

## The Redemptive Vision of the Heart and Mind in Margaret Edson's Wit

Enas Ja'afar Jawad

College of Education for Women – English Language Dept.

### Abstract

Approaching the turning of the millennium, the American theatre witnessed an arousing interest much shown in patients suffering of severe diseases as a subject matter to drama. In a discussion of Margaret Edson's *Wit*, the light is shed on how far such patients, who were literally involved in secular visions during their life-time, become apt to create a different one on their death beds. The vision newly blossomed becomes much rooted in the spiritual life; it is a redemptive vision that can amend what those patients' hearts and minds have long ignored. Further, the human touch that has been ignored during man's healthy secular life is ultimately needed for the time being. It helps to enhance man's vision towards the inevitable and eternal salvation as much as it does elevate man through the power of love and genuine humanity to be united with his Creator.

### رؤيا الخلاص للقلب واللب في مسرحية مارغريت أدسون "الفطنة"

ايناس جعفر جواد

كلية التربية للبنات - قسم اللغة الانكليزية

D 306 307

شهد المسرح الاميركي اهتماما تجلى على نحو واضح بالمرضى الذين يعانون منامراض عضال والذين اضحوا موضوعا لمسرحيات أفول الالفية الاولى. وفي مناقشة لمسرحية مارغريت ادسون "الفطنة" يتم تسليط الضوء على مقدرة هؤلاء المرضى، والذين انغمروا كليا في رواهم العلمانية على خلق رؤيا جديدة مختلفة وهم على فراش المرض. وقد مدت هذه الرؤيا المزدهرة حديثا جورها في الحياة الروحانية حيث كانت رؤيا للخلاص بإمكانها إصلاح ماغفلت عنه قلوب أولئك المرضى والبابهم. ومن الطبيعي ان يكون للمسة الإنسانية التي غابت عن الحياة العلمانية حاجة ملحة لتعزيز رؤيا الخلاص وصولاً الى النجاة الحتمية الأبدية لأنها تسمو بالإنسان عبر قوة الحب والشعور الإنساني الخالص للإرتباط بالخالق.

*Grace is the opportunity to experience*

*God in spite of yourself.*<sup>1</sup>

Margaret Edson

The last decades of the first millennium witnessed a developing theatrical interest in some people who were hardly noticed on the stage. The American playwrights have shown a rising interest in those who are diseased with deadly traumas and infections as cancer and AIDs. Yet this interest does not much concentrate on their suffering as it is concerned with the final moments on their death bed. The concern is rooted in the spiritual redemption blossoming out of their suffering, the suffering that comes not only from physical pain but also from the loss of human dignity.

The American playwright, Margaret Edson (b1961), presents a fine example of one's secular vision leading to a final redemption of both themind and heart in her one act play, *Wit*

(1995). Edson was awarded the 1999 *Pulitzer Prize for Drama* for her play. Yet it was exposed to criticism by such reviewers as Carol Iannone, *The First Things* reviewer, whose apparent rejection is due to its abandonment of the full commitment of John Donne's poetry, especially his *Holly Sonnet 10*, "Death Be Not Proud". She accuses the playwright of being anti-intellectual and anti-religious as he asks,

*Why must great art be diminished in order to affirm contemporary cult of feelings? Why must a false dichotomy between mind and heart substitute for a fuller comprehension of the human soul and the poetry that expresses it? For that matter, why can't a contemporary playwright appreciate that something real actually goes on in religious thought?*<sup>2</sup>

Iannone suggests that the processing of redemption which *Wit* introduces stems out of the mere sentiments. She goes further to claim that such redemption is standing quite inferior to the Christian and intellectual cult that Donne offers. She cynically charges that the "excellences of the past get pared down to the sentiments of Oprah."<sup>3</sup>

It seems that what Iannone failed to recognize in *Wit* is that the play does affirm both Christian faith and scholarship, yet, simply, within a subtler framework. *Wit* digs deep into the essence of both celestial and intellectual principles that Iannone calls for; such an essence resides fully in the power of compassion and love. This power is underestimated and ignored by both Dr. Vivian Bearing, the protagonist of the play, during all her academic life, and by her doctors when she was hospitalized for her ovarian cancer.

There is no doubt that *Wit* has been readily characterized as a play about redemption. Yet, the nature of that redemption has been the reason behind all different kinds of criticism undertaken with or against the play. On the one hand, Vivian's intellect is seen as an indispensable medium to assist her in discovering and processing her need for some type of a spiritual and emotional recovery. In his article, "*Blame the Scholar, Not the Discipline*," Bertie Bergman situates the play's redemptive vision in its pairing of the heart and mind. This can be justified by the protagonist's ability to be mindful enough to discover that she has made a terrible mistake by imposing a constant emotional loss on herself. Further, she is sensible enough to make her final decision towards the redemption of her intellectual life.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, the play's redemption is suggested to be necessarily enhanced by some type of a human communication. *The American Theatre* reviewer, Pamela Renner, states that *Wit*'s redemption "takes an unexpected form" initiated by

*an oncology nurse [whose] willingness to speak the truth to Professor Vivian Bearing, a Donne scholar dying of ovarian cancer, gives the patient protagonist the courage to make a crucial decision about her treatment.*<sup>5</sup>

Renner situates the play's redemption in the honest and compassionate communication, a matter that Dr. Vivian Bearing did not concern herself with throughout all her academic life. By making her decision about the final step of her treatment, Vivian Bearing changes her priorities. She is no more interested in the intellectual as much as she is interested in the human side of herself. It appears significantly that there is a blend of the two aspects of redemption in *Wit* residing in man's wit and human affectionate connections.

