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Language in *Wit* by Margaret Edson

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Abstract

The aim of this bachelor thesis is to analyse the language in the play *Wit* (1991) by Margaret Edson. This piece of work deals with the questions of life, death, rationality, and humanity. Language in the play plays an important role in approaching all the powerful themes, by the main character's use of direct audience address, witty dialogues, or the quotations of John Donne's Holy Sonnets. This thesis examines five selected literary devices and analyses their role in the text. Subsequently, John Donne's verses and their role in the formation of the main character's approach towards life are focused on. The development of the main character is explored from the perspective of shift in her thinking, and consequently in her transition from complex to simple language. Margaret Edson depicts how emotional and physical suffering leads to the comprehension of crucial human values.

Introduction

Language is a skill that living creatures have for the purpose to convey meaning and communicate with others. Its exact origin is still being discussed but it is obvious that language constitutes an integral part of everyday human life.

People use language for various reasons; to inform, persuade, ask and respond, confess love, reveal feelings, express fears. Nevertheless, language seems to be limited. Expressing the innermost emotions, such as faith, pain or compassion, often fails due to the lack of appropriate word stock. A touch of hand, smile, hug or physical approval are supposed to be more powerful in those moments.

This thesis sets to explore and analyse the language in the play *Wit* (1991) by Margaret Edson. It consists of three chapters, each of them divided into subchapters.

In the first chapter, the life of the author, Margaret Edson, is looked at. The necessary background information is provided to enlighten what stands behind the literary work analysed in this thesis. A brief commentary on the reception of her work is a part of the first chapter, too.

The second chapter deals with the plot of the play, as not every reader is familiar with Margaret Edson's work.

The third chapter is divided into three subchapters. In the first subchapter five important literary devices – flashback, irony, juxtaposition, jargon and paradox – are examined, supported with relevant examples from the play. In the second subchapter, the thesis deals with the personality of poet John Donne, the prominent representative of the English Metaphysical poets. Donne's Holy Sonnets and their connection with the main character of the play by means of their quotations represent an integral part of the thesis. In the third subchapter, the topic of language complexity, simplicity, and limitations of language, in the context of development of the main character of the play, is examined.

1 Margaret Edson's Life and Work

1.1 Life

Margaret Edson, a playwright and sixth-grade teacher in Atlanta, was born on 4th July 1961 in Washington, D.C. and she grew up there. Her mother, Joyce Winifred Edson, a medical social worker and her father, Peter Edson, a newspaper columnist, encouraged her early theatrical learnings. Margaret was an active member of the theatre programme at high school.

She graduated magna cum laude in 1983 with a degree in Renaissance history at Smith College in Massachusetts. Then Edson spent a couple years doing odd jobs. In 1985 she took a job as a clerk at an oncology/AIDS unit at a research hospital in Washington. The unit was doing clinical trials of the drug for AIDS and developing new protocols for the treatment of ovarian cancer. There Edson was able to watch the interactions of patients with their caregivers, and to observe how patients coped with their illnesses and the dehumanizing environment of a busy hospital. Edson left the hospital after a year. However, the experience stayed with her.

Margaret Edson made up her mind to pursue a doctorate in literature but first she wished to write a play. And in 1991 she decided to write a play about her year at the hospital. In 1991, she enrolled in the graduate program in English at Georgetown University. When she was at school, Margaret Edson volunteered at an elementary school in Washington. After she got her master's degree, she became an elementary school teacher. At the time of writing *Wit* (1991), Edson was an Atlanta-area kindergarten teacher and since the early 2010s she has been a sixth-grade teacher at Inman Middle School in Atlanta and has no plans to write another play.

Margaret Edson has a partner, Linda Merrill, who is an art historian. They have known each other since they met as undergraduates at Smith College. They bring up two sons together.

1.2 Work

1.2.1 Edson's Path to *Wit*

Margaret Edson had never written a play before and she wrote *Wit* with no particular expectation that it would ever get staged. That was the reason why Edson felt free to write her play, mentioned Charles McGrath (2012).

