

# **Wit Study Guide**

**Wit by Margaret Edson**

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## Plot Summary

Wit, by playwright Margaret Edson, was first produced in 1995. After several small productions, Wit had its first showing in New York in 1998. Edson won the 1999 Pulitzer Prize for Drama for this piece. Page numbers in this guide refer to the Faber and Faber 2001 edition.

Vivian Bearing is diagnosed with stage four metastatic ovarian cancer. She goes through eight cycles of an aggressive experimental chemotherapy. This treatment is not intended to help Vivian recover; her cancer is too far gone. Instead her treatment will provide much needed research information.

Vivian guides the audience through her tale and shares her reflections with them. The audience follows her journey through her treatment until her ultimate death. Interspersed with this journey, Vivian joins scenes from the far and recent past: when she received her diagnosis; her viewpoint as a student, as a teacher, and a memory of a childhood moment with her father.



## Scenes 15-16 (p. 74-85)

### Summary

#### Scene 15 (p. 74-78)

With Vivian unconscious, Jason and Susie insert a catheter to collect Vivian's urine. The doctor describes how magnificent Vivian used to be, a great scholar and a superb lecturer with no notes. This didn't make her any more popular with the students, though, as she was ascerbic. Susie says she'd expect a scholar of poetry would be 'sort of dreamy', but Jason explains Donne was challenging and intense. The content of the Holy Sonnets occupied themselves with what Jason has named Salvation Anxiety: Donne is both brilliant and aware he has sinned. He can seek salvation but under scrutiny, religion doesn't stand up very well. Equally true, Donne can't abandon religion. And his way of processing these dichotomies was to write these complex sonnets. The doctor defends both Donne's work and his own, saying research is simply the attempt to 'quantify the complications of the puzzle.' They ponder over the meaning of life 'garbage' and the doctor leaves.

#### Scene 16 (p. 78-85)

E.M. Ashford (Evelyn) visits Vivian, who wakes up on her arrival. She is in town for her great-grandson's birthday. She stopped by Vivian's office and was told where she could be found. Vivian, in pain, scared and overwhelmed, cries. Evelyn climbs into the bed with Vivian and hugs her. Evelyn suggests she recite Donne. Vivian releases an impassioned 'no,' so instead, the professor pulls out *The Runaway Bunny* by Margaret Wise Brown. She reads the story of a little bunny who wants to run away. His mother says she'll run after him wherever he goes, for he is her little bunny. Realizing there is no way to escape, the bunny gives up and decides to stay at home. Evelyn surmises this as an allegory: "A little allegory for the soul. No matter where it hides, God will find it." Vivian is asleep by the end of the story and the professor takes her leave.

Jason enters and starts collecting the usual data. Vivian's unresponsiveness has him investigate further and he discovers her heart is no longer beating. He calls Code Blue and starts CPR. Susie rushes in to stop him, saying Vivian is DNR. The doctor replies "She's research!" Susie perseveres and throws him off the bed. Susie reminds him he witnessed Kelekian put the order in. Susie calls to cancel the code but it is too late. The code team enters, takes over, and has Vivian on a board, attached to a respirator, and ready for the defibrillator. Susie screams at them to stop, there is a DNR order. They shock Vivian and continue, until Jason shouts loudly that he made a mistake. This stops the activity in the room enough for Susie to show them the chart, which has no code. Protectively, she pushes the code team away from the bed. As the code team tries to sort out and process what has happened, Vivian steps out of the bed, towards a light, removing her cap, her identification bracelet, her hospital gown. She is naked, reaching for the light. Stage lights go out.



## Analysis

When Jason speaks to Susie about Vivian's classes and reputation as a teacher, it is with great respect. It also reminds the audience just how rigid Vivian was in her life, so the difference between that strong woman and her current vulnerability is at its sharpest.

