Wit

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MARGARET EDSON

Margaret Edson grew up in Washington D.C., the daughter of a newspaper columnist and a medical social worker. She received her undergraduate degree from Smith College in Renaissance history, worked odd jobs in Iowa, lived in a French convent in Rome, and then returned home to D.C. to work as a unit clerk on the cancer treatment floor of a research hospital. Her two years working there inspired her to begin working on *Wit*, which she wrote during the summer of 1991 while working at a bicycle shop in D.C. That fall, she enrolled in a graduate English program at Georgetown and began teaching in the D.C. public schools on the side, which she discovered she enjoyed more than academia. This led her to leave her graduate program with a master's degree and begin a career as a teacher. In 1995, a theater in California produced *Wit* and the play won major Los Angeles drama awards before being produced on the east coast (in New York and in New Haven, CT) in the late 1990s. Although *Wit* was a major success, earning Edson the Pulitzer Prize in Drama, she never wrote another play. Instead, she pursued elementary education. As of late, she teaches sixth-grade in Atlanta, where she lives with her partner Linda and their two sons.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Wit takes place almost entirely in a single hospital and deals with one woman's battle with cancer, so it stands mostly disconnected from historical events in the outside world. Despite this, the play and Vivian's character are heavily influenced by the 17th-century poet John Donne (Vivian is a famous scholar of Donne and teaches classes on his work). Donne was an English poet who lived from 1572 to 1631; he was famous for the intensity of his style and language, his intellect and wit, and his themes of both sensual eroticism and heavy religiosity. The play also deals with research in cancer treatment, which is a constantly shifting field in medicine. In *Wit*, Vivian becomes a model patient for a new, especially aggressive chemotherapy treatment. Chemotherapy was first developed from studies of the victims of mustard gas during World War II, and researchers began using nitrogen mustard and other chemical agents to kill rapidly dividing cells (like cancer). In the ensuing decades, chemotherapy has grown ever more effective and safer, but it is still an imperfect practice that can leave patients in devastated health, as Vivian experiences in the play.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Echoing *Wit*'s themes of science, intellect, and humanity in the face of impending death, *When Breath Becomes Air* is an autobiographical work by neurologist Paul Kalanithi describing his battle with terminal lung cancer. Similarly, *On the Move* by Oliver Sacks is an intimate memoir from the famous neurologist written while he was dying of terminal cancer. Also like *Wit* in its study of scholarship, genius, and illness on the stage is the play *Proof*, written by David Auburn.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Wit (often spelled "W;t")
- **When Written:** 1991
- **Where Written:** Washington, D.C.
- **When Published:** As a book, *Wit* was first published in 1999. However, it was first performed at South Coast Repertory Theatre in Costa Mesa, California in 1995. It was staged again at the Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven, CT in 1997, and then at the Union Square Theatre in New York City in 1999. The text of the published play is based on that third, NYC performance.
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary American Theater
- **Genre:** Drama
- **Setting:** The oncology unit at a university hospital
- **Climax:** Vivian's death
- **Antagonist:** Vivian's own arrogance and lack of empathy, and her doctors' narrow focus on their research over the value of her life

EXTRA CREDIT

Awards and adaptations. In 2001, the play was adapted into an HBO television film starring Emma Thompson, which went on to win an Emmy. A 2012 Broadway production of the play was nominated for two Tony awards.

Edson's perseverance. Edson has reported that she sent *Wit* to sixty theatres across the country in the hopes that one of them would produce it. Certainly, her dedication mirrors that of her protagonist.

PLOT SUMMARY

Vivian Bearing, the play's protagonist, is a fifty-year-old woman with stage-four ovarian cancer. She is also an indomitable force in the academic field of seventeenth-century poetry (particularly the sonnets of John Donne) and a professor in a university English department. The play begins in the oncology

unit at the university hospital, where she is receiving an eight-week, experimental chemotherapy treatment. Her overseeing doctor is Dr. Harvey Kelekian, who is also a university professor, and the two have a lot in common, including their relentless work ethics and their bemusement at undergraduate students' lack of academic motivation. Jason Posner, the most accomplished medical fellow in the oncology unit, is charged with administering much of Vivian's care. He, too, has a work ethic and a passion for knowledge that mirrors Vivian's. Coincidentally, Jason was once a student of Vivian's, during a semester in which he challenged himself to ace the hardest classes on campus. Vivian admires Jason for his drive and sees her younger self in him, although she is often uncomfortable with their odd role-reversal in the context of the hospital; this time, *her* fate is in *his* hands.

Vivian oscillates between narrating the action of the play and acting in the scenes. As the narrator, she knows how the play—and her story—is going to end, but as her character-self, she does not. This separation between Vivian's narrator-self and her character-self establishes the play's dramatic irony, in which the audience knows that Vivian is going to die before her character-self does. As Vivian explains in various monologues, irony is also a major theme in Donne's work, which is concerned with life's "big questions" like death and God, but usually ends up losing itself in its own wit and intellectual quandaries.

Narrating the play also allows Vivian to present flashbacks of her life. In one flashback, she is diagnosed with cancer by Dr. Kelekian. In another, she is being admonished by her graduate school mentor, E. M. Ashford, about misunderstanding the punctuation in a John Donne sonnet. In another, her father, Mr. Bearing, is helping her read a book called **The Tale of the Flopsy Bunnies**, which spurs her lifelong love of language.

Over the course of the play, Vivian gets sicker and sicker, both due to her extremely aggressive chemotherapy and due to her worsening cancer. She is thus forced to face the likelihood of her own impending death. This process is especially difficult for her because it requires her to change her mind about a few things, particularly her assumption that the pursuit of knowledge and intellectual excellence is the most valuable part of life. At the start of the play, she approaches her cancer diagnosis as if it were another intellectual problem to be solved. After all, she thinks, she is a respected scholar on metaphysical poetry, most of which takes on mortality as its theme—if she can conquer Donne's poetics of death, she can handle the real thing. However, as her body and mind begin to fail her, and her days become more and more painful, she struggles to remain tough and brave.

Vivian's attending nurse, Susie Monahan, comforts her as her cancer worsens, but Dr. Kelekian and Jason remain distant and only concerned with their research. They continue to insist that she receive the full dose of chemotherapy, and they never address her comfort and pain-management. To them, Vivian is a body that they can study rather than a human being. They are excited by the prospect of their research, which will be groundbreaking in their field, and they prioritize that over Vivian's dignity. Before her illness worsened, Vivian admired this tenacity, but by the time she is nearing her death, she resents their coldness and detachment and seeks out Susie more and more. In the final days of her life, Vivian calls out to Susie, who brings her a **popsicle** and comforts her as she cries. They discuss what to do if Vivian's heart stops, and she tells Susie that she wants to a DNR: a "Do Not Resuscitate" order.

In the play's final scene, Vivian is visited by her old mentor, E. M. Ashford. E. M. offers to recite Donne for her, but Vivian (who is on morphine and barely coherent) groans a refusal. Instead E. M. reads a children's book she has with her called *The Runaway Bunny*. After E.M. leaves, Jason enters and sees that Vivian isn't breathing. He frantically calls a code team and gives her CPR, despite knowing her wish to not be resuscitated. Susie tries to stop him and halt the code team that enters and starts frantically working, but they only stop when Jason yells that he made a mistake. As the code team mutter to themselves about Jason's grievous error and Jason whispers "Oh, God" to himself, Vivian gets out of bed, undresses, and stands naked and reaching for a distant light.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Vivian Bearing, Ph.D. – Vivian is a fifty-year-old professor of English who specializes in the metaphysical poetry of John Donne. She has stage-four ovarian cancer, and she is the play's narrator and protagonist. As a professor, she is infamously tough, and as a scholar, she is unrelenting in her pursuit of knowledge. However, she has prioritized her academic career over everything else and doesn't have any friends or family to speak of. At the time of her diagnosis, Vivian seems to believe she can solve her cancer like an academic problem, resolving to research and build bibliographies while only vaguely paying attention to the dire words of her oncologist, Dr. Kelekian. She agrees to participate in an experimental drug trial because her doctor reminds her that, despite the awful side effects, her participation will contribute to cancer research. Over the course of the play, though, as Vivian suffers tremendously from her loneliness and from the brutal side effects of her treatment, she begins to question her prioritization of knowledge and research. The doctors—who share her emphasis on research over human connection—don't see her as a human being, which magnifies her suffering and loneliness, and she realizes that she hasn't made meaningful connections with people, nor done much good for others. Vivian's nurse, Susie Monahan, is the only person who treats her with dignity and kindness. Before she dies, Vivian realizes that she should have valued kindness more throughout her life instead of focusing so single-mindedly

on her work.

Harvey Kelekian, M.D. – A fifty-year-old chief of medical oncology at the University Hospital. He oversees Vivian's care as well as Jason's medical fellowship. He and Vivian share a similar unrelenting work ethic and passion for knowledge, as well as a similar bemusement at the difficulties of teaching undergraduates. Like Vivian, Dr. Kelekian is a top-tier professional, and the two of them initially bond over their shared values of thoroughness, research, and hard work. However, as Vivian's treatment progresses and she begins to suffer from the side effects of the experimental drug trial in which Dr. Kelekian has enrolled her, she begins to doubt their shared values, since Dr. Kelekian's prioritizing his own research goals over her comfort is making her feel less than human. The actor who plays Dr. Kelekian also plays Mr. Bearing, Vivian's father, in one of the play's flashbacks, which emphasizes Vivian and Dr. Kelekian's likeness and suggests that Vivian's prioritization of intellectual rigor over emotion and human connection might have been caused by her father's influence.

Jason Posner, M.D. – A twenty-eight-year-old medical fellow in Dr. Kelekian's oncology unit who is charged with directing much of Vivian's care. Coincidentally, he was once a student of Vivian's while he was an undergraduate; he challenged himself to ace the hardest classes on campus and Vivian's was among them. He also has an unrelenting work ethic, and he once confides in Vivian that he is eager to get the fellowship ("the part with humans") over with so that he can pursue his own medical research in a lab. He, like Vivian, prefers individual study over practically everything, and Vivian sees her young self in him—both in the excellent work he produces and in the sacrifices he has made to do so. In the climactic scene of the play, Vivian's heart stops and Jason calls a code team to resuscitate her (against Vivian's wishes) because "she's research." After a frantic scene in which Jason is forced to admit he made a mistake, it's implied that he has a realization about how much he has prioritized research and his career over individual human life and kindness.

Susie Monahan, R.N., B.S.N. – The twenty-eight-year-old primary nurse in the Dr. Kelekian's oncology unit who administers much of Vivian's care. Unlike her peers, she is not academically minded, though she is an excellent nurse. She prioritizes Vivian's human dignity and comfort over any kind of research gains, and Vivian begins to appreciate this more and more as she gets sicker. By the end of the play, Susie is Vivian's greatest ally (and seemingly her only friend), and it is Susie that she seeks out at the very end of her life. Susie is on the front lines of Vivian's care, unlike Jason and Dr. Kelekian, who mostly just call the shots from behind the scenes. When Jason calls a code team and gives Vivian CPR in the play's climactic scene, Susie throws him aside and tries to stop the team from resuscitating Vivian—since Vivian had told Susie herself that she didn't want to be resuscitated.

E. M. Ashford, D. Phil. – An eighty-year-old, now-retired professor of English literature who was Vivian's mentor in graduate school. E. M. inspired Vivian to pursue the study of John Donne's poetry and fostered her unrelenting work ethic. She always pushed her to do the most thorough work possible, which turned Vivian into the scholar that she is. At the same time, she encouraged Vivian to go outside and spend time with friends—advice Vivian ignored. The audience meets E. M. in a flashback near the beginning of the play and again at the end, when E. M. visits a mostly non-responsive Vivian in the hospital and reads a children's book aloud to her.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mr. Bearing – Vivian's father, who teaches her how to read. He appears very briefly in one of Vivian's flashbacks. He is played by the same actor as Dr. Kelekian, suggesting a similarity in their characters—perhaps in their sense of professional detachment and rigorous intellectual standards.

Technicians – They staff the oncology unit and attend to Vivian during her various tests and treatments. The actors who play the technicians double as Vivian's students, the code team, and the clinical fellows.

Students – Vivian's students at the university, who appear in a series of flashbacks showing how strict and unforgiving she was as a professor. The actors who play the students double as the lab technicians, the code team, and the clinical fellows.

The Code Team – The team called in to try and resuscitate Vivian. They ignore Susie's demands to stop until Jason finally yells that he made a mistake. The actors who play the code team double as Vivian's students, the lab technicians, and the clinical fellows.

