



RESEARCH ARTICLE

FROM MONEY TO MERCY: THE WRITING OF DEATH IN EVERYMAN

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Submission Apr. 17, 2026 Acceptance May. 23, 2026 Keywords Everyman; Death; Repentance; Redemption; Good deeds Corresponding Author liushan200205@163.com	This paper reexamines Everyman from the perspective of death and explores the philosophical insights about life that the work presents. By analyzing “the beginning of death—Money,” the article reveals human beings’ excessive reliance on material wealth and the moral crisis of medieval society. Through “the process of death—Separation,” it illustrates Everyman’s detachment from external entities and highlights the significance of the inner virtue of “Good Deeds.” Finally, in “the redemption in death—Mercy,” it explains how Everyman attains spiritual salvation through repentance, good deeds, and an understanding of God’s mercy. By portraying the experiences of Everyman, the play underscores that death is the key to divine mercy and redemption, exposes the illusory nature of material pursuits, and emphasizes that only repentance leads to salvation. Its reflections offer valuable insights for contemporary readers in understanding the relationship between life and death.

1. INTRODUCTION

Everyman is a medieval morality play intended to convey moral exhortations through allegory. Its central plot revolves around the symbolic figure “Everyman,” narrating how, when faced with impending death, he shifts from pursuing the material world to longing for spiritual and moral redemption. By personifying various moral qualities—such as Fellowship, Wealth, and Knowledge—the play illustrates how a person’s life is influenced by these attributes and how, in the face of death, such external factors are powerless to save one’s soul. “Death” in the play is sent by God, serving as a reminder for people to reflect on the meaning of life and their moral responsibilities, thereby achieving ultimate redemption. This profound exploration of human existence, and the actions and reflections possible in the presence of death, provides valuable material for later literary and philosophical thought. Studying Everyman not only helps us better understand medieval moral concepts but also offers modern individuals deep reflections on life, death, and morality.

Existing studies tend to analyze *Everyman* from the perspectives of “repentance” or “tragedy,” viewing the play either as an extension of late medieval penitential theology, or as a work that integrates the aesthetics of classical tragedy with religious moral doctrine through its dramatic structure and linguistic style. However, these studies often overlook the deeper philosophical implications within the play, especially the insights brought forth by death itself. This paper reexamines the philosophical reflections on life in *Everyman* from the standpoint of death. As an inevitable part of human existence, death is often perceived as an end, yet in many literary works, it carries profound symbolic significance. Through the revelation of death, the individual undergoes a transformation between the material and the spiritual, ultimately moving toward redemption. More specifically, *Everyman*, through its protagonist’s journey, demonstrates the transition from the material world to the spiritual realm, explaining how inner rebirth can be achieved through reflection and behavioral transformation, and conveying deep insights into human life.

This paper analyzes the play from three perspectives:

(1) **The Beginning of Death—Money:** In their pursuit of pleasure, human beings neglect spiritual and moral needs, resulting in helplessness and fear when facing death. Greed for money, as the beginning of death, serves as an important point of reflection in the play.

(2) **The Process of Death—Separation:** As death approaches, humans become separated from their wealth, social status, friendships, and all other external conditions upon which they once relied. This process exposes humanity’s resistance to death and its inability to escape ultimate questions.

(3) **The Redemption of Death—Mercy:** Ultimately, the protagonist attains spiritual salvation by repenting for past actions and accepting mercy and forgiveness. This process symbolizes how, in the face of death, humanity may achieve spiritual rebirth through genuine inner contrition.

Through this analytical perspective, the paper aims to break away from traditional interpretive frameworks and reveal the deeper philosophical reflections on life, death, and redemption in *Everyman*, thereby offering contemporary readers a new approach to understanding these issues.

2. THE BEGINNING OF DEATH: MONEY

The play begins with *Everyman* being “summoned” by Death to appear before God for the “reckoning” of his accounts. In this scene, death is not merely a biological end but also a moral and spiritual judgment. Through Death’s summons, the play reflects medieval society’s understanding of “reckoning”—that every individual must ultimately answer for their actions, especially those who rely excessively on material wealth while neglecting morality and faith. *Everyman*’s initial response is an attempt to bribe Death with money, which directly reveals his dependence on material wealth. Money symbolizes the external, transient things he pursues—things incapable of offering true salvation. Yet money holds no value to Death, and thus *Everyman* cannot escape the “reckoning” demanded by God.