Evelyn's visit is a gift of mercy to Vivian, who intuits she has connected with one person. The story of *The Runaway Bunny* echoes early childhood and the state of being dependent on others, which is now Vivian's reality. It also allows for Vivian to be open to such simplicity and beauty.

Jason's immediate instinct to save Vivian for research purposes echoes Vivian's determination in her own field of study. When he realizes what he has done, he grasps the full understanding of life, of Vivian's life, and of a patient's dignity.

With Susie as her protector, Vivian finally and quietly takes her leave from this world.

## Vocabulary

salvation, convoluted, complexity, unresponsive, Code Blue, resuscitate



## Scenes 11-14 (p. 59-74)

### Summary

#### Scene 11 (p.59-63)

Vivian teaches a class full of students. She asks a student a question he cannot answer, and she berates him either to come prepared or leave the class and the university. Vivian points out to the audience she was not gentle and understanding of his youth and ignorance. She then defends herself by saying she taught him a lesson. Another student asks why Donne makes everything so complicated. Vivian ponders. The student proposes her own answer: "I think he's hiding. I think he's really confused, I don't know, maybe he's scared, so he hides behind all this complicated stuff, hides behind this wit." The student goes on and Vivian is curious to see if she will push through to great insight. The student loses her way trying to follow her line of thinking.

Vivian advises the students to pay attention to the original pronunciation of i-o-n, as in expansion (expan-see-on.) At the end of class, she overhears two students mocking her lecture, saying words like pronuncia-see-on and gradua-see-on. Though Vivian admits to the audience this was witty, she did not appreciate it at all.

The student that Vivian had already berated approaches her for an extension on a deadline for his paper because his grandmother has died. Vivian gives him no leeway. Vivian tries to express to the audience how she feels looking back on these scenes but the words escape her.

#### Scene 12 (page 63-70)

Vivian pinches her IV line so the machine will beep and summon Susie. When Susie arrives, she finds nothing wrong but Vivian is struggling with her thoughts. Vivian cries and admits to Susie she is scared. She looks back and now has doubts, and is now unsure of herself. Susie consoles her with words like 'sweetheart'. She then brings Vivian a popsicle, reminiscing about the ice cream truck that used to come by her street when she was growing up.

Susie broaches a new topic. She is delicate in her approach. She clarifies while the tumor has shrunk significantly, the cancer has spread to other places. There was no chance of Vivian recovering from the outset but her treatment has provided valuable insight for the researchers. Vivian acknowledges she has understood this ambiguity all along. Susie advises Vivian to think about her "code" status: she can choose between full code if her heart stops, or Do Not Resuscitate. The doctors' priority is the continuation of life and they always want to learn more, so Susie wants to give Vivian some time to think about this decision before the doctors make it for her. Vivian first says she too has always wanted to learn more, but when Susie takes this to mean an intention of full code, Vivian is quick to clarify: "Let it stop." Susie leaves and Vivian tells



the audience how corny her life has become. She realizes, though, this is not an abstract but a real discussion of life and death - her life and death. She goes on: "Now is a time for simplicity. Now is a time for, dare I say it, kindness." Vivian discovers what she really desires: Vivian wants to hide.

#### Scene 13 (p. 70-73)

Vivian wants to tell the audience just how severe her pain has become. She can't find the right words, until finally she does: "It hurts like hell. It really does." Susie enters and tries to soothe Vivian's pain. She says they'll set up a patient-controlled device giving Vivian control over the dosage of her pain medication. Doctor Kelekian and Jason arrive and ask if Vivian is in pain. This launches Vivian into a screaming tirade to the audience, "Yes I'm in goddamn pain.[...] I didn't know there could be such pain on this earth." Kelekian orders a morphine drip. Susie asks why he is not using the standard, less extreme, patient-controlled analgesic, and Kelekian says Vivian has earned a rest. He tells Vivian they will help her through this.

Vivian steps out of the scene and speaks to the audience. She tries to give them a worthy last line - a quote from Donne – but this falls short and Vivian decides on only "I'm sorry."