Clinical Fellows – The young doctors-in-training under Dr. Kelekian. Jason is a fellow as well, but he distinguishes himself from the rest and they resent him for this. The actors who play the fellows double as Vivian's students, the lab technicians, and the code team.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

POETRY AND THE LIMITATIONS OF LANGUAGE

Wit demonstrates that words, despite their ability to define, describe, teach, inform, and comfort, often fall short. Vivian Bearing has devoted her life to the study

of the written word. She is a scholar of John Donne's metaphysical poetry, which is famous for its complicated vocabulary and mind-boggling examinations of life's "big questions" (e.g., God, love, death). She has lived her whole life under the impression that her rigorous study of Donne's language has the power to fulfill her (her scholarly work gives her success and a sense of purpose) and that it gives her a unique understanding of the world. Then she is diagnosed with untreatable cancer. Facing down her cancer, Vivian must confront her tendency to escape her life through language.

Before her cancer diagnosis, Vivian derived nearly all of her self-confidence from her ability to tease out meaning from Donne's poems, which she claims "requires a capacity for scrupulously detailed examination." She takes an enormous amount of pride in her work, to the extent that her self-worth is entirely based on her academic superiority. "Donne's wit is…a way to see how good you are," she says. "After twenty years, I can say with confidence, no one is quite as good as I." However, Vivian's time spent climbing the ranks in academia comes at great cost; she has never prioritized having a personal life, which has left her alone in her time of crisis, without friends or family. She recalls that even as a young graduate student, and even despite her mentor Dr. E. M. Ashford advising her to spend time with her friends, she preferred to study at the library.

Once Vivian is diagnosed with cancer, she doesn't immediately recognize that her love of language can be both a source of joy and a way to hide from reality. In the beginning of the play, Vivian clings to her fascination with words in order to cope with her cancer diagnosis and bring the measured coolness of her scholarly work into her personal life. For example, when Dr. Kelekian describes her cancer using the medical term "insidious," Vivian zones out, focusing on the multiple meanings of the word "insidious" instead of taking in the harsh reality of the information Kelekian is providing.

On one hand, this coping mechanism helps Vivian to keep up her strength as she endures a horribly difficult experience. For instance, in a moment when the side effects of her treatment are making her extremely sick, she thinks of the situation as parallel to Donne. "My treatment imperils my health," she says. "Herein lies the paradox. John Donne would revel in it. I would revel in it, if he wrote a poem about it. My students would flounder in it, because paradox is too difficult to understand. Think of it as a puzzle, I would tell them, an intellectual game." In this scene, Vivian goes from thinking aloud in her hospital room to delivering a full-blown lecture, and the stage directions read "escaping" as she moves into the lecture flashback. She *is* escaping—back into her mind and the world of poetry, where things are safe and certain, which is comforting but also dangerous for Vivian. Escaping allows her to stay at arm's length from her fate, and in doing so, it prevents her from addressing it head-on.

Vivian's attempt to frame death as a solvable intellectual puzzle is ironic, given her own analysis of Donne's poetry. Donne certainly wrestles with death and salvation, but he never comes to any conclusions—he gets lost in his own puzzle, and never finds a satisfying solution to his big questions. Thus Vivian's story in some ways echoes the work she has spent her life studying—she must accept that wit and language alone can never "solve" the problem of death, but are simply another way to either face death or distract oneself from it.

As she approaches death and her body and mind begin to fail her, Vivian finds that she can rely less and less on her intellect—on her facility with language and poetry—for survival. Confronted with the gruesome, physical realities of the deathbed (rather than Donne's abstract puzzles about death), she loses her ability to rationalize and must—perhaps for the first time—lead with her heart instead of her head. "I thought being extremely smart would take care of it," she says. "But I see that I have been found out." Language has been the great joy of Vivian's life, but she must also recognize its limitations in the face of the reality of death.

KINDNESS AND MORTALITY

In *Wit*, Vivian is concerned with mortality—both the mortality of her physical body and of her body of scholarly work. Even as her health is failing her, she thinks of how her work will survive her, since she will be remembered for her contributions to the field of seventeenth-century poetry. However, as her death looms nearer, she must confront the fact that she has failed to make meaningful personal connections in her life, and that no earthly achievement, no matter how grand or long-lasting, can replace a legacy of kindness. Ultimately, the play comes to the conclusion that, although Vivian will be remembered for her brains, her articles, and her scholarship, she will not be remembered as a loving friend or family member—and this is the great tragedy of her life.

Vivian first tries to make her illness meaningful in the same way she made her career meaningful, by emphasizing that her suffering is contributing to Jason and Dr. Kelekian's research. She is undergoing a new type of aggressive cancer treatment that will inform a prestigious study, and she is therefore a "prized patient," which makes her feel that, like her scholarly work, the research study will outlive her. "I am distinguishing myself in illness," she jokes. "I have become something of a celebrity. Dr. Kelekian and Jason are simply delighted. I think they foresee celebrity status for themselves upon the appearance of the journal article they will no doubt write about me."

However, as she gets sicker and sicker and Jason and Kelekian's bedside manner remains impersonal and detached, Vivian begins to understand an ugly part of her past self. As a healthy professor, Vivian believed that her unrelenting approach

toward education (for example, obliquely accusing a student of fibbing about a grandparent's death to get an extension on a paper) was in her students' best interest. However, looking back on her life from her deathbed, she regrets that she wasn't more compassionate toward her students when they struggled. She starts to realize that in the face of the realities of life (like the death of a student's grandparent), sometimes simple kindness is more important than a rigorous pursuit of knowledge. "Now is not the time for verbal swordplay," Vivian says, speaking on her own crisis in a moment of departure from her former self. "For unlikely flights of imagination and wildly shifting perspectives, for metaphysical conceit, for wit. And nothing would be worse than a detailed scholarly analysis… Now is the time for simplicity. Now is the time for, dare I say it, kindness."

When faced with death, Vivian recognizes for perhaps the first time that there is more to existence than scholarly articles and the continuation of knowledge and research. Speaking of Jason and Kelekian's research on her treatment, she says, "The article will not be about me. It will be about my ovaries…What has become of me, is, in fact, just the specimen jar." Notably, in her last days Vivian reaches out to Susie, her compassionate but non-academic nurse, far more than Jason or Kelekian, her brilliant but detached doctors. Susie provides Vivian with the things that she finally realizes are just as important as intellect and drive: kindness and comfort. Unfortunately, it is only when faced with her own immediate mortality that Vivian is able to recognize this crucial aspect of the human experience.

RATIONALITY AND INTELLECT VS. EMOTION AND HUMAN CONNECTION

Throughout most of the play and well into her cancer treatment, Vivian tries her best to be all business and never slip into sentimentality or weakness. This defense mechanism has clearly served her well all her life. Despite having no family or friends to speak of, she feels entirely fulfilled by her profession and her own self-sufficiency and intelligence. Further, the focus of her study—the sonnets of John Donne—centers around wit and intellectual puzzles more than the emotional aspect of poetry. And even as her treatment leaves her body in shambles and no friends or family come to visit her in the hospital, Vivian takes a rational, cut-and-dry approach to her diagnosis. "I know for a fact that I'm tough. A demanding professor. Uncompromising. Never one to turn from a challenge."

Vivian shares this attitude with Jason, the medical fellow who is assigned to her case, and who approaches Vivian as more of a research sample than a human being. At first, Vivian respects this about Jason (as well as about Dr. Kelekian, who oversees her treatment and Jason's education in a no-nonsense manner). She is fine with—and perhaps even grateful for—the fact that her team of doctors lack a friendly bedside manner. She doesn't want pity, hugs, and pats on the hand, and she doesn't want to be patronized. Vivian sees her young self in Jason, especially when he claims that he wants to get his residency, "the part with the human beings," out of the way so that he can move on to focusing on medical research. She, too, always cared more about her solo research than she did about her relationships, professional and otherwise.

Although at first Vivian admires Jason's unrestrained pursuit of knowledge, as Vivian's cancer worsens, Jason and Kelekian's distance begins to make her feel lonely. As she puts it: "So, the young doctor, like the senior scholar, prefers research to humanity. At the same time the senior scholar, in her pathetic state as a simpering victim, wishes the young doctor would take more interest in personal contact." This comment demonstrates that as her death approaches, Vivian, without losing any of her wit, has begun to set aside some of her blind rationality in order to make room in her heart for human connection—and a key aspect of this is simply recognizing the *importance* of emotion and human connection in life.

In what is perhaps her most vulnerable moment in the play, the dying Vivian calls for Susie, the head oncology nurse, in the middle of the night. Susie represents everything that Vivian, Jason, and Kelekian do not. Susie is kindhearted and interested in ensuring that her patients are comfortable and respected as humans more than anything else. She is portrayed as being smart but nonacademic, someone who can be sentimental and wants there to be some kind of meaning to life and death—very much the opposite of Vivian and Jason. That night, Susie brings Vivian a **popsicle**, which they share, and Vivian cries into her lap. This is a huge departure from Vivian's actions in the beginning of the play, where she worked very hard to put on a strong face. Susie is the only person at the hospital who seems to truly value Vivian as a person, and at the end of her life, Vivian finds more comfort in this than she does in Jason and Kelekian's facts and analysis.

Vivian's evolution is further apparent when her former academic mentor, Dr. E. M. Ashford, visits her in the hospital. During the visit, E. M. asks Vivian if she might recite some Donne, and Vivian, in terrible pain, answers, "Noooo." Instead, she has E. M. read from a children's book, **The Runaway Bunny**, that E. M. had bought for her great-grandson. Vivian has had her fill of wit and rationality, and now longs for simplicity and kindness. In a touching moment, then, the two great scholars of Donne read a children's book together until Vivian falls asleep. Rationality and intellect have their place, the play ultimately suggests, but in times of crisis kindness, emotion, and simple human connection are vital.

EMPATHY VS. PROFESSIONAL DETACHMENT

Wit is partly a critique of the medical profession

and academia, as both pursuits encourage a focus on a narrow specialty at the expense of big-picture concerns and individual relationships. Vivian's studies focus entirely on language and the mind, while her doctors' work focuses entirely on the body, and the play argues that in their pursuit of knowledge, both Vivian and her doctors neglect the personal and emotional needs of those around them, remaining detached from other people in an often harmful way.

Wit takes on this theme from the very first lines of the play, which are "How are you feeling today?" This is what the doctors say every time that they enter Vivian's hospital room, and she tells the audience, "I am waiting for the moment when someone asks me this question and I am dead." This is Vivian's wry acknowledgement of the fact that this question, which the doctors repeat like a broken record, doesn't come from a place of concern for her feelings at all. Rather, it is a rote embodiment of "bedside manner," or "clinical" (i.e., clinical skills), which is the set of conversational and behavioral guidelines that medical professionals are trained to follow when they interact with their patients.

Jason—a resident who is overseeing Vivian's treatment—isn't unkind to Vivian, but his interactions with her are never personal. Once, even though she is at her very sickest (she's trembling from fever and is in isolation because her immune system is so compromised), Jason enters her hospital room, and "going right to the graph on the wall," he starts complaining about how he has to change into a sterile uniform in order to check on her. Suddenly remembering his obligation to bedside manner, he corrects himself. "Oh, Jeez. Clinical. Professor Bearing. How are you feeling today?"

To complain about putting on rubber gloves to a terminal cancer patient with a 104-degree fever is tone-deaf at best, and it's symptomatic of Jason's myopic focus on research throughout the play. Once, when Vivian's empathetic nurse Susie suggests that Vivian take a lower and less traumatic dose of her cancer treatment, Jason rejects the suggestion and claims that Vivian can handle it, by which he means that if they lessened the dosages, his study would be wrecked. He even expresses that he wishes all terminal cancer patients would decide to try this miserable full-throttle treatment so that he and other doctors could accrue more data. Jason's rationality makes him an excellent researcher, but it also means that his approach to medicine lacks compassion and empathy. His patients are just bodies for him to study.

That said, Jason's reaction to Vivian's death demonstrates a growing awareness that his attitude toward his profession has been misguided. Vivian eventually files a "do-not-resuscitate" order, which means that when her heart stops, the doctors are not supposed to try to revive her. However, when her heart stops in the last scene of the play, Jason ignores these orders and calls for a resuscitation team in order to continue his study. "She's DNR!" Susie yells at him. "She's research!" Jason replies. The resuscitation team shocks Vivian's body with a defibrillator—a traumatic and painful experience for the body—but when they realize that the call was an error, they stop trying and they're furious at Jason for ignoring a patient's wishes. In this moment, Jason seems to realize the monstrosity of his actions. He slumps over, saying "Oh, god…" and the implication is that he is revaluating his entire approach to medicine. He is confronted with the fact that he valued Vivian's body for its research potential over her humanity, and he seems to understand that pure rationality and professional ambition aren't always the right approach.

