

Vivian bearing: a tragic heroine that triumph



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Vivian Bearing: A Tragic Heroine that Triumph Margaret Edson's play *Wit* is about Vivian Bearing, a professor of seventeenth century poetry, specializing in John Donne. She is a strong willed intellectual being treated for ovarian cancer. Vivian lives a very secluded life and avoids human emotional contact. Just like any tragic hero, Vivian has flaws that prevent her from human kindness, which leads to her downfall. Her treatment of cancer causes her to realize that she needs emotional connection, which she has missed her whole life.

Although her flaws are her intellect and wit that cause her an inability to connect emotionally with people around her, she becomes noble because she begins to express her emotions and accept kindness. Vivian Bearing has lived an intellectual rather than emotional life. As a child, education was very important to her family. On her fifth birthday which she recalls as her best birthday she read a book (Edson 41). She would rather read a book than have a party, cake or even having friends over.

Reading a book during her birthday is very ironic because she claims this to be her best birthday which is really unique, because this is horrible as any standard for a fifth birthday. Most five year olds want a party and cake. Vivian takes the book and she reads its spine intently. Reading a book attentively on her birthday proves Vivian's obsession with learning and expanding her horizons. She is only interested in learning, not worried about connecting with people her own age or even her family. While she is reading her book, her father sits on his chair " disinterested but tolerant" (Edson 41).

Since her father does not pay any attention to her, Vivian is emotionally detached from her father. She only knows education and learning. She never mentions receiving any affection as a child. This is the only time she mentions her childhood. One can only assume that because of this the character's own remote personality reflects that of her father's. It is very likely that she never received the gentle touch of affection from her dad, the way she probably would have from her mother, if the mother had been in the picture.

We know that her mother died at the age of forty, but other than that, nothing else is either mentioned or displayed regarding her. Vivian's intellect and crave for knowledge continues to prevent her from human emotional connections. We meet Vivian as a student in a flashback. Her scholarship was her consuming and unrelenting passion, blinding her to other concerns of life like making friends. Despite being advised by her professor to enjoy life, she resorts to withdrawing into the library instead of going out (Edson 15).

Her toughness and strictness towards her education blinds her treatment of humanity. She remains lonely and uses her education to cover her need for showing and needing emotional attachment. She does not enjoy her college life like most students do. Her intellect refuses her to show a need of emotional connection with students her own age. Her emotional detachment is apparent when she is told that she has ovarian cancer. Instead of crying and being afraid of death, she begins to analyze and think. " Must read something about cancer. Must get some books, articles.

Assemble a bibliography," she explains (Edson 8). The character's excessive need for knowledge, which can be perceived as her tragic flaw, causes her to be oblivious to the reality of her diagnosis. Vivian is consumed with learning that she is unable to grasp with the reality that she has a disease that is slowly killing her. Her need for knowledge can be seen as a flaw because this prevents her from becoming psychologically attached to anything or anyone. Vivian thrives on knowledge and her ability to learn and understand things and uses her intellect to avoid human contact.

The character's addiction to intellect has shut down her need for any human emotions. Vivian's wit appears as rude and uncaring when she uses her wit to push people away. Vivian's smart remarks to everything cause people around her and also people that meet her to be unable to create a relationship with Vivian. When Vivian is diagnosed with ovarian cancer, Dr. Kelekian uses the word "insidious" and defines it as "undetectable" (Edson 8). Vivian is unable to control her witty comments and could not resist the urge and decides to tell him the correct definition saying "treacherous". Dr. Kelekian has a negative attitude towards her because of these corrections. Instead of treating her cancer, he decides to use her as research. Dr. Kelekian is unable to feel any compassion for her because she is rude. Vivian's wittiness also appears as being uncaring. She is not liked very much by others, due to her unkindness. Previously, when a student asked for an extension on his paper, Professor Bearing rejects his request with a heartless comment. "Don't tell me, your grandmother died" (Edson 63). Then she goes on to say, "Do what you will, but the paper is due when it is due" (Edson 63).

Instead of showing some sentiment for the student, she is inconsiderate and cold-hearted towards him. She is so evil towards the student that no other student is able to feel comfortable around her and even speak to her as a person. She terrorizes her students inconsiderately and dispassionately.

Vivian Bearing uses her wittiness to push people away so she does create an emotional attachment. Being put in hospital causes Vivian to reflect on her life and to realize how much she needs kindness. She even admits to craving kindness.

She wants Susie to come see her to the point where she creates an emergency (Edson 64). She begins as an intellect, witty professor who is lonely, but now she is thirsty for a drop of kindness. Vivian's hunger for kindness becomes apparent when she allows her nurse to call her "sweetheart" (Edson 64) or "honey" (Edson 65). These are words Vivian has never been referred to in her life and she is comfortable with them. She realizes that it is acceptable to allow people to treat her like a person and be kind to her. Vivian starts to open up and shows her emotions without any problem or hesitation.

At the end of the play when Vivian is lying in her deathbed, alone, shivering scared, and in pain, E. M. comes to her side. When her college professor Ashford comes to visit her, she asks Vivian if she wanted her to recite Donne, she replies "nooooo" (Edson 79). Vivian is finally realizing that her need for intellect and wit is not what she needs because she has received kindness. The emotional part of life is what she needs and not the complicated poems by Donne. As her time draws to a close, a sea change begins to work in the way Vivian thinks about life.

As mentioned in the above paragraphs, Vivian has devoted her life to education and it is only through suffering that she learns that being extremely smart is not enough. It takes our heroine fifty years, and an insidious cancer to realize that it does not matter in the end how much you know since knowledge cannot possibly comfort you in death. Vivian says this line in the play “ And death shall be no more, death thou shalt die “(Edson 72-73). By these words she learns that “ death is nothing but a breath, a comma that separates life from life everlasting”, Vivian’s last breath was nothing but a comma” and she has now moved on where she will live not by her knowledge, but by her heart. Though her body has died, her soul is awakened. Before Vivian’s final moments of life, she receives the attention and affection that she never had. She dies with a sense of peacefulness. Vivian Bearing is a very intellectual and witty individual who is dedicated to her love for knowledge. But because she is consumed by her incredible love for knowledge she lives a secluded life. Her downfall is that she is incapable of showing any emotions to another person.

The play did not leave the audience with a sense of sadness or remorse, but with hope and respect for Vivian Bearing. She lived the final eight months of her life in extreme pain so doctors could gain more knowledge for future cancer patients. In the process, she learns that life is about humanity. This is what brings the audience to believe that this individual is a tragic hero who triumph and leaves one not with a sense of pity but one of empathy for her suffering. Work Cited Edson, Margaret. Wit. Oxford: Faber & Faber, 1999. Print.