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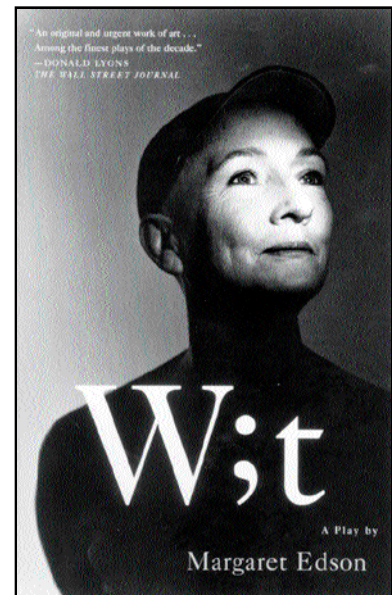
TEACHER'S GUIDE

Wit

by Margaret Edson

“Among the finest plays of the decade . . .
An original and urgent work of art.”

—David Lyons, *The Wall Street Journal*



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WINNER
of the
PULITZER
PRIZE

WINNER

New York Drama
Critics Circle Award

Drama Desk Award

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TO THE TEACHER

Margaret Edson’s powerfully imagined Pulitzer Prize–winning play examines what makes life worth living through her exploration of one of existence’s unifying experiences—mortality—while she also probes the vital importance of human relationships. What we as her audience take away from this remarkable drama is a keener sense that, while death is real and unavoidable, our lives are ours to cherish or throw away—a lesson that can be both uplifting and redemptive. As the playwright herself puts it, “The play is not about doctors or even about cancer. It’s about kindness, but it shows arrogance. It’s about compassion, but it shows insensitivity.” In *Wit*, Edson delves into timeless questions with no final answers: How should we live our lives knowing that we will die? Is the way we live our lives and interact with others more important than what we achieve materially, professionally, or intellectually? How does language figure into our lives? Can science and art help us conquer death, or our fear of it? What will seem most important to each of us about life as that life comes to an end?

The immediacy of the presentation, and the clarity and elegance of Edson’s writing, make this sophisticated, multilayered play accessible to almost any interested reader. While the vocabulary and concepts are not simple, this guide should help you in your presentation of the material. It also points out and explores a number of themes, angles, and issues in the play of particular interest to young readers.

As the play begins, Vivian Bearing, a renowned professor of English who has spent years studying and teaching the intricate, difficult Holy Sonnets of the seventeenth-century poet John Donne, is diagnosed with advanced ovarian cancer. Confident of her ability to stay in control of events, she brings to her illness the same intensely rational and painstakingly methodical approach that has guided her stellar academic career. But as her disease and its excruciatingly painful treatment inexorably progress, she begins to question the single-minded values and standards that have always directed her, finally coming to understand the aspects of life that make it truly worth living.

PRAISE FOR *WIT*

“A dazzling and humane play you will remember till your dying day.”—John Simon, *New York Magazine*

“[A] brutally human and beautifully layered new play . . . You will feel both enlightened and, in a strange way, enormously comforted.”—Peter Marks, *The New York Times*

“A one-of-a-kind experience: wise, thoughtful, witty and wrenching.”—Vincent Canby, *The New York Times Year in Review*

“A thrilling, exciting evening in the theater . . . [*Wit* is] an extraordinary and most moving play.”—Clive Barnes, *New York Post*

“*Wit* is exquisite . . . an exhilarating and harrowing 90-minute revelation.”—Linda Winer, *Newsday*

“Edson writes superbly . . . [A] moving, enthralling and challenging experience that reminds you what theater is for.”—Fintan O’Toole, *New York Daily News*

PREPARING TO READ

Since the play deals largely with questions of death and dying, it might be a good idea to begin your study of it with a general discussion on these themes. Get your students to express their own feelings on these difficult topics: coming to terms with a fatal illness; choosing whether or not to undergo painful treatment that might not be effective; euthanasia; “pulling the plug”; denial; despair or hope; and the ways that various religions help people to come to terms with death. Students could write essays on any of these topics, and sharing these essays with one another could prepare them for the frank yet crucial concerns at the heart of *Wit*.

Language is important to Vivian, but she has become so caught up in its semantics that she has overlooked its real purposes. The abstract poems of John Donne, her academic specialty, eventually prove almost useless in helping her come to terms with her own life and mortality. But is that the fault of the poet, or of Vivian herself? You might want to read a few of Donne's sonnets, particularly "Death be not proud" and "If poysonous mineralls," as a way of preparing students to understand how they relate to the play. Do they find them dry, or consolatory? Ask your students to bring up other works of art—books, poems, plays, films, whatever they choose—that have helped them to understand mortality.