Everyman makes full use of the traditional portrayal of Christ’s Passion as humanity’s

redemption. This theme is introduced early in God's monologue, as stated in Gassner (2016)

"They take no heed of spiritual matter,
 Led by their senses in folly's path;
 Worldly riches doth their minds flatter,
 They fear not my righteousness, nor hell's wrath.
 My laws they break, my pains they forget—
 For their sake I suffered to redeem them all;
 I hung betwixt two thieves, in torment met,
 To bring mankind from death's thrall."

This monologue not only reveals humanity's fall and deviation from God's expectations, but also lays the foundation for the central metaphor of accounting and reckoning. God sacrifices Himself to save humanity; this act is a sacred form of "gift-giving"—a divine offering made without return. Yet humans, absorbed in sin and wealth, forget God's laws and sacrifices, thereby betraying this divine gift. In this sense, God's salvific action becomes part of the play's economic metaphor: human actions constitute debts in a spiritual economy that must eventually be accounted for. This theme deepens the spiritual dimension of *Everyman*, showing that under God's judgment, humanity's actions form a meticulously recorded spiritual ledger. When the characters face Death's summons, their disregard for God's redemption and pursuit of sin and wealth become debts confronting them at judgment, reinforcing the play's exploration of salvation and accountability.

"Reckoning" is a crucial metaphor in the play. In *Medieval Drama: Comparative and Critical Studies (Series II)* (Cunningham, 1991), scholars explore the financial imagery within *Everyman*. The central economic metaphor is the depiction of divine judgment as a "reckoning," a term mentioned about forty times in the play. Although derived from the Bible and common throughout the Middle Ages, *Everyman* revitalizes this ancient rhetorical device by presenting the reckoning as an audit of a literal ledger held by a merchant skilled in bookkeeping. Yet this ledger is only one element of a broader network of economic metaphors, which also include the divine "gift-giving" previously mentioned, as well as the language of human "borrowing."

In essence, reckoning represents God's judgment of humanity. Death, as God's messenger, summons *Everyman* to face this judgment. This resembles a legal summons. However, instead of accepting judgment, *Everyman* attempts to bribe Death, as shown in Gassner (2016)

"Thou mightest be liberal unto me,
 And I would give thee of my gold in store,
 If thou wilt defer this matter till another day;
 A thousand pound shalt thou have—and more!"

This scene reveals Everyman's attempt to use money to delay divine judgment. It exposes his greed, ignorance, and reliance on material wealth, while also reflecting late-medieval English attitudes toward wealth and power. At that time, wealth was intertwined with social authority; the Church and nobility relied heavily on land and money to sustain influence, and financial donations were often believed to secure spiritual benefit. Many believed that donating to the Church or paying for indulgences could reduce sins and obtain forgiveness. Everyman extends this belief into the face of death, wrongly assuming that wealth can solve spiritual dilemmas.

In medieval literature, summoners and messengers were often portrayed as corrupt and bribable. For example, Langland's *Piers Plowman* characterizes summoners as greedy and fraudulent:

“Then all Christian folk, save women common,
Repented them sore—save a shrewd summoner and a false witness,
Who often for silver swore falsely;
They knew their wickedness well,
And for covetousness wrought harm. (Russell & Kane, 1997)”

The false witness and the summoner profess repentance with their lips, yet have long abandoned their faith in their hearts. Seduced by money and power, they sell their souls, abuse their official positions to accept bribes, and oppress the vulnerable in society—an irony that exposes the moral corruption and frailty of the legal system in the medieval period. Therefore, within such a social environment, it is understandable that Everyman believes wealth and external material resources can solve all problems. However, the “Death” messenger in *Everyman* remains unmoved and says directly to him:

“Everyman, alas, thou hast thy wit far set;
Gold and silver is none of my covet;
Pope, emperor, king, duke, nor prince also,
If I would receive gifts, might I get all the world;
But such pilgrimage I do not use to ride.
My custom is clean contrary. Go, make thee ready! (Gassner, 2016)”

Through the Death-messenger's firm rejection of Everyman's attempted bribe, Everyman expresses a critique of contemporary social customs. It reveals that, when confronted with death and the final judgment, people still cling to the illusion that material means can help them evade responsibility—reflecting the widespread materialism and moral crisis of late medieval society. In the play, Death's summons ruthlessly shatters Everyman's blind reliance on wealth and material possessions. Throughout his life, Everyman has been immersed in the pursuit of riches, greedily accumulating wealth without cultivating any spiritual strength. Only when death arrives does he awaken to the emptiness within his soul. His dialogue with Death reveals to him that he

is merely a temporary custodian of wealth, not its true owner. This realization compels him to abandon the fantasy of escaping judgment through wealth and to seek other “companions” on his journey, hoping they might help him through the trial ahead.

