

# The digression of vivian's power within wit



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The play *Wit* by Margaret Edson addresses one of the most challenging topics that mankind is forced to grapple with: death. For Vivian Bearing though, death had always been more of a subject to study rather than one to face. Death in Vivian's experience is a tool to teach with, an inevitable end of life not to be feared and as she will find out through her own experience, a force that will totally alter the way social status is perceived. Edson addresses Vivian's passing through the use of intertextual references in order to align Vivian's experience to her studies in poetry, and give her play an extra dimension for the audience to explore.

Vivian Bearing's disease first begins to take major tolls when she signs the informed consent form, for at this moment she is forced to recognize that her fate is no longer her own. Similarly to Donne's "Holy Sonnet 6", Vivian has been forced to come to the understanding that her life is quickly fleeting as a result of being diagnosed with terminal cancer. This first stage of Vivian's treatment represents a coming to terms with her future. Coming to terms with the fact that "This is [her] play's last scene, here heavens appoint / [Her] pilgrimages last mile, and [her] race / Idly, yet quickly runne..." (Donne, Holy Sonnet 6). Donne's many references to time and repetition of the word 'last' within the sonnet help to build the idea that life is moving ever more quickly and will not move forward until its fate is accepted. Although Vivian understands that her death is approaching, she maintains her confidence and social status initially with the help of Dr. Kelekian, who addresses her as 'Dr. Bearing,' and creates a level playing field so to speak by referencing the commonalities between the two professors. Here, Edson builds a relationship of equality between them.

Jennifer Givhan also notes this relationship, writing that " Like the medical researchers who have dissected her body, Vivian in turn has learned to dissect poetry with her own skillful employment of language" (79). As a result of Kelekian and Bearing's mutual respect, the audience is able to feel comfort in the fact that although Vivian's medical procedures are invasive, her new found and unique relationships are supportive.

Before Vivian's arrival at the Ground Rounds, her position of power at the university was all consuming. Jason describes Donne as the " Hardest poetry in the English department," and Vivian's role in the class made her consumption by it mandatory (Edson, 31). As a result, she was unable to build supportive relationships to help her through the hardship that she did not know she would have to face. This power over language preoccupied Vivian during the initial treatments (as she questioned her relation as a study subject to a poem in her own study), but her vast knowledge of language also had a negative effect on her. In the opinion of Givhan, Vivian's education pushed her "...to erect distancing walls between herself and other people...atop which she [was] dominant..." and as a result, she grew more and more alone (78). This very well may have contributed to the digression from Vivian's initial confidence to suffering, and forces the audience to consider their own social standing and the relationships that fluctuate as a result of that standing.

Vivian's second stage at the hospital begins with her inspections by the fellows, but is solidified upon her entrance to the isolation unit. This second stage marks a change in the relationships between Vivian and the staff at hospital and is illustrated by the way Jason treats her. One clear example is <https://assignbuster.com/the-digression-of-vivians-power-within-wit/>

Jason explaining her ailments to the other fellows and Dr. Kelekian: " He takes a sheet and carefully covers her legs and groin, then pulls up her gown to reveal her entire abdomen. He is barely audible, but his gestures are clear" (Edson, 36). Jason's abrupt and degrading actions show a clear change in Vivian's social status from the way that she is treated by Kelekian, beginning her entrance to a far less confident period of time. In the perception of Jennifer Givhan,

" Jason uses Vivian's body - indicated by the stage directions that he ' puts his finger on the spot on her abdomen' and ' moves his hand over her entire body' (36) - as a demonstration of his own superior intellect, while he enumerates her symptoms, seemingly unconcerned with her presence as a thinking, subjective person in the room with him." (78).

Regardless of how the reader perceives the specifics of Jason's actions towards Vivian, he undeniably finds himself to be the dominant one in the relationship, illustrating the swiftly changing power dynamics referenced previously and showing the audience the effect perceived social status has on the way people are treated.

After being socially degraded, Vivian's physical suffering arises. Continuously growing from the moment that she takes the popsicle like a child, explaining that " The epithelial cells in [her] GI tract have been killed by the chemo [and] The cold popsicle feels good..." Vivian's disease grows steadily more painful. This stage is characterized by the next Holy Sonnet in the sequence, " if poysonous minerals." Donne writes, " To God, in his sterne wrath, why threatens hee? / But who am I, that dare dispute with thee? / O God, oh! ..."