The English Professor Vivian Bearing was a fifty-year-old scholar who taught, in her healthy life, the 17<sup>th</sup> Century metaphysical poetry. She is a woman who dedicates herself to the mind of John Donne, ignoring the fact that he was "a man of enormous emotional and physical appetite."<sup>6</sup> She was socially inept, brusque, and lacking the ability to express compassion. Yet, her callously attitude changes when she enters the hospital. During her eight horrific months of experimental chemotherapy when she becomes at the mercy of the sharp scholarly doctors, who

represent extreme versions of her own callousness, she comes to see and regret that she was ever like that.

The play starts with a bare stage reflecting, physically, the baldness of the patient's head, and, figuratively, the self-imposed barrenness of the human touch in the protagonist's life. After being diagnosed of the terminal stage four of ovarian cancer, Vivian was advised by her doctor to the noted cancer research scientist, Dr. Harvey Kelekian, to be included in experimental trials designed hopefully to increase her chances of survival. The very first moments of meeting the medical team in the hospital do reveal that there is a great gap of communication underlying the doctor-patient conversations. Buther primary doctor, Kelekian seems very interested in making clear the medical problem of Vivian's disease by using mere scientific terms. Vivian, herself was so much interested in making some scholarly tangible sense out of those same terms, as she is much interested in their 'word connotations'.<sup>7</sup> None of the two were really conversing with each other; none was part of the other's world, the human world.

All her life, Vivian was voluntarily lonely. She chose to be unmarried and with no children. She has no other companions than her books. She lived most of her life as a person drowned in intellectualism with no real grasp of any human connections. Even the poetry she analyzed essentially avoided such human interests. She has stayed much with "Donne's words on the pages, not the whole human being"<sup>8</sup>. She used to praise the wit which the authors possessed, failing the real messages they would rather convey. But now, while in hospital, Vivian's loneliness was surely involved compulsively in her battle with her disease. Physically, she started to develop a very weak immune system, a case that necessitates being left all alone in a private room lest she would get any external infections. Now her loneliness is no more self-imposed. This develops in her a new feeling towards her loneliness. As it happens, she starts to feel a new identity developing inside her and consequently arousing a feeling of estrangement. Susan Sontag states in her "*Illness as Metaphor*," that,

*"In cancer, the non-intellectual cells are multiplying, and you are being replaced by the non-you"*<sup>9</sup>

Sontag's words suggest that there are always two sides of the self in sickness, in the state of empowerment\_ the strong and the weak. Usually, the weak is triggered by the disease to appear on the surface and starts a struggle with the strong one. Because a human being often thinks of his strength more than of his weakness, he would feel estranged to the idea of being paralyzed by his disease. This is apparently what happens to Vivian in her stay in hospital. Telling Vivian about her cancer was a shock to her. But still she did want to reserve her usual tough nature as well as her wit in her struggle with this fatal disease. Vivian used to feel self-confidence and full individuality in her solitude. But now, she witnesses 'the other side of herself'; this side craves desperately for some strength. Such feeling creates a stress which she cannot endure all alone, arousing a confrontation that makes her feel quite away from her previously conceived identity. Reminiscences of her past life are now at hand revealed to the audience in flash backs to the audience. Through these recollections, Vivian tries to remember her past identity, attempting, eventually, at founding a substantial basis to help her understand this new identity flourished in sickness. She is now lying on her bed unable to move without the chemically induced treatments and medical machines. Vivian becomes a stranger to herself. Therefore, she refuges herself to a conceivable past landscape. The sequence of her flashbacks follows a certain pattern to show the gradual shifts in Vivian's interests.

The succession of the first two recollections; her first shock when she was told of her deadly disease, and then of her mentor Prof. Dr. E. M. Ashford mainly suggest the change in her priorities. She first remembers herself as a human being shocked by the news of her terminal

disease. Then, she remembers herself as a student in Ashford's John Donne's class. Yet, in her both remembrances, she is still striving to retain her tough self-control. When her doctor advises her to try the chemotherapy, telling her that she will face some unbearable pains and control loss, she urges herself to a verbal analysis of Dr. Kelekian's explanation of the symptoms of her disease:

- *The antineoplastic will affect some healthy cells.*
- *antineoplastic. Anti: against Neo: new, Plastic: to mold. Shaping. Antineoplastic: Against new Shaping.*
- *You will be hospitalized in as an in-patient for treatment each cycle*
- *Must read something about cancer: Must get some books, articles....*<sup>10</sup>

Vivian uses her witty analysis of language to create a certain kind of emotional comfort and connection to cope with the issue of death. Also, Dr. Vivian feels the necessity to retain her distinction as a specialist in word analysis.