1. What does Vivian's opening monologue (pp. 5–7) tell us about her as a person and as a teacher? Is she a professor you would like to have yourself? Do you think you would find her inspiring? Intimidating? Irritating? Why?
2. At the beginning of the play, Dr. Kelekian informs Vivian that she suffers from an advanced form of cancer—"stage four" (p. 7). Do the doctors believe that the treatment they propose to give her might possibly save her life? Does she believe it? If not, why does she decide to go along with it?
3. What is the scene with Vivian as a child with her father intended to tell you (pp. 41–43)? Did you feel you understood the adult Vivian better after reading this scene?
4. In her first monologue, Vivian says that, in the play to come, irony "is a literary device that will necessarily be deployed to great effect" (p. 6). What is irony? Can you think of any examples of irony in your world? How, in fact, does the playwright use irony? What aspects of the play would you call ironic? At what point, and why, does the play (and Vivian, as a character) eventually turn away from irony? What limitations does an ironic stance impose on us, as human beings?
5. Vivian is passionate about language: "It has always been my custom," she remarks pointedly, "to treat words with respect" (p. 41). How do her experiences in the hospital change her ideas about language—and about what language is and is not capable of expressing? When Vivian says, "My only defense is the acquisition of vocabulary" (p. 44), is she being straightforward or ironic?
6. In the scene in which the medical students undertake Grand Rounds with Dr. Kelekian, Vivian says, "Once I did the teaching, now I am taught" (p. 37). What does it mean to Vivian to lose her power?

7. Vivian has no visitors in the hospital, at least not until Professor Ashford arrives. What has caused her isolation? What aspects of her personality have kept her at a distance from other people?
8. After her initial discussion with Dr. Kelekian, Vivian says, “I know all about life and death. I am, after all, a scholar of Donne’s Holy Sonnets, which explore mortality in greater depth than any other body of work in the English language” (p. 12). What *has* she learned about life and death from Donne? How do her experiences as a cancer patient change her ideas about mortality? How useful do her studies prove to be when it comes to confronting her own end?
9. Vivian has lived her life according to a set of principles she has never questioned and with a set of skills that she has fine-tuned as she has gotten older. Do these prove to be insufficient at the end of her life? How do these skills serve her in the new situation in which she finds herself trapped?
10. Professor Ashford, in her scene with Vivian as a young woman, stresses the difference—an important one to her—between being sentimental and being a scholar (pp. 13–14). Is she saying that scholars cannot be sentimental? Does she differentiate between sentimentality and emotion? What message does she try to get across to Vivian during this meeting, and how successfully does she in fact communicate it? What does the scene tell us about the kind of scholar, and the kind of person, Vivian will become, and about the differences between her and her mentor? Does Professor Ashford strike you as emotionally limited in the same way that Vivian is, or do you see her as a fuller and more “human” person?
11. In what important ways are Jason and Vivian alike? Do they ever recognize their basic similarities? What does Vivian learn about herself from watching and talking to Jason? What sort of influence do you think Vivian had on Jason when he was her student? Has his professional attitude to some degree been formed by hers?
12. Vivian is “uncomfortable with kindness” (p. 34). What other instances of this discomfort can you find? Why might she have become this sort of person?
13. How would you describe Jason’s relationship to Vivian? Does he see her purely as “research,” or as a vulnerable human being? How does he show his very genuine respect for her?
14. What does the playwright mean when she says, “The play is not about doctors or even about cancer. It’s about kindness . . .” How is *Wit* about kindness?

15. After the classroom scene, Vivian tries to express her emotions: “I feel so much—what is the word? I look back, I see these scenes, and I . . . ” (p. 63). How might Vivian complete the sentence, if she were being perfectly honest with herself?

16. What is your opinion of the nurse, Susie? Does your view of her change as the play progresses? Do you agree with her own unspoken assessment of herself as not as intelligent as the doctors, or as Vivian? If so, what does this tell us about our definition of intelligence?

17. Do you think Susie’s approach to medical care is different from that of the doctors? What impact does Susie have on Vivian? Does Vivian’s opinion of Susie change by the end of the play?

18. Does Professor Ashford really visit Vivian as she is dying, or is this a dream? What is the purpose of this scene?

19. Toward the end of the play, Susie admits that the doctors had never expected their treatment to actually cure Vivian, that they were implicitly dishonest with her in raising hopes that it might have done so. How do you feel about the ethics of using a patient like this? Does the fact that it is being done in a good cause, that future patients might live, make it excusable? Is Vivian herself angry about her treatment? How would you explain her feelings?

20. A play is meant to be spoken and heard, not read silently. In your reading group, try reading portions of the play aloud. Possibilities are the scene where Professor Ashford discusses Donne’s punctuation (pp. 12–15), Vivian’s classroom lecture on Donne (pp. 48–50), the students’ discussion of Donne’s poetry (pp. 59–62), the scene where Susie offers Vivian the Popsicle, or the scene where Vivian and Jason speak overlapping dialogue (pp. 36–37).

