

W;t

Gabby

Author Biography

- Margaret Edson was born in 1961, Edson's mother was a medical social worker and her father was a newspaper columnist
- She attended Smith College, took part in the Scholars Program and eventually graduated with a degree in Renaissance history
- In 1985, she took a job as a clerk on an oncology/AIDS research hospital in Washington.
- The unit was undertaking clinical trials of the drug AZT for Aids and also developing new protocols for the treatment of ovarian cancer
- In her clerical position, Edson was able to watch the interactions of sick patients and their interactions with their caregivers.
- She only stayed at the hospital for a year, but the experience stayed with her
- She later interned at a philanthropic organisation and took part in fundraising for a mental health agency where she published her first piece, *Living with AIDS: Perspective for Caregivers*
- In 1991, Edson decided to “get serious” about her life and decided to write a play about her year at the hospital.
- *Fun fact:* she was childhood friends with Julia Louis-Dreyfus and they often performed plays in their basements as children

Crafting her protagonist

- It took Edson a while to craft her main character. She knew she wanted her character to move from a position of power, to a position of dependency.
- She was initially considering her protagonist to work in the law or medicine field, however she liked the idea of a highly educated academic, who realises her real-life trauma, cannot be addressed or 'understood' with academic research
- Edson had also learnt from former classmates that John Donne was one of the most difficult poets to study, so he seemed like a good research subject for the firm protagonist's research
- Having never studied Donne, Edson spent much time studying both criticism and commentary and eventually discovered, Helen Gardner, whose work on Donne's sonnets made her a well-respect figure among scholars (she was who E.M Ashford was based off)

‘Plot’

- Margaret Edson’s play, ‘W;t’ is a creative response to the Divine Poems of John Donne, as Vivian Bearing, a demanding, arguably cold and uncompromising English professor has been diagnosed with terminal metastatic cancer
- As an academic, she attempts to treat the news with the detachment, similar to how she would treat her own research
- Her medical team (Dr. Kelekian and Dr. Posner), treat her solely as a research experiment with a “live at all cost” approach. The doctors eventually recommend aggressive chemotherapy, which she agrees to
- During the treatment she reflects on her own reactions to the cycle the cancer takes and begins to reflect on her career, as well as significant events in her life
- Susie Monahan, is the only nurse who seems to empathise and care for Vivian’s condition whilst at the hospital, in turn causing Vivian to unfavourably consider her own inflexible insensitivity and high standards towards students and their personal needs
- In many ways, it can be argued that ‘W;t’ mirrors and parodies the poetry of John Donne as he too, experimented with language, analysed death and eventually confronted his own death in a dignified way

Characters

- **Vivian Bearing (Protagonist):** Ph.D., 50, professor of English literature and respected authority on the works of English poet John Donne. She has recently been diagnosed with ovarian cancer
- **Harvey Kelekian:** M.D, Chief of Medical Oncology at the hospital and lead investigator in research trial of a new drug protocol to treat ovarian cancer
- **Jason Posner:** M.D, a clinical fellow under the supervision of Dr. Kelekian, interested in the study of cancer and the effect of the new drug protocol on treating tumors
- **Susie Monahan:** R.N, Vivian's primary care nurse on the oncology unit, who shows atypical kindness, empathy and care
- **E.M Ashford:** A scholar, Professor Emerita of English Literature, and mentor teacher to Vivian when she was a graduate student.
- **Mr. Bearing:** Vivian's father

Themes

Poetry and the limitations of language

- *W;t* demonstrates that words, despite their ability to define, describe, teach, inform and comfort, can still fall short
- Despite Vivian devoting her life to the study of language, she realises it cannot fulfill her when she is diagnosed with terminal cancer → during her cancer treatment, Vivian must confront her habit of escaping life through language

Kindness and Morality

- Vivian is concerned with both the morality of her physical body and scholarly work
- Even as her health fails her, she ponders how her work will survive her. Yet, as her death looms nearer, she must also confront the fact that she has failed to make meaningful personal connections in her life
- The play ultimately reveals that Vivian will be remembered for her academia, not who she was as a friend or family member - and this is revealed as the great tragedy of her life

Themes

Rationality and Intellect vs. Emotion and Human Connection

- Throughout the majority of her treatment, Vivian tries her best to never slip into sentimentality or weakness → this has been her lifelong defense mechanism and a way to cope with having no family or friends
- In the end, we see that Vivian however, makes room for human connection - a key element of this being her ability to recognise the importance of emotion and human connection in life

***W;t*, Death and Meaning**

- *W;t* deliberately avoids an easy conclusion - echoing the works of John Donne that there is no “answer” to the big questions of life
- Whilst Vivian initially reiterates that she can come to terms with life and death, she later realises that death cannot be experienced or understood in the abstract
- In Donne’s poetry, death is to be considered and reconsidered and analysed, yet in life it is painful, irrational and difficult to come to terms with. However, Vivian must come to terms with it because it is unavoidable

Symbols

The Popsicle:

- Prior to Vivian's symptoms worsening, she wrote off nurse Susie as being unintelligent and too sentimental, instead preferring the dry, intellectual approach of Jason and Dr. Kelekian.
- As her symptoms worsened however, Vivian turns to Susie for comfort, realising that being treated with kindness and respect is what she desires as she endures trauma and pain
- As Vivian's pain is so unbearable one night, Vivian cries into Susie's arms and Susie returns with an old-fashioned popsicle with two sticks and Vivian offers to share it with Susie → this is moment when Vivian extends real kindness
- The popsicle is therefore representative of Vivian's new perspective of the world and the fact that we need to be kind to all we meet

Symbols

The Tale of the Flopsy Bunnies and the Runaway Bunny

- In one flashback in the play, Vivian recalls the moment she ‘fell in love’ with words and language
- Her father, Mr Bearing, was reading her Beatrix Potter’s book, *The Tale of the Flopsy Bunnies*
- Vivian stumbles over the word “soporific” (‘makes you sleepy’) and is delighted to learn a new word
- At the end of the play, E.M Ashford, Vivian’s graduate school mentor, visits and brings along the children’s book *The Runaway Bunny* (which she brought to gift to her grandson)
- Ashford offers to recite some Donne poem to Vivian, but Vivian refuses and requests Ashford reads *The Runaway bunny* instead → the similarity of the two books and their critical emergence in Vivian’s life, links them as a symbol and highlights their importance in the play
- They represent the childlike love of language that first ignited Vivian’s literary life, which she returns to just before death
- Despite Ashford wanting to recite Donne to the dying Vivian and can’t help offering a critical analysis of the children’s book, Vivian no longer has the capacity or desire for lofty, complex language or academic puzzles
- It ultimately symbolises Vivian’s slow return to childlike simplicity → these two women are some of the foremost scholars of John Donne, but they find connection in a children’s book about bunnies

Intertextual connections

'Death not be proud'

- Indirectly and directly referred to throughout *W;t*,
- Directly referenced in the middle of the play as Vivian and the audience attempt to use Donne's poetry to come to terms with death
- Shows how a postmodern audience can relate to Donne's idea

Present same ideas but in a different environment

- Donne - strict religious environment, struggling from the turmoil of the creation of the Church of England
- *W;t* - a post-modern scientific environment with limited emotional connection and religious presence