Furthermore, in her flashback of John Donne's classes about 25 years ago, there appear the instructions of her mentor, Dr. E. M. Ashford, of the necessity of being away from the sentimental aspect in the criticism of metaphysical poetry, blaming Vivian Bearing:

*You take this too lightly, Miss Bearing. This is Metaphysical Poetry, not the Modern Novel. The standards of scholarship and critical reading which one would apply to any other text are simply insufficient.* (19)

Professor Ashford used to insist on the delicate details of Donne's poetry. Her instructions were taken too personally by Vivian. She becomes so keen on looking in scrutiny into her life within the instructed intellectual framework.

Vivian used to carry out the unsentimental aspects of the metaphysical poetry quite literally to her own life referring to them as, "wit". She never thinks of Ashford's advice to go out and enjoy the time with friends in preference to library sittings (25-6). When compared to Ashford, Vivian fails to be as successful in life as her professor. She tries to follow Ashford's advice of having some type of communication but she cannot cope with the sentimentality of human connections:

*I went outside. It was a warm day. There were students on the lawn talking about nothing, laughing.... Simple human truth. Uncompromising scholarly standards. They're connected. I just couldn't... I went back to the library.* (26-7)

Ashford is now a grand-mother of a fourth generation. She has been able to derive wittily that the message of John Donne's holly sonnets lies in the 'simple human truth' that Vivian failed. Ashford's success in holding Donne's humane message makes her eligible to be chosen as the final enhancing agent for Vivian's redemption at the end of the play bringing Vivian to the 'warm day' that she missed (26-7). Ashford chose to fulfill her life with the real human entity, to be a human being who is fully prepared to face her death in the way that makes 'Death Be Not Proud'. Using Donne's words, Ashford explains that death is not meant to be dealt, the *inevitable truth*, with as a simple secular phenomenon:

- *Nothing but a breath — a comma separates life from life everlasting ... Life, death. Soul, God. Past, present.*
- *Life, death ... I see. It is a metaphysical conceit. It is wit!*
- *It is not wit, Miss Bearing. It is truth.*
- *The insuperable barrier between one thing and another is ... just a comma?* (23)

The eight-month stay of medical treatment aroused in Vivian a new type of suffering. Adding to the fact that her body was assaulted by a fatal disease, her psychological and mental entities are also included in the war in which Vivian is fighting. This creates for her a new

conflict to encounter. It is not only her body that is on the stake; it is also her long last respected dignity. When she feels deprived of any interest in her as a human being by the medical staff, she starts to plea for such an interest. A disregarding monotonous repetition of the condensed question, "Name?", bare of any titles, is so painfully directed to her. It stands for her as an evident negligence of her academic identity which represented for her the whole of her entity. Her self-worth is assaulted when she tries to add a further comment on the medical technician's question, "Doctor?" by attempting a recoverable exclamation:

*"I am a doctor of philosophy... a scholar of seventeenth-century poetry." (30)*

But the technician takes no interest in her commentary, frequently interrupting her to conduct the medical procedures. Yet, Vivian tries to overcome this negligence remaining to strive for her academic worth. She cynically answers the second time he repeats the question of "Name?" by saying, "Lucy, the Countess of Bedford", referring to herself as the patron of poets and literature.<sup>11</sup> Giving this answer, Vivian is still struggling to reserve her absolute intellectualism. Vivian's stay in the hospital awakened in her the need for some kind of a support that helps her face such a hard conflict. She knows that the human touches made deliberately absent in her personal and academic life are desperately needed for the time being.

Vivian's recognition of the long lost human touch is further triggered by her meeting with Dr. Jason Posner, Kelekian resident doctor and past student in her class on John Donne. Meeting Jason reminds her of how much obsessed she was with the intellectual matters instead of enjoying the simpler aspects of her academic life, one of which is her experience with her students. Vivian was completely cut off from others. She suggests subconsciously the idea that her stay in the hospital, and especially after meeting someone whom she taught in college, would allow her to retrace a new path towards personal understanding away from the mere intellectual bases. A newfound desire to show kindness springs up inside her as an attempt to release away some part of the psychological conflict she begins to suffer. She wishes she could have been more forgiving of Jason in her poetry class thinking of him as a savior striving to cure her and others of the cancer that is destroying their bodies,

*I wish I had given him an A. Two times one is two. Two times two is four. Two times three is six. (52)*

Dr. Bearing might have felt some relief by meeting a former student. This gave her a shadowy feeling of acquaintance. But this feeling soon vanished when she encounters Jason's dry and quite scientific way in dealing with her. Although he talks with his previous professor respectfully, yet, he dealt with her in a way that is quite devoid of any human interest. No sign of intimacy or even sympathy is shown to her by Jason. He starts his first conversation by telling her that he was her student having an A- minus in her 17<sup>th</sup> century poetry class. And only then he asks her; "How are you feeling?" (66), just for a start to his medical interview and recording the answer for the medical history. Comparing the doctors in the hospital to herself when treating her own students in college, Vivian realizes that they are interested in her for her research value. Like her, they tend to ignore humanity in favor of knowledge. She concludes: "So, the younger doctor, like the senior scholar... prefers research to humanity." (128) However, she still feels regretfully that she is in a great need for more human and compassionate involvements:

*At the same time... the senior scholar, in her pathetic state as simpering victim... wishes the young doctor would take more interest in personal contacts. Now I suppose we shall see how the senior scholar... ruthlessly denied her simpering students... the touch of human kindness she now seeks. (128-9)*

Vivian's plea for 'the touch of human kindness' reminds her of the way she used to deal with her students. Her relation with them used to be completely devoid of any sign of

compassionate communication. Even in her explanations of poetry, she used to make fun of and dehumanize them in a very cynical manner for the reason that they were unable to infer the intellectual integrity of the poetry she preaches:

*What is the principal poetic device? I'll give you a hint: It has nothing to do with football. What propels this sonnet? You can come to this class prepared, or you can be excused from this class... this department, and this university. Do not think for a moment that I will tolerate anything in between. Did I say: "You are... years old. You are so young. "You don't know a sonnet from a steak sandwich."(130-1)*

The embarrassing way by which Vivian dealt with her students makes her grasp her wrong approach to life. Her reflections lead her to reconsider the shortcomings of someone satisfied only with his intellect to face such an emotionally complex issue as death all alone:

*I am learning to suffer.... Yes, it was embarrassing to have to wear a nightgown all day long... watching myself go bold... having a former student give me a pelvic exam...[it] was thoroughly ... degrading.... I could not have imagined the depths of humiliation... Oh, God. Please ... (59-60)*

She realizes that she should have offered some more respect and 'human kindness' to her students that, ironically enough, she will be desperately craving for when her suffering accumulates. Now, Vivian is in a great need for a company to face this fearful issue.

Her desire and need for companionship is skillfully characterized and symbolized by the heartily devoted and absolutely caring oncology nurse, Susie. She is Vivian's primary nurse. Her first sign of intimacy, "What's the trouble sweetheart?" was rejected by Vivian as she was still trying to retain her past 'tough academic character.' Susie shows her respect to Dr. Vivian as a college professor expecting her to have many visitors. When she knows that "None to be precise" is there to visit her, she offers Vivian her continuous presence whenever needed. Susie, the humane nurse, knows well that such a terrible suffering as that which Vivian is going through would be unbearable without some affectionate company. By her offer, she triggers in Vivian an insistent need to get away from her feeling of loneliness and vacancy:

*You cannot imagine ... how time can be so still. It hangs. It weighs. And yet there is so little of it. It goes so slowly. And yet it is so scary. If I were writing this scene it would last a full minutes [sic] .... Not to worry: "Brevity is the soul of wit."(72)*

Vivian ends her documentation of experience to the audience with a full knowledge that she has but little time to live, and she must make a full use out of it, and this is the new meaning of 'wit' for her. The intellectual excellence leads her to the fact that what she needs now is to seize her day by all human means.

With the newly born vocation for meeting others in Vivian, she seems to start tolerating the affectionate informal terms Susie uses with her. Vivian comes to the realization that she is in need for such an ensuring human touch which may help her cope with her mortality. This is enhanced by Susie's simple understanding that life resides more in the human and compassionate connections. Her concept of life lies greatly in contrast to the unsentimental view of the metaphysical poetry as previously preached by Dr. Vivian

Technically, Susie seems to serve intentionally by Margaret Edson as the long time hidden human layer in Vivian's entity. Susie's attitude towards Vivian brings up to her mind some of her past reminiscences of childhood. Her most special experiences were those related to her father encouraging her love for understanding the meaning of words. She remembers that the only sociable ties she had were only with her father. That is why she refuted herself completely in the world of words, to escape the real spiritual and emotional aspects of life. The world for young Vivian was trodden only by her love to what emotionally tied her to her father. That is why

searching for the meaning of words, which she was fulfilling much in the metaphysical poetry, was seen, psychologically, her most suitable personal path in life.

Vivian's short conversations with Susie revived in her the human layer of her character. The beginning of these conversations were also rooted within the frame of her intellectual use of words, but this time the choice of the words she explains to Susie show a transition in her interest. She interprets to her the meaning of the word 'soporific', taken from the children's pictured book *The Runaway Bunny* (1942)<sup>12</sup>, referring to the sleep of the little bunnies. Yet Vivian's intention is directed to her own long-last sleep which comes to an end by having Susie. She is using the words for enhancing this newly revived human communication. She feels comfortable at this revival and she realizes that there would be no more sleep or running away from her inevitable confrontation with death. At this full realization, she pleads Susie to be with her confessing that the tough character she used to witness is no more present. It has been replaced by the unfamiliar non-tough layer of her character and this makes her unable to recognize her past confidence:

- *What's the trouble, sweetheart?*
- *I don't know. Can't sleep... I just keep thinking. If you do that too much you can get confused.... I know. I can't seem to figure things out. I'm in a quandary. Having ... these doubts...*
- *It's like it's out of control, isn't it? I'm scared.*
- *Honey, of course you are.*
- *I'm worked up... I don't feel so sure of myself anymore.*
- *And you used to feel sure, didn't you?*
- *Yes, yes, and I used to feel sure. (137-8)*

Vivian, witnessing those moments of weakness and feeling of being unconfident, undergoes a withdrawal to the human aspect that was long lying beneath. It is part of man's nature that whenever man is in his weakness the human layer dismisses the mental and practical, leading to an insisting need for ensuring and supporting humanity. Susie brings Vivian's human layer onto the surface ensuring that she will never leave her alone. She is the only one who deals with Vivian as a human being worthy of respect and care. Even when Vivian's doctors quiz her about her symptoms, none listens to her responses but Susie who well understands and anticipates her needs and pains. Providing, she has become her advocate when she recognizes the deep humiliation Vivian feels.