Much of *Wit* is based on her experience as a clerk on a cancer floor in a Washington research hospital. She said about the time spent there that it was a very weighty and very meaningful time for her. According to McGrath (2012), she loved her job there, because she felt useful.

At the position as a clerk she was hit by the low survival rate of women with ovarian cancer and awed by their bravery in the face of death. Charles Klassen (2000) mentions, Edson knew she wanted her main character to be someone who moved from a position of authority and power to a position of dependency. Klassen (2000) also points out that Edson liked the idea of a highly articulate academic who discovers that her expertise in literary interpretation has little to do with the real-life trauma of cancer, which cannot be addressed through scholarly research or school intellectual argument.

When the play was finished, it was nearly three hours long. Her family, her first audience, gave Edson some suggestions, one of which was to trim the play. After some cutting, she started to send the play out to regional theatres. She hoped in seeing it produced. However, Edson received back only rejection letters.

1.2.2 *Wit* on Stage

In 1993, the South Coast Repertory Company in Costa Mesa, California gave the play a public reading, after which, in 1995, after more cuts, it was given a full production. It ran for seven weeks, got rave reviews, won numerous drama awards in Los Angeles area but then nothing again. Edson kept getting the same negative responses from producers: cast size too large, too much talk, too sad, too academic, too disease-of-month. (Cohen, 2000)

Finally, thanks to Edson's high school friend, Derek Anson Jones, who was working professionally in the theatre and was showing the script to producers, breakthrough appeared. Jones was chosen by the Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven, Connecticut to create a new production of the play with the actress Kathleen Chalfant playing the main character – Vivian. Audiences loved the play very much so a year later the production moved to Manhattan Class Company Theatre in New York City, where it was a hit. In January 1999 the production, still with Kathleen Chalfant in the lead, moved to the Broadway Union Square Theatre and became one of the hottest tickets in New York.

The play has been produced around the country at regional theatres e.g. in Atlanta, Sarasota, Seattle as well as in translations abroad. Kathleen Chalfant took the lead in the London production of the play. (Cohen, 2000)

1.2.3 Reviews of *Wit*

Every time the play is produced on stage, it strikes a chord with audiences.

Cohen (2000) points out that *The New York Times* critics called *Wit* the kind of theatrical experience of which legends are made.

The Atlanta reviewer Farmer (2016) notes that Edson wrote a character study of a woman who has tried to hide behind words and intellectualism all her life and is now facing a situation she has no idea how to cope with.

And the Northsider reviewer Dunne (2018) reminds about themes in *Wit* that the play also discusses the immense power of language, work, paradox, life, death and, naturally, wit.

1.2.4 Awards

The play was awarded nearly every drama award given for an off-Broadway play – e.g. The Drama Desk Award for outstanding play or The Outer Critics' Circle Award for outstanding play.

In 1999, *Wit* was awarded The Pulitzer Prize in drama.

In 2001 *Wit* was awarded Emmy Award for Outstanding Made for Television Film.

Margaret Edson donated the money she won for the Pulitzer Prize to set up a foundation dedicated to helping medical students with their bedside manner. (Kent, 2001, p. 841)

2 *Wit* in a capsule summary

2.1 Setting

The play takes place during about twelve months in a patient room of The University Hospital Comprehensive Cancer Centre and in various places of the memory of the main character – Vivian Bearing.

2.2 Plot

The play begins with Vivian Bearing talking to the audience. She is a patient in a research hospital. She is going through treatment for advanced ovarian cancer. Her prognosis is not good which she knows. Just right at the opening scene of the play she makes the audience aware of “the beginning of the spectacle of her “death“ (Ojrzynska, 2016, p. 300).

Before her hospitalization, she was a professor, specializing in John Donne, especially in his Holy Sonnets. To portrait her life before being hospitalized, Vivian takes the audience to various scenes in the past. These scenes show her achievements in the world of scholarship. Then the audience is taken to the scenes of her experience with aggressive chemotherapy that Vivian was undergoing in last eight months. It is clear how Vivian’s present reality is distorted with her previous life experience.

