

## ENGLISH ADVANCED: *DONNE/W;t*

**Comparisons between *W;t* and Donne's poetry enhances our understanding of the human experience.**

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A more comprehensive understanding of the human experience emerges from pursuing correlations between John Donne's 17th Century poetry and Margaret Edson's 1993 play *W;t*. Donne's *A Valediction Forbidding Mourning* is pertinent to *W;t* as the two explore contrasting scenarios in order to demonstrate a contextually universal idea regarding the essential nature of the nourishment provided by relationships when an individual is faced with adversity. Similarly, *W;t*, as with John Donne's *Hymne to God, My God in My Sicknesse*, shows the way in which an individual's response to death elucidates the personal beliefs that manifest in their humanity.

When confronted with a distressing situation, relationships are vital to human nature for overcoming obstacles. This understanding is initiated through exploration of connections between the poem *A Valediction Forbidding Mourning* and the protagonist of *W;t*. Donne's work displays the way in which a romantic attachment is equivalent to divine perfection by evoking the circular image. The latter utilises a prominent vision present within late Medieval and Renaissance poetry. Dante for example, associated the circle's perfect proportions the perfection of the Godly image, matched within humanity by the potential of the soul. The conceit of the compasses broadens this motif "And we be two as stiffe twin compasses are two," as the repetition of two displays the couple's lack of differentiation between the physical and the spiritual by exemplifying their unity through symbolism of objects usually associated with travel. Similarly, the enjambment of the final lines "Thy firmness drawes my circle just and makes me end where I begunne," shows the poet drawing on simplicity and contentment as the dominant idea within the situation of his parting from his wife by carrying the notion fluently into the next line.

Contrastingly, Vivian's emotional journey in the *W;t* sees the protagonist lacking the empowering relationships that are elemental foundation of a positive human experience, as she tries to cling onto her intellect as a means of detaching herself from a distressing situation. While John Donne puts faith into the emotionally alleviating notion a powerful love, Vivian Bearing utilises her capability of mind when dealing with her illness and it is through the portrayal of her tribulations that the latter notion regarding relationships is endorsed. "Death-semicolon-thou shalt die" is symbolism that is indicative of Vivian's adoption of the New Criticism as the concerns of punctuation are characteristic of this 20th century scholarly movement that chooses to reject a composer's context, as Vivian seems to have done with the study of Donne. The most prominent indication of these sentiments lies in the characterisation. Her name 'Vivian' comes from the Latin root *vivus* meaning 'to be alive' while her surname indicates the way she is 'bearing' life in the human world without fully investing in humanity itself. The prompt breaking of the fourth wall indicates this as she begins her story by establishing a relationship most comfortable to her: that between a witty lecturer and her less educated audience. "There is some debate as to the correct response...Should one reply 'I feel good', using feel as a copulative," the highly modal tone employed by Vivian in her scrutiny of a salutation highlights her overwhelming intellect. Vivian's fear of death, the initial reason for her detachment, elucidates her lack of emotional support. Thus, the extent of her depleted spirituality can be affirmed through this response a notion that is also shown in John Donne's *Hymne to God My God in My Sicknesse*.

John Donne's tranquil response to the prospect of death in his *Hymn to God* shows the predominance of Donne's Christian faith during his life, a characteristic piety for people of the Renaissance period. This contrasts to the fear and detachment of Edson's protagonist. The central metaphysical conceit in the work lies in Donne's comparison of his body to a map "who lie Flat on this bed,". This imagery evokes the poet's certitude as he pictures himself calmly lying on his bed in anticipation of his imminent mortality. All throughout the work Donne's unshakable faith is presented through allusions both biblical and geographical. "As the first Adams sweat surrounds my face" the

biblical allusion elucidates Donne's integral spirituality by expressing his great awareness of the Holy Text while "Is the Pacific Sea my home? Is Anyan...and Gibaltare." Evoke the notion of death being a novel experience through references to foreign lands that have been prominent locations in the Renaissance Age of Discovery. These examples evoke Donne's exceedingly spiritual perspective on the human experience by their repeated divine connotations. While religion acts as Donne's vessel of amenity, Vivian's personal values, amalgamated with her already established lack of human relationships bring about a secular view of death that she finds both morbid and daunting.

Vivian Bearing's shallow view of the human experience reflects the steadfast beliefs and mental outlooks integral to her nature. "Simple human truth, uncompromising scholarly standards? They're connected? I just couldn't...I went back to the library." The two rhetorical questions connect Vivian's pedantic dissection of Donne's poetry by showing her intertwining the notions of humanity with her studies. As Vivian continues to obsess over 'scholarly standards' the meaning of Donne's poetry is realigned to fit her ideals, leading her to miss Donne's most blaring messages of the undeniable connection between a personal faith and contentment within the human experience. The cancer hospice is a setting that is subversive to Vivian's dignity as a scholar as well as a symbol of her vulnerability as she places her faith in a very modern, albeit undeveloped science that is only degenerates her physical state. Contrastingly to Donne, Vivian fears death entirely. "I feel so bad," this final admission juxtaposes with her usual reply 'fine' as she is no longer able to maintain her scholarly veneer under the strain of her suffering, a melancholy scenario for which redemption is offered by the imagery of the ending as Vivian walking naked into the light. Vivian Bearing's experiences as well as John Donne's poem Hymne to God, show the way in which a person's perspective on their mortality is heavily influenced by the human experience of their individual values.

In conclusion a deeper understanding of the human experience is acquired by comparing the poetry of John Donne and Margaret Edson's play *W;t*. As William James said "The deepest principle in human nature is the craving to be appreciated." and it is this manifestation of the human condition that allows the works to transcend time in the way they endorse emotionally nourishing relations. A similarly integral part of human nature that emanates when associations between the two texts are pursued is the way in which an individual's beliefs underscore their respective attitudes towards their eventual and inevitable mortality.