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İnceleme Makelesi/Review

## Carol Ann Duffy's *Everyman* (2015), A Contemporary Morality Play

Çağdaş Bir Ahlak Oyunu Olarak Carol Ann Duffy'nin *Everyman* (2015)  
Adlı Oyunu

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### Abstract

Morality is a particular system that regulates human relations, and in this respect, moral behaviour is one of the most necessary attributes of humankind as a social being. A myriad of philosophers, writers and playwrights from various societies has tried to establish moral codes of conduct that individuals must obey in order to lead them to a better world. Emerged in the fifteenth century, morality plays still have a significant role in contemporary discussions on morality by the use of characters personifying moral qualities or abstract concepts. This review examines today's concept of morality in Carol Ann Duffy's *Everyman* (2015), an adaptation of a medieval morality play of the same name, which provides striking examples from the consumerist and materialist lifestyles of modern people.

**Keywords:** Morality Play, Adaptation Studies, Ecocriticism, Carol Ann Duffy

### Öz

Ahlak, insan ilişkilerini düzenleyen bir sistemdir ve bu yönüyle ahlaki davranış, sosyal bir varlık olan insanın en belirleyici özelliklerinden biridir. Çeşitli toplumlardan sayısız filozof, yazar ve oyun yazarı daha yaşanabilir bir dünya oluşturmak için bireylerin uyması gereken ahlaki davranış kuralları oluşturmuşlardır. On beşinci yüzyılda ortaya çıkan ahlak oyunları, ahlaki nitelikleri veya soyut kavramları kişileştiren karakterlerin kullanımıyla ahlak üzerine yapılan çağdaş tartışmalarda hala önemli bir role sahiptir. Bu çalışma, günümüzün ahlak kavramını, modern insanların tüketici ve materyalist yaşam tarzından çarpıcı örnekler sunan, aynı adlı Orta Çağ ahlak oyununun uyarlaması olan Carol Ann Duffy'nin *Everyman* (2015) adlı oyununda incelemektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Ahlak Oyunları, Adaptasyon Çalışmaları, Eko-eleştiri, Carol Ann Duffy

### Review

**God/Good Deeds.** 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. The firmament so  
full of filth,

my two Great Lights, to rule the day and night, have  
tears in their eyes. (Duffy, 2015, p. 3)

Commissioned by the National Theatre, *Everyman* (2015), one of the few plays of Carol Ann Duffy, premiered at the National Theatre under the direction of Rufus Norris, the artistic director of the theatre. Performance notes in this review are based on performance of the play available online on the National Theatre at Home platform.

Even though Carol Ann Duffy is famous for her poetry as the first woman Poet Laureate of Britain, she has also produced plays such as *My Country* (2017), *Everyman* (2015) and *Grimm Tales* (2010). In *Everyman*, which is an updated version of the fifteenth-century morality play with the same title, Duffy actually touches on contemporary issues like the fast pace of corporate lifestyle, the dissolution of the nuclear family, and environmental issues like the annihilation of nature. As the epigraph, which in the play is the opening remark made by God, implies, this story asserts an environment-conscious morality that removes religion from moral teaching by establishing moral responsibility we should have for all life, the universe, and our planet. This contemporary adaptation of a medieval morality play questions modern life from an ecocritical perspective. The setting of the play which is a bar, portrayal of the characters as personifications of materialism, and use of techno and rap music are elements that make this story a contemporary morality play for all people.

The play begins with the fortieth birthday party of Everyman who is an abstract figure representing all humanity. Together with his guests, they drink alcoholic beverages, dance in an intimate way, and use drugs during the party. Suddenly, the audience is confronted with God, who, appears to be a woman sweeper working at the club in this adaptation. God complains about human individualism and lack of responsibility to nature and other creatures. She talks about how all elements of creation, like rivers and fruits, are destroyed by these 'selfish' creatures and as a punishing God, she summons Death who is represented by a man with a shopping bag, to take Everyman on his final journey. Everyman's confrontation with death is highly ironic. As a representative of all humanity, he tries to bribe Death into postponing

his end. It is a very suitable action for Everyman, a member of our capitalist society, to act as if money was able to buy everything. However, in this case it does not work. Everyman falls on the stage in slow motion, dies, and his spiritual journey begins.

As in the original text, Everyman searches for a companion in the allegorical characters of Fellowship, Kindred, Goods, and Good Deeds. Although the characters and the ultimate aim of the play are the same as the adapted text, there are many contrasts between the medieval text and the new version. In the original play, Everyman is judged by his seven deadly sins which are determined by the Bible. However, it is not plausible for Duffy to write a morality play in the same religious context for modern audiences. Therefore, she does not try to pass religious messages to the audience but rather aims to raise awareness of moral conscience and responsibility for all beings in the world. All the characters in the play from whom he seeks help in his spiritual journey draw attention to the way he, and every human, devotes their time to materialistic things only.

The audience firstly observes his consumerist lifestyle at his birthday party. His friends and Everyman have no intimate connections with each other. They just have full enjoyment of the party by consuming alcohol, drugs, and food. The songs played at the party also draw a picture of humanity in a capitalist society. These songs thematise human hegemony over nature and other beings by calling them masters of the universe (Duffy, 2015, p.4) . His meeting with his family members also tackles one of the major problems in a capitalist society: the dissolution of the family. Everyman's father has dementia and his mother has cancer, but he is disinterested in them and their health problems. We are informed that he visits them only when he needs them and the only way for him to show his affection is to send them money. His parents also reject to accompany him in his journey. These elements of the story show the destructiveness of capitalism.

Duffy seems to argue for a fundamental change in the way of living that prioritises money and consumerism which is based on human superiority over animals, plants, and natural resources. The use of costumes and stage props also appeals to the modern audience. Goods, as a group of characters, have no religious connotation. In the new version, they are portrayed as wearing luxurious gold dresses and pieces of jewellery. They seem to obey Everyman and accompany him. However, the

audience soon realises that in fact Everyman is the one to obey them by turning into a vehicle for capitalism. Everyman's striking conversations with Goods represent his ignorance of the fact that the materialist attitudes he has taken are destroying nature on which the life of humanity and all other beings depend.

The most memorable moment of the play in which Everyman makes a progress in his spiritual journey from ignorance to awareness is when a large pile of rubbish is trundled onto the stage. In this scene, Good Deeds, which is the only character who can help him reach salvation enters the stage struggling to survive in a polluted environment. This touching scene creates an awareness of environmental issues for both Everyman and the audience.

Accordingly, as Duffy aims to write a morality play for every human in the contemporary world, she does away with many social and moral rules that religious people consider essential. Religion has no longer the primary position for determining moral qualities. Sacred books like the Bible and the Quran lost their importance for a good life. In contrast, the religious faith in the adapted version is replaced by an environmental conscience which orients moral values for creating an awareness and concerns towards ecological degradation in the Anthropocene Epoch or Era of Man in which everything on Earth such as nature, and animals serve the needs of humanity. In this way, the concept of being human is questioned by God/Good Deeds through Everyman's relationship with the planet.

In other words, Everyman's good and bad behaviours are determined by environmental concerns, not religion. For instance, although there are many references to the cardinal sins of pride, greed, wrath, envy, lust, gluttony, and sloth committed by Everyman in the play, the main point is to develop a perspective of these sins in relation to environmental problems. All in all, to raise environmental consciousness among people, *Everyman*, as a modern morality play, now adopts an eco-centric mind-set versus an anthropocentric one as this appears to be the most pressing moral problem today.

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