The audience follows Vivian during undergoing medical tests and number of procedures in the sterile hospital environment. She also takes them to her past when she was a university student. In that scene she had a meeting with her school professor, E. M. Ashford. After the encounter, Vivian decided to choose an extremely tough area to study – poetry of John Donne and to continue in her effort to become a preeminent scholar in the future.

Another moment from Vivian’s past which the audience is invited to follow is from her childhood, when she, as a five-years-old girl, spent time with her father reading a book about Peter Rabbit by Beatrix Potter and first fell in love with reading and with the magic world of words.

While lying in the hospital bed, Vivian recalls the classroom at university she taught at. She was well-known as a spellbinding lecturer on John Donne, and as a demanding teacher. Ironically, these qualities inspired Jason, one of her doctors, who attended her classes of poetry

while studying at university and today, in his profession, he is as uncompromising researcher as Vivian was in her past.

Vivian is undergoing chemotherapy which weakens her more and more and the doctors take less and less notice of her pain. The only person Vivian can rely on is Susan, her nurse, who comes every day, sees how Vivian suffers and treats her with kindness. She is also the person who helps Vivian to decide not to be resuscitated when there comes her time.

According to Agnieszka Romanowska (2013, pp. 113-114), the play deals with the questionable value of knowledge in relation to such important topics as human interactions and one's own attitude towards death. Awareness of mortality and becoming conscious that no one can be sheltered from death catalyses the main character's longing for humanity and her need for simplicity.

The play ends when Vivian passes away, having learnt about life, at peace with herself and her mortality, too.

3 Language in *Wit*

This chapter, divided into three subchapters, provides an analysis of the language. The first subchapter discusses literary devices used by Margaret Edson and their role in understanding the background of the main character, and the main character's manners and thinking, in the context of her present situation or/and other characters. Drawing on this, the second subchapter deals with the work of metaphysical poet John Donne, specifically with three of his Holy Sonnets, and the aim of examinations is to draw line between complexity of Donne's poetry and its impact on the main character's perception of life. The third, last chapter, focuses on the development of the main character and its impact on hierarchy of her values and her language, topic of limitations of language not omitted.

Romanowska (2013, p. 113) observes that Edson's text is extremely human and exquisitely layered and that the audiences and critics admire "its emotional appeal and sparkling display of witty, dramatically vigorous language"(Romanowska, 2013, p. 113). *Wit* demonstrates that language and its words have the power to define, describe, teach, and comfort. However, despite these ability words can often fall short, which the main character, who deals with words all her life, experiences, too. This is called paradox and *Wit* is a play which, besides other features, plays on paradox, too.

Vivian Bearing, the main character, is the narrator and guide throughout the play, which enables the audience to reach Vivian's thoughts via direct comments.

The language used by Margaret Edson plays a key role in comprehension of inner development of the main character. While Romanowska recognizes the protagonist's development by changing present and past tenses in the text, and then "her gradual acceptance of the past tense perspective" (Romanowska, 2013, p. 113), Martha Greene Eads adds that Vivian's illness changed her language "to terms that reflect her new focus on the earthy realities of digestion, excretion, and pain" (Eads, 2002, p. 245).

The language chosen by Margaret Edson is an effective way to introduce the main character as a person devoted to complex language, a person who struggles not to yield up her stance of authority from which she derives her strength. In addition, Edson also demonstrates that although language can be a great joy, its limitations are recognizable in the face of reality or death. Pain or fear cannot be expressed linguistically which means that words do not accurately express reality.

3.1 Literary devices

The next part of the work provides an analysis of literary devices used in language of *Wit*.

Language is figurative and uses figures of speech to be more effective, persuasive, and impactful. Figures of speech thus provide readers with new insights or appeal to their senses.

Figurative language covers the wide range of literary devices, e.g. metaphor, personification, oxymoron, hyperbole, alliteration, irony, sarcasm, allusion or synecdoche.

3.1.1 Flashbacks

The plot of the play is complicated by a series of flashbacks focusing on several key moments in the life of the main character.

In the play, audiences are aware of her first fascination with words in the flashback, which transfers action to Vivian's age of five. While reading *The Tale of Flopsy Bunnies* by Beatrice Potter, Vivian comes across the word soporific. Her father takes time to explain the word and illustrates its usage. Vivian then realises that words would be her life's work.