Jason's arc from rigid professionalism to a turn towards empathy echoes Vivian's own transformation from someone possessed by a relentless scholarly drive to a more empathetic and emotional person. Her illness helps her realize how blind she has been to the human element of scholarship—as illustrated in the flashbacks showing her treating her students coldly, and her regret that she lacked empathy during these interactions—and her situation ultimately helps her doctors see that their care lacks compassion toward their patients' human dignity.

WIT, DEATH, AND MEANING

Wit deliberately does not come to an easy conclusion. Echoing John Donne, the play suggests that death, like life, love, and God, cannot be rationally understood—there is no "answer" to the big questions of life. Instead of trying to find an answer to death, Donne intentionally puzzled over it in his work, as if he were doing a Rubik's cube with no intention of solving it. Vivian has achieved great acclaim in her field by studying Donne's poetry, but before she is diagnosed with cancer, she seemingly approaches death as something that *can* be solved, with rigorous intelligence and wit. "I know all about life and death," she says. "I am, after all, a scholar of Donne's Holy Sonnets, which explore mortality in greater depth than any other body of work in the English language." This is ironic, considering that Donne's "explorations" of death come to no satisfying conclusions, especially in the face of one's own personal mortality. As Vivian's cancer worsens, however, she comes to an understanding of Donne that she didn't have before, despite her extensive research. She realizes that death cannot be experienced or understood in the abstract. In Donne's poetry, death is something to be considered and reconsidered—it is something to be analyzed. But in life, death is painful, irrational, and difficult to face—yet it *must* be faced, because it is unavoidable.

As Vivian says about one of Donne's poems about death: "The speaker of the sonnet has a brilliant mind and he plays the part convincingly, but in the end he finds God's *forgiveness* hard to believe, so he crawls under a rock to *hide*." In other words, Vivian here recognizes that Donne's poem resists the notion

that there is salvation in God's forgiveness, and so instead of fighting to find a resolution to his qualms and questions, he avoids them. This moment in the poem goes still deeper, because it is also an example of Donne's use of dramatic irony. A reader of Donne here might feel let down, perhaps even surprised, that the great poet cannot resolve his life's biggest question. However, that effect is precisely what Donne is going for, because it lets him drive home his deeper point: that death answers to no one.

In another of Vivian's flashbacks, she is lecturing her students about this very topic. "So we have another instance of John Donne's agile wit at work; not so much *resolving* the issues of life and God as *reveling* in their complexity." One of her students in this flashback hits the nail on the head, both in terms of analyzing Donne's dramatic irony and unknowingly remarking on one of Vivian's fatal flaws as a person. "I think it's like he's hiding. I think he's confused, I don't know, maybe he's scared, so he hides behind all this complicated stuff, hides behind his wit." Vivian acknowledges that there's something to this argument, but when the student later trails off in his explanation she avoids pursuing it. It's only in her flashback that she seems to really consider the validity of the point.

Jason, too, seems to be preoccupied with complexity in his cancer research. Although he certainly hopes to find a cure to cancer, his passion largely comes from the fact that cancer is "awesome…You grow cancer cells, and they never stop. No contact inhibition whatsoever. They just pile up, just keep replicating forever…It's an error in judgment, in a molecular way, but *why*?... Smartest guys in the world, with the best labs, best funding—they don't know what to make of it." Jason is awed by the complicated nature of cancer—which is somewhat horrifying, considering cancer's devastating effects on real human beings—just as Vivian is awed by the complicated wit of metaphysical poetry. Each of them approaches their respective subject as a kind of puzzle that no one else can figure out, rather than acknowledging that cancer and metaphysical poetry both deal with subjects that are largely unknowable, and both entirely resist conclusion.

Vivian's lifetime of studying Donne seemed to her at the time like she was confronting hard questions, confronting death. But by the end of the play, she turns away from a quest for resolution, for meaning, from "hiding behind wit," and seeks instead to accept the unknowability of things and find comfort in simple human connection. The reader, too, is left to ponder the outcomes of Vivian's life. She walks into a blinding light on stage—suggesting, but not explaining—death and afterlife. These final moments are peaceful and they hint at the idea that if death is unknowable, perhaps there is something just as unknowable beyond it.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE POPSICLE

Before Vivian's symptoms worsened, she wrote off her nurse Susie as being unintelligent and overly sentimental, preferring Jason and Dr. Kelekian's cut-and-dry, fiercely intellectual approach to oncology. As her cancer symptoms become harder for her to deal with, however, Vivian begins reaching out to Susie for comfort, realizing that being treated with kindness and dignity matters more to her as she approaches death. One night, when her pain is unbearable, Vivian cries into Susie's arms, and Susie offers to go and fetch her a popsicle, returning with an old-fashioned orange popsicle with two sticks. Vivian offers to split it with Susie, which is the first moment in the play when Vivian extends real kindness to someone else.

The popsicle therefore represents the fact that Vivian has come to understand the world differently than before. As she reflects on her own previous unkindness and lack of empathy, she learns from her appreciation of Susie's kindness that she, too, should be kind to others and meet them where they are. Furthermore, Vivian recognizes that crying and reminiscing with Susie over a popsicle is "maudlin" and "corny," but accepts that this is the reality of her life. She no longer cares much about intellectual originality as she faces the reality of her impending death.

THE TALE OF THE FLOPSY BUNNIES AND THE RUNAWAY BUNNY

In one flashback early in the play, Vivian describes the moment she fell in love with words and language. She was sitting with her father, Mr. Bearing, and reading Beatrix Potter's book *The Tale of the Flopsy Bunnies*. She stumbles over the word "soporific," and Mr. Bearing explains that it means "makes you sleepy." Vivian is then delighted to see that in the book, the illustration accompanying the passage bears out the truth of this word—the picture shows bunnies asleep. "Because of soporific!" the young Vivian exclaims.

Then, towards the end of the play, E. M. Ashford, Vivian's graduate school mentor, visits Vivian in the hospital, and she happens to bring along a children's book—*The Runaway Bunny*—that she bought as a gift for her great-grandson. At first, E. M. offers to recite some Donne poems to Vivian, but Vivian (who is on morphine and barely coherent) refuses. Instead, E. M. reads from *The Runaway Bunny*, a simplistic story about a bunny who wants to run away from home.

The similarity of these two books (both of them children's' books about bunnies) and their appearance in crucial moments of Vivian's life (during her first inspiring experience with language and accompanying her only visitor while she's on her deathbed) links them as a symbol and highlights their importance in the play. They represent the childlike love of language that first set Vivian off on her literary life, and to which she finally returns just before her death. Though E. M. wants to recite Donne to the dying Vivian, and can't resist offering a literary interpretation of *The Runaway Bunny* ("a little allegory of the soul"), Vivian no longer has the capacity or desire for lofty, complex language or intellectual puzzles. An important arc in the play is Vivian essentially "unlearning" her pride in her own intellect and sense of superiority in her expertise in language, so E. M.'s reading of the *The Runaway Bunny* symbolizes Vivian's slow return to childlike simplicity, human connection, and an acceptance of the sometimes-clichéd realities of life. These two women are some of the foremost scholars of John Donne, but they find a last crucial connection in reading a children's book about bunnies together.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Farrar, Straus and Giroux edition of *Wit* published in 1999.

Scene 2 Quotes

VIVIAN: (*Hesitantly*) I should have asked more questions, because I know there's going to be a test.

I have cancer, insidious cancer, with pernicious side effects—no, the *treatment* has pernicious side effects.

I have stage-four metastatic ovarian cancer. There is no stage five. Oh, and I have to be very tough. It appears to be a matter, as the saying goes, of life and death.

I know all about life and death. I am, after all, a scholar of Donne's Holy Sonnets, which explore mortality in greater depth than any other body of work in the English language.

And I know for a fact that I am tough. A demanding professor. Uncompromising. Never one to turn from a challenge. That is why I chose, while a student of the great E. M. Ashford, to study Donne.

Related Characters: Vivian Bearing, Ph.D. (speaker), Harvey Kelekian, M.D.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

Vivian delivers this monologue to the audience, addressing them after she has just learned from Dr. Kelekian that she has cancer and has agreed to undergo an especially aggressive new chemotherapy treatment. She lays out the facts of the conversation, focusing on two words she picked up on in Kelekian's speech: "insidious" and "pernicious." These words clearly mean different things medically and poetically—Kelekian is essentially using them as euphemisms to gloss over the harsher realities of both Vivian's illness and her treatment, while as a scholar of literature Vivian is interested in the full range of meaning of each word—but not as they might apply to her own life.

This is thus an early example of Vivian treating real-world issues—notably her own cancer and its treatment—as if they were an academic matter. Kelekian has been giving her information that pertains to her literal life and death, but she examines his language as if it were an abstract piece of rhetoric unrelated to her. Vivian then goes on to list her academic credentials, and assumes that because she is an expert on John Donne, who explored life and death in great detail in his Holy Sonnets, then she is consequently an expert on life and death themselves. She also assumes that because she is a "tough" and "uncompromising" professor and scholar, then she will be mentally and even physically tough enough to endure her cancer and an aggressive regimen of chemotherapy.

Essentially this quotation is a kind of character statement for Vivian as she begins the play, before she undergoes the changes her ordeal will bring about in her. She seems to accept the harsh reality of her situation, but actually keeps it at an abstract distance by focusing on the language rather than seeing the big picture. She thinks that because her intellect and high standards have served her well in the past, then they will also help her overcome this trial. And finally, she sees death itself as a kind of rational puzzle that can be solved, a poem that can be analyzed and explained.

[E. M.]: Nothing but a breath—a comma—separates life from life everlasting. It is very simple really. With the original punctuation restored, death is no longer something to act out on a stage, with exclamation points… Life, death. Soul, God. Past, present. Not insuperable barriers, not semicolons, just a comma.

VIVIAN: Life, death…I see. (*Standing*) It's a metaphysical conceit. It's wit! I'll go back to the library and rewrite the paper—

E. M.: (*Standing emphatically*) It is *not wit*, Miss Bearing. It is truth. (*Walking around the desk to her*) The paper's not the point.

VIVIAN: It isn't?

E. M.: (*Tenderly*) Vivian. You're a bright young woman. Use your intelligence. Don't go back to the library. Go out. Enjoy yourself with your friends. Hmm?

Related Characters: Vivian Bearing, Ph.D., E. M. Ashford, D. Phil. (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 14-15

Explanation and Analysis

This exchange takes place in a flashback to Vivian's university days as a student of E. M. Ashford, a famous scholar of John Donne. They are discussing a paper Vivian has written on a Donne sonnet, and E. M. has told Vivian to rewrite the paper, as the version of the poem Vivian used made the lines she was analyzing seem too melodramatic (using capital letters, a semicolon, and an exclamation point instead of a simple comma and period). E. M. emphasizes how this changes the whole meaning of the line, which says, "And death shall be no more, Death thou shalt die." (Or in the translation E. M. disparages, "And Death shall be no more; Death thou shalt die!")

Though E. M. is initially making a narrow and seemingly pedantic criticism, she then expands her focus to try to teach Vivian a lesson about the human experience in general. E. M. wants Vivian to see the line about death and life as not just an abstraction or "metaphysical conceit" of "wit," but as "truth." She wants Vivian to feel and consider the truth of Donne's point in her own life, not just as the detached subject of an essay. And indeed, over the course of the play, the idea of only the "one breath" of a comma separating life from death becomes immediately pertinent to Vivian herself in her terminal cancer, but as a grad student in the flashback she cannot appreciate this.

Instead, the young Vivian ignores her mentor's final advice. She briefly attempts to go outside with other students, but then quickly returns to the library and focuses on her essay.

This then shows the general arc of Vivian's academic life up until the start of the play: choosing research over friendship, and wit over truth. To her, the paper *is* the point.

Scene 3 Quotes

To the scholar, to the mind comprehensively trained in the subtleties of seventeenth-century vocabulary, versification, and theological, historical, geographical, political, and mythological allusions, Donne's wit is…a way to see how good you really are.

After twenty years, I can say with confidence, no one is quite as good as I.

Related Characters: Vivian Bearing, Ph.D. (speaker), Technicians

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

Vivian says this as she is being examined by various technicians, being poked and prodded and asked basic questions over and over. Yet even as she is being treated like a piece of meat, she delivers an extended monologue about John Donne and her own academic achievements.

This juxtaposition of action and dialogue is meant to highlight Vivian's attempt to remain in control of her situation. At this point in the play, she still feels fulfilled by her own intellectual achievements and contributions to the study of literature (particularly the wit of John Donne), and is perhaps even flattered to be an object of study herself, because she still feels like she is unique and in control. She assumes that she is special because of her intelligence and rationality, and she thinks that she can solve the "problem" of her cancer because she has always been able to analyze and solve every other problem she's faced in the world of academia. As she says here, she's the best. Unfortunately, the action happening immediately around her shows otherwise, and she will soon come to learn that death makes no exceptions and has no favorites, and she cannot remain professionally detached from the reality of her own suffering and mortality.

