

INTERPRETATIONS OF EVERYMAN

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 quem for the undated engraving.¹ 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.² 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. Supporting 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.³ 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 *Elck* in a positive way, assuming that the Everyman is as modest in his needs as Diogenes. Franzsepp Württenberger has referred us to another iconographic tradition of importance to an understanding of *Everyman*: the numerous Nobody depictions.⁴ 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 broken 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 Everyman 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 symbolizing 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 hilfft mich sün(n) / licht oder prill, weyl ich doch selbs nicht sehen will* (What help are sunlight or glasses if I don’t choose to see).⁵ 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 jumble 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: a checkerboard, 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 companies 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 disorder: 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.⁶

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 encounters another is evident from the tussle 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 behinds.

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 Everyman’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.⁷ Finding God is always tantamount to being found by God.⁸ Bruegel's Everyman commits the error of trusting that he can find God on his own.

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1. Münz 1961, no. 138.
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. Würtenberger 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 Beßrung 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 sünden 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.
8. See Krötke 1989, pp. 517–32.