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. (Edson, 2000, p. 27)

Another important inquiry, brought by a flashback of Vivian denying her student the touch of human kindness, drives the audience to the university class. After the lesson, one of the students asks for an extension for an assignment.

STUDENT 1: I need to ask you for an extension on my paper. I'm really sorry, and I know your policy, but see –

VIVIAN: Don't tell me. Your grandmother died.

STUDENT 1: You knew.

VIVIAN: It was a guess.

STUDENT 1: I have to go home.

VIVIAN: Do what you will, but the paper is due when it is due.

[...] VIVIAN: I don't know. I feel so much – what is the word? I look back, I see the scenes, and I...

(Edson, 2000, p. 41)

The scene demonstrates Vivian in the past and her present reaction to what happened then. Eads (2002, p. 243) emphasises that Vivian was absolute cynical about her students. Only now Vivian finds how cruel she used to be, ignoring the reality of death and sadness for the sake of an assignment being on time, hiding from empathy behind intellect, preferring rationality and wit to emotions.

The reader or audience learn through several more flashbacks in the play about Vivian as a student worrying about her essay on John Donne, as a professor in her university classes and as a patient in the initial stages of ovarian cancer. By using the flashbacks, awareness of the main character's background and her human development in the past is revealed. As a part of the play, flashbacks serve the main character to learn more about the bad decisions she made, and examine, in a new perspective of her illness, what she believed in and what she practised.

3.1.2 Irony

According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary irony is „an incongruity between the situation in drama and the words used by the characters [...]“. (Merriam-Webster, 2019)

The main character's attempt to frame death as a solvable intellectual puzzle is ironic. She approaches herself and others with sardonic humour which, at first, seems to be too resistant to be spoilt.

The play opens with the monologue when irony helps Vivian in dissociating herself from the immediate circumstances, being an in-patient at the University Hospital Comprehensive Cancer Centre, devastated by illness, bald, with a baseball cap on her head. The wordplay with her surname – Bearing – is noticeable in the irony of her overbearing that she exhibits in her self-confident attitude.

VIVIAN: (*In false familiarity, waving and nodding to the audience*) Hi. How are you feeling today? Great. That's just great. (*In her own professional tone.*) This is not my standard greeting. I assure you. [...] But it is the standard greeting here. (Edson, 2000, p. 1)

In her short opening monologue she comments on the topic of irony:

VIVIAN: *Irony* is a literary device that will necessarily be deployed to great effect. I ardently wish this were not so. I would prefer that a play about me be cast in the mythic-heroic-pastoral mode; but the facts, most notably stage-four metastatic ovarian cancer, conspire against that. *The Faerie Queene* this is not. (Edson, 2000, p. 2)

Although Vivian is aware of her prognosis, initially she copes with it by means of sardonic and cynical humour and rises above the stressful situation. As Romanowska (2013, p. 122) proposes, even the moment when Vivian articulates the inkling that she may die, she is indignant rather than frightened and communicates with irony.

In the following scene, Vivian ironically comments on what would happen if she ‘barfs her brain out’:

VIVIAN: [...] 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 honour my memory they would put together a collection of *their* essays about John Donne. (Edson, 2000, p.20)

She acknowledges that her colleagues would not grieve for her. Her death would affect them only on professional terms.

Another example of irony can be distinguished in Posner’s, clinical fellow, statement, while talking to Vivian about his choice of medical branch.

JASON: [...] Cancer’s the only thing I ever wanted. (Edson, 2000, p. 36)

He is referring to his passion in medical research, but this statement demonstrates the quirk of fate has inverted the positions of authority between Posner and Bearing. Cancer is the last thing that Vivian Bearing wanted.

The irony is that the medical doctors are doing to her what she has often done to a literary text. As Vivian observes them during the Grand Round, she ponders:

VIVIAN: [...] Full of subservience, hierarchy, gratuitous displays, sublimated rivalries – I feel right at home. It is just like a graduate seminar.

With one important difference: in Grand Rounds, they read me like a book. Once I did the teaching, now I am taught.