Scene 4 Quotes

❝❝ You may remark that my vocabulary has taken a turn for the Anglo-Saxon.

God, I'm going to barf my brains out.

(*She begins to relax.*) If I actually did barf my brains out, it would be a great loss to my discipline. Of course, not a few of my colleagues would be relieved. To say nothing of my students.

It's not that I'm controversial. Just uncompromising. Ooh— (*She lunges for the basin. Nothing*) Oh. (*Silence*) False alarm. If the word went round that Vivian Bearing had barfed her brains out…

Well, first my colleagues, most of whom are my former students, would scramble madly for my position. Then their consciences would flare up, so to honor *my* memory they would put together a collection of *their* essays about John Donne.

Related Characters: Vivian Bearing, Ph.D. (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

Vivian addresses the audience here, again trying to remain relatively aloof even as she is in great pain and vomits multiple times. She comments on her own devolving vocabulary, as she slowly loses her ability to use elevated language to remain detached from and in control of her situation.

In musing on her own hypothetical death, Vivian essentially admits that she has no close friends or family. She doesn't describe anyone actually mourning her or being emotionally moved by her loss, but only how her professional relationships would be affected—and some people would even be "relieved." At this point in the play, Vivian still seems okay with that lack of human connection. Vivian also comments on how her colleagues seem similarly detached from each other and self-absorbed, as they would use her death as an excuse to get *themselves* published. Finally, note that Vivian is almost joking about her own potential death here, but she uses this distance to begin to address its real likelihood. She probably won't "barf her brains out," but it's almost inevitable that she will die of cancer.

Scene 6 Quotes

❝❝ VIVIAN: It is said that the effect of eating too much lettuce is soporific.

The little bunnies in the picture are asleep! They're sleeping! Like you said, because of *soporific*!

(*She stands up, and MR. BEARING exits.*)

The illustration bore out the meaning of the word, just as he had explained it. At the time, it seemed like magic.

So imagine the effect that the words of John Donne first had on me: ratiocination, concatenation, coruscation, tergiversation.

Medical terms are less evocative. Still, I want to know what the doctors mean when they…anatomize me. And I will grant that in this particular field of endeavor they possess a more potent arsenal of terminology than I. My only defense is the acquisition of vocabulary.

Related Characters: Vivian Bearing, Ph.D. (speaker), Mr. Bearing

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 43-44

Explanation and Analysis

This scene begins in a flashback. Vivian is five years old and experiencing the first moment when she "knew words would be [her] life's work." She reads aloud from Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of the Flopsy Bunnies*, and as her father explains to her what the word "soporific" means, she has a moment of epiphany about the word and illustration.

Over the course of the play Vivian goes through a process of "unlearning" many things, eventually putting aside her detachment, sense of superiority, and high standards of intellect to embrace emotion, kindness, and human connection. This flashback to her as a child is important, then, because Vivian progressively grows more childlike as she nears death, and this scene shows just what "childlike" might mean to her: notably a simple delight in language and experience that comes with no judgment or abstraction.

In her commentary on the scene, though, Vivian shows that she is still trying to retain a sense of agency through language and intellect, treating her cancer and mortality like an academic problem that can be solved. "Acquiring vocabulary" makes her feel less helpless, even if it doesn't do anything to change the reality of her situation.

Scene 7 Quotes

I am not in isolation because I have cancer, because I have a tumor the size of a grapefruit. No. I am in isolation because I am being treated for cancer. My treatment imperils my health.

Herein lies the paradox. John Donne would revel in it. I would revel in it, if he wrote a poem about it. My students would flounder in it, because paradox is too difficult to understand. Think of it as a puzzle, I would tell them, an intellectual game.

(*She is trapped.*) Or, I *would have* told them. Were it a game. Which it is not.

(*Escaping*) If they were here, if I were lecturing: How I would *perplex* them! I could work my students into a frenzy. Every ambiguity, every shifting awareness. I could draw so much from the poems.

I could be so powerful.

Related Characters: Vivian Bearing, Ph.D. (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47-48

Explanation and Analysis

Vivian has been placed in isolation—meaning she can have no human contact whatsoever—because of adverse side effects to her treatment and because the chemotherapy has destroyed her immune system. She then muses to the audience here about the paradox of this situation—it is her *treatment* that is causing this, not her illness. She starts to get carried away with her own sense of superiority and delight in Donne's intellectual games, but then is reminded that this *isn't* a game—it's her real life.

The italicized stage directions make this explicit. "She is trapped" and realizes that she isn't talking about abstract poetics or paradoxes, but her own mortality—but then manages to "escape" and lose herself in a fantasy where she is once again "powerful." Indeed, immediately after this the scene changes to a daydream of herself teaching a lecture on Donne. Vivian is once again trying to flee from harsh reality through language and a world of abstraction and academia, but she increasingly finds herself unable to do so, and unfulfilled even by reminders of her own brilliance.

Scene 9 Quotes

In everything I have done, I have been steadfast, resolute—some would say in the extreme. Now, as you can see, I am distinguishing myself in illness.

I have survived eight treatments of Hexamethophosphacil and Vinplatin at the *full* dose, ladies and gentlemen. I have broken the record. I have become something of a celebrity. Kelekian and Jason are simply delighted. I think they foresee celebrity status for themselves upon the appearance of the journal article they will no doubt write about me.

But I flatter myself. The article will not be about *me*, it will be about my ovaries. It will be about my periotoneal cavity, which, despite their best intentions, is now crawling with cancer.

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.

Related Characters: Vivian Bearing, Ph.D. (speaker), Harvey Kelekian, M.D. , Jason Posner, M.D.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

Vivian addresses the audience here, though at this point she is considerably weakened and sitting in a wheelchair. She is again distinguishing herself based on academic or scientific achievements, the idea that her work or the studies based on her will outlast her own life, and trying to feel fulfilled by this.

In the same monologue, though, she recognizes that she is being objectified by her doctors, and it isn't *she* who will live on in this study, but only her cancer and its treatment. She feels dehumanized. Vivian is on the verge of longing for more than just intellectual and rational satisfaction to make her feel okay in her time of crisis.

Scene 10 Quotes

VIVIAN: (*Getting out of bed, without her IV*) So. The young doctor, like the senior scholar, prefers research to humanity. At the same time the senior scholar, in her pathetic state as a simpering victim, wishes the young doctor would take more interest in personal contact.

Now I suppose we shall see, through a series of flashbacks, how the senior scholar ruthlessly denied her simpering students the touch of human kindness she now seeks.

Related Characters: Vivian Bearing, Ph.D. (speaker), Students , Jason Posner, M.D.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 58-59

Explanation and Analysis

Vivian has just had an unsatisfying interaction with Jason, in which he complained about having to interact with patients and said that his clinical fellowship was a waste of time and getting in the way of his research. She tried to ask him how he might comfort a patient who was frightened, but Jason just assumed that Vivian was having a side effect of "confusion" and offered to order another test.

Here Vivian examines this interaction, stepping outside of herself and referring to herself in the third person (as "the senior scholar")—trying to remain detached and rational, as usual, but actually being very sincere here. She recognizes the changes she has undergone in the last months. She used to be like Jason, and found "humanity" a distraction from intellectual achievement, and even admired Jason and Kelekian for their professional detachment. But as she is forced to face her own mortality, Vivian increasingly longs for something more, something she has never felt like she needed—kindness and human connection.

Vivian also recognizes how she, like Jason, has denied others this kindness in the past: namely, her students. She then wryly comments on how she will witness flashbacks showing examples of this, to make sure she has learned her lesson. And indeed, in the following scene we see Vivian's cold interactions with her students.

Scene 12 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.

(*Slowly*) Now is a time for simplicity. Now is a time for, dare I say it, kindness.

(*Searchingly*) I thought being extremely smart would take care of it. But I see that I have been found out. Ooohh.

I'm scared. Oh, God. I want…I want…No. I want to hide. I just want to curl up in a little ball. (*She dives under the covers.*)

Related Characters: Vivian Bearing, Ph.D. (speaker), Susie Monahan, R.N., B.S.N.

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 69-70

Explanation and Analysis

Vivian and Susie have just had an emotional interaction in which Susie brought Vivian a popsicle, Vivian cried to Susie, and they discussed what should happen if her heart stops. After Susie leaves, Vivian comments on what a "maudlin" scene it was: sentimental and clichéd. But here she recognizes that she is okay with this and doesn't judge the scene, herself, or Susie for this sentimentality. She then offers a condensation of the major themes of the play in this quotation.

For most of her life, Vivian has scorned human connection and kindness and instead found fulfillment and pleasure only in the things she describes here: "verbal swordplay," "metaphysical conceit," "wit," scholarly analysis," "erudition," "complication." (Essentially, in her study of John Donne's poetry.) But as her cancer worsens and she nears death, she finds that it is no longer "the time" for these things. What she seeks now is simple human kindness. She used to feel most comfortable with the detached and professional doctors Jason and Kelekian, but now she prefers the company of the compassionate, caring (but non-intellectual) Susie.

Ironically, Vivian echoes Donne himself in some of the sentiments she expresses here. Previous analysis of the Holy Sonnets (from Vivian herself and her students) has commented on how Donne wrestles with large issues of death, life, and salvation, but never finds a conclusion to his problems and so he loses himself in intellectual puzzles and games of language: essentially hiding behind his wit. Vivian, who was then lost in her study of Donne's wit and assuming that her mastery of his poetry and simply "being extremely smart" meant that she could also solve the "puzzle" of her cancer, has come up against her own failure—the realization that death is real, painful, and inevitable, and no one can "solve" it, no matter how intelligent—and now she wants to hide. She ends the scene in a childlike state, literally hiding under the covers from the specter of her own mortality.

Scene 13 Quotes

(*VIVIAN concentrates with all her might, and she attempts a grand summation, as if trying to conjure her own ending.*)

And Death—*capital D*—shall be no more—semicolon.

Death—*capital D*—thou shalt die—*ex-cla-mation point!*

(*She looks down at herself, looks out at the audience, and sees that the line doesn't work. She shakes her head and exhales with resignation.*)

I'm sorry.

Related Characters: Vivian Bearing, Ph.D. (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 72-73

Explanation and Analysis

Kelekian has just ordered a steady dose of morphine for Vivian, who is in extreme pain, and after this medication takes effect Vivian is hardly coherent for the rest of the play, so she's unable to speak in her usual elevated language. She ends this painful scene here quoting the same lines of Donne that she had examined with E. M. Ashford as a grad student, in the second quotation from Scene 2. Notably, she chooses to use the more melodramatic version that E. M. had criticized—with the semicolon, capital-D "Death," and exclamation point—rather than the more reserved and simple version E. M. preferred. This seems to be Vivian making an important statement—that death *is* something melodramatic, and that when truly facing mortality one cannot indulge in wit and intellectual puzzles. As she said in the previous quotation, "now is not the time…for wit." She has given up her old adherence to rationality and pure intellect, and now accepts that things like emotion, melodrama, and banality are vital parts of the human experience.

But the quotation ends sadly, in Vivian recognizing that "the line doesn't work." This seems to mean two things. First, her scholarly self will never entirely disappear, and even in her time of crisis she can't help analyzing the line of poetry to see how well it "works" in the abstract. This is just the way she thinks, and that will never change. Secondly, Vivian seems to be thinking about what the line itself is saying—it is an assertion of salvation, of eternal life in God—and finding that she doesn't believe it. When confronted with her own real death, she sees its power and inevitability. She cannot believe the promise that "death shall be no more," when death is staring her right in the face.

Scene 16 Quotes

SUSIE: (*Pushing them away from the bed*) Patient is no code. Get away from her!

(*SUSIE lifts the blanket. VIVIAN steps out of the bed.*

CODE TEAM HEAD: (*Reading*) Do Not Resuscitate. Kelekian. Shit.

She walks away from the scene, toward a little light.

(*The CODE TEAM stops working.*)

She is now attentive and eager, moving slowly toward the light.

JASON: (*Whispering*) Oh, God.

She takes off her cap and lets it drop.

CODE TEAM HEAD: Order was put in yesterday.

She slips off her bracelet.

CODE TEAM: —It's a doctor fuck-up.

—What is he, a resident?

—Got us up here on a DNR.

—Called a code on a no-code.

She loosens the ties and the top gown slides to the floor. She lets the second gown fall.

The instant she is naked, and beautiful, reaching for the light—

JASON: Oh, God.