What distinguishes Susie is that she is completely conscious of the human layer of the medical treatment of patients. In her human consciousness she stands as an antipode to Dr. Jason Posner, who appears to be completely detached from the human aspect of his profession and for whom the patients stand merely as a "*colossal waste of time for researchers*"(117). When she is asked by Dr. Jason for help in examining Vivian, she blames him for leaving her half gowned waiting on the examination table. Also, when they are intended to insert the catheter to collect urine, he makes fun of her when she tries to ensure the unconscious Vivian that the process will not hurt her, laughing that, "*Like she can hear you*". Her reply that "*It is just nice to do,*" (166) shows the great difference in profession consciousness between the two. Bringing together Dr. Jason, who has the upper hand in his profession compared to Susie, seems to be figuratively devised by the writer to signify the two sides of Vivian's character. On the one hand, Jason's indifference to Vivian's body and dignity suggests the long termed secular layer in Vivian's character struggling to retain its secularity. The identification between Vivian and Jason is skillfully symbolized by some simple scenes in which Jason is seen standing next to the unconscious Vivian having her feet stuck to the machine's wires without showing any help to

push them away to be free. On the other hand, in her lower position in career, Susie strives to make the best side of Vivian come to life. She stands for the long time 'soporific' human side deliberately anesthetized by its owner. The weakness Vivian witnesses revives in her the longing for her human side which she sees in her primary nurse, Susie. After all these years she urges herself to that hidden side again.

When Vivian tells her fears and her need for her company, Susie tells Vivian urgently that what she must think of is to make her decision about her life. She gives her the opportunity to have the choice that her doctors tried to deprive her of, in response to their scientific sensitivity. At that moment, Susie reveals to her the real state of her disease as being irrecoverable. When the chemical dosage Bearing withstands takes a serious toll, Susie immediately notices her suffering and urges Jason to lower Vivian's experimental chemical dosages. She also asks Kelekian to give her a patient-controlled analgesic pump so that she can have some rest that helps her maintain some sense of control as her death approaches. When both refuse to listen to her, from this point through the final moments of the play, Susie takes on a more dominant role. She informs Bearing that she has certain rights and should choose whether or not she wants to be resuscitated in the event that her heart stops. Bearing realizes the irony lying in that she will soon die, not only because of her terminating disease, but because of her treatment merely as a 'research object'. She is finally told that her medical case is hopeless and the medicines and chemical treatments she has been taking are all intended for effect examinations. Already, Vivian had previously known that researches will experimentally follow up the development of her treatment with the chemotherapy:

- *This treatment is the strongest thing we have to offer you. And as research, it will make a significant contribution for knowledge....*
- *Knowledge, yes. (9)*

At first, Vivian was still endeavored by her praise of mere 'wit', a matter that makes her approve of the program of her "survival trials". But later, she was most devastated by the news that both, Dr. Kelekian and Dr. Posner, selfishly wanted to keep their patients alive in order to accomplish their researches. Jason's dedication to Dr. Kelekian and his job is so complete that he does not realize how impersonal he is to his patients, quite similar to how his previous Professor, Dr. Vivian Bearing, used to act with her students. Susie tries to calm Vivian down by justifying that it is part of their duty; yet, Vivian is not comforted and she feels deep dehumanization:

- *They like to save lives. So anything is okay as long as the life continues.*
- *Doesn't matter if you're hooked up to a millions machines.... But they always want to know more things. I always wanted to know more things. I'm a scholar. Or I was... (146-8)*

Being the friendliest person to her out of the whole medical staff, Susie viewed Vivian as a human being fighting for her life. Vivian denies her doctors' decisions about her life without any acknowledgement or reference to her. Thus, Susie is intended to be more straightforward telling her that she has thefreewill to make the choice for her life and no one can deprive her of that individual right:

*What you need to think about is your code status. What you wantthem to do if your heart stops beating?(144-5)*

She explains to Vivian that a patient suffering of cancer and under experimental chemotherapy can be a "full code", so that the Code Team will resuscitate her and take her to the intensive care until she stabilizes. Or she can be a 'no code' (DNR: *Do Not Resuscitate*), so when



her heart stops, they simply let it. Vivian makes her mind to take the (DNR) choice insisting to reserve respect to her dignity and humanity in preference to research.