This is much easier. I just hold still and look cancerous. It requires less acting every time.

(Edson, 2000, p. 23)

Irony in the play is used as a device which helps the main character cope with the reality. Grand Rounds is a teaching practise of examining a patient, presenting information about their treatment. Although this is a useful procedure, it also has a potential to dehumanize the patient. As Bertie Bregman asserts, “cold intellectuality that precludes empathy is a function of the scholar, not of the discipline“ (Bregman, 1999, p. 851). Because of escaping from the uncomfortable position, Vivian focuses on the ironical comments on her situation, trying to maintain the sense of control over the situation.

3.1.3 Juxtaposition

Another literary device used in the play is juxtaposition. Juxtaposition is defined as “the act or an instance of placing two or more things side by side “(Merriam-Webster, 2019).

The plot of the play takes place mainly in two places – the hospital and university. At first sight the places are different, but as Rimmon-Kenan (2006, p. 347) states, analogies can be observed between the two contrasted worlds.

By using juxtaposition Edson demonstrates the adaptability of language and how different fields of study can use the same word to mean different things. Confusion and lack of communication could occur as a result.

For example, when Dr Kelekian describes her cancer using the medical term ‘insidious’, Vivian zones out, focusing on the multiple meanings of the word.

KELEKIAN: Well, yes. Now then. You present with a growth that, unfortunately, went undetected in stages one, two, and three. Now it is an insidious adenocarcinoma, which has spread from the primary adnexal mass –

VIVIAN: ‘Insidious’?

KELEKIAN: ‘Insidious’ means undetectable at an –

VIVIAN: ‘Insidious’ *means* treacherous.

KELEKIAN: Shall I continue?

VIVIAN: By all means.

(Edson, 2000, p. 3)

In the play, technical and imaginative language, represented by the language of medical researchers on one hand and literary study language used by Vivian Bearing on the other hand, are an illustration of communication affected by juxtaposition.

Just a simple word ‘doctor’ leads to confusion:

TECHNICIAN 1: Name.

VIVIAN: My name? Vivian Bearing.

TECHNICIAN 1: Huh?

VIVIAN: Bearing. B-E-A-R-I-N-G. Vivian. V-I-V-I-A-N.

TECHNICIAN 1: Doctor.

VIVIAN: Yes, I have a Ph.D.

TECHNICIAN 1: *Your* doctor.

VIVIAN: Oh. Dr Harvey Kelekian.

(Edson, 2000, p. 9)

The quotation proves that in the hospital the treatment strips Vivian of her professional identity. Being hospitalized “puts the patient in position of inferiority“ (Rimmon-Kenan, 2006). This leads to Vivian’s involuntary adjustment of her language.

Edson also draws a connection between Vivian Bearing and Dr Kelekian’s fellow, young doctor Jason Posner, who took her class on the metaphysical poets during his studies at university. Jason is proud of a very good mark he got from the notoriously strict professor Bearing and explains his motivation for taking her course:

JASON: (*trying to be casual*) Professor Bearing was very highly regarded on campus. It looked very good on my transcript that I had taken her course. (*Silence.*) They even asked me about it in my interview for med school – (*He feels the mass and does a double take.*) Jesus! (*Tense silence. He is amazed and fascinated.*) [...]

Yeah. I survived Bearing’s course. No problem. Heh. (*Silence.*) Yeah, John Donne, those metaphysical poets, that metaphysical wit. Hardest poetry in the English department. Like to see *them* try biochemistry. (Edson, 2000, pp. 18-19)

Jason confesses that he has never been a lover of poetry and that he attended Vivian's lessons on John Donne only because of a good-looking transcript. In other words, he reveals that he cares, as Vivian in the past, only about his professional status. Romanowska (2013, p. 118) examines the juxtaposition of the characters that Edson dramatizes the play by showing similarities in the humanities scholar's and medical doctor's approaches to their fields of study.