Lights out.)

(*The bedside scene fades.*)

Related Characters: The Code Team , Jason Posner, M.D., Susie Monahan, R.N., B.S.N. (speaker), Harvey Kelekian, M.D. , Vivian Bearing, Ph.D.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 84-85

Explanation and Analysis

This passage concludes the play's climactic scene, as well as the play itself. Vivian's heart has stopped, but Jason still calls a code team to resuscitate her, going against Vivian's own wishes. Despite Susie's attempts to stop them, the code team works frantically until Jason finally yells, "I MADE A MISTAKE!" In this quotation, then, the code team stops working and comments on Jason's error, while Vivian, dying, undresses and reaches for a distant light. The two actions are set simultaneously and physically next to each other, making for a frenzied and then poignant scene.

On the side of the quotation with the hospital staff, it becomes clear that this is a major turning point for Jason. He has gone directly against a patient's wishes for the sake

of his scientific study, frantically trying to resuscitate Vivian because, as he says, "She's research!" When he finally shouts out his mistake and sees the code team react, then, he seems to recognize just what he has done and how far he has gone down the road of dehumanizing his patients and treating them like lab rats. He can only whisper "Oh, God" to himself, and seems horrified by his own actions. But it's left open whether or not he will make a lasting life change because of this, or how he might be punished for his error.

On Vivian's side, her dying actions seem spiritual and mysterious, a contrast to her rational, no-nonsense personality in life. During her cancer and its treatment she has gradually been stripped of all but the core of her being: her scholarly accomplishments, her elevated language, her high intellectual standards, her sense of agency and control, her fulfillment in herself, and then any words at all. In death, then, she symbolically becomes totally naked, representing this core of herself, what John Donne would call a soul, leaving the world and reaching for something else.

Crucially, what this "something else" actually might be is left unknown to the audience, as the lights go out and play ends just as Vivian approaches it. Because the last lines of the play are Jason's "Oh, God," it's suggested that this might be Vivian reaching for some kind of afterlife or salvation. But like Donne and his struggles with death and God, there is no answer to the puzzle on this side of life. Whatever Vivian might have found is not yet for us to know.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

SCENE 1

Vivian Bearing begins the play onstage in a hospital gown, pushing an IV pole. She is "fifty, tall and very thin, barefoot, and completely bald." She has stage-four ovarian cancer and is a patient at the University hospital—the same university where she works as a professor in the English department. She greets the audience "in false familiarity," with a "Hi. How are you feeling today? Great. That's just great." This familiarity breaks, and she says, "This is not my standard greeting, I assure you. […] But it is the standard greeting around here."

The opening of the play introduces its structure and shifting narrative perspective. Here Vivian is addressing the audience directly, breaking the fourth wall and acting as an omniscient narrator, while at the same time presenting herself as the main character of the play and dressed as a cancer patient, the role she plays throughout.

Vivian undertakes a brief grammatical analysis of possible responses to the question, adding that she is a professor of seventeenth-century poetry who specializes in John Donne's sonnets. Though when doctors ask her how she's feeling she generally responds that she feels "fine," she's actually dying from terminal cancer and she clearly feels horrible. She jokes that she wishes she had come upon "the question's *ironic significance*" earlier, so she could have deployed it while handing out final exams to her students.

The motif of the detached, rather meaningless question "How are you feeling today?" will recur throughout the action to follow. This serves as an early example of empty language that is unable or unwilling to face the harsh realities of life, and of doctors practicing professional detachment (they're supposed to have "bedside manner" and ask questions like this) rather than having real empathy and individual concern.

Vivian addresses the fact that she is narrating a play, saying that irony is a literary device she will deploy throughout. Though she'd prefer the play be about a "mythic-heroic-pastoral" hero, the fact is that it's about a woman suffering from ovarian cancer. She also notes that she was surprised to realize that the play is sometimes funny.

Edson deploys irony in various ways, and in another meta-theatrical moment here she has Vivian state that fact directly. Throughout the play, Vivian switches back and forth between being a narrator (who knows how the play is going to end) and being a character (who is unaware of her fate). At this point, she is establishing that the play itself will contain moments of dramatic irony—emphasizing the separation between what character-Vivian knows and what narrator-Vivian knows.

Vivian says, "It is not my intention to give away the plot; but I think I die in the end," and she explains that she has two hours left to live. She notes that to illustrate this she could potentially use the "threadbare metaphor" of sand slipping through an hour glass, but at the moment she isn't poetically inclined. She quotes Shakespeare, and says that after the two hours are over, "Then: curtain."

This is another humorous meta-dramatic moment, as Vivian references the length of the play itself—within the narrative, she actually has months to live, not just two hours. But as both a professor of literature and a narrator describing her life from beyond the grave, she is presented as someone often detached from day-to-day reality, a scholar who takes a critical and analytical distance from life.

SCENE 2

Vivian ushers the audience back in time to the moment of her cancer diagnosis, saying that the moment was unforgettable. At his desk in the hospital office, Dr. Harvey Kelekian, a fellow professor and her head oncologist (cancer doctor), is explaining that she has stage-four ovarian cancer. When he calls her cancer an "insidious adenocarcinoma," Vivian—in dialogue with the doctor, no longer narrating to the audience—fixates on the word "insidious." Kelekian explains that its medical usage means "undetectable," but Vivian notes that the word generally means "treacherous."

Immediately Vivian is established as someone who focuses on the details and nuances of language, often to the detriment of her own real-world experience. Kelekian is giving her life-altering information here, but she zeroes in on his word choice. Depending on how the character is directed or played onstage, this could either show Vivian's naïveté and distance from reality, or her fearful response to Kelekian's news and consequent desire to retreat to a realm that is comfortable and secure for her—the world of words.

Dr. Kelekian asks if he should continue, and he uses complicated medical language to describe the experimental chemotherapy treatment that Vivian will receive. While the doctor gives a monologue about treatment, Vivian—narrating her inner thoughts—talks over him, remarking on his "curious word choice" and resolving to research cancer for herself ("Must get some books, articles. Assemble a bibliography"). Kelekian says that Vivian will be hospitalized for her treatments and thoroughly monitored, but that the treatment will "inevitably affect some healthy cells."

Kelekian's words seem objective and rational, but they are essentially euphemisms when compared to the reality of human experience—"affect some healthy cells" seems like a paltry explanation of the brutal experience Vivian is about to have. Tellingly, Vivian approaches her cancer treatment like it's an academic assignment ("assemble a bibliography"). At this point she is still trying to stay in her comfort zone, and treats her own mortality like a piece of scholarship she can study and "solve."

Though Vivian tries to focus on what Kelekian is saying, she continues drifting into ruminations on the specific words he uses. However, when he says that he is "relying on" her to cope with "some of the more pernicious side effects" of the treatment, she seems alarmed.

Again Vivian focuses on Kelekian's language, as if he were reciting a poem she must analyze rather than giving her direct information about her own health. At the same time, Vivian's mastery of language lets her see through some of the clinical euphemisms Kelekian uses.

When Dr. Kelekian is finished speaking, Vivian commends him on his thoroughness, which leads them to discussing their respective experiences as university professors. Vivian and Kelekian have a lot in common, despite their differing academic focuses. "'Thoroughness'—I always tell my students, but they are constitutionally averse to painstaking work," Vivian says. The two commiserate over the fact that their students don't have the work ethic that they do.

Edson presents Vivian and Kelekian as similar figures when the play begins—both are consummate professionals, experts in their respective fields, and teachers who prioritize intellectual rigor and hard work in their students. It's suggested that neither character has much sympathy for those who can't keep up.

Dr. Kelekian suggests that Vivian not teach next semester due to the severity of her diagnosis and her treatment plan, but she says that this is "out of the question." Kelekian emphasizes that she will be cycling between exhaustion and hospitalization, which doesn't persuade her. He then explains that her treatment, which is part of a research study on the "strongest" treatment available, "will make a significant contribution to our knowledge." Vivian acknowledges this and immediately signs the informed consent form the doctor gives her.

Vivian doesn't give a second thought to signing the form once she learns that her treatment will aid with research and the general pursuit of knowledge. The problem is that she is still treating her illness like an academic issue, and can't yet accept that this "strongest" treatment will be extremely brutal, both physically and mentally.

Dr. Kelekian asks Vivian if there is anyone that he should call—a friend or family member who might want to be involved in the process of her cancer treatment—and she says that it won't be necessary. He then warns her that the study depends on her taking the full chemotherapy dose, even if the side effects make her wish for a lesser dose. He asks her if she can be "very tough," and she tells him not to worry.

Throughout the rest of the play, Vivian never discusses any of her personal friends or family members (except for her deceased parents), suggesting that she doesn't have any. She is in this alone—but she's used to being alone, and that has never been a problem before. This experience will be different, however.

Vivian addresses the audience, again as the narrator. She lays out what she has understood from the doctor's explanation, saying that she has "insidious cancer with pernicious side effects," but correcting herself to note that the treatment, not the cancer, has such side effects. "I have to be very tough," she says. "It appears to be a matter, as the saying goes, of life and death." Vivian claims to know "all about life and death" because she is a scholar of Donne's Holy Sonnets, poems that "explore mortality in greater depth than any other body of work in the English language." She also knows that she's tough because she's an "uncompromising" professor who is up for any challenge, which is why she chose to study Donne in the first place.

The notion of the treatment being just as harmful as the illness is a paradox that will come up later in the play, as well. Vivian's statement here shows her hubris as the play's action begins. She thinks she is an expert on death because she is an expert on Donne, who wrestled with death in his works. Further, she assumes that because she is "uncompromising" as a scholar and teacher, then she is also "tough" enough physically to handle this aggressive chemotherapy. All of these assumptions will eventually be proven wrong.

Vivian then ushers the audience into another flashback, in which she is a twenty-two-year-old graduate student approaching her mentor, Professor E. M. Ashford, who is fifty-two at the time. E. M. tells Vivian that she needs to redo a recent paper—that she has missed the point of Donne's sonnet "Death be not proud" completely. "You must begin with a text, Miss Bearing, not a feeling," E. M. says. She explains Vivian's misunderstanding by noting that the version of the sonnet that Vivian used for the paper was, according to E. M., "inauthentically punctuated," which is a matter that cannot be taken lightly in the study of poetry.

Periodic flashbacks throughout the play help flesh out Vivian's character, and once again she plays the role of omniscient narrator as well as unwitting character. E. M. was clearly an influential figure for Vivian, as she seems to have instilled in her the very high academic standards Vivian now holds. In Donne, every mark of punctuation is crucial, and because of this E. M. makes Vivian rewrite her entire paper. Note also the phrase, "begin with a text…not a feeling"—Vivian is learning to study poetry in a solely rational and intellectual rather than emotional manner.

E. M. explains that the incorrect punctuation puts too much of a barrier between Donne's analysis of "life" and his analysis of "death." In the version of the text Vivian used, a semicolon, capital letters, and exclamation points signify that life and death are opposing forces, melodramatic in their conflict. "If you go for this sort of thing," E. M. jokes, "I suggest you take up Shakespeare." In the version E. M. approves of, life and death are divided only by a mere comma—"nothing but a breath." Vivian claims that she understands now—"it's wit!"—but E. M. says, "It is *not wit*, Miss Bearing. It is truth."

This is an important point, and the lines of poetry quoted here recur later in the play. Vivian sees this thin line, "nothing but a breath," between life and death as a kind of intellectual game—"it's wit!" The older and wiser E. M., however, reminds her student that the line is also talking about reality—"it is truth." Vivian doesn't learn this lesson until much later in life, however, when there really is only "a breath" between her life and death.

Before Vivian leaves, E. M. suggests to her that she should go out with her friends instead of going back to the library, saying, "The paper isn't the point." Vivian tries to take her advice, claiming that she "went outside…There were students on the lawn, talking about nothing, laughing," but she is too tied up in her realizations about commas and exclamation marks to care, and she goes back to the library to redo the assignment.

E. M. tries to make her point clearer—she is teaching a lesson beyond the classroom, about living one's "truth" rather than just analyzing it on the level of language alone. The older Vivian then admits, rather wistfully it seems, that she didn't understand or take her mentor's advice. This brief scene then suggests how much of the rest of Vivian's academic career has progressed: she has always chosen the library over friends, and wit over truth.

SCENE 3

Vivian is fifty again, and back at the hospital, this time getting a chest x-ray. A technician is performing the x-ray, and he asks her a number of questions about herself, such as her name and her doctor. To the latter question, she (perhaps purposefully) wrongly answers that she does, in fact, have a PhD. The technician humorlessly corrects her—he wanted to know who her primary doctor at the hospital was. She gives Dr. Kelekian's name, and then explains that she herself is a doctor of philosophy.