#### Scene 14 (p. 73-74)

Vivian rejoins the scene. As Susie prepares the morphine, Vivian mentions it will surely have a soporific effect. Susie replies she has no idea about that, "but it sure makes you sleepy." Vivian explodes in laughter, and when she explains soporific means that very thing, Susie laughs as well. The laughter continues until the morphine kicks in, when Vivian is overtaken by sleep.

## Analysis

It is this point in the play when Vivian learns a profound lesson about life and humanity. Only now, on the cusp of her death, does she understand the importance of kindness and the need for connected human interaction. She sees how insensitive she was to her students. Someone who did not need to rely on anyone, Vivian now turns to a nurse to cry on her shoulder. She has become vulnerable for the first time and it is this vulnerability that has brought her a greater understanding of what resides in the human heart. Vivian's fear and desire to hide echo the earlier-examined poem by Donne, when the speaker wanted to hide from God for fear God would judge harshly and not forgive. With the Do Not Resuscitate order, Vivian permits herself to leave the role of contributor of knowledge, research and study; she allows herself the right to die. And now that Doctor Kelekian will no longer be asking more sacrifice of her, he finally allows himself to see what the cancer and treatment have done to Vivian, and he shows mercy.

## Vocabulary

agile, infelicitous, perspicacious, scansion, quandary, epithelial, stabilize, maudlin, erudition, palliative treatment, modality, coherence, analgesic





## Scenes 6-10 (p. 41-59)

### Summary

#### Scene 6 (p. 41-44)

A moment from the past is portrayed: Vivian, five years old, reads a Beatrix Potter story with her father. As she reads, she comes across the word soporific. Her father explains soporific means something that makes you sleepy. When Vivian sees the sleeping bunnies in the picture, she is delighted the image bore out the definition of soporific.

Vivian tells the audience about her love of words, her love of Donne's words in particular (concatenation, coruscation, tergiversation,) and her custom of looking up relevant medical terms to gain knowledge.

#### Scene 7 (p. 44-48)

Susie helps Vivian as she arrives at the hospital one night with fever and chills. Jason examines her. Susie tells him she thinks the dosage should be lowered for the next round of chemotherapy. He replies "No way. Full dose. She's tough. She can take it."

The scene jumps forward in time to the fifth cycle. Vivian is now in isolation, as the chemotherapy has destroyed her immune system. Doctor Kelekian visits Vivian briefly. Jason comes in to check the charts, pressed for time and inconvenienced by the precautions he has to take. He has to remind himself on the way out to stop and speak with the patient briefly. Vivian points out to the audience that the treatment (rather than the cancer) is putting her health in danger. She is sure Donne would delight in such a paradox. Had Donne written a poem on the subject, she'd teach her students to approach the piece as a puzzle, an intellectual game. But this is no game.

#### Scene 8 (p. 48-52)

Vivian slips into her role as a lecturer, expounding on wit as the featured skill in the early seventeenth century. John Donne was the king of wit. He used his wit to examine life, death, and God. His poems never resolve the larger questions raised. Vivian reads the sonnet *If poisonous minerals* and proceeds to analyze it. The speaker challenges God: it would be difficult for God to condemn but it would be easy and glorious to show mercy and forgive. Unusually, the speaker asks God to forget, rather than remember him. The speaker wants to hide from God's judgment of his sins, yet he needn't; he only has to accept God's forgiveness.

Susie interrupts to take Vivian for an ultrasound; there is concern regarding a possible bowel obstruction. Vivian refuses and gets extremely angry at Susie's efforts to persuade her. Finally her will collapses, she gives in, and Susie rolls her to the test. Vivian gives her name but before the ultrasound, the technician gets up to take a break.