Jason possesses many of the same characteristics as Vivian. He is smart, ambitious, dedicated to the medical research, and as Christine Gottlieb (2015, p. 332) mentions, Jason does not care about emotional and spiritual questions of his profession. He sees only a body, not the person lying in the bed and is annoyed with the patient's emotions. Vivian used to be autocratic with her students. To their detriment, both Vivian and Jason are arrogant and callous. Elizabeth Klaver aptly comments the play in the context of western culture: "The play demonstrates a contradictory moment in the history of Western culture: two humanist fields dedicated to a tradition of social and individual improvement – medicine and literature – are both guilty of yielding to a perspective that precludes compassionate treatment of human beings (Klaver, 2004, p. 660).

In the play, two seemingly different places are juxtaposed. Many similarities can be found in the approach of Vivian and medical doctors towards their professional discipline. Vivian's interest in teaching lies in the study material, not in her students. The doctors' interests are blind to the patient's emotions. Being treated by the doctors the way she is, Vivian becomes aware of her mistaken behaviour in the past. In juxtaposition of the characters, Edson demonstrates the importance of humanity and kindness.

3.1.4 Jargon

Jargon is „the technical terminology or characteristic idiom of a special activity or group; obscure and often pretentious language marked by circumlocutions and long words [...]“ (Merriam-Webster, 2019)

Vivian Bearing has devoted her life to the study of written word and lived her life under the impression that her rigorous study of John Donne's poetry has the power to fulfil her, give her success and a unique understanding of the world. Her self-worth is based on her academic superiority. When reduced to an anonymous patient, Vivian endures depersonalization and

dehumanization. Due to this, she informs, during the monologue while waiting for the technician with wheelchair, the audience about her previous extraordinary work:

VIVIAN: [...] My book, entitled *Made Cunningly*, remains an immense success, in paper as well as cloth.

In it, I devote one chapter to a thorough examination of each sonnet, discussing every work in an extensive detail. (Edson, 2000, p. 11)

In her current state of cancer victim, she realizes that acquisition of vocabulary has become her only defence. As Romanowska (2013, p. 123) proposes, by comparing the medical language to the vocabulary of John Donne, Vivian tries to overwhelm her sense of insecurity through continuous efforts to keep pace with the medical doctors. In the following quotation, Vivian ponders about medical terms, which doctors use to manifest their authority over the patients:

VIVIAN: [...] So imagine the effect that 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...anatomise me. And I will grant that in this particular field of endeavour they possess a more potent arsenal of terminology than I. My only defence is the acquisition of vocabulary. (Edson, 2000, p. 27-28)

During the first consultation with Dr Kelekian, Vivian is exposed to the high-caliber of medical jargon.

KELEKIAN: [...] In invasive epithelial carcinoma, the most effective treatment modality is a chemotherapeutic agent. We are developing an experimental combination of drugs designed for primary-site ovarian, with a target specificity of stage three-and—beyond administration.

(Edson, 2000, p. 3)

At the same time, Vivian tries to align her defence in an analytical way:

VIVIAN: ‚By cancer nature’s changing course untrimmed‘ (Edson, 2000, p. 3)

While talking about their work, both Doctor Harvey Kelekian and Vivian Bearing talk “with frenzied eagerness, their speeches overloaded with literary/scientific jargon” (Romanowska, 2013, p. 118). They are both academics and they are used to prove their power through words. According to Katarzyna Ojrzynska (2016, p. 291), Dr Kelekian wants to impress Vivian with his professional expertise. As obvious, for Vivian the dialogue is a challenge to analyse Kelekian’s oversophisticated medical jargon.

Experiencing tedious hours in isolation, Vivian imagines what she would do, if her students were here:

VIVIAN: 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. (Edson, 2000, p. 30)

Language, again, is manifested as a symbol of knowledge and power. In this case the language is used to become a tool of deliberate confusion. It becomes evident, that Vivian Bearing uses language not to inform but to confuse. Kelekian's patients are also confused, because of the doctor's complex language, overloaded with medical jargon, with no intention to explain and, as Rimmon-Kenan (2006, p. 348) posits, no interest in just a minimal emotional involvement.

Bearing's and Kelekian's common device to display their prowess is a specific language, accompanied with impersonality and coldness.

