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Every Man's Faustus

In comparing the plays *Everyman* and *Dr. Faustus*, many differences can be found. *Everyman* is a medieval play, written by an anonymous author, while *Dr. Faustus*, written by Christopher Marlowe, is a Renaissance play. The fact that the two plays come from different time periods in English literature can be accredited as a main reason for their many differences. While both plays discuss ideas of sin and redemption, each play deals with these ideas in a different manner. *Everyman* is a morality play in allegory form (Norton Anthology). It serves as a warning against sin, attributing redemption to one's good works. Throughout the play, the character of Everyman represents mankind. This play is a very good example of how medieval writers, usually clergymen, viewed man's insufficiency in God's eyes. Marlowe's play, however, offers a different perspective on sin and attributes redemption to faith, not works. As Faustus' life continues in the play, the audience may wonder whether or not his "sins" are truly wrong. This play offers a new way of looking at sin, challenging traditional values of right and wrong. When comparing these two plays, their difference in purpose becomes manifest; with each play working to evoke a different emotion in its audience.

As a morality play, the purpose of *Everyman* is as a lesson. Directed toward a common folk audience during the medieval period, the play is meant to instruct. Written by an anonymous author, most likely a clergyman of the time, the play shows the evils of sin and the importance of good works. At the beginning of the play, God is heard expressing his disappointment in every man. Everyman has forgotten God's sacrifice and has neglected to build up his mansion in Heaven (447). God's sacrifice was his death upon the cross in order to save Everyman, and

Everyman proves he has forgotten this by using the seven deadly sins. In using these sins, and encumbering himself with earthly riches, Everyman has neglected his good deeds. These are what build up heavenly wealth and would save Everyman on the day of reckoning, which God has chosen to bring upon Everyman now.

In Everyman's "counting book" both his good and bad deeds are recorded. Death has come suddenly upon Everyman who realizes that his counting book is not in order. This is an example of a medieval belief that the extent of one's good works is what allows entrance to Heaven. Wanting more time for this, Everyman offers Death his earthly goods that he has been amassing instead of performing good deeds. Everyman's sins are included in the seven deadly sins of pride, avarice, wrath, lechery, envy, gluttony, and sloth. The fact that Everyman has so much earthly wealth to offer Death is an example of one of his sins.

Sin in *Everyman*, as well as during the medieval period, was seen in this "counting book" form. A person's sins stack up and can only be redeemed with confession, and more unique to this time period, with penance. This is why good deeds are so important. Good deeds are a form of penance for Everyman's many sins throughout his day-to-day life. When Death comes so suddenly and Everyman's Good Deeds are not strong enough to outweigh his sins, he must go to Confession. Through Confession Everyman is given Penance.

Penance is necessary for Everyman's redemption. The penance Everyman is given is described as harsh and is compared to God's suffering on the cross (459). Redemption during the medieval period often required bodily purification. The word "scourge" is used many times in reference to Everyman's penance. He is told to suffer patiently as Christ did when he was scourged for Everyman. This scourging of Everyman is his penance. By purifying his body and asking God for his mercy, Everyman will find the forgiveness he needs in order to be redeemed.

Redemption is a deliverance from one's sins. In *Everyman*, Everyman acquires God's mercy and forgiveness through Confession and Penance. Both Confession and Penance are necessary to make Everyman's Good Deeds strong enough to attend him on his journey to redemption and ascend with him into Heaven. An audience watching this play would see the benefit of good deeds, and desire not to go through what Everyman (who's good deeds were lacking) was forced to in order to be redeemed and go to Heaven.

The Renaissance play, *Dr. Faustus*, is also a play that deals with the ideas of sin and redemption. However, this play, unlike *Everyman*, was not written as a warning. While it is unlike *Everyman* in this sense it is similar because it is also meant to instruct its audience. Written by Christopher Marlowe, a contemporary of Shakespeare, the play offers a new way of looking at the idea of sin. The play is written as a kind of tragedy, with Dr. Faustus presented as a more or less noble character. As the audience becomes familiar with him, they see him as a rebel against an oppressive morality, and their sympathies lie with him. This oppressive morality is the traditional view of sin, which would condemn Faustus for his contract with the devil in exchange for knowledge. The view that Marlowe is offering through this play is the idea that seeking knowledge is not a sin. In fact, as Marlowe would have it, Faustus becomes the exemplar of a new successor morality (Phil 115, Pyne).

This new morality is one where a person does and should search for knowledge. The idea of sin in this morality does not coincide with efforts to attain this knowledge. As Faustus continues on his search, pushing past the limits of traditional values and assumptions, he becomes a hero in the eyes of the audience, not a condemned sinner. The fact that Faustus believes his soul belongs to him, and is his to sell and not God's who has given his son and

bought Faustus with his life, is his sin. While Faustus has sinned against God in this sense, he is not unredeemable as he himself believes.

Redemption in *Dr. Faustus* follows the Renaissance belief that salvation comes through faith, not works. While Faustus spends his twenty-four years in search for knowledge and defying his own urges to repent for selling his soul to devil, he retains the God's offer of forgiveness until the very end. Each time Faustus considers repenting, he is stopped either by himself or by the devil, convinced his sin was too great.

The lesson of the importance of faith does lie within this play. In order to be redeemed, all Faustus needs is faith, a post-reformation belief. If he could have faith enough to believe that God will forgive him of his sin then he can be saved. The fact that Faustus does not repent, even though he may come close to it many times, is the reason he does go to hell. In his contract with the devil, Faustus agrees that after the twenty-four years are over he is to belong to the devil and join the other lost souls in Hell. It is this agreement and his lack of faith that God can overcome it on his soul's behalf that keeps Faustus from being redeemed and going to Heaven.

The audience, after watching this play, is meant to be left with two main ideas. First, they would see pushing the limits of an authoritarian society and searching for knowledge as admirable, not sinful. Second, the audience would appreciate the Renaissance belief that redemption is attained through faith and be reminded never to lose faith in God.

It is noticeable that the differences in the two plays, *Everyman* and *Dr. Faustus*, are credited to their difference in time period. The medieval view of sin presented in *Everyman* is challenged by the Renaissance view of sin offered in *Dr. Faustus*. This view offered by Marlowe in *Dr. Faustus*, that the search for knowledge is admirable and not sinful, has had lasting effects and is valued by a majority of today's society. The fact that the medieval play is written pre-

reformation and the Renaissance play is written post-reformation is the reason for their difference in belief on ideas of redemption. The former offering the belief that redemption comes through good works, and the latter attributing redemption only to faith.

Due to this difference in time period and therefore difference in religious belief, the difference in purpose of the two plays is shown. Meant as a warning and a lesson, *Everyman* instructs its audience on the importance of good works and stresses the need for confession and penance for redemption. Offered as a new morality, *Dr. Faustus* challenges the traditional idea of sin presented in *Everyman* and instructs its audience to no longer live within the limits of an oppressive morality, while still preserving the Renaissance view that redemption comes only through faith.