

Everyman

Adapted by Carol Ann Duffy, 2015. London: Faber & Faber.

I spent late 2023 away from the internet and its distractions, engaging in a mental detoxing to get a little closer to myself. I did not expect this to occur in three weeks, but I am hopeful that it marks a first small step in a slightly different direction. Keeping me company were several books, including a slim modern adaptation of *Everyman*, a medieval allegorical play that I had the chance to see at the National Theatre in 2015.

As I have not delved into the original text (nor do I plan to, as memories of struggling with Dutch medieval texts in school have not faded), it is challenging for me to make a direct comparison between the two versions. What I can say is that Carol Ann Duffy's adaptation is accessible, an easy read. Her use of contemporary language and themes resonated with me, making the text relatable and comprehensible.

Below the surface of her words, the play is immersed in existential themes. This is the story of the journey of Everyman, the embodiment of man representing our shared struggles and dilemmas. Everyman, at the height of his career and success, meets Death at his fortieth birthday party. He is called to account for his life's actions. The encounter forces him to abandon his former life and seek a friend who will vouch for him. Naturally, the journey is arduous and finding that friend is challenging. Along his path, he meets various allegorical characters – including Fellowship, Kindred and Goods – each representing different facets of human existence before he ultimately confronts his own self.

On his journey, Everyman navigates the fundamental realities of life, death and the human condition. The story probes existential themes, particularly emphasising individual responsibility, a personal favourite of mine.

I kept my head down. Looked away.

There'd always be another day.

The waste.

I thought the Earth was mine to spend,

A coin in space.

I hated the news. The News.

Didn't want to hear it –

*floods, fires, melting, burning, droughts, extinctions...
too much!*

What could I do? Me?

(p44)

In this poignant passage, I see how Duffy has updated the play, highlighting our collective apathy towards climate change. Many, including me, deflect

responsibility by turning a blind eye, ignoring the (hollow) words from the politicians and rationalising our inaction by believing that our individual contributions hold little or no sway. The character representing Good Deeds (or God as he is known in the original play) mourns our indifference, symbolised by the desolation of the Earth:

*...The angels weep
to see the ruin of the Earth:
the gathered waters, which I called the seas,
unclean, choking on themselves.
The dry land – fractured, fracked.*

(p5)

I feel encouraged to self-reflect, urged to contemplate my own (in)actions and my values. It is a call to reconsider the choices I have made and will make. The sentiment of despair and the vivid images of the passage echo the disruption of balance in the universe while also mirroring my internal struggle for coherence in an indifferent world. It further underlines my/our disconnection from nature, others and ourselves.

Duffy is a keen observer of our emotions and our search for instant gratification. She observes our trials, emotional landscapes and innermost thoughts. She connects us on a deeper level with this allegory of the human condition. We are all bound together, interconnected through our narratives and shared experiences. These enable us to overcome our obstacles and differences and help us to forge deeper connections.

Everyman's struggle with the inevitability of death mirrors our own existential disquiet. It makes me reflect on the transience of life. How swiftly does life pass; do I have ten Xmas'es ahead, or just a handful? Towards the tale's conclusion, he evolves from ignorance to enlightenment and embraces the miracle of life and the reality of death. Everyman also wonders if he has a soul, a deeper essence, much like the moon's glow in a sky of darkness. It invites me to recognise the depth of our/my being.

*I think I have a soul.
In all humility, I think I have a soul.
Where will it go?*

...

*I think I have a soul-
like this planet has a moon-
my own soft light,
when there is only endless night.*

(p63)

I believe that this short and beautiful little play can serve as a springboard for therapeutic discussions. First, and most obvious, it explores important existential themes such as life, death, meaning, responsibility and freedom, echoing the universal struggles we all share. The exploration of morality and ethics can help us to engage with our clients in discussing their values, ethical considerations and decision-making processes. Last, the play's rich metaphors and symbolism offer therapists an alternative perspective and allegorical tools to navigate complex emotions and discuss life transitions with our clients.

I will end by recognising that a play based in allegorical storytelling, symbolism and moral lessons might indeed pose a challenge to engage with, yet its depth and complexity render it a thought-provoking and relevant read. *Everyman* stands the test of time as a tale of the human condition and our enduring search for meaning in an ever-changing world. Its exploration of existential themes, human struggles and ethical considerations make it a valuable resource for both therapists and clients alike.

Ondine Smulders

NSPC OFFERS SPECIALIST, FLEXIBLE POSTGRADUATE TRAINING IN A WIDE RANGE OF MENTAL HEALTH TOPICS AT THE EXISTENTIAL ACADEMY



THE HOME OF EXISTENTIAL TRAINING

- MA EXISTENTIAL COACHING
- MA EXISTENTIAL AND HUMANIST PASTORAL CARE
- MA IN DIVERSITY STUDIES
- MSc AUTISM AND RELATED NEURODEVELOPMENTAL CONDITIONS
- MSc PSYCHOTHERAPY STUDIES
- DProf EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOTHERAPY AND COUNSELLING
- DCPsych COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

WWW.NSPC.ORG.UK










NSPC

NEW SCHOOL OF PSYCHOTHERAPY AND COUNSELLING
 61-63 Fortune Green Road London NW6 1DR
 ☎ 0207 435 8067 // 0203 515 0223 @ admissions@nspc.org.uk 🌐 nspc.org.uk