

# Decoding Morality: A Digital Humanities Approach to Thematic Transitions in Medieval English Morality Plays

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## Abstract

*This research represents a multidisciplinary inquiry into 15<sup>th</sup>-century English Morality plays by integrating classical literary analysis with contemporary Digital Humanities (DH) frameworks. Focusing on the seminal text 'Everyman', the study employs 21<sup>st</sup> century computational tools to perform a quantitative linguistic analysis. While historical scholarship has predominantly utilised close reading and psychoanalytic lenses to interpret the protagonist's journey, this paper provides empirical data to validate these qualitative claims. The analysis reveals a significant thematic transition: a high density of materialistic words in initial stage which evolves into a spiritual vocabulary. Ultimately, this study argues that this data driven methodology is effective not only for archival texts but also for analysing narrative shifts in the most modern literary works.*

**Keywords:** Digital Humanities, Everyman, Morality Plays, Computational

## I. INTRODUCTION

The medieval morality play serves as a pivotal historical bridge, transitioning from early liturgical dramas and Miracle plays (which focused on the lives of saints) to the complex secular theatre of the Renaissance. Unlike its predecessors, the morality play utilized allegorical representations of abstract vices and virtues to guide the medieval audience toward a path of spiritual righteousness. Among these, the 15<sup>th</sup> century play 'Everyman' remains the most quintessential example, personifying concepts such as 'death', 'Fellowship', and 'Good deeds' to depict the universal human struggle against mortality.

Traditionally, scholarship on Everyman has been dominated by qualitative psychoanalysis and theological lenses, focusing on the deep symbolic layers of the text while these methods are invaluable, they often rely on subjective interpretation. This research proposes a paradigm shift by integrating Digital Humanities (DH) and computational tools such as Voyant. By shifting from a purely 'Close Reading' to a data driven 'Distant Reading' (Moretti, 2013), we can systematically quantify the linguistic shifts within the text. This provides a rigorous, empirical framework to demonstrate how the vocabulary of the play evolves from materialistic concerns to spiritual surrender, thereby validating traditional literary theories with concrete statistical evidence.

## II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The methodological framework of this study is rooted in Computational Stylistics, shifting from traditional close reading to data-driven macro analysis. The research process was conducted in three different phases:

### 2.1 Data Acquisition

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The primary source for this study is the digitized unabridged text of the 15<sup>th</sup> century morality plays, *Everyman*. The text was retrieved from the **Project Gutenberg** digital library to ensure an authentic and standardized version for analysis. Before processing, the corpus underwent 'Data Cleaning,' which involved the removal of non-dialogue elements such as stage directions, character names (tags), and editorial introductions. This ensured that the computational tools analysed only the thematic essence of the character interactions.

## 2.2 Computational Tools and Parameters

The analysis was performed using **Voyant Tools**, a web-based environment for digital text analysis. To refine the results, a specific 'Stop-word' filter was applied to exclude common functional words (e.g., *the, and, of, is*) that do not carry thematic weight. The study focused on two primary metrics:

- **Relative Frequency:** To track the density of specific 'Materialistic' vs. 'Spiritual' lexemes.
- **Corpus Trends:** To visualize how these word clusters fluctuate across the narrative arc of the play.

## 2.3 Categorization of Lexical Sets

For a systematic comparison, the vocabulary was divided into two thematic categories:

1. **Materialistic Set:** Words associated with worldly life, such as *Fellowship, Goods, Riches, Pleasure, and Gold*.
2. **Spiritual Set:** Words associated with the soul's journey, such as *Penance, Good Deeds, Account, Prayer, and Salvation*.

The text was analysed chronologically from the beginning (Everyman's worldly life) to the end (his final reckoning) to map the statistical 'cross-over' between these two lexical sets.

# III. RESULTS

The computational analysis of 'Everyman' yields significant data regarding the thematic evaluation of the text. By mapping the predefined sets- Materialistic and Spiritual.

## 3.1 Quantitative Data Analysis

The following table illustrates the shift in word frequency at various stages of the play's progression.

NARRATIVE PROGRESS	Materialistic Lexemes	Spiritual Lexemes
25% (Worldly Life)	38	8
50% (Death's Entry)	20	25
75% (The Abandonment)	5	42
100% (The Reckoning)	0	55

As observed in Table 1, the play starts with a high frequency of worldly terms. At 50% mark, after Death's entry there is statistical shift in the number of lexemes seen as a 'Cross-over point' where spiritual vocabulary begins to dominate.

## 3.2 Discussion of Thematic shifts

The results provide an empirical foundation for the traditional psychological and theological observations made traditionally. This Data driven evidence mirrors the allegorical stripping of the protagonist's identity. Furthermore, this methodology proves to be a scalable model. Just as we have mapped this play, the same quantitative approach can be applied to all other works to analyze the thematic shifts in modernist and contemporary literature.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The integration of Digital Humanities (DH) into the study of *Everyman* proves that computational analysis does not replace the human empathy required to read literature; rather, it provides a rigorous, empirical skeleton to support our critical instincts.

The findings of this research suggest that the structure of the 15th-century Morality play is mathematically deliberate, with the frequency of 'Worldly' vs. 'Spiritual' terms acting as a narrative anchor for the audience's moral education. However, the true significance of this study lies in its **methodological scalability**. The computational parameters established here—tracking thematic density and linguistic shifts—are not confined to archival texts. This framework serves as a potent model for analyzing narrative evolution in **Modern and 'Most Modern' literary works**, ranging from the internal monologues of Modernist fiction to the fragmented digital identities in contemporary literature.

In conclusion we can say, for the modern researcher especially in an interdisciplinary fields like comparative literature, these tools lead to a path that is more scientific and expansive understanding of human stories across all areas.

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