Bruegel's engraving *Everyman* is universally regarded as an especially complex allegory. As the drawing for it is signed and dated "[B]rueghel 1558," that date serves as a terminus post quern for the undated engraving. The composition takes its name from its chief figure, identified by the word *Elck* (Everyman) inscribed on the hem of his coat. The entire composition is built up around this Everyman, who stands bent over in the very center, staring at an open lantern with a burning candle inside it and apparently engaged in some sort of search.

The left half of the composition is presented against the backdrop of a wall. In a shadowy niche in that wall, in the center of the picture, we see an unlighted candle. To the left of the niche hangs the portrait of a man identified by his clothing as a fool. The inscription under the portrait reads: *NIEMA[N]T. EN. KENT. HE[M]. SELVE[N]* (Nobody knows himself). The right half of the picture provides a glimpse of an army camp in its background: tents, a small group of officers, standard-bearers, and a host of mercenaries whose upright lances block out the horizon. We also see a church and a leafless tree standing forlorn against the sky. In this part of the landscape there are two more Everymen, recognizable as such from their poses and lanterns. They too are bent forward, staring intently at their lanterns as they go about their own searches.

Art historians have taken the print to be an allegory of selfishness, pointing to the full purse of the Everyman in the foreground as an indication that he is as miserly as he is greedy. The inscription beneath the picture seems to support such a view, declaring "No one does not seek his own advantage everywhere, no one does not seek himself in all that he does, no one does not look everywhere for..."
private gain. This one pulls, that one pulls, all have the same
love of possession." Yet the attribute of the lighted lantern
immediately brings to mind Diogenes and his searching
with a lantern in broad daylight for an honest man. Supp­
porting this idea is the similar imagery of emblem 31 in
the Morosophie of Guillaume de La Perrière from 1553, which
shows the ancient philosopher in his search as evidence
of his sagacity. Bruegel’s portrayal of another Everyman
who has crawled into a barrel at the lower left edge of the
picture may also be a link to Diogenes, who is said to have
been so frugal that he lived in a tub. In the context of this
interpretation, it would almost seem that we are to consider
the Ekel in a positive way, assuming that the Everyman is as
modest in his needs as Diogenes. Franzsepp Würtenberger
has referred us to another iconographic tradition of impor­tance
to an understanding of Everyman: the numerous
Nobody depictions. He offers a Georg Pencz woodcut
from 1535, Nobody (Der Niemand), as a specific precedent.
But Pencz’s Nobody is surrounded by things that are bro­
ken or have fallen apart, whereas the objects in Bruegel’s
image are all intact.

The central figure in Bruegel’s composition provides an
important clue to the interpretation of the scene, for Every­
man is clearly gazing at his lighted lantern in daylight.
Apparently the lantern is not merely an aid in his search
but the actual object of it. His spectacles are another key
detail; he doubtless wears them in order to see his light
clearly. But they must have additional significance, for
glasses can have a negative meaning, supposedly symboliz­
ing delusion, ignorance, or self-deception, as the literature
on Bruegel’s engraving reminds us. In this connection we
think of the well-known woodcut formerly attributed to
Erhard Schoen, The Owl Hates Light from 1540, a scene in
some respects comparable to Bruegel’s allegory. There an
owl, conspicuously brandishing a pair of spectacles, is perched
next to a burning candle, and so that the viewer can see that
the candle is burning in broad daylight, Schoen has included
a sun in the upper left corner. The owl also refers to the sun
in the inscription: Was hilft mich sin(n) / licht oder prill,
weyl ich doch selbs nicht sehen will (What help are sunlight
or glasses if I don’t choose to see). A related image also
appears as the illustration for chapter 28 of Sebastian
Brant’s Narrenschiff (Ship of Fools) from 1494. Titled Vom
Wider-Gott-Reden (On Blasphemy), this woodcut portrays
a fool who has lit a fire in broad daylight, a daytime fire that
is meant to show the obduracy of the man attached to the
things of this world and how incapable he is of being saved.

