

Wit and wisdom



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In literature (novels, folk tales, plays, movies, etc.) one finds presented two forms of so called “ coming-of-age” stories. The traditional method is preparation for adulthood. A youth (generally between 10 years old and 20) passes, by some calamity or other intense situation, from the world of innocence to the world of experience to join the rest of the adults who made the passage before him. The youth is stripped of utopian illusions about life and acquainted with the hard facts of reality in a fashion that is painful, but never lethal. Classic examples of this type of tale include the folk tale “ Hansel and Gretel” and Charles Dickens’s novel David Copperfield. Another coming of age or rite of passage presented by literature is the preparation for death. In this version, the character is stripped of the illusions of adulthood and made ready to die peacefully. The plot of these stories (like any in literature) involves some conflict or dilemma which opens the eyes of the character to the certainty of death. Once this is done and the character accepts mortality, he is then able to put his affairs in order (usually with loved ones) and possibly able to pass on learning to his loved ones. An example of this form of literature is the play Wit by Margaret Edson (also wittily titled W; t). So what is the purpose of this less often used rite of passage? Generally it is to teach readers/viewers about death in order to allow them a fuller life. Furthermore, if they are presented with someone else’s mistakes that cause the conflict of the story, they can perhaps see a reflection of themselves in the literature and be able to side-step the unpleasant dilemmas that cause anxiety about death which can prevent living a fulfilling life. One of these dilemmas presented in this rite of passage is grappling with the illusion of control. If a person cannot accept that control is an illusion, then he will face much anxiety and unhappiness. Religion has

often sought to deal with this crisis, offering the simple mantra “let go and let God” as well as the more meaningful serenity prayer (used by Alcoholics Anonymous, an organization dedicated to helping people to regain some measure of control in their lives). The serenity prayer attempts to meet people halfway: “Lord, give me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” A key word used in this prayer is the driving goal behind much of literature and religion – the attainment of wisdom. Part of this wisdom is understanding that total control in life is an illusion. The thwarting of control leads to anxiety and pain because people feel that something is being taken from them. Literature often seeks to show that it was never there to be taken (truthful literature, at least). While it is possible and desirable for one to be the “captain” of his or her own soul, that is the extent of the control one can achieve in life, and some, the mentally ill for example, do not even have that control. It is this wisdom that is the focus of the play *Wit*. *Wit*’s main character is Vivian Bearing, a scholar of 17th century poetry, particularly John Donne. Her life, which has been under control for half a century, is undergoing drastic changes. She has been diagnosed with terminal stage four metastatic ovarian cancer, the cancer having slipped by undetected when it would have been treatable in stages one through three. Up until this point in her life, she had exercised great control over her environment. In terms of her scholarly career, she at one point refers to herself as “a force” in the study of literature (Edson 17). She is the queen of the department, and her colleagues, it appears, cannot wait for her to move on so that they may take her place, even those that are former students of hers (32). In the classroom, Vivian exercised tremendous control and poise, never needing

notes and never slipping in her lectures (74). She had tremendous control of the subject matter, saying, “ I could work my students into a frenzy. Every ambiguity, every shifting awareness. I could draw so much from the poems. I could be so powerful” (48). Apparently, she expected others to control their situations to the same extent, not showing mercy to students who may have needed a little extra time or a little extra help. If a student could not control his situation, this was no reason for her to show kindness – ironically, this comes back to bite her in the end with her doctors not showing her the kindness that she aches for when she starts to feel as if she has lost control of her life. This perceived loss of control is evidenced in the latter half of the play; however, she could not lose what she never had. In her life, she felt the illusion of control, but she never really had it. If she had control over her life, a few things would have been different. First off, she would not have ever gotten cancer. She did not tell her cells to behave in such a manner, nor did she have the power to stop them. Furthermore, she is not able to control what happens to her body as a result of the treatment. While she has actively chosen to undergo the particular therapy, she cannot control the hair loss or nausea that she experiences. Moreover, she has given herself over to the care of the doctors who treat her not as a person but as research. These doctors may claim to be trying to help her, but they are actually more concerned with seeing the effects of their experimental medicine. Further evidence of this lack of control is that she must submit to the rules of the hospital: she must wear a gown, she must be ready when the doctors are ready, and most importantly, she must undergo tests when they want her to, no matter how inconvenient or demeaning the test may be. For instance, at one point she has to (at least, she feels she has to) undergo a “ degrading”

pelvic exam by a doctor who is a former student of hers (30-32). This subservience to the doctors is well characterized by her comments in regard to the “ grand rounds” of the doctors. This is when the head researcher, Dr. Kelekian, brings all of his students through the hospital to examine the patients in order to review diseases, treatments, symptoms, side effects, etc. She says Full of subservience, hierarchy, gratuitous displays, sublimated rivalries – I feel right at home. It is just like a graduate seminar. With one important difference: in Grand Rounds, they read me like a book. Once I did the teaching, now I am taught. This is much easier. I just hold still and look cancerous. It requires less acting every time. (37) This gives us further evidence that Vivian is not in control, rather she must bend to the doctors’ wishes. The most salient example to prove this subservience to the doctors comes a little later in the play when she is demonstrating for the audience what it was like when she taught a class. In the middle of this enactment, however, the nurse Susie comes in and tells Vivian that the doctors need her for a test. When she complains that she is busy teaching her class, Susie is insistent and finally persuades her to go down to the lab for the test. As it turns out, though, the test which has to be done immediately (as per the doctor’s order) must be postponed because the technician is on break at the moment, thus revealing that she actually could have reveled in her teaching fantasy for a while longer after all (50-52). Regardless of who is in control, Vivian finally comes to terms with lack of control (and her need for human kindness) at the end when confronted with the certainty of death. She has undergone every phase of the treatment and realizes that she is not getting any better. Moreover, she fully realizes by this point that Dr. Kelekian never really expected her to get better, but was rather using her to further his

research (67). She confesses her lack of control and the fear this generates to the nurse Susie. In an atypical emotional display, she breaks down and declares: “ I do not feel sure of myself anymore” (65). With the help of Susie, Vivian exercises one final bit of control, perhaps the only control one can have in life. She decides, in one of her final scenes, that if her body should stop functioning, she will not be resuscitated; she will be allowed to die peacefully (68-69). Despite the fabulous control that Vivian felt she had in her life, her circumstances brought her face to face with her fear of losing control. This fear, along with the fear of death, troubled her greatly throughout the play until she was able to gain the serenity to accept the things she could not change. Before she could do that, before she could grow, she had to lose everything in her life, she had to leave behind the lifestyle that she had. There is a fantastic quote from the movie Fight Club that goes something like “ it’s only when you’ve lost everything that you are free to do anything.” Because she lost everything, Vivian was able to be prepared for death and to lose her fear of death, thus bringing about the final scene of the play in which she was able to walk gracefully from her earthly life. Works Cited Edson, Margaret. Wit. New York: Faber and Faber Inc., 1993.