## Scene 9 (p. 52-53)

With her focus back on the audience, Vivian recites a Donne poem that concludes “And gluttonous death will instantly unjoynt / My body, ‘and soule.” This was a poem Vivian used to enjoy but now she finds it a bit too close for comfort. Vivian stresses she is becoming very sick, “ultimately sick, as it were.” She notes she’s always been steadfast in everything she’s done, and now her illness is no exception. She’s survived the full 8 treatments of the experimental chemo, a first. The doctors are thrilled.

## Scene 10 (p. 54-59)

Doctor Prosner checks in on Vivian, who is now back in her room. As usual, he asks how she is feeling. He mentions her kidneys are doing great, explaining he knows this because if there were a problem, there would be “lots of in, not much out.” As he turns to leave, Vivian asks what they had just been talking about. This stops the doctor in his tracks and he asks Vivian if she has been experiencing confusion or short-term memory loss. She says she has not. She asks him why he chose cancer as his specialty. He says it is something he’s always wanted to do. Cancer is fascinating. Unlike normal cells that replicate for a given period of time and then stop, cancer cells keep replicating forever. This process is called immortality in culture. Vivian jokes “Sounds like a symposium.” The doctor is in awe of cancer. He looks forward to opening his own lab if he survives his current fellowship. Vivian clarifies - the part with the human beings. The doctor is obliged to learn how to deal with patients but he does not enjoy it or see the necessity for researchers. Vivian asks if he ever misses the people who die in the studies. Prosner replies many people, particularly girls, ask that. Vivian wants to know what he says to the girls. He says yes, and some of them believe him. Vivian asks what he says when a patient is afraid. The doctor is oblivious to her intent and asks her a memory question. She replies she is alright, just tired. The doctor leaves.

Vivian notes Prosner prefers research to humanity, just as she prefers her own research to humanity. And yet now as the victim, she wishes he’d reach out to connect with her. Vivian prepares the audience for what they are about to see: examples of her denying her students the kindness she now seeks for herself.

## Analysis

Vivian looks up medical terms the doctors use around her so she can stay informed. This is a way of keeping control over a situation where she has no control.

The doctors refer to her toughness, acknowledging there is something brave and strong in living through this. The bulk of the suffering is brought on by the treatment and this is difficult for Vivian to process. The treatment is experimental. Vivian reads between the lines perceiving there is no chance it will save her, and she knows the suffering she takes on is strictly for the good of medical knowledge moving forward after she is gone. Vivian seeks comfort in the words she loves, the poetry of John Donne. She examines a



tough poem challenging beliefs: Why is a person more suitable for condemnation than animals or poisons? Does God really forgive? Can one hide from one's sins?

Vivian is devastated as she is reminded of her plight when Susie comes to collect her for tests. Torn away from her safe world of poetry and classrooms, she finally releases an anger she has kept in check until now. Vivian is reduced to being a petri-dish for an experiment. Vivian admits she should be saying it is a relief to return to her room after the tests, but "this is hardly true. It would be a relief to be a cheerleader on her way to Daytona Beach for Spring Break. To get back to my room after those infernal tests is just the next thing that happens."

The doctor's focus on the disease rather than on the patient further isolates Vivian. All of her years with her research, rather than with people, have led to this moment. She has no one to turn to, to discuss her fears. She is compelled to look back at the lack of human kindness she has been shown.

## Vocabulary

soporific, coruscation, evocative, anatomize, endeavor, eradicated, imperils, paradox, revel, flounder, perplex, frenzy, wit, ingenuity, virtuosity, vigorous, jousts, pious, melodrama, disputed, hyperactive, histrionic, overweening, overwrought, outwitted, steadfast, resolute, proliferation, malignant, confluent, replicating, fellowship, impediments, simpering



## Scenes 3- 5 (p. 16-41)

### Summary

#### Scene 3 (p. 16-31)

Vivian is rolled into the scene in a wheelchair for her x-ray and upper GI series. She is asked her name but when she tries to provide additional information about who she is and what she does, there is no response. At one point she gives the name Lucy, Countess of Bedford, which again inspires no reaction from the technicians. Vivian continues to talk to the audience as the technicians run the tests. After her undergraduate degree, Vivian continued to study for three years with E.M. Ashford, “during which time,” she says, “I learned by example what it means to be a scholar of distinction.” She names off her publications. Vivian identifies the salient characteristic of Donne’s poems as wit. Wit sharpens the mind, and uncovering the wit in Donne’s poems is the final test of ability. Vivian states immodestly, “After twenty years, I can say with confidence, no one is quite as good as I.”