Further clues to Bruegel’s meaning emerge from the jum­
bble of objects at the bottom of his composition representing
a wide variety of occupations, for the more we study it, the
more suggestive it becomes. On the left we see an ax, a
trowel, and a scale, and at the feet of the central Everyman
a shoemaker’s last—all evoking specific trades. There are
also barrels, baskets, and tied sacks. In the right half of the
picture, in addition to still more objects that may refer to
trades—a pot, shears and cloth, a book, and more tied
boxes and bundles—are things used in various games:
checkers, dice, and playing cards. And at the very
bottom edge of the image lie a mirror and a roll of paper.
Markings on the sacks and boxes identify the trading com­
panies to which the wares belong. Interestingly, some of
the bundles have several different markings, which could
mean that more than one person or company lays claim to
them. Bruegel has included an inside joke in all of the dis­
order: on one of the visibly empty boxes in the left half of
the composition is the firm mark of Hieronymus Cock, the
publisher of his prints.

All the figures in Bruegel’s engraving are so deeply
absorbed in their materialistic searching, so shortsighted
in the intellectual sense, that eyeglasses would be of no
use to them. What can happen when one Everyman en­
counters another is evident from the tussle of two of them
are engaged in over a length of cloth. Each is so determined
that the other shall not have the cloth that he tugs on it
with all his strength. If either of them were to give way
they would both fall on their backs.

That Bruegel’s Everymen rule the world, even own it, is
indicated by the presence of the orb between the central
figure’s legs. At first glance we register this symbol of the
world as just another tied sack, for it is easily overlooked
because of the way Bruegel has positioned it. Once we spot
the cross, projecting outward behind the figure’s right leg,
we see that it corresponds to the traders’ marks; it is as if
the world itself had become a mere commodity.

Here it is important to emphasize how much Bruegel’s
way of building up meaning in a composition differs from
traditional iconographic practice, how much he relies on
the viewer’s ability to make the necessary connections. In
the case of Everyman we must recognize the biblical images
he alludes to. Seeing the bushel measure in front of Every­
man’s left foot and noting the discrepancy between the
lighted candle and the unlit one in the wall niche, we can
only recall the New Testament admonition that we not
hide our light beneath a bushel basket (Luke 11:33–35): "No
man, when he hath lighted a candle, putteth it in a secret
place, neither under a bushel, but on a candlestick, that
they which come in may see the light. The light of the body
is the eye: therefore when thine eye is single, thy whole
body also is full of light; but when thine eye is evil, thy body also is full of darkness."

Elck has misunderstood this image by taking it literally. He carries his lantern about with him, mistaking external light for the light within. He fails to comprehend that light is only a metaphor for Christian virtue. We, Bruegel’s viewers, in turn, are required to fully appreciate the image in order to recognize how it has been misunderstood, that this is an ironic perversion of the biblical metaphor for the search for God. In the Psalms, especially, we read of men searching for God with all their hearts. In the Gospel of Mark (1:37), Christ’s disciples find him and tell him: “All men seek for thee,” or “Every man is looking for you.”

Linked to the problem of man’s search for God is the theological issue of grace, for just as we cannot raise ourselves up into heaven alone, we cannot search for God and find him if he does not choose to be found. Finding God is always tantamount to being found by God. Bruegel’s Everyman commits the error of trusting that he can find God on his own.

2. See Lebeer’s brief review of interpretations up to 1969 in Brussels 1969, pp. 77-81.
3. For the Diogenes iconography in general and La Perrière’s Morosophie in particular, see Schmitt 1993, p. 72.
4. Würtzberger 1957, p. 80. For the most recent study of the Nobody iconography, see Schuster 1981, pp. 28-43.
5. Hollstein 1954—, vol. 48, no. 209. The explanatory text by Hans Sachs emphasizes men’s stubbornness. Here we read that the gospel has become a sign of lack of belief rather than of faith: “Doch wenig Befrung kumpt darvon, Derhalb das Evangelion wirdt vor dem endt / wie christus meldt Gepredigt durch die gantzen welt Nur zu[m] zeugnus das wir nicht glaubet haben / sonder blind und betaubet Bleyben / in schwerer siinden schlaff” (Yet little good comes of it. Before the end, the gospel and Christ’s teachings will be preached throughout the world, if only to show that we have not believed but remain blind and deaf in the deep sleep of our sins). This pessimistic view is based on John 3:19, “light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light.”
6. See the engraving by Pieter van der Heyden of Cock’s three different devices, reproduced in Rotterdam 1988, p. 82, ill. pp. 67-68. On the subject of Cock’s firm mark, see Riggs 1979, pp. 166-67.
7. John 6:44, a passage that Erasmus discusses in his debate with Luther over free will. See Erasmus (1524) 1967, p. 141.