(Donne, Holy Sonnet 9). Throughout this sonnet, the speaker approaching death is asking God why they must suffer while animals and objects that have sinned may pass peacefully. Vivian too finds herself in this situation. "There is cancer eating away at my goddamn bones, and I did not know there could be such pain on this earth. (She flops back on the bed and cries audibly to them.) Oh, God" (Edson, 71). Vivian will not move beyond this pain until she passes, and until then her language choices grow more and more similar to those demonstrated in "Holy Sonnet 9." Vivian's previous social status and references to poetry are replaced with basic moans and questions directed to higher powers, illustrating once again to the reader that even after a respected career studying death, often the only conclusion is to face it, and in Vivian's case all the pain that came along with it.

On page 84 through the end of *Wit*, Edson creates a situation characterized by a final power struggle and contrasted by the peace of Vivian's death in order to further connect her text to the poems of John Donne and form the last stage of Vivian's time at the hospital shown through the diction choices and chaotic characterization throughout this final passage. As Vivian begins to fall into cardiac arrest and Jason calls the code, the hierarchy of the medical world becomes instantly apparent. The code team, yelling "Get out of the way!" and "Move it!" is in control. Susie's frail attempts to stop them are an obvious failure, putting the code team in the position of power and Vivian in the lowest position of all. In connection to "Holy Sonnet 10," Susie is attempting to allow Vivian to die, and plays the role of death. Here though, Vivian's choice is to be made at the mercy of the code team. Their role is fate, illustrated by the inevitability of their actions. In essence, Edson is

connecting the final roles of the characters in Wit to the final " Holy Sonnet 10" through the line "[death,] Thou'art slave to Fate, chance, kings and desperate men." Secondly, Edson characterizes the code team as robotic and inevitable through diction choices to further illustrate that as in " Holy Sonnet 10," death is powerless under Fate. The most prevalent method of diction that Edson utilizes to create this persona for the code team is the uniformity of their speech. For example,

"-Almost ready!

-Hit her!

-CLEAR!

-Pulse? Pulse?" (Edson, 84).

The way in which the team completes each other's thoughts, anticipates each other's actions and follows through on each task as a single unit molds the character of the code team into the mechanical (inevitable after being called in by Jason) and unstoppable force that Donne claims is more powerful than death. Then, as Vivian begins her final passing, Edson draws one final connection to " Holy Sonnet 10": " One short sleepe past, wee wake eternally, / And death shall be no more, Death, thou shalt die." (Donne, Holy Sonnet 10). As in the poetry of John Donne, Vivian had struggled with death since she was a student. Her studies taught her not to fear death, yet as it approached, she began to question her beliefs. Her final battle with death though relieved her fears, for as " Vivian walks out of bed...away from the scene, toward a little light," her short sleep is past. And finally, as " She

loosens the ties and... She lets the second gown fall... reaching toward the light," death has passed too, and Vivian gains a final understanding of death that all her years of studying could not provide. (Edson, 85). In accordance with John Sykes' " Wit, Pride and the Resurrection," " Professor Bearing herself undergoes an inner religious drama remarkably like one portrayed in the sonnets in which she is expert. Her suffering...[and passing] is, as Donne suggests, a means to correction, and ultimately salvation" (60). By drawing the connection between Wit and John Donne's poetry, Edson is able to show that even after a lifetime of studying death, its power to alter relationships, status perception and provide relief to suffering cannot truly be understood until a passing is experienced.

By making continual reference to Donne's Holy Sonnets and aligning Vivian's fight against cancer with the themes present in them, Edson alters the original relationships and social standings found in her play to match the degradation that occurs within Vivian's body and mind. This choice makes her play even more intriguing for those who have studied the works of Donne as Vivian had, and pays homage to her for the suffering that she is forced to endure as a result of her ordeal. Finally, Edson illustrates to the reader that only as her social status declined was Vivian's understanding of death able to improve, providing a catharsis to the audience in knowing that her passing would allow Vivian to rest peacefully having finally completed her studies.

## **Works Cited**

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