Vivian has her next examination with the doctor. Jason Posner introduces himself and immediately tells Vivian he took her 17th Century poetry course in university. He wanted to get an A in the three most difficult courses at the university, but he only managed to get an A- in her class. He then launches into his medical interview. He learns Vivian is 50 and she is not married. Her father died of a heart attack when she was twenty and her mother passed away from breast cancer when Vivian was 42. She is an only child. Other than having had her tonsils removed at 8 years old, she has had no medical problems in her life. Vivian does not smoke or do drugs. She enjoys the occasional glass of wine and a few cups of coffee daily. Jason asks about her current condition. Vivian’s first symptom, four months earlier, was a strong, dull cramp. Then she developed sharp sudden pains and noticed an extreme fatigue. While the doctor is out of the room to find a nurse, Vivian quotes Donne’s poetry. Jason returns with a nurse and performs a pelvic exam. His reaction is audible when he feels the mass. He finishes the exam and leaves.

#### Scene 4 (p. 31-34)

Vivian vomits abundantly as a result of the chemotherapy. Susie (the nurse) comes in to measure the amount and notes the information on a chart. Vivian has had no visitors. Susie asks if she can call someone but Vivian declines. Susie detaches an IV bottle and leaves.

#### Scene 5 (p. 34-41)

Vivian describes to the audience how still time is between bouts of treatment. “If I were writing this scene, it would last a full fifteen minutes. I would lie here, and you would sit there.”



Doctor Kelekian, Jason, and four fellows enter for grand rounds during the first cycle of Vivian's treatment. While Jason reviews the case for the other doctors, Vivian talks to the audience about the grand rounds experience ("In Ground Rounds, they read me like a book. Once I did the teaching, now I am taught.") The doctors learn that Vivian's ovaries, fallopian tubes and uterus have been removed. Jason shows his colleagues where the mass is detectable by touch. In addition to signs of mass shrinkage, the chemotherapy has additional possible consequences: Vivian's blood cell count will lessen and there is risk of kidney failure. Side effects at this stage have included nausea, pain during urination and hair loss. When the doctors are leaving, Doctor Kelekian reminds Jason to speak to the patient before leaving. The team of doctors exit. While Vivian detests the close scrutiny of grand rounds, she recognizes their necessary role in education.

## Analysis

This grouping of scenes portrays one aspect of the nature of the medical world. Depersonalization and degradation are part of a patient's journey: Vivian's vomit is measured, her body is poked and prodded by strangers, and she loses her hair. The technicians don't interact with her beyond asking her name. The treatment's side effects are worse than those from the actual cancer. This is exceptionally difficult for Vivian, as she is only doing this for the sake of research; no one expects her to recover. Vivian's toughness in sticking with it shows her dedication to the search for knowledge.

## Vocabulary

immeasurable, distinction, prestigious, solicit, sonnet, exhaustive, scrupulously, exacting, internist, biochemistry, controversial, emesis, impresario, intervention, hydration, nefarious



# Scenes 1 - 2 (p. 5-16)

## Summary

### Scene 1 (p. 5-7)

Vivian Bearing greets the audience while wearing a hospital robe and hooked up to an IV. She is in the hospital for stage 4 metastatic ovarian cancer and she's been told she has less than two hours to live. Vivian is a professor of seventeenth century poetry, specializing in John Donne's Holy Sonnets. She acknowledges this is a play about herself and speaks of ideas of death found in poetry. She disconnects the tube from the IV pole and the scene shifts.