3. THE PROCESS OF DEATH: SEPARATION

After receiving Death’s summons, Everyman falls into extreme terror and desperately longs for a way to cope. He weeps alone, hoping that someone might accompany him and offer assistance so that he may successfully pass through the arduous process of “reckoning.” At first, he turns to Fellowship, Kindred, and Goods for help; yet all those whom he once regarded as dependable utterly abandon him in his moment of crisis. Fellowship and kinship are among the most cherished emotional supports in human life. In daily existence, when we encounter difficulties, seeking help from our friends and relatives often brings comfort and strength. They accompany us through life’s ups and downs, offering warmth and a sense of being loved. However, when the shadow of death descends, even the closest friends and family cannot truly walk with us into death. This indicates that although interpersonal relationships play a significant role throughout the course of life, they cannot alter its ultimate end nor cross the boundary between life and death. It reveals further that the essence of life is solitude—each person must face death alone. No matter how deep the emotional bonds formed in life may be, at the final moment, one must bear it by oneself.

When standing before death, the false value attributed to wealth is also ruthlessly exposed. People often fall into the illusion that wealth can construct an unbreakable fortress of security and control. In the real world, wealth satisfies material desires and grants social status, appearing omnipotent. Yet when life’s train arrives at the terminal of death, one discovers that money can no longer make the wrong things right; the fragile nature of wealth becomes unmistakably clear. From a life-course perspective, death is the great equalizer—it favors no one regardless of their material abundance. Whether rich or poor, all are reduced to the same essential state. Wealth cannot serve as ransom for life nor purchase even a single extra moment. This reveals that the wealth people spend their lives pursuing becomes utterly useless at the moment of death, its significance dramatically diminished.

The departure of Fellowship, Kindred, and Goods teaches Everyman that he must seek assistance elsewhere—marking a shift from external bonds to inner virtues. Thus, in Everyman, the replacement of characters is not merely a dramatic device but a profound transformation of relational structure. Traditional external ties such as “Fellowship,” “Kindred,” and “Goods” are replaced by internal qualities like “Discretion,” “Strength,” “Beauty,” and the “Five Wits.” This shift reflects a move from reliance on external social connections to a mode of interaction based on individual moral virtues and rational faculties. “Discretion,” for instance, symbolizes the judgment and insight required for navigating complex human relationships. In this new moral framework, human connections are no longer built solely upon external dependence but increasingly upon personal moral choices and inner qualities.

This transformation challenges traditional notions of friendship and kinship and places the individual’s inner life at the core of social behavior. At the same time, by elevating “Discretion,” “Strength,” “Beauty,” and the “Five Wits” as new “counselors,” Everyman emphasizes the moral

construction of the inner self. These figures are not merely external traits but representations of how individuals shape their moral outlook through self-examination and reflection. Compared to the traditional sacrament of confession, these personified virtues highlight the deeper internal impact moral qualities have on behavior. Confession, in its traditional sense, represents the recognition and remorse for past sins; yet in *Everyman*, internal “Discretion” acts as a vehicle for moral reflection. By distinguishing right from wrong and weighing consequences, the individual adjusts his conduct—revealing how one attains growth and elevation through internal self-reflection amid complex social contexts. Through this new arrangement of characters, the play demonstrates how humans seek balance between internal morality and the external world, thereby reconstructing their relationship with themselves and others.

Furthermore, the gradual emergence of these inner qualities on the stage mirrors the collective practices surrounding the dying in the Middle Ages. Rooted in medieval religious belief and social values, it reflects a communal concern for the spiritual well-being of each member. *Ars Moriendi* vividly describes the scene faced by the dying: the entire community was expected to assist the departing soul, for “pious people, including women, should not shrink back for the sake of propriety, but out of reverence should go to the side of the dying” (Horstman, 1896). In that era, people did not participate in end-of-life care for external social gain but out of reverence for life, compassion for others, and a sense of moral responsibility. Many would gather in the dying person’s room, each fulfilling distinct roles: some provided bodily care; others offered spiritual comfort, urging the dying to repent and guiding them to face death with steadfast faith so that their soul might achieve salvation.

These practices represent the external expression of inner qualities such as “Discretion” and “Strength.” “Discretion” manifests in recognizing the dying person’s needs—whether spiritual comfort or practical assistance—while “Strength” appears in the willingness to overcome fear, fatigue, or hesitation to offer unwavering support. According to critic Munson, the emergence of these inner traits signifies the deepening of *Everyman*’s spiritual and moral insight. In his view, *Everyman*’s inward turn indicates a more profound and individualized engagement with the external and formalistic patterns of earlier conduct (Munson, 1985).

