought to the forefront. The end aim being 'Salvation' alone.

Ans to Q 14: The 'anonymity' of the work Everyman in way also can be read as a representation of the collective Medieval thought and preaching.



1.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Give a detailed summary or explanation of the text *Everyman*

Q2. What are the major themes evident in the play *Everyman*?

Q3. Name some of the personified characters in the text of the play *Everyman*.

Q4. Discuss the style and language employed in the play.