### Scene 2 (p. 7-16)

Doctor Kelekian appears and Vivian enters the scene with him. He breaks the news that she has advanced metastatic ovarian cancer. He explains this cancer went undetected in its first three stages of existence but now it is an insidious adenocarcinoma. Vivian picks up on the word insidious – which the doctor defines as undetectable and which Vivian defines as treacherous. As Doctor Kelekian talks, Vivian simultaneously reflects on the thoughts going through her mind (she must read up on cancer) and the nature of the words involved (Anti/neo/plastic). Her treatment over the course of eight months will consist of aggressive experimental drugs which are bound to hurt some healthy tissue as well; it will not be an easy course. The doctor emphasizes the fact that this treatment is research and, as such, will make a significant medical contribution. He advises Vivian to take the semester off from teaching, as every month there will be one week of in-house treatment followed by one week of severe fatigue, followed by two relatively normal weeks. Doctor Kelekian offers to speak to a family member for her but Vivian declines. He stresses the full dose of chemotherapy needs to be employed each time, to be of any use. He warns her, "You must be very tough."

As Dr. Kelekian recedes, Vivian tells the audience her cancer is stage four; there is no stage five. She must be tough; it is a matter of life and death. Vivian knows all about life and death from an academic standpoint - mortality is explored extensively in Donne's Holy Sonnets, which is her academic specialty. Donne is a challenge which is why she chose to study that particular poet.

Vivian is revealed in a scene with E.M. Ashford, occurring 28 years earlier. Vivian, at that time a student, is surprised when her professor requires her to re-write her essay on Donne's Holy Sonnet Six. The professor emphasizes the unique standards required for the study of Metaphysical Poetry. Ashford demonstrates the dangers of relying on editions with inaccurate punctuation to discover the meaning of the poetry: a simple comma can separate life and death. The professor recognizes Vivian's reticence to apply the poetic lessons to her life and Ashford encourages her to get away from the library and have some fun. Vivian tries to engage in the outside world but just can't



make the connection and runs back to the library. The memory-scene dissolves and Vivian prepares for her first full dose of chemotherapy.

## Analysis

The beginning of this piece sets the framework for the play as a whole. A woman at the end of her life is on stage and speaks directly to an audience. Effortlessly, she drops back in to moments from her past and out again to the present. Vivian is a poetry professor at the end of her life, grappling with questions of life and death mirrored in her specialty, Donne's Holy Sonnets. When Vivian revisits her first exposure to Donne as a young adult, she has not yet tasted life, and tries, according to her professor's urging. "I, ah, went outside. The sun was very bright. [...] There were students on the lawn. Talking about nothing, laughing. The insuperable barrier between one thing and another is...just a comma? Simple human truth, uncompromising scholarly standards? They're connected? I just couldn't... I went back to the library."

## Vocabulary

salutations, copulative, washbasin, feigned, solicitude, metastatic, disinclined, insidious, treacherous, follicles, averse, pernicious, metaphysical poetry, punctuated, valiant, vanquish



# Characters

## **E. M. Ashford, D.Phil.**

Evelyn Ashford, now 80, is in town for her great-grandchild's birthday- contrasting with Vivian, who has no family. Ashford first introduced Vivian to Donne. She was also the first to perceive Vivian shied away from people and preferred to keep to her studies. As a teacher, she encouraged Vivian to get out and enjoy life with others. Now at the end of Vivian's life, she is quiet and gentle and loving.

## **Susie Monahan, R.N., B.S.N.**

Susie, also 28, is Vivian's primary nurse. She is not intellectually inclined. Susie's strengths are in her caring and giving nature. She demonstrates a sensitivity in dealing with people the other characters in the play could not achieve. Susie puts the patient first, and she stands by Vivian until the very end.