Vivian's treatment is beginning, but she is still able to remain rather detached from the reality of her situation, making jokes to the technicians and emphasizing her own academic credentials to make her feel powerful and in control.

As more technicians ask her to raise and lower various parts of her body, turn sideways, etc., Vivian introduces herself in a self-aggrandizing manner: "I have made an immeasurable contribution to the discipline of English literature." She discusses the specifics of her work at length, including the fact that she specializes in John Donne's sonnets, that she served as a research assistant for the renowned Dr. E. M. Ashford as a graduate student, and that she wrote an "exhaustive" book of essays about Donne that has remained an integral text in her field ever since. As she is describing her essays, she is lifted and set onto a stretcher.

It's suggested that Vivian assumes that her own formidable academic accomplishments somehow separate her from other patients, and even from the harsher realities of her own illness and treatment. At the same time, the action on stage bears out the foolishness of such assumptions, as she is handled like any other patient by the detached, seemingly uninterested technicians, and treated more as an object than an individual. This contrast then emphasizes the irony of her boasting about her unique accomplishments.

Vivian continues to speak about herself and her accomplishments even as the various technicians enter and exit, performing diagnostic tests and measurements. The hospital swirls around her, she is prodded and poked, and all the while she is steadfast in her monologue. At this point, Vivian is addressing the audience more than she is addressing the other characters in the room; she seems to exist somewhere between her narrator-self and her character-self.

This scene is a montage of sorts, showing how Vivian spends her life now—being treated as test subject or object of research, while still assuming that her own intellect (or even the uniqueness of her treatment) makes her special and exempt from certain realities.

Vivian's train of thought is interrupted by a technician who is looking for her wheelchair—a shift that momentarily takes her fully back into the scene. She responds sarcastically, saying that she doesn't know where the wheelchair is, and that they shouldn't "inconvenience [themselves] on [her] behalf." After the technician leaves, she continues her monologue as if nothing happened. She notes that her second major success was an essay about the sonnet "Death be not proud," the same sonnet that she and E. M. Ashford discussed in the grad school flashback.

At this point Vivian has no desire to interact with her caretakers in a personal way at all, and they seem to feel the same way about her. Clearly Vivian has spent a great deal of time studying the poem she discussed with E. M. Ashford in the flashback, but it also seems that she hasn't absorbed any real life lessons from it, despite her technical mastery of Donne. She has continued to focus on the "wit," rather than the "truth."

Vivian then introduces the concept of "wit," which she says is a pillar of Donne's poetic works, one that requires "scrupulously detailed examination…exacting and seemingly pointless scrutiny." Meanwhile Susie Monahan, the head oncology nurse, enters and wheels Vivian to her exam room. Vivian does not seem to notice and continues to discuss her academic work. She references the complexities of Donne's poems ("the subtleties of seventeenth-century vocabulary, versification…" etc.) and ends by saying that "Donne's wit is…a way to see how good you really are. After twenty years, I can say with confidence, no one is quite as good as I."

This is another crucial passage, as Vivian makes known her hubris and naïveté as well as explicitly describing her area of expertise—John Donne's wit, which to most people is "seemingly pointless." Notably, it is during this monologue of intellectual boasting that Susie first enters the play. Susie comes to be a foil to Vivian, someone who embraces the parts of the human experience that Vivian has rejected: emotion, kindness, and friendship.

Susie has now helped Vivian sit on the exam table, and Jason Posner, a young medical fellow under Dr. Kelekian, enters. He introduces himself, calling Vivian "Professor Bearing," and says that as an undergraduate he took her course in 17th-century poetry. Jason says he wasn't an English major, but he challenged himself to get an A in the "three hardest courses on campus," and one of those was hers. He admits to Vivian that he got an A minus. Susie exits.

Jason, as Edson will show, is a character similar to the young Vivian—entirely focused on his research to the detriment of his relationships with others. He immediately presents himself here as someone who is very intelligent and has high standards for himself—qualities Vivian admires (at this point, at least).

Jason, who seems nervous, starts to ask Vivian some questions about her medical history. Vivian notes that Dr. Kelekian already did this, but Jason says that Kelekian wanted *him* to do it, too. He starts by asking, "How are you feeling today?", to which Vivian responds, "Fine, thank you." A quick series of questions and answers then follows, as Vivian states that she is fifty years old, unmarried, without siblings, and both her parents are dead. She has never been pregnant or had any serious medical or psychological issues before now, and she occasionally drinks wine and frequently drinks coffee, but uses no other substances. For exercise she "paces," and she is not currently sexually active.

While Jason is very intelligent and capable in the research aspect of medicine, he is still clearly a student and lacks the "bedside manner" that would allow him to truly connect with patients. He then becomes the primary asker of the detached, meaningless "how are you feeling today?" question that Vivian mentioned at the beginning of the play. Edson also includes these basic questions to give more information about Vivian: she seemingly has no close personal relationships, whether with friends, romantic partners, or family, and focuses entirely on the life of the mind, not the body (as shown in her choice of "exercise" and substances).

Jason then asks Vivian about how her "present complaint" started, and Vivian describes a gradually growing pain in her abdomen. She says she was working on a major article about Donne with a strict deadline at the time, and so was stressed, but not "much more stress than usual"—the difference was she "couldn't withstand it this time." After she turned in the article, Vivian says, she visited her gynecologist, who sent her to another specialist, who sent her to Dr. Kelekian.

Vivian is used to stress and anxiety, but is so confident in her toughness that she always pushes through and, it seems, succeeds. What was frightening about this time, however, is that she "couldn't withstand" the stress. Her body has forced her to leave behind her abstract and academic existence and acknowledge her reality as a vulnerable human being.

Jason, growing more nervous and flustered, prepares Vivian for her physical exam. He puts her legs in stirrups and places a paper sheet over her. He then says he has to get Susie, because there's a rule that he's "got to have a girl here." Jason leaves and walks through the halls, calling for Susie, and Vivian sits in silence. Vivian then starts to recite the Donne poem "Death be not proud," her lines interrupted by Jason's calls for Susie. Jason finally reenters with Susie, just after Vivian recites the line she had discussed with E.M. in her flashback: "And death shall be no more—*comma*—Death thou shalt die."

Jason is clearly uncomfortable giving Vivian a physical exam, and there is an odd power dynamic here as well, considering that he was once her student but is now interacting with her when she is at her most vulnerable and he is in a position of power. Vivian seems to turn to Donne for comfort here, but as usual she lingers on details like the punctuation rather than applying the meaning *of the lines to her own life.*

Susie seems upset that Jason left Vivian alone in the stirrups, but Jason interrupts her and begins the pelvic exam. As he feels around inside Vivian, he makes awkward small talk with Susie about how he once took Vivian's literature course. Jason then feels the tumor and interjects "Jesus!", but tries to recover from his surprise and continues talking about John Donne and how difficult Donne's poetry is. The exam over, Jason awkwardly leaves, followed by Vivian. Susie cleans up and exits, as well.

Susie is already concerned about Vivian as a person—she's upset that Jason left her alone in the stirrups, an extremely vulnerable and exposed position—but Jason brushes her aside and perhaps doesn't even notice the indignity he has subjected Vivian to. Jason then once more shows his ineptitude at interpersonal connection, as his exclamation at the tumor is surely shocking and terrifying for Vivian. Note also that Jason focuses only on the intellectual difficulty of Donne's poetry and Vivian's course, rather than anything meaningful about life he might have learned from either.

SCENE 4

Several weeks or months have passed, and Vivian describes her treatment to the audience. She says she is "learning to suffer" and has undergone various discomforts, humiliations, and degradations during her treatment. She is then interrupted by her own nausea and runs across the stage to vomit into a plastic washbasin. She vomits again and moans in agony, saying she hasn't eaten in two days.

Vivian can no longer ignore the harsh reality of the treatment she has signed up for. Her doctors see it as a research opportunity, and she herself initially was happy to commit to the expansion of medical knowledge, but now she is the only one absorbing the human cost of this "experiment"—which includes physical pain as well as indignities suffered at the hands of the detached, unsympathetic professionals. Though she still sees things in academic terms, Vivian now must admit that she has become a student in this situation: she is "learning to suffer."

Vivian comments on her own devolving vocabulary, and says she feels like she's going to "barf [her] brains out." She then starts to muse about what would happen if she actually barfed her brains out—how her colleagues and students would mostly just "scramble madly for [her] position." Vivian rings the bell for Susie, who has to measure her "output" (how much she has vomited).

Vivian acknowledges that her colleagues and students wouldn't grieve for her because they like her or feel connected to her—instead her death would only affect them on practical or professional terms. She doesn't seem to regret this right now, but she also still feels fulfilled and secure in her academic accomplishments.

Susie enters and measures the basin, and then asks Vivian if she's okay "all by [her]self here." Susie comments on how Vivian hasn't gotten many visitors, and Vivian corrects her to say that she's had "none, to be precise." Susie says she will try to check in on Vivian more, and tells Vivian to call her if she needs anything. Vivian, "uncomfortable with kindness," thanks her.

Susie grows in importance as a character as the play progresses, and it becomes clear that she is the only one who actually cares about Vivian as a human being and is naturally compassionate towards her. But Vivian is still "uncomfortable with kindness" and seemingly comfortable with the fact that no one at all has visited her.

SCENE 5

Vivian addresses the audience, saying that "in this dramatic structure you will see the most interesting aspects" of her treatment and stay at the hospital, but that the vast majority of her time is spent simply lying there in silence. She says if *she* were writing the scene, she would lie there for fifteen minutes and make the audience sit and watch. But she reassures the audience that she won't, since "brevity is the soul of wit."

Vivian again acts as a narrator detached from her character-self. She quotes Shakespeare's Hamlet on wit, retaining her cleverness and love of literature even as her situation worsens. At the same time, her complaints about boredom might suggest that she does indeed wish she had some visitors.

Vivian then introduces the scene—a Friday morning, "Grand Rounds"—and says "Action." Dr. Kelekian, Jason, and four other clinical fellows enter. Jason asks Vivian how she's feeling, and she responds with "Fine." Jason then gives Vivian a pelvic exam, describing her cancer and treatment aloud to the other fellows. As he continues his monologue (which is full of medical jargon), Vivian comments to herself on the term "Grand Rounds," and how the practice is similar to a graduate seminar in literature, except now *she* is the one being read like a book.

"Grand rounds" is a teaching practice of examining a patient and presenting questions about their treatment to an accompanying audience of students (in this case, the clinical fellows). While it can be very useful, it also has the potential to be dehumanizing for the patient if they are present and conscious, as in Vivian's case here. Once again Vivian focuses on details of language to escape her uncomfortable situation.

As Jason finishes his description, Vivian remarks to herself, "excellent command of details." Dr. Kelekian then gives Jason this same compliment, and starts to ask the fellows questions about Vivian's treatment. Jason always answers first, and the other fellows "resent him." They discuss Vivian's side effects, and when the fellows fail to answer one of Kelekian's questions he commiserates with Vivian about the inadequacies of students. Vivian is "delighted" to be addressed thus.

Vivian and Kelekian echoing each other's statements reinforces their similarities (for example, they both love details and thoroughness), but their situations are now very different. Kelekian is praising Jason abstractly, while for Vivian Jason's competency is a matter of her own health. Also note how "delighted" Vivian is to actually be addressed as a human being, and even a colleague, by Kelekian. She is starting to feel the strain of being treated solely as a research object.

The questioning over, the fellows leave, but Kelekian stops Jason and reminds him, "Clinical." Jason then thanks Vivian, and then he and Kelekian leave her "with her stomach uncovered." Vivian gets up and muses on the detailed examinations she receives, and the cycles of her treatment. She says she has been looking up the medical terms the doctors use, because she has always treated words "with respect." She then recalls the exact hour that she "knew words would be [her] life's work."

Jason continually has to remind himself or be reminded by others with the word "clinical" (meaning clinical skills, including bedside manner), and it is only then that he actually addresses Vivian and interacts with her as a human being—although even then usually only with the detached "how are you feeling?" Vivian is still trying to maintain a sense of control in her situation by focusing on language: her comfort zone and area of expertise.

SCENE 6

"It was my fifth birthday," Vivian says, as she enters a flashback. Mr. Bearing, her father, is reading a newspaper while Vivian starts to read Beatrix Potter's book **The Tale of the Flopsy Bunnies**. Vivian, reading aloud, comes to the word "soporific" and sounds it out. She asks her father what it means, and he says it means "makes you sleepy." They discuss the word and then Vivian keeps reading. She is delighted to see that in the passage's accompanying picture the bunnies are asleep—"because of *soporific*!"