However, in the face of death—the ultimate boundary of life—other seemingly important qualities such as Beauty, Strength, and Discretion reveal their limitations. Their withdrawal at the crucial moment underscores their transient and insubstantial nature. Only “Good Deeds” remains by *Everyman*’s side. It is Good Deeds who helps him prepare his “account book” so that he may stand with confidence when called to “reckoning.” This is analogous to the sacraments of “Viaticum” and “Extreme Unction” in the *Ars Moriendi* tradition, which provided spiritual preparation and comfort for the dying, symbolizing the transition from the earthly world to the world to come (Comper, 1917). After confessing his sins, *Everyman* receives these “final rites,” reflecting the holistic support—both psychological and spiritual—that medieval religious practices offered to the dying. Together with Good Deeds, these rites construct the moral and spiritual framework through which individuals confronted death, revealing the central role of religious belief and moral values in medieval responses to mortality.

Ultimately, these scenes reveal that the process of dying is one of continual separation from

illusions. Only by abandoning false dependencies can one truly begin walking the right path.

4. THE REDEMPTION OF DEATH: MERCY

Throughout the process of “separation,” Everyman gradually realizes that everything he possesses has been given by God. He comes to understand his relationship with his community and with God, recognizing that it is through God’s mercy that he has been granted an opportunity for repentance. Through confessing his sins, Everyman seeks the salvation of his soul. With the help of Good Deeds, he learns to distribute his wealth, assist the poor, and acknowledge his responsibility toward God. This indicates that only when death approaches—and after painfully undergoing the process of separation from all external things—does Everyman finally comprehend his urgent need for divine mercy.

For parishioners in the Middle Ages, the Passion of Christ and the Last Judgment were central to Christian teaching. Churches invariably displayed related murals to educate local residents, thereby highlighting God’s dual attributes of mercy and justice. Christ’s Passion exemplifies God’s mercy, as expressed in the line: “To bring mankind to life, I spared not myself, but suffered death” (Gassner, 2016). The Last Judgment, in contrast, represents God’s justice and impartiality: on that day, every person’s actions will be judged fairly—rewarding the righteous and punishing the wicked. These two aspects—divine compassion and divine justice—constituted the most fundamental attributes of God. The Passion manifests God’s transcendent love—“He was willing to die for us because He loved us.” Judgment, on the other hand, reveals the counterpart: “Our Lord is just, and justly He shall judge us”(Ross, 1940).

Moreover, the very moment of death is decisive. Any effort made after this moment is futile, for “there no one can escape—neither by deceit, nor by fear, nor by favor of nobles, nor by payment. No one shall be redeemed unless he be freed from deadly sin. If you are found in mortal sin, then even if Our Lady and all the saints in heaven pray for you, you shall not be heard, for the time of grace for redemption and repentance has passed” (Lumiansky & Mills, 1974). This demonstrates that God’s mercy extends only to this life. Christ’s suffering can bring mercy to every person approaching death, yet death marks the boundary. Before reaching this limit, one still has a final opportunity for atonement—an opportunity that must be seized. Beyond this point, any mortal sin becomes unpardonable, and the soul must endure endless anguish when facing the final “reckoning.”

Everyman thus uses death as the turning point that initiates reflection on the self and on one’s relationship with God—a reflection not derived from innate understanding but gradually formed through the worldly experiences of sin, repentance, and forgiveness. In this process, as Everyman moves toward death, he becomes increasingly isolated—an inevitable path toward true repentance. The means through which he seeks redemption is confession, which plays a decisive role. Confession breaks the naïve state that stems from a lack of self-knowledge, compelling the individual to confront personal sins and begin a journey of self-awareness. At the same time, confession is the bridge that reconnects the individual with God; it is a “place of purification” where one voices and reflects upon sin, releases internal burdens, heals spiritual wounds, and attains rebirth on both moral and spiritual levels (Paulson, 2001).