## **Jason Posner, M.D.**

Jason, 28 years old, is a researcher who must complete his clinical fellowship as part of his accreditation. Jason is not a natural with patients and bedside manners. He is more comfortable with cells and numbers and measurements. Jason was a student in Vivian's class. He has a great respect for Vivian as a professor. He recognizes Donne's exceptional intelligence and appreciates the complexities the poet explored in his sonnets. Jason goes through a journey during the play so at the end he has a greater awareness of a patient's reality when faced with death.

## **Harvey Kelekian, M.D.**

Doctor Kelekian is an oncologist. He is the same age as Vivian and they can relate to each other on the topic of modern university students. The doctor cares about his patients, yet he also understands the value of research for the larger good. He has no qualms asking Vivian to go through a rigorous experimental treatment even though there is no chance she will benefit from it. He shows Vivian kindness near the end by offering her morphine.

## **Vivian Bearing, Ph.D.**

Vivian is 50 years old. She is a professor of seventeenth century poetry, and of John Donne's Holy Sonnets in particular. She is dying of metastatic ovarian cancer. Vivian is an exacting scholar, much more comfortable with books and words than with other people. Even as a student she isolated herself and the pattern never changed. She only



has one visitor through the course of her illness. Vivian is exceptionally bright and perceptive. She is unusually clever with words. Her lectures at the university are held in high regard. Her courses also have a reputation of being the toughest. Vivian is not a gentle and giving person, yet through her journey towards death, she learns the value of kindness.



# Objects/Places

## Defibrillator

Brought on by Jason's efforts to save Vivian, the code team arrives to revive her. Vivian has suffered so long to bring her back to life for even more suffering would be cruel. The defibrillator in this context reminds us medical technologies must be applied with human sensitivity.

## Hospital

Vivian stays in the hospital several days for each treatment over the course of eight months. As the cycles progress, she becomes less mobile until finally she remains an inpatient. All of her tests and exams happen at the hospital. So does her death.

## Wheelchair

Susie wheels Vivian from one test to another in the wheelchair. Vivian is too weak to walk on her own.

## The Runaway Bunny

The Runaway Bunny by Margaret Brown Wise is a children's book E.M. Ashford reads to Vivian when she comes to visit. She first suggests Donne but Vivian refuses, and this book is the opposite of Donne- simple, with nothing to figure out, no puzzle, and no maze to work through.

## The IV drip

Vivian is connected to an IV tube in the hospital. On stage, she frequently removes it when she steps out to speak to the audience.



# Themes

## Complexity vs. Simplicity

Vivian's student correctly identifies Vivian's plight in life: She involves herself with complex mental challenges as a way to hide from the simplicity of life and truth. Vivian's journey progresses and as her body experiences more and more pain and though she is still afraid, she becomes less and less willing to wrap herself in the impossible complex mazes of the mind.

## Depersonalization and Connection

At Vivian's first exam with Jason, he does a medical interview and concludes with "Well, that about does it for your life history," Vivian replies "Yes, that's all there is to my life history." Vivian is aware how easily the medical profession can reduce a person strictly to their body parts. Later in the play, Susie summarizes the doctors' philosophy: "Well they like to save lives. So anything's okay, as long as life continues. It doesn't matter if you're hooked up to a million machines." Both of these examples show how easily the machine of modern medicine depersonalizes health care. Vivian, who has always been a thinker rather than a feeler, is now on the receiving end of this depersonalization, and this pushes her to further growth: connecting with other humans, kindness, and sharing are all key and Vivian learns this final lesson at the end of her life. She apologizes for this.

## The Cost of the Pursuit of Knowledge

Vivian has devoted her life to scholarly study in the pursuit of knowledge, as have the doctors who treat her. Doctor Jason Posner in particular shares Vivian's hunger for knowledge, and it is for this reason both of them embark on the experiment of using the new chemotherapeutic agents. In both cases, their narrow blinders have limited their actual learning by sticking with raw data and not factoring in the human element. Both Vivian and Jason understand by the end of the play knowledge comes in human form as well, in kindness, understanding, respect, and empathy.