By making her decision to end her life when her heart stops, Vivian decides to curb the non-human thirst for seeking merely secular interests in man. Furthermore, along with this decision she develops a deeper interest in Susie, for her sheer honesty, to be as her only supportive and trustworthy companion in the hospital with whom she can share the last moment of her life. This special contact with Susie, at least as it stands for Vivian, demonstrates her first step towards the reconciliation between her heart and mind. It leads her to the realization that the matters of life and death can never be hazily dealt with or interpreted within the framework of one's secular vision:

*I can't believe my life has become so corny. But it can't be helped. I don't see any other way. We are discussing life and death, and... not in the abstract, either ...*  
(151-2)

For the time being, the discussion is not a scholarly lecturing confined to the conceits or the paradoxes of a poem. The discussion, here, should be subtler and more realistic. The real meaning of life that Vivian was not interested to infer is life's simplicity. It lies mainly in man's essence as a human being who is now standing at the gates of death after having been witnessing all the joys and pains of life. At that stand, the meaning inferred by a human being out of all his life decides the way that 'Death Be [or] Not Proud':

*We are discussing my life and my death.... Now is not the time for verbal swordplay. Nothing would be worse than a detailed analysis.... Now is the time for simplicity. Now is the time for ... dare I say it kindness.* (152-3)

Vivian gives up the idea that being smart would fulfill her confront with life and death. She finally understands that the 'comma' in John Donne's *Holy Sonnet 10* is not only a punctuation mark referring to a pause when the poem is recited. This pause, Vivian at last infers, is the moment of the inevitable death that divides 'life from life everlasting', before which a breath is held out of the body to be replaced by the embrace of another bringing one's soul into an eternal revival. Finally, the message of this holy sonnet is clearly established for Vivian. She realizes that the everlasting powers of love and kindness are the ones that protect man at that pause. She recalls the compassionate story of Margaret Wise Brown's *The Runaway Bunny* in which a little bunny tries to escape the embrace of his affectionate mother to a more liberated life. Yet, the mother never gives up her promise to secure it with her compassionate protection. The compassionate protective layer of this story is so much similar to the spiritual and emotional layers of life that Vivian previously escaped. By recalling this story, Vivian tries to give up completely the complexity of the intellectual life she used to imprison herself in, to the more blended simplicity of the mind and heart. She understands that only the elevating powers of compassion and love constitute the real tie that relates man to his Creator. It is in reaching this conception of life and death that Vivian achieves redemption. She has been given the opportunity to experience the roots of redemption through the help of Susie's character who provided her with such an affectionate care generating in her the love of her own humanity rather than her secular entity.

The final interaction of Vivian's redemption is enhanced by the visit of her refined poetry professor, Dr. Ashford. She appears at the door of Vivian's room holding Donne's volume of holy sonnets in one hand, and the book of *The Runaway Bunny*, in the other. It is well stated by many critics that reserving Professor Ashford's visit to the end of the play is intended by Edson to show that the academic excellence need not "quench faith and compassion, but may even enhance them."<sup>13</sup> This is well manifested by the moderate character of Vivian's mentor who

insists always to make of her own life a blend of the two, the intellectual and the compassionate.<sup>14</sup> When Vivian is asked by Ashford to which of the two she prefers to listen on her death bed, she appears quite longing for the bunny's story with its protector. Edson does affirm through offering this story both the serious scholarship and Christian understanding of God's pursuit of His children.<sup>15</sup> Vivian's longing to the story is a smooth move towards the perfection of her redemption. She had been familiar with the story since her childhood, but it is only now on her death bed she infers that only the elevating powers of love may help her unite to her Protector, and thus might be ensured for salvation.

Going into a painful seizure, Vivian feels a complete loss and confusion which she tries to overcome by recalling Susie's supporting words of how to manage her severe pains:

*Susie says I need to be in aggressive pain management ... if I'm going to stand it. "It." Such a little word. I think in this case... "it" ... signifies being alive. (156-7)*

The condensed word, 'it', does underscore the sudden emotional shift Vivian witnesses. As much as the word '*signifies being alive*', it does signify the remorse Vivian feels at her underestimation of this condensed expression of life, 'it'. The whole living was all behind, but now, in this shortage of time and while she is suffering all this pain, this word, 'it', is ironically holding the whole meaning of life for her.<sup>16</sup> The idea of time as being in an inevitable shortage is related intentionally to the setting of the play. Edson is presenting *Wit* in the frame of a long one-act play to highlight the emotional stress that Dr. Vivian Bearing undergoes in her final days.<sup>17</sup>

Seeing Vivian suffering an inconceivable pain as her responsible doctors are pushing her around, Susie finally listens to her protective feelings towards Vivian. She fights against the Code team and Vivian's primary and resident doctors advocating that Vivian wishes to succumb to death by not allowing them to try reviving her heart. She repeatedly exclaims, especially to Dr. Jason Posner,

*She's DNR!... She's no code! She's no code! Kelekian gave the order and you were there, you saw it yourself! (183-4)*

Posner is never subdued in his research interests. He forgets his "ethical responsibility"<sup>18</sup> towards his patient, insisting that Vivian is only a 'research' and cannot be a 'No Code'. He never listens to Susie's exclamations and continues in his attempt to resuscitate Vivian to "*quantify... the complications of the puzzle,*" (171) as he once told her. Till the end of the play, Posner could not accept that his research would be over with Dr. Vivian. He screws up everything by his decision to resuscitate her, denying the fact that it is not his right to overlook Vivian's choice about her own life. At the end, he comes to the realization that his dedication to his secular life has ruined him starting with his own profession. Only then, he howls "*Imade a mistake!*" (186)

