

Margaret edson's play, "wit" essay sample

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"How are you feeling today?" asked doctor Jason Posner in his usual automatic, inattentive salutation to Vivian, which is both humorous and distressing. There is a connection between Vivian Bearing and Jason Posner. Prepped for research and scholarship by Vivian herself (he took her class on the metaphysical poets) Jason possesses many of the same traits as Vivian. He is smart, ambitious, dedicated to the complexities of his medical research, and inept at human relations. Like Professor Bearing, who could be overbearing with her students, Jason prefers research to "the part with the human beings." Both Vivian and Jason are arrogant and unfeeling, much to their own detriment. Vivian is forced to temper her arrogance when illness becomes agony. Jason's arrogance causes him to make a serious blunder when he tries to resuscitate Vivian despite her do not resuscitate (DNR) orders.

Vivian is part of a clinical trial for a new drug regimen to fight ovarian cancer. She is a subject of research for the doctors who attend her and is urged by her doctors not to compromise their study, that is, to endure the "full dose" of chemotherapy. Ironically, Vivian is sympathetic to the researchers. As a researcher herself, she sees the value in gaining further knowledge about cancer, even if she is the subject of study. "What is the alternative?" she asks, "Ignorance? Ignorance may be bliss, but it is not a very noble goal." With an arrogant confidence in her fearsome intellect, Vivian assumes that her mental prowess alone will allow her to master ovarian cancer, just as she has spent 30 years mastering the 17th-century metaphysical poets.

On being informed that she has advanced ovarian cancer and that the treatment will be difficult to endure, Vivian replies cavalierly, " It appears to be a matter, as the saying goes, of life and death. I know all about life and death. I am, after all, a scholar of Donne's Holy Sonnets, which explore mortality..." In truth, Vivian knows little about life or death and it is only when she confronts life at its most difficult time does she come to understand that intellect is only one aspect of being human. Only when terminal cancer forces her to look at her own life, does she truly understand Donne's fears and spiritual struggle.

Vivian goes through eight months of an experimental, ultimately futile cancer treatment, and along the way she confronts her treatment (which is more debilitating than the cancer itself) with a brilliant sense of irony honed by her long entanglement in Donne's complex metaphors.

The hospital environment is so foreign to Vivian that as a patient, she loses the control she once had in her classroom and, in the presence of her doctors she is no longer the authority in the field. Being ill and in the hospital makes her weak and vulnerable. Now, as one more sick person on the doctors' grand rounds, Vivian quips, " Once I did the teaching, now I am taught."

Terminally ill at the end of her treatment, Vivian becomes more cynical. Although she is supportive of the goals of research, she thinks differently when she feels its dehumanizing effect on her and, in the end she derives no benefit, no extended quality of life from having undergone the full course of the new drugs.

Vivian realizes that the study of literature that she so prized has little meaning when devoid of human connections. Rather than administering the "full dose" of Donne to her students, perhaps she should have taken the time to nurture their minds and to attend to them as individuals and not vessels to be filled with knowledge.

As she grows weaker and closer to dying, Vivian begins to rely on her nurse, Susie, who sees that Vivian is suffering and afraid. Susie responds with empathy and care and, literally, a human touch. Similarly, Vivian's imposing mentor, E. M. Ashford, visits her and climbs into bed beside her and reads a children's story that brings soothing comfort.

There was definitely some sense of grace at the end with messages of human growth and the importance of kindness. Vivian learns to treat herself and others with more compassion, and to accept compassion from others.

Were I in Vivian Bearing's position, I would also undergo the full course of treatment. I would be an active participant, maintain a positive attitude, and trust the doctors and nurses to do their best to provide humane and compassionate therapy. Amidst the whirring of machines and the dripping of the IV, I would want to be surrounded by the people that love me and I would tell them that I loved them. I would want to know that even though there was no hope for recovery, that I would not be abandoned.

I would be focused on helping my children and my husband cope with their feelings and make sure that all legal documents were in order. Like Vivian, I would also have a do not resuscitate (DNR) order, a request not to be given

cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) if my heart were to stop beating or if I were to stop breathing.

I would take the sacraments of the Eucharist, of reconciliation, and of the anointing of the sick to celebrate the presence of God who brings his gifts of inner healing and strength. They are also a mark of the fact that sick people continue to belong fully to the community of the Church, even though they may not have been able to join in the activity of that community for some time.

It is my opinion that most of us go to our graves with our music still inside of us. Only a few really get free: free of fear, want, worry and stress. Free to be gloriously guilt-free and living unashamed, in the manner that gives us the greatest personal satisfaction. Instead of joyfully falling in love with ourselves, others and the varieties of all things, we fall in line, assume our responsibilities and take on the burdens of survival and conformity. I would want to live my last months simply being free.

I know that peace does not come by getting everything you want; that peace comes instead through acceptance. Acceptance of life on life's terms; acceptance of your beautiful self as perfect and as good and decent; acceptance of the cancer that would ultimately extinguish my internal illumination. I would hope that at the time of my death I would have found peace and acceptance, and be surrounded by those who love me, as they would watch while their hearts still beat, and their blood still pulsed while I quietly slip away into the realm that the living, cannot comprehend.