Vivian's belief in the importance of the pursuit of knowledge was necessary for her to withstand the brutality of the eight-month treatment. The cost to her was significant, effectively eliminating her capacity to function, at the very moment when her time was most precious.

# Style

## Point of View

Wit is a play and each character speaks lines from a script in the first person. In this particular play, Vivian – the central character - acts as the narrator and guide through the tale, outside of the scenes where she interacts with other characters. With this device, the audience is privy to Vivian's thoughts and emotions that would not be apparent if she were limited to speaking with the other characters.

## Setting

The play takes place in the present at the University Hospital Comprehensive Cancer Center.

## Language and Meaning

Though this is a modern play, Vivian Bearing, a professor of Donne's Holy Sonnets from the seventeenth century, uses heightened language as a matter of course. Her vocabulary is large and with her insistence on looking up medical terms, it keeps expanding. She uses words indicative of thought and precision. This contrasts with the caring terminology Susie uses.

## Structure

This play is a journey with a guide. There are 16 total scene divisions. There are no sharp scene changes; everything rolls from what came before. Vivian joins scenes, leaves scenes, and even sometimes talks to the audience during an ongoing scene. The stage directions specify the set should not be elaborate, allowing for the scenes to change fluidly between past and present, between Vivian speaking to the audience and Vivian in her hospital bed. The fluidity of jumping around in time echoes the idea of one's life flashing before one's eyes at the moment of death.



## Quotes

Now is not the time for verbal swordplay, for unlikely flights of imagination and wildly shifting perspectives, for metaphysical conceit, for wit. And nothing would be worse than a detailed scholarly analysis. Erudition. Interpretation. Complication. Now is a time for simplicity. Now is a time for, dare I say it, kindness. I thought being extremely smart would take care of it. But I see I have been found out. Oooohh. I'm scared. Oh, God. I want... I want... No, I want to hide.

-- Vivian (Scene 12 paragraph Page 69-70)

It felt more like boot camp than English class.

-- Jason Posner (Scene 15 paragraph Page 75)

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.

-- Vivian (Scene 9 paragraph Page 53)

One thing can be said for an eight-month course of cancer treatment: it is highly educational. I am learning to suffer.

-- Vivian (Scene 3 paragraph Page 31)

I, ah, went outside. The sun was very bright. [...] There were students on the lawn. Taking about nothing, laughing. The insuperable barrier between one thing and another is...just a comma? Simple human truth, uncompromising scholarly standards? They're connected? I just couldn't... I went back to the library.

-- Vivian (Scene 2 paragraph Page 15)

It is not my intention to give away the plot; but I think I die at the end.

-- Vivian (Scene 1 paragraph Page 6)



# Topics for Discussion

## Topic 7

What is the significance of the story of The Runaway Bunny in this play?

## Topic 7

Does Vivian have a dignified death? What would you change? What would you keep the same?

## Topic 7

What is Jason's fascination with cancer? In what ways is the study of cancer similar to Vivian's study of Donne's poetry? In what ways is it different?

## Topic 6

Who is E.M. Ashford and what is her relationship to Vivian?

## Topic 5

How does Susie feel about the treatment? How does Jason feel about the treatment?

## Topic 2

What is Jason's role at the hospital? What kind of doctor is he planning to be? Why does he resent his current academic requirement? Does he still resent it at the end of the play?

## Topic 3

Why does Doctor Kelekian offer this aggressive treatment to Vivian? Why does Vivian choose to comply? What are the alternatives? What do you think she should have done?

## Topic 4

Why doesn't Vivian want Susie or Doctor Kelekian to call any friends on her behalf?



## Topic 1

What is Vivian's profession? What does she love about it? In what ways does it keep her safe?