Margaret Edson maintains that she is never intended for doctors to be targeted by her play, stating that,

*researchers are not guilty of any cruelty that Vivian is not guilty of. They are completely equal in my mind.*<sup>19</sup>

Edson's point is made clear through bringing Vivian and Jason together as non-promising advocates of different disciplines despite their sparkling intelligence. Offering man's body and flesh to be subjected to research is not surprising in science and especially in medical sciences. Neither is the subjection of man's mind to the field of education. The problem lies not in the scientific or human fields but in the practitioners' treatment of the very object of their research.<sup>20</sup> Both Vivian and Jason are indifferent and arrogant. Vivian was forced finally to temper her arrogance when her illness turns to be severe agony. Jason's arrogance causes him a serious blunder when he tries to revive Vivian's heart despite her 'DNR' orders. He refers to his mistake of calling the code team on Vivian. Yet, the audience is given a hopeful suggestion that

Jason might have referred to his mistake of maltreating Vivian as a mere research subject. He is at the threshold of understanding the flaws of his character although there is no real shift in him that is clearly seen on the stage.

The last scene of the play leaves the audience with the final image of the newly attentive Vivian. She leaves behind all the objects that represent the struggles she has battled against through the entirety of the play. The lights fall distinctively on her body, raising her completely naked out of her hospital gowns and launching her road to a more enlightened region which is supposed to be Heavens. This final enlightenment demonstrates her ultimate passage into the full understanding she has been searching for. The monologue spoken by Vivian's long time mentor, Ashford, starting with the story of the little bunny holds the message that Vivian finally comprehends:

*A little allegory of the soul.  
Wherever it hides, God will find it.  
See, Vivian? (181)*

It is not until the end of the play that Vivian finally enters into the light of the comprehension that death is not to be feared as it is only the 'breath' or 'pause' between 'life' and 'life everlasting'. All her struggling and fears of death have finally come to an end as she feels finally the embrace of her Creator, symbolized by the little bunny's return to its protector:

*'I will be a bird and fly away from you.'  
'If you become a bird and fly away from me,' said his mother...  
'I will be a tree you come home to.' (181)*

The passage into death that Edson's *Wit* introduces is a passage which is free of limitations and fears, as it shows that death is ultimately the inevitable finality of life that leads human beings to the everlasting rest:

*Time to go.  
'And flights of angels  
Sing thee to thy rest' (181)*

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> John D. Sykes, Jr. "Wit, pride and the resurrection: Margaret Edson's play and John Donne's poetry" in *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature* (Jan.1 2003). (URL: [www.Questia.com/Online\\_Library](http://www.Questia.com/Online_Library)) Retrieved: May 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Carol Iannone, "Donne Undone", in *First Things 100* (February 2000). (URL: [www.Questia.com/Online\\_Library](http://www.Questia.com/Online_Library)) Retrieved: June 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Oprah Gail Winfrey (born January 29, 1954) is an American media proprietor, talk show host, actress, producer, and philanthropist. Her emotional ad-lib delivery eventually got her transferred to the daytime-talk-show arena. (URL: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oprah\\_Winfrey](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oprah_Winfrey)). Retrieved: March 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Bertie Bergman, "Blame the Scholar, not the Discipline", in *The Lancet*, Volume 353, Issue 9155, Pages 851 – 852 (6 March 1999) (URL: [www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article)) Retrieved: May 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Pamela Renner, "Science and Sensibility" *American Theatre* 16, no. 4 (April 1999): 34-6, as quoted in Martha Greene Eads, "Unwitting Redemption in Margaret Edson's *Wit*" (Winter 2002) in *Christianity and Literature* Volume: 51. Issue: 2, page no. 241. Gale Group 2002.

