

An Introduction to *Everyman* (Memoria Press)

I. Read the text and answer the questions following.

EVERYMAN

While miracle plays drew their basic plots from Bible stories, moral plays, or "moralities," presented religious and ethical doctrines in dramatic form. The moralities came into being somewhat later than did the miracle plays, but came to an end in literary history at about the same time; they range roughly from the beginning of the fifteenth century to the middle of the sixteenth. During these hundred and fifty years, they retained their essential allegorical character and didactic purpose, but they changed gradually from medieval dramatized sermons on the warfare of the vices and virtues for the possession of man's soul and similar theological themes to post-Reformation lessons on the struggle of ignorance and wisdom for the possession of every child and various political and polemical topics. The didacticism of most moralities is mellowed and seasoned by the introduction of comic realism, either in farcical situations or burlesque characters, the most important of which are the Devil, who may perhaps be the link between miracle and moral plays, and the Vice, a combination of the Seven Deadly Sins, who became a clownish and very popular prankster. In its lack of comic realism, *Everyman* is hardly typical; indeed, its lofty seriousness keeps it definitely above other early moralities in which vicious characters are made entertaining by their antics. *Everyman* is a typical early morality, however, in its use of personified abstractions as actors and of a plot that presents the progress of the hero from sin to salvation, quite after the manner of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

The early popularity of *Everyman* seems to be indicated by its having been printed in four editions in the first four decades of the sixteenth century. It was probably produced shortly before the first of these printings, perhaps as early as the end of the preceding century. The creator of *Everyman* is unknown, but that the author was a priest is evident from the theme and the details of the play, and particularly from Five-Wits' praise of righteous priests in lines 730 to 768. Although the play does not present such a sharp conflict of vice and virtue as appears in some of the other early moralities, it is, nevertheless, an epitome of much of the theological didacticism of the Middle Ages. The central theme is the popular one of Christian dying, in which the messenger of God pipes king and peasant to the grave with equal inevitability. Although *Everyman* himself is not a hopeless sinner, he has lived after his own pleasure and has delighted to have his body "gay and fresh." But if in his youth he has neglected virtue for vice, he is not beyond repentance, and with the help of Good-Deeds and Knowledge, his soul is saved.

The art of dying like a repentant Christian seems to be, then, the central theme of *Everyman*; but other devices of the early theological morality also appear in the play. The lurking pitfalls of temptation—the World, the Flesh, and the Devil—are alluded to in several places, even if not fully developed, and the "seven deadly sins damnable" are definitely listed as the foes of *Everyman*. As opponents to sin appear the seven holy sacraments, and priesthood, confession, last communion, and extreme unction all help the sinner to clear his reckoning. Even though the conflict between good and evil is not so sharply marked as in other early moral plays, *Everyman* reveals definitely the medieval interest in the *débat*, or formal argument, between opposites. Of physical action in the play there is very little; of debating there is a great deal. Indeed, the play may be outlined in terms of *Everyman*'s successive failures to induce Goods, Fellowship, Kindred, and Cousin to accompany him to that country "from whose bourn no traveler returns," and his ultimate success in finding spiritual companionship, which he had neglected in his gay life. Finally, the high quality of the play appears in its directness and compression. The inevitability of *Everyman*'s end seems reflected in the tempo of the plot. Unlike the dialogues of many of the other early moral plays, the dialogues of *Everyman* are direct and pointed, and the action is not obscured either by artistic example of that alliance of pulpit and stage which produced the early moral play.

Comprehension Questions:

1. The morality plays presented _____ and _____ doctrines in dramatic form.
2. What is the approximate date range of the morality plays?

3. During these 150 years, they retained their essential _____ character and _____ purpose.
4. Circle—**True** or **False**: Over the 150 years, they gradually changed from strictly religious (medieval dramatized sermons) to more secular political and polemic topics.
5. Is *Everyman* a notable example of an early theological morality play or a later Tudor morality play? _____.
6. What indicates the early popularity of *Everyman*?
_____.
7. *Everyman* has a close relationship to what other text?
_____.
8. Though unknown, the author of *Everyman* was most likely a _____.
9. What are the three lurking pitfalls of temptation?
_____.
10. What are listed as the foes of *Everyman*?
_____.
11. What, then, are the opponents of sin?
_____.
12. *Everyman* reveals the medieval interest in the débat, which is what?
_____.