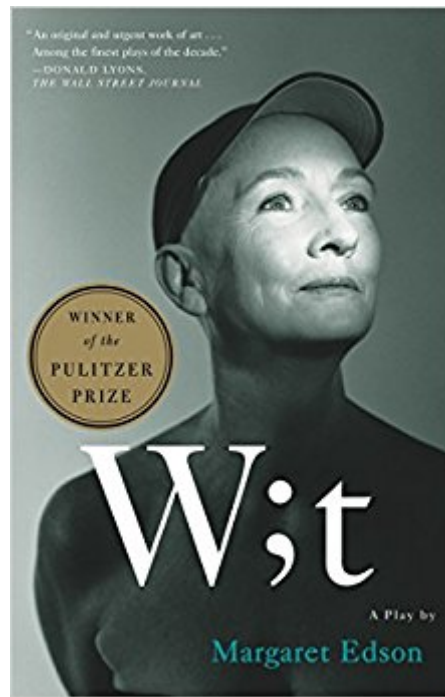


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# Wit: A Play



## Synopsis

Winner of the 1999 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, the Drama Desk Award, the Outer Critics Circle Award, the Lucille Lortel Award, and the Oppenheimer Award, Margaret Edson's powerfully imagined Pulitzer Prize-winning play examines what makes life worth living through her exploration of one of existence's unifying experiences—mortality—while she also probes the vital importance of human relationships. What we as her audience take away from this remarkable drama is a keener sense that, while death is real and unavoidable, our lives are ours to cherish or throw away—a lesson that can be both uplifting and redemptive. As the playwright herself puts it, "The play is not about doctors or even about cancer. It's about kindness, but it shows arrogance. It's about compassion, but it shows insensitivity." In *Wit*, Edson delves into timeless questions with no final answers: How should we live our lives knowing that we will die? Is the way we live our lives and interact with others more important than what we achieve materially, professionally, or intellectually? How does language figure into our lives? Can science and art help us conquer death, or our fear of it? What will seem most important to each of us about life as that life comes to an end? The immediacy of the presentation, and the clarity and elegance of Edson's writing, make this sophisticated, multilayered play accessible to almost any interested reader. As the play begins, Vivian Bearing, a renowned professor of English who has spent years studying and teaching the intricate, difficult Holy Sonnets of the seventeenth-century poet John Donne, is diagnosed with advanced ovarian cancer. Confident of her ability to stay in control of events, she brings to her illness the same intensely rational and painstakingly methodical approach that has guided her stellar academic career. But as her disease and its excruciatingly painful treatment inexorably progress, she begins to question the single-minded values and standards that have always directed her, finally coming to understand the aspects of life that make it truly worth living.

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## Customer Reviews

I bought and read the play after seeing it performed twice by Judith Light, once off-Broadway and once regionally in Washington, D.C. I believe one would find the play equally powerful without having seen it. Perhaps because Margaret Edson never had formal training as a playwright, no one told her what she "shouldn't" do, and as a result, *Wit* is a brilliant, searing, \*unique\* vision of how a woman's mind becomes sharper and more insightful even as her body deteriorates. The character of Dr. Vivian Bearing reminded me a lot of Maria Callas in "Master Class" (at least, as rendered on stage); both are strong, imperious characters who draw you into their confidence while challenging you to keep up. And it's a relief to find a play that doesn't talk down to its readers/viewers, and actually contains, for instance, a lecture on a Donne sonnet -- which, incredibly, moves the action forward. After reading or seeing the play, you feel emotionally drained but energized. I'm both a cancer patient and a playwright, and I can only hope that I'm able to produce as eloquent and powerful a work as Margaret Edson has given us.

Playwright Margaret Edson does everything in this play that playwrighting and directing teachers tell their students not to do. She speaks in jargon. She breaks the fourth wall. She demands a hefty cast. She's digressive. Yet the play, both in performance and as literature, is compelling. This play, in the great expressionist style, creates a world as seen through the eyes of only one character. Events unfold from a distinct point of view that is made comprehensible to us by allowing that POV to address us apart from stage events. Edson, a literature graduate and former oncology ward worker, is knowledgeable about the topics that inform this play: classic poetry and cancer. The connection between the metaphysical lyrics of John Donne and the imminent mortality of uterine cancer provide a smooth harmony in the character of Dr. Vivian Bearing. Thematically and structurally, this play has the theatrical elements that make playwrights from Sophocles to Strindberg to Sam Shepard writers of great significance. This isn't to say the play is easy to stage. Scene shifts take place without a pause to let actors get their feet. Our narrator gets a pelvic exam in full view of the audience. Supporting characters double on the fly, and lead characters have to change ages from scene to scene. At the final moments, our narrator appears in front of us as naked as the day she was born. But these difficult elements contribute to the great meaning that is

this play. Without these trials, the production wouldn't touch us in the same way. We need these almost offensive structural components to understand what the narrator must endure. This play is difficult to read, difficult to stage, difficult to watch. Yet the things that make it difficult make it most ultimately rewarding. A modern classic from a forward-thinking mind.

Dr. Vivian Bearing is renowned throughout the literary world for her expertise on John Donne's seventh century Holy Sonnets. The professor enjoys teaching at the University, but not as much as she relishes a rational analysis of Donne's brilliant work. However, the fiftyish Vivian soon learns that she suffers from late stage ovarian cancer. The University medical research staff provide her a rare opportunity to receive special experimental treatment. She soon finds herself feeling sicker from the "cure" than the disease even as she discovers that it is simpler to learn than to teach. As Vivian goes through the eight stage process, she begins to appreciate the Donne sonnets as simple works of art by a great metaphysical poet, and not just intellectual fodder to be ripped asunder by English teachers like her. *W;t* is an incredible play that forces the audience (reader or attendee) to evaluate one's values. The main theme is brutally honest yet done in a humorous, thought provoking manner. Margaret Edson provides one of the top plays of the decade as it leaves everyone agreeing it deserved the Pulitzer it won. This play (in book or theater form) needs to be experienced to understand the emotions it generates. Great work by a master playwright.

Six years ago, when I was living in San Francisco and attending high school, a friend of my family's took us all to see a production of 'Wit' because it was making a highly anticipated debut there after a run in New York. I remember this experience not because I thought that the play was good, but because it had made me so uncomfortable. I just didn't get it; perhaps I was too young. Last week I found myself in a bookstore, browsing for a new read, when I stumbled upon a lone copy of this book on the shelf. I skimmed through it and was intrigued by the play. I bought it and gave it another chance, and I am so glad that I did. Frankly, I was stunned by how beautiful -- and sadly truthful -- Margaret Edson's play is. Perhaps it's that in the years since I saw "Wit" performed I have had a cancer scare in my family, and have seen a lot of what she has captured in her play firsthand. Whatever the reason, I could no longer deny the power of the story because it made me uncomfortable to think about such things. I would highly recommend this play: it says so much about humanity, fear, loss, regret, and life in under a hundred pages -- truly an incredible feat. It would take most writers at least double that to say half of what Edson conveys so easily.

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