Mr. Bearing is meant to be played by the same actor as Dr. Kelekian, perhaps suggesting that Vivian's father shared similar high academic standards and a lack of personal warmth. This scene shows Vivian engaging with language on a pure, simple level—a far cry from her present tendency towards analysis and criticism.

The flashback ends (and Mr. Bearing exits), and Vivian discusses what felt so magical about this moment—"the illustration bore out the meaning of the word, just as he had explained it." She then gives some of Donne's more fascinating words, and discusses medical terminology. She admits that when it comes to her cancer, the doctors have a "more potent terminology than I." She says, "My only defense is the acquisition of vocabulary."

Vivian briefly explains the evolution of her relationship with language—from a simple love for words and delight in their "meaning" to an increasingly complex understanding that also leaves behind her original childlike delight in the "truth" of words. She is still clinging to words in the face of mortality, but at least she now recognizes this fact. In the absence of friends or family, her sole lifelong relationship is with language.

SCENE 7

At the hospital, Susie supports a clearly suffering Vivian. Vivian says she was at home reading and then suddenly felt terrible, so she decided to come in. Susie asks if someone drove her, and Vivian says she took a taxi. Susie brings Vivian some juice and goes to get Jason, who is on call that night. Jason enters and, without looking at Vivian, asks, "How are you feeling, Professor Bearing?" Vivian says, "My teeth—are chattering."

As Vivian's health drastically deteriorates, Susie acts more and more as a supporter and friend, while Jason continues to remain detached and "clinical." Once again its suggested that Vivian has no close friends, as she had no one to call to drive her to the hospital.

Susie gives Jason the stats on Vivian's vitals, and suggests that Kelekian should lower the dose for the next cycle of chemo. Jason dismisses this, saying that Vivian is "tough. She can take it." He leaves, and Susie takes Vivian to her room and tends to her, wiping her face with a wet washcloth. Susie exits.

Again Susie is concerned about Vivian as a human being who is clearly suffering, while Jason is focused on his research. If they were to lower Vivian's dose, the study would be ruined. Thus Jason callously speaks for Vivian and dismisses Susie's concerns.

After a while Kelekian and Jason enter, both of them with surgical masks. Kelekian talks to Vivian, and says she's "doing swell." She is going to be isolated for a couple of days, and he tells her to "think of it as a vacation." Kelekian then leaves, as Jason puts on a paper gown, mask, and gloves. Vivian explains to the audience that she is in isolation because the chemo has destroyed her immune system, so "every living thing is a health hazard" to her right now.

Kelekian, like Jason, feels entitled to speak for Vivian about her own health and is insistent that she keep going in her treatment as part of the study. Vivian already lacked close relationships with others, but now she is literally isolated from any human contact at all. At her most vulnerable she is also made to feel entirely alone.

Jason comes in to Vivian's room, complaining to himself about how much prep he has to do just to come into the room and read a chart. He then remembers "Clinical," and asks how Vivian is doing, and then immediately leaves. Vivian continues her explanation to the audience: she isn't in isolation because of the cancer, but rather because of the treatment. "My treatment imperils my health." She muses on the paradox of this, and imagines Donne writing a poem about it. She then imagines herself teaching this poem, and her students being perplexed by it. She says she could "draw so much from the poems"—she "could be so powerful."

Jason is especially self-absorbed and even cruel in his detachment here, as he complains about having to wear certain equipment while Vivian is suffering and dying in the same room, and he has to remind himself to even address her at all. In her increasingly desperate state, Vivian again reaches out to language and Donne in an attempt to find a sense of agency. She is totally helpless, but finds some solace in imagining herself in a position of power, back in a world where she was the one in control.

SCENE 8

Vivian stands and removes her IV, "as if conjuring a scene." She starts to deliver a lecture on John Donne and his wit. In his Holy Sonnets, Vivian says, Donne used his wit to wrestle with the largest issues of humanity: "life, death, and God." This was essentially an exercise in "ingenuity, virtuosity, and a vigorous intellect" that never came to any real conclusions.

Vivian's escapism becomes more extreme here, as in her total isolation she lets herself slip into a fantasy of her past self: healthy, brilliant, and in control. At the same time, the subject of her "lecture" applies to her current situation—Donne's wrestling with mortality and coming to no satisfying conclusions, but finding pleasure in the struggle itself.

A screen lowers behind her, and on it is projected Donne's sonnet "If poysonous mineralls." Vivian reads the sonnet aloud, and then discusses it. In her analysis, the speaker of the poem finds God's forgiveness "hard to believe," so he wants to hide from God. With his rhetorical questions and wit, the speaker essentially "turns eternal damnation into an intellectual game." Vivian continues her lecture, saying of the poem's end: "We are left to our own consciences. Have we outwitted Donne? Or have we been outwitted?"

Vivian suggests that Donne, finding no answers to his questions, contents himself with games of wit, language, and intellect. It's then implied that Vivian herself has done this as well—but in her current desperate state, she is forced *to contend with the reality of death, and can no longer hide behind wit or intelligence.*

Susie comes in, interrupting Vivian to say that the doctors want her to have another ultrasound. Vivian resists, saying "not now," but Susie insists that it must be done. Vivian says she is "in the middle of—this" right now, finally declaring "*I do not want to go now*!" Eventually Vivian admits defeat, though, and walks away from the poem, hooks herself back to her IV, and lets a technician wheel her away.

Vivian is feeling increasingly helpless and afraid, and wants to linger in her fantasy of abstractions and analysis for as long as she can. Notably, she also seems childish in this exchange, as she slowly loses her façade of detachment, superiority, and "toughness" over the course of her ordeal.

SCENE 9

Vivian sits in her wheelchair and recites a Donne poem about death. She then tells the audiences how sick she truly is and discusses the treatment she has undergone. She has "broken the record" and "become something of a celebrity" for undergoing this aggressive new treatment, and Kelekian and Jason are pleased and excited to publish an article about her. Vivian then corrects herself—the article won't be about her, it will be about her ovaries and her cancer. She is now just a "specimen." She says her next line is supposed to be about how relieved she is to return to her room after the tests, but actually returning to her room is "just the next thing that happens."

Vivian still feels a sense of accomplishment in distinguishing herself academically, but she is also accepting the reality of the situation: she *is not the celebrity, but rather her cancer and its treatment are. She has been dehumanized by this ordeal, and no longer finds enough fulfillment or satisfaction in purely intellectual accomplishments. In her suffering and loneliness she finds herself longing for more.*

SCENE 10

Vivian goes to her bed and says her line about being relieved to get back to her room (but with two "goddamns" thrown in). Jason enters and asks how she's feeling—Vivian says, "Fine." Jason discusses Vivian's side effects, and makes it clear that he's simplifying things for her because "we're supposed to." He complains that he had to take a whole course on bedside manner, and says it was a "colossal waste of time for researchers."

Jason assumes that Vivian is still her "old self" (or just doesn't care), and thus he is impatient with social niceties or anything that might get in the way of research and study. He is being especially callous here, but the old Vivian would not have been hurt by his manner, and probably would have admired his rationality and work ethic.

Jason turns to go, but Vivian stops him, "trying to ask something important." She hesitates, and Jason worries that she is experiencing confusion as a side effect. Vivian denies this, and then asks Jason why he decided to study cancer. Jason says cancer is the only thing he ever wanted to study, because it's so powerful and mysterious in its unstoppable growth and science's inability to understand it. He says that the endlessly replicating cancer cells grown in a lab are called "immortality in culture."

Vivian is trying to interact with Jason on a person-to-person level and talk about important matters, but he can still only see her as a specimen who might be experiencing certain side effects. His fascination with cancer also shows his detachment once again, as he sees no issue with rhapsodizing about cancer's "awesomeness" right in front of someone currently dying of cancer.

Vivian asks if Jason has any theories about curing cancer, and he says he's mostly waiting to get a lab of his own, once he gets through this fellowship. "The part with the human beings," Vivian clarifies, and Jason complains about how it's a waste of time. Vivian then asks what he says when a patient is "frightened." Jason is confused by this question, and again asks if Vivian is experiencing memory loss. Vivian reassures him she's not, and Jason leaves.

Jason is explicit in his preference of solo research over human interaction, and of rationality over emotion. Vivian understands this—it's been her way of thinking for most of her life—so she's able to almost finish Jason's sentences for him, but it's also apparent that she now longs for something more. She needs basic comfort, because she *is the one who's frightened.*

Vivian gets out of bed and addresses the audience, commenting on how "the young doctor, like the senior scholar, prefers research to humanity. At the same time the senior scholar, in her pathetic state as a simpering victim, wishes the young doctor would take more interest in personal contact." Vivian says there will now be a "series of flashbacks" showing how in the past she denied her students "the touch of human kindness she now seeks."

This is an important moment of self-reflection for Vivian. She's still speaking about it in a detached, analytical way, but is basically admitting that she now wants kindness and human connection, not just intellectual expertise and rationality. She then ironically comments on the flashbacks to follow, which will highlight how she's being "taught a lesson" by this ordeal.

SCENE 11

Students enter, and Vivian addresses them as a class. She singles out one student and asks him a question about a sonnet. The student is confused, and Vivian (after acknowledging to the audience something kinder she could have said) reprimands him sharply, telling him to come to class prepared or don't come at all.

Vivian never valued kindness or empathy when it got in the way of rationality or excellence, but now she is finally learning that these qualities are also important to the human experience.

Vivian addresses the class again, commenting on how Donne doesn't try to resolve the issues of life so much as "revel…in their complexity." Another student asks her: why? Vivian lets the student follow his train of thought, and the other students seem to agree with him. The student says it seems like Donne is scared, and so he "hides behind this *wit*." Vivian suggests that Donne might be "suspicious of simplicity," but the student says that's "pretty stupid." Vivian tells the audience that the student has a good point here, but is unable to follow it all the way through. Indeed, the student starts to ramble and loses his train of thought.

This student makes an excellent point—one that Vivian herself is slowly coming to accept—but because the student is unable to properly articulate it, Vivian ignores it. In the flashback she still sees no problem with "hiding behind wit" or complexity for complexity's sake only. It is only now, in the face of her own death, that she comes to value simplicity, emotion, and human connection.

Next Vivian says she remembers overhearing two students making fun of her after a lecture. She had been discussing the way to pronounce "expansion" in a poem, and as they are leaving the students use her pronunciation in a clever exchange. Vivian admits to the audience that they were being witty, but she was unable to appreciate it at the time.

Even Vivian's appreciation of wit—a centerpiece of her intellectual life—was limited to the abstract and academic sphere. She disapproved of it as a part of spontaneous interactions between individuals.

Next a student interrupts Vivian and asks for an extension on an assignment. Vivian guesses that the student's grandmother died, and the student says she's correct—he has to go home. Vivian refuses to the grant the extension. The student leaves and the classroom disappears, and Vivian tries to describe what these scenes make her feel, trudging about silently on stage before giving up and going back to bed.

This is Vivian at her most cruel and naïve. She ignores the reality of death and grief for the sake of an assignment being on time. This final flashback thus shows all that she has had to unlearn over the course of the play—hiding from empathy behind intellect, hiding from emotion behind rationality, and hiding from death behind wit.

SCENE 12

Vivian is in bed at the hospital late at night and tells the audience that she wanted Susie to come visit her so she "had to create a little emergency." Vivian pinches her IV tube so that the pump alarm goes off, and Susie enters. Vivian admits that she's fine and was awake. Susie addresses Vivian as "sweetheart" and asks her what's wrong. Vivian tells the audience that no one ever calls her "sweetheart," but she is allowing it this time.

In direct contrast to the last scene, here Edson shows Vivian at her most vulnerable and helpless, longing for some human contact and kindness to the point that she creates a false "emergency" and allows herself to be addressed in a way she once would have considered inappropriate.

Vivian tells Susie that she can't figure things out this time—she's in a "quandary"—and she feels scared and out of control. Vivian starts to cry, and Susie comforts her. Vivian says she doesn't feel sure of herself anymore, and she "used to feel so sure." Susie offers to get Vivian a **popsicle** and Vivian says ("like a child") "Yes, please." Susie leaves and Vivian tries to pull herself together, explaining in medical terms why the popsicle sounds appealing to her in her current state.

Vivian is facing the same "quandaries" Donne struggled with in his work, but Vivian can no longer hide behind wit and intellectual games as Donne did (in his poems at least). It was in that realm that she "felt so sure," but in the face of real death she has no control or agency. Vivian has been abandoned by her academic achievements and analytical skill, and finds herself longing for simple human connection. Part of the arc of Vivian's unlearning involves a kind of return to childlike simplicity, and this is symbolically reflected in her request for a popsicle. She then recovers slightly and tries to remain rational and detached, but only halfheartedly so.