From this perspective, Everyman does not represent a specific social class—such as merchants—but stands for all types of people in society. As Clifford Davidson notes, he represents “members of all estates” (Davidson, 1981). That is, he symbolizes individuals from every social class who, when summoned by God for their final reckoning, must undertake a process of repentance and redemption if their Good Deeds are found deficient. The relationship between God and Everyman in the play is highly complex. God, as Redeemer, Giver, and Creditor, establishes a unique “divine economy.” This relationship is not merely a theological construct but also a test of human nature when confronted with divine gifts and corresponding responsibilities. The depiction of Everyman’s judgment as a reckoning reflects that God has already “carefully accounted” for humanity. In His monologue, God laments: “To bring mankind to life, I spared not myself, but suffered death” (Gassner, 2016) —suggesting that His blood serves as the “currency” used to purchase human life (Mills, 1996). As Creditor, God “lends” existence and life to humanity, requiring them to manage this divine gift responsibly. Human attributes such as beauty, strength, and knowledge are like “assets,” meant to yield returns for God’s “investment.” Yet Everyman loses himself amid worldly prosperity, forgetting his “debt” to God and failing to fulfill the responsibility of stewarding his life rightly.

In *Everyman*, the protagonist’s understanding of divine mercy unfolds through three petitions for God’s compassion, each closely intertwined with his understanding of divine justice. His first petition occurs after encountering Death, when he learns he must begin his journey toward death. He pleads: “Therefore, Death, I pray thee, for God’s mercy, spare me this time, till I be provided of remedy” (Gassner, 2016). This reveals his shallow comprehension of his relationship with God; invoking the common phrase “for God’s mercy,” he paradoxically attempts to delay the reckoning demanded by divine justice. The request is ironic, revealing a superficial attitude toward death and an undue concern for worldly life rather than a genuine insight into divine mercy.

His second petition occurs when he cries: “O glorious fountain and everlasting divine, forgive my unkindness; I cry thee mercy” (Gassner, 2016). Although this plea appears sincere, its motivation remains fear of journeying into death alone. It shows that Everyman is still preoccupied with earthly anxieties rather than genuine spiritual purification.

Only at his third and final petition—“In this place I cry God mercy” (Gassner, 2016) — does he fully grasp divine mercy. Having been abandoned by Fellowship, Kindred, and Goods, and after all inner qualities leave him at the threshold of death, Everyman comes to understand God’s compassion only after experiencing complete disillusionment with the world. His journey reveals that the protagonist’s transformation is one of gradually stripping away worldly attachments to arrive at a sacred insight. This progression shows that access to the divine realm requires significant inner awakening and spiritual transformation. Through these trials, Everyman ultimately recognizes that “all earthly things are but vanity, save God alone is most sure” (Gassner, 2016) and that it is God who “hath me bought and kept me from sin” (Gassner, 2016).

At the same time, Everyman slowly recognizes his relationship with society. Formerly consumed by the pursuit of wealth and status, he wandered within a worldly illusion, neglecting the nourishment of his soul and the moral obligations he owed to others. As the shadow of death

draws near, Everyman faces abandonment not only by those around him but even by his own human faculties. He thus experiences a profound sense of alienation from the community. Through this painful ordeal, Everyman gradually discerns that humans both belong to and stand apart from the community: they share collective responsibilities, yet each individual ultimately faces death alone. Only through Good Deeds can one bridge this separation, reconnecting the individual with the community. This illuminating realization awakens him from his former delusions. As he declares, “I will give half my goods to the poor, of my free will and without constraint; and the other half shall I make restitution of my debts secretly” (Gassner, 2016). This signifies his resolution to change—to assist the poor, make restitution, and atone for his sins.

Thus, God, through the seemingly harsh yet profoundly merciful form of death, grants Everyman a final opportunity: to repent for past wrongs, to make amends, to help the poor through acts of charity, and ultimately to save his soul.

5. CONCLUSION

Everyman employs vivid allegorical techniques to explore profoundly the significance and revelations of death within the human life cycle. In the play, “Death” is not merely a symbol of the end of life but also a force of judgment that compels Everyman to reflect upon his actions and values. By portraying the psychological transformation that Everyman undergoes when confronted with death, the drama exposes the impermanence of material wealth and worldly achievements, emphasizing that only repentance can secure God’s mercy.

At the same time, the concept of “Everyman” is not static; rather, it is continually formed and reshaped throughout the process of divine judgment. This gradual transformation ultimately leads to the emergence of a renewed self. From his initial superficial attempts to evade death, to praying out of worldly anxiety, and finally to attaining a genuine understanding of divine mercy after complete disillusionment with earthly attachments, Everyman undergoes a profound journey from naïveté to introspection, and from spiritual confusion to awakening.

Throughout this process, Everyman comes to comprehend his relationship with the community, recognizes his responsibility toward God, and resolves to atone for his faults through good deeds and acts of charity toward the poor. In doing so, he embodies the essential message of the play: that only by confronting death, embracing repentance, and practicing virtue can one achieve spiritual redemption.

CONFLICT STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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