- <sup>6</sup>Kamal Al-Solaylee, "Wit and Wisdom: Margaret Edson's Pulitzer Winner Makes Toronto Debut" (15 February 2001) (URL: <[http://www.eve/netlevelissue\\_02.15-01/arts/wit.html](http://www.eve/netlevelissue_02.15-01/arts/wit.html)> Retrieved: May 2013.
- <sup>7</sup>Madeline M. Keaveney, "Death Be Not Proud: An Analysis of Margaret Edson's *Wit*" in *Women and Language*, Vol. 27, No. 1, Pages, 40-4.
- <sup>8</sup>Al-Solaylee.
- <sup>9</sup>Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrer, Straus and Giroux, 1978) p.66
- <sup>10</sup>Margaret Edson, *Wit* (1995) (URL: [http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie\\_scripts/w/wit-script-transcript-emma-thompson.html](http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/w/wit-script-transcript-emma-thompson.html)). Retrieved on March 2012. P.4. Subsequent reference to the play is all to this same script and will be introduced within the context by page number.
- <sup>11</sup>Bedford Lucy Russell, Countess of Bedford (1580–1627) was a major aristocratic patron of the arts and literature in the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras. Sidney Lee called her "the universal patroness of poets." (URL:[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lucy,\\_Countess\\_of\\_Bedford](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lucy,_Countess_of_Bedford)). Retrieved May 2012.
- <sup>12</sup>The *Runaway Bunny* is a 1942 pictured book written by Margaret Wise Brown and illustrated by Clement Hurd. The plot deals with a small rabbit, who wants to run away. His mother, however, tells him that "if you run away, I will run after you". (URL:[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Runaway\\_Bunny](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Runaway_Bunny)) Retrieved: May 2012.
- <sup>13</sup>Martha Greene Eads, "Unwitting Redemption in Margaret Edson's *Wit*" (Winter 2002) in *Christianity and Literature* Volume: 51. Issue: 2, page no. 241. Gale Group 2002.
- <sup>14</sup>*Ibid*
- <sup>15</sup>*Ibid*
- <sup>16</sup>Charles McGrath (16 February 2012) "Changing Gears But Retaining Dramatic Effect" in *New York Times: Theatre*. (URL: <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html>) Retrieved: 17 February, 2013.
- <sup>17</sup>Charles McGrath states that the original version of "Wit" was an hour longer than it is now. It was so long that its sophistications were less visible. *Ibid*
- <sup>18</sup>Kate Rossiter, "Bearing Response-Ability: Theatre, Ethics and Medical Education" in *Journal of Medical Humanities*, vol. 33, issue: 1, pages 1-14. (URL:[www.ivsl.com/link.springer.com.tiger.sempertool.dk/article](http://www.ivsl.com/link.springer.com.tiger.sempertool.dk/article)) Retrieved: August 2013.
- <sup>19</sup>Carol Cohen, "Margaret Edson's *Wit* - An Audience Guide" (August 21, 2000) in Madison Repertory Theatre (Eric Houghton and Toad Hall Productions, 2000) (URL:<http://www.madstage.com/rep/witguide.html>) Retrieved: May 2013.
- <sup>20</sup>Kate Rossiter, "Bearing Response-Ability: Theatre, Ethics and Medical Education" in *Journal of Medical Humanities*, vol. 33, issue: 1, pages 1-14. (URL:[www.ivsl.com/link.springer.com.tiger.sempertool.dk/article](http://www.ivsl.com/link.springer.com.tiger.sempertool.dk/article)). Retrieved: August 2013.

## WORKS CITED

Al-Solaylee, Kamal. "Wit and Wisdom: Margaret Edson's Pulitzer Winner Makes Toronto Debut" (15 February 2001) (URL: <[http://www.eve/netlevelissue\\_02.15-01/arts/wit.html](http://www.eve/netlevelissue_02.15-01/arts/wit.html)> Retrieved: May 2013.

- Bergman, Bertie. "Blame the Scholar, not the Discipline". *The Lancet*. Vol.353. Issue: 9155. Pages: 851 – 852 (6 March 1999) (URL: [www.the.lancet.com/journals/lancet/article](http://www.the.lancet.com/journals/lancet/article)). Retrieved: May 2012.
- Cohen, Carol. "Margaret Edson's *Wit* - An Audience Guide" (August 21, 2000). *Madison Repertory Theatre* (Eric Houghton and Toad Hall Productions, 2000) (URL: <http://www.madstage.com/rep/witguide.html>) Retrieved: March 2013.
- Eads, Martha Greene. "Unwitting Redemption in Margaret Edson's *Wit*" (Winter 2002). *Christianity and Literature*. Vol.51 Issue: 2 . Gale Group 2002.
- Edson, Margaret. *Wit* (1995) (URL: [http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie\\_scripts/w/wit-script-transcript-emma-thompson.html](http://www.script-o-rama.com/movie_scripts/w/wit-script-transcript-emma-thompson.html)). Retrieved: March 2012.
- Iannone, Carol. "Donne Undone". *First Things 100* (February 2000). (URL: <https://www.questia.com>) Retrieved: March 2013
- Keaveney, Madeline M. "Death Be Not Proud: An Analysis of Margaret Edson's *Wit*." *Women and Language*. Vol. 27 No. 1 Pages: 40-4.
- McGrath, Charles. "Changing Gears but Retaining Dramatic Effect"(16 February 2012). *New York Times: Theatre*. (URL: <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html>). Retrieved: February 2013
- Rossiter, Kate. "Bearing Response-Ability: Theatre, Ethics and Medical Education". *Journal of Medical Humanities*. Vol. 33. Issue:1 Pages 1-14.(URL: [www.ivsl.com/link.springer.com.tiger.sempertool.dk/article](http://www.ivsl.com/link.springer.com.tiger.sempertool.dk/article)). Retrieved: August 2013.
- Russell, Bedford Lucy (URL: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lucy,\\_Countess\\_of\\_Bedford](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lucy,_Countess_of_Bedford)). Retrieved: May 2013.
- Sontag, Susan *Illness as Metaphor*. New York: Farrer, Straus and Giroux, 1978.
- Sykes, John D. Jr. "Wit, Pride and the Resurrection: Margaret Edson's Play and John Donne's Poetry". *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature* (Jan.1 2003). (URL: [www.Questia.com/Online\\_Library](http://www.Questia.com/Online_Library)) Retrieved: May 2012.
- Winfrey, Oprah Gail. (URL: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oprah\\_Winfrey](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oprah_Winfrey)). Retrieved: March 2012.