Susie returns with a two-stick orange **popsicle**, and Vivian breaks it in half and offers Susie the other part. Susie sits by the bed and tells Vivian about how she used to eat popsicles as a kid. "Pretty profound, huh?" she asks, and Vivian responds, "It sounds nice."

This tender scene shows Susie giving Vivian the kindness and comfort—almost like that of a loving mother to a child—that Vivian has never wanted or needed before, but that she finds herself needing now. Susie even acknowledges her own non-intellectual nature, perhaps feeling judged in Vivian's presence, but Vivian is finally appreciating qualities like this, so she doesn't retreat to her refuge of language. Her simple "it sounds nice" thus seems especially sincere.

Susie then says they need to talk about something—Vivian's cancer isn't going away. The treatment has made the tumor get smaller, but the cancer has started in new places, as well. She says "they've learned a lot for their research" with the treatment, but there still isn't a cure for what Vivian has. Susie apologizes and says the doctors should have explained this, but Vivian tells her she already knew—she "read between the lines."

As usual, the doctors have been speaking to Vivian in a detached manner, using medical terminology and careful phrases to avoid stating the fact of the matter: she is going to die. It's then especially kind of Susie to deliver this news in such a personal and compassionate way, as Jason or Kelekian certainly wouldn't have been so comforting. Vivian is still seeing the world through the lens of language, but no longer using language as an escape—she is returning to her simple love of words, and using her analytical skills to interact with the real world.

Susie says Vivian now has to think about her "code status"—what to do if her heart stops. If she's "full code," then a code team will come and resuscitate her, but if she's "Do Not Resuscitate," then they won't try to restart her heart. Susie says she wanted to let Vivian know the choices before the doctors talk to her.

This conversation sets up the play's climactic scene, and also further contrasts the compassionate and caring Susie with the more detached and impersonal doctors.

Susie seems to disapprove of the desire to keep someone alive at all costs for the sake of science—because the doctors "always…want to know more things." Vivian says she too wants to know more things. Susie assumes she will be "full code" then, but Vivian contradicts her. If her heart stops, Vivian says, "let it stop." Susie, surprised, says she'll tell Kelekian this. As she goes to leave, Vivian asks Susie if she'll still take care of her—"'Course, sweetheart," Susie says. "Don't you worry."

Susie is once more set as a foil to Jason (or Vivian), in that she prioritizes human dignity over research. Vivian then makes a crucial and seemingly out-of-character decision—she wants to die with dignity, even if it means messing up the study and ruining her legacy as a "specimen." Note that Vivian again seems childlike in her request for Susie to take care of her, and Susie kindly meets her needs.

Susie leaves and Vivian addresses the audience, remarking on how "corny" her life has become, with things like **popsicles** and "sweethearts." But then she admits that they aren't talking about abstract things anymore—they're discussing her literal death. "Now is not the time for verbal swordplay…for wit," she says. "Now is a time for simplicity. Now is a time for, dare I say it, kindness." She says she thought being smart enough would save her, but now she recognizes she was wrong. She's scared and just wants to hide, and she climbs under the covers.

Vivian gives a sort of thesis statement for the play here, as she openly acknowledges the changes she has made and the lessons she has learned in the face of death. She admits that she now longs for kindness and connection, and in the face of real death she no longer finds fulfillment or security in wit or intellect. She finally accepts that just being smart enough was never going to work—death is not a puzzle that can be solved. Vivian then echoes Donne's action within his poems, and "hides" from her encroaching mortality.

SCENE 13

Vivian wakes up in pain and addresses the audience. She says she wants to explain how the pain feels, but she doesn't have the words. She apologizes for how this horrifying pain might affect the "dramatic coherence of [her] play's last scene," but it really "*hurts like hell*."

Once again the brutal realities of life overpower human constructions like language or "dramatic coherence." For Vivian, losing her words must feel especially painful and degrading, as they were her last bulwark against losing control entirely.

Susie enters, and says she's paged Kelekian. Kelekian enters, and Susie says they need to give Vivian "Patient-Controlled Analgesic"—a pump so that Vivian can control how much pain medicine she receives in her IV. Kelekian asks Vivian if she's in pain, and Vivian is infuriated by the question. She describes her ailments and brutal suffering, crying, but she is "unnoticed by the staff."

Susie, who values Vivian as a person, wants her to have some agency in her situation and control how much pain medication she gets. Vivian finally cracks under Kelekian's insensitive questions and lashes out, in her desperation seeking any kind of connection, even a negative one.

Kelekian orders a morphine drip, going against Susie's suggestion of Patient-Controlled medication. He tells Vivian they're going to help her through this, and then leaves. Vivian addresses the audience, her voice weak: "Hi. How are you feeling today?" She says that these are her "last coherent lines" in the play. She then quotes Donne about death again, using the melodramatic punctuation E. M. Ashford had criticized in her earlier flashback. But Vivian "sees that the line doesn't work," and she apologizes to the audience.

Kelekian takes away Vivian's last vestige of control—how much pain medication she receives—and gives her a strong dose, essentially rendering her incoherent for the rest of the play. Vivian poignantly asserts her melodramatic interpretation of Donne, hoping to find some kind of answer or solace in this crisis, but still she is stymied by her own analytical self, and perhaps also by the tragic realization that there never was any real answer to be found in language. She has been stripped of everything, even her words, and must face death with only the core of her being.

SCENE 14

Vivian lies down as Susie injects morphine into her IV. Vivian says, "I trust this will have a soporific effect." Susie says, "Well, I don't know about that, but it sure makes you sleepy." Vivian finds this funny and starts to laugh. Susie is confused, and then Vivian explains it and Susie starts laughing too. Susie thanks Vivian for explaining, and Vivian says, "I'm a teacher." They giggle together for a while until the morphine kicks in and Vivian falls asleep.

The word "soporific" calls back to Vivian's reading of The Tale of the Flopsy Bunnies, *as once again she finds a childlike comfort and "unlearning" with Susie. She is also returning to that simple enjoyment of language, and her basic identity as a teacher—no longer constructing her sense of self based on academic achievements or a sense of rational superiority.*

SCENE 15

Jason and Susie discuss Vivian as they enter, and Jason comments on how Vivian was a great lecturer. He says a lot of students hated her, though, because she "wasn't exactly a cupcake." Susie laughs and then leans over to tell Vivian (who is unconscious) what's going on—they're inserting a catheter, but it won't hurt. Jason says, "Like she can hear you," and Susie responds, "It's just nice to do."

Vivian no longer speaks lucidly after the previous scene, and Edson presents more of the other characters' perspectives on her. As is typical, Jason treats Vivian like an object or specimen—even as he comments on her skill as a lecturer—while Susie offers her compassion and respect.

Jason comments on how Vivian has undergone a treatment so aggressive he didn't think it was possible. Susie says she thought a poetry professor would be more "dreamy," and Jason says Vivian's Donne class was more like "boot camp" because Donne was so intense and complex. Jason talks about the Holy Sonnets and how Donne had "Salvation Anxiety"—he couldn't deal with the promise of salvation, but also couldn't live without it, and so he just wrestled with that in his "brilliantly convoluted" sonnets. "Like a game," Jason says, "to make the puzzle so complicated."

Jason offers the audience another interpretation of Donne here, further explaining the poet's navigation of the big questions of life, and how he ultimately had to "hide" behind his wit. Jason, who still has the worldview of a pre-cancer Vivian, finds no problem with this idea of complexity for complexity's sake only. For Jason (at this point), intellect alone is fulfilling enough.

Jason inserts the catheter. Susie asks him, "what happens in the end?" Jason explains that there is no end or understanding in Donne—"the puzzle takes over." Susie keeps pushing for some kind of conclusion or meaning, but Jason dismisses this. He says, "you can't think about that *meaning-of-life* garbage all the time or you'd go nuts." Susie is unsure and thoughtful, and she lingers with Vivian after Jason leaves.

Susie wants there to be some kind of meaning or answer, for Donne to face his anxieties head-on and find a truth. Jason, meanwhile, dismisses the clichéd search for "meaning-of-life garbage"—a sentiment Vivian might once have echoed. But Susie doesn't have any answers herself either. The play is moving towards a conclusion similar that of its characters and Donne—that there is no simple conclusion, and we must face mortality as best we can, with all the tools we have: kindness, language, art, reason, religion, love.

SCENE 16

Professor E. M. Ashford, who is now 80 years old, enters Vivian's hospital room. Vivian wakes up, confused, and speaks in a slurred way. E. M. says she was in town visiting her great-grandson and then went to see Vivian at her office and was sent here. "I feel so bad," Vivian says, and starts crying. E. M. comforts her, takes off her shoes, and gets on the bed next to Vivian.

Vivian is reduced to the simplest of language, crying like a child in front of her old mentor whom she once tried so hard to impress. Yet E. M. doesn't judge her, and meets her on her own level, getting into bed with her. She too has learned to value kindness and empathy.

E. M. offers to recite some Donne, but Vivian moans "noooooooo." E. M. then takes a children's book out of her bag: **The Runaway Bunny** by Margaret Wise Brown. She starts to read it aloud as Vivian drifts in and out of sleep. The story describes a bunny who wants to run away from his mother and threatens to turn in to various other things if his mother runs after him. As she reads, E. M. comments on the text: "A little allegory of the soul. No matter where it hides, God will find it." Vivian can only groan in response. Eventually the little bunny gives up and decides he should just stay home with his mother and "be your little bunny." When E. M. finishes the story, Vivian is asleep. E. M. gathers her things, says "And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest," and leaves.

Vivian's groaning rejection of Donne is humorous but also poignant—as she said previously, now is not the time for intellectual games, analysis of language, or wit. Now is the time for simplicity and kindness, and so the two great Donne scholars read a children's book about bunnies together—an echo of Vivian's first experience with the magic of language, and thus another symbol of her "unlearning" and return to a more childlike state. E. M. still can't seem to resist analyzing the book somewhat, but this could also just be her approaching Vivian as a colleague who could appreciate such things, while also treating her with compassion. E. M. then quotes Shakespeare—whom she had previously disparaged as being too melodramatic—to bid farewell to Vivian, in perhaps another acknowledgment of the more emotional aspects of the human experience.

Jason enters, asking Vivian "How are you feeling today?" without looking at her. He checks her vitals and realizes that her kidneys have failed. He then looks at Vivian and listens for her breathing. There's nothing, and Jason panics and calls a Code Blue. He frantically gives Vivian CPR as he waits for the code team to arrive.

After the poignant scene with E. M., Jason enters with his typical dehumanizing question. He then makes a crucial decision to give Vivian CPR and call a code team, despite knowing that she is "DNR." The act of giving her CPR also makes his choice especially damning—he didn't just blurt out a mistaken order, but continues to take action that he knows is going against Vivian's wishes.

Susie enters and yells at Jason for calling a code, reminding him that Vivian is "Do Not Resuscitate." Jason protests, saying, "She's Research!" Susie grabs Jason and throws him off the bed, saying that he saw Kelekian put in the order for Vivian to be DNR.

Susie is Vivian's only defender against Jason's attempt to totally dehumanize her into nothing more than "research." Susie takes drastic action, violently throwing Jason from the bed, but she does so in defense of her patient's humanity.

The code team sweeps in, knocks Susie out of the way, and starts trying to resuscitate Vivian. Susie tries to stop them and cancel the code, but they ignore her. A loudspeaker in the hall announces that the code is cancelled, but the team continues. Susie and Jason now both run to each person and yell for them to stop, but they still administer an electric shock to Vivian to try and restart her heart. Finally Jason screams "I MADE A MISTAKE!" and the team stops.

The play's climactic scene is a frenzy of action, culminating in Jason finally admitting that he acted wrongly and humiliating himself in front of the rest of the staff. Note that only Jason, as a clinical fellow and man, is listened to by the code team, while Susie is ignored and shoved aside.

The code team head asks Susie "Who the hell are you?" and demands to see Vivian's chart, and they realize that Kelekian indeed put in an order that she was no code. They discuss how this was a "doctor fuck-up" and is Jason's fault, as Jason can only whisper "Oh, God" to himself. While all this is happening, Vivian gets out of bed and walks away from the scene, "towards a little light." She slowly removes all her hospital equipment and gown, and stands naked, reaching for the light. Then the light goes out, and the bedside scene fades.

It's implied that this is a turning point for Jason, as he realizes just how far he's gone down the road of treating human beings like research specimens, though it's unclear how his behavior might change after this (or how he'll be punished for his error). Vivian, who has been stripped of her pride, her achievements, and even her words, becomes fully naked in death and reaches for an unknown, unknowable light—representative of Donne's search for salvation, and also crucially lying beyond the gaze of the audience. Whatever conclusion Vivian might have found, it is not for us to know, yet.

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