QUESTIONS FOR
CLASS DISCUSSION

1. Why does the author choose to have Vivian read and discuss the sonnet “If poysonous mineralls” at one particular point in the play (p. 49)? What does Donne mean by “mercy”? What might Vivian mean by the same word?

2. Vivian is the narrator of her own demise. Is she a reliable narrator? Can you find instances in the play in which her explanations about people are not accurate? Is she approaching the end of her life as if it were a test to be taught, distancing herself from her experience?

3. In the classroom scene (pp. 59-63) Vivian describes “Donne’s agile wit at work: not so much *resolving* the issues of life and God as *reveling* in their complexity” (p. 60). Student 2 rejects the idea that Donne revels in the complexity and suggests, on the contrary, that he is “scared, so he hides behind all this complicated stuff, hides behind this *wit*,” and describes him as “running away” from the big questions. Do you think this is a fair assessment of Donne? Is it a fair assessment of Vivian’s own behavior? What is Vivian most afraid of? What form does her “running away” take?

4. Why do you think the play is called *Wit*? What different meanings does the word “wit” have for you? What else might this play be called?

5. Jason describes John Donne as suffering from “Salvation Anxiety” (pp. 75–76). What does he mean by this? Would you say that Vivian suffers from her own form of Salvation Anxiety? If so, in what does it consist? Does God or heaven enter into it? “Doctrine assures us,” she pronounces, explaining Donne’s theology, “that no sinner is denied *forgiveness*, not even one whose sins are overweening *intellect* or overwrought *dramatics*” (p. 50). It is easy to recognize overweening intellect as one of Vivian’s faults; is she also guilty of overwrought *dramatics*? If so, how are these *dramatics* manifested?

6. One of the principal themes of metaphysical poetry is the link, and the division, between the body and the soul. Does *Wit* present the body and the soul as different, or as inextricable? Talking of the doctors’ interest in her, Vivian says, “What we have come to think of as *me* is, in fact, just the specimen jar, just the dust jacket, just the white piece of paper that bears the little black marks” (p. 53). How does *she*, and how do *we*, see the “me” in her?

7. After a funny exchange between the two students, Vivian admits that it “showed the mental acuity I would praise in a poetic text. But,” she says, “I admired only the studied application of wit, not its spontaneous eruption” (p. 62). Does her humor change and broaden as the play progresses? How so, or how not?

8. As a teacher, Vivian liked to attack Donne’s poetry as though it were “a puzzle,” “an intellectual game” (p. 48); it is a one-sided and limited approach, as she comes to realize. Her former student Jason, who adopts it, admits that “the puzzle takes over. You’re not even trying to solve it any more” (p. 76). What implications does this technique have when it is applied to medical research and clinical work? What about when it is applied to an academic course of study and the students being trained in it?

9. Just before Vivian finally accepts morphine, she recites, as her last coherent words, some lines from Donne’s “Death be not proud” (pp. 72–73). Why, in this recitation, does she revert to the punctuation—semicolon and exclamation point—that Professor Ashford deemed “hysterical” (p. 14)? Why does she say “I’m sorry” after her recitation?

10. Professor Ashford calls *The Runaway Bunny* “a little allegory of the soul” (p. 80). What does she mean by this? How does the children’s book, in this light, relate to Donne and Vivian, with their cases of Salvation Anxiety? What sort of comfort does the story give Vivian, assuming she is capable of taking it in? Why does Professor Ashford say “And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest” (p. 80) as she leaves? What does Professor Ashford perceive in *The Runaway Bunny* that is important? Why did the playwright select this book for Professor Ashford to read to Vivian?

11. What does the play’s ending have to say about death and salvation, the body and the soul? Does its note of optimism, even of joy, surprise you?

OTHER RESOURCES

FURTHER READING

Anonymous, *Everyman*; Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*; John Berger, *To the Wedding*; Samuel L. Bloom, *The Doctor and His Patient*; Margaret Wise Brown, *The Runaway Bunny*; Karin Cook, *What Girls Learn*; Michael Cristofer, *The Shadow Box: A Drama in Two Acts*; John Donne, “Death be not proud”; Larry Kramer, *The Normal Heart*; Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*; Larry McMurtry, *Terms of Endearment*; Paul Monette, *Borrowed Time*; Sherwin B. Nuland, *How We Die*; Oliver Sacks, *A Leg to Stand On*; Abraham Verghese, *My Own Country*; Walt Whitman, “Out of the Cradle and Endlessly Rocking”; and Thornton Wilder, *Our Town*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Margaret Edson was born in Washington, D.C., in 1961. She has degrees in history and literature. She wrote *Wit* in 1991, after a period spent working as a clerk in the oncology/AIDS department of a Washington hospital in 1985. Edson now lives in Atlanta, where she teaches kindergarten. *Wit* was awarded the 1999 Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

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