3.1.5 Paradox

Paradox is "a tenet contrary to received opinion; a statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet is perhaps true; a self-contradictory statement that at first seems true; an argument that apparently derives self-contradictory conclusions by valid deduction from acceptable premises." (Merriam-Webster, 2019)

Vivian's treatment is not so much a cure. Her body becomes an experimental rat for the medical researchers. Dr Kelekian and his fellow Jason Posner seek to gain new knowledge about how the drugs could be used to treat other patients with ovarian cancer. They force Vivian to endure a full dose of chemotherapy. At the beginning Vivian does not hesitate about her strength to undertake the challenge.

VIVIAN: [...] 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.

(Edson, 2000, p. 6)

Vivian clearly understands the paradox of her situation. She knows that there is no intent to prolong patients' life and that the cure will kill her. Romanowska (2013, p. 116) explains Vivian's decision to undergo full-dose treatment as a trust in the power of intellect and in the value of knowledge. At the same point Ojrzynska (2016, p. 292) argues that Vivian should accept the proposed treatment because if she finishes the relationship with her oncologist, she may have to cope with her illness on her own.

However, Kelekian and Posner cross the ethical line when Vivian is too weak to tolerate the full dose. Only one person at the hospital unit, primary nurse Susie, reveals that in case Vivian's heart stops, she could be DNR – Do Not Resuscitate. Susie explains about the medical researchers:

SUSIE: Well, they like to save lives. So anything's okay, as long as life continues. It doesn't matter if you're hooked up to a million machines. (Edson, 2000, p. 44)

At a certain point, Vivian's ability to resist infection becomes impaired by the chemotherapy that she must be placed in an isolation unit. She comments on her situation:

VIVIAN: (*getting up from bed with her IV pole and resuming her explanation*). I am not in isolation because I have cancer, because I have a tumour the size of 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. (Edson, 2000, p. 30)

As a scholar, Vivian studied the concepts of metaphysical poetry which paradox is a part of. She knows how intellectually demanding this discipline is. However, now she learns how the same concept works in her present reality and that wit and intellectual ability are not enough to stand the situation or take control over it. Paradoxically, she had isolated herself to study language while using it as a barrier against others.

3.2 John Donne in *Wit*

3.2.1 Life and work of John Donne

John Donne, born in 1572 in London, died in 1631, is considered to be the leading English poet of the Metaphysical school. He was a dean of St. Paul's Cathedral.

John Donne was born of Roman Catholic parents. When he was four, his father, a prosperous London merchant, died. At the age of 12 he matriculated the University of Oxford where he studied for three years, then he continued his education at the University of Cambridge. He took no degree from either university because as a Roman Catholic he could not swear the required oath of allegiance to the Protestant Queen Elizabeth. In 1591 he was accepted as a student of law at the Tavie's Inn legal school, in 1592 he was admitted to Lincoln's Inn.

During his education, he led a dissolute rakish student life. He travelled a lot, too. By the age of 25, he was well prepared for diplomatic career and was appointed chief secretary to Sir Thomas Egerton, the Lord Keeper of the Great Seal.

He fell in love with Egerton's niece, Anne More, and they secretly married in 1601, against the wishes of both Egerton and More family. For this offense Sir George More had Donne briefly imprisoned and dismissed from his post with Egerton as well. He also denied Anne's dowry to Donne. Because of marriage, moreover, all possibilities of a career in public service were dashed, and Donne found himself at age of 30 with neither prospect for employment nor adequate funds with which to support his household. (Pinka, 2019)

During the next ten years he lived with his wife in poverty in the country, relying on the support of noble patrons. His family was growing, his wife gave birth to twelve children and she died in 1617, five days after giving birth to their twelfth child.

Despite his misery, Donne wrote and studied, produced works on theology, canon law, anti-Catholic polemics, and composed love and religious poetry. In his poetry he used a great deal of specialized knowledge.

Donne's earliest poems were notable for his criticism of English society and its problems and also for erotic poetry, especially his elegies. In his later work a pious tone can be distinguished. During this period, he wrote religious works. He converted to the Anglican Church and quickly became noted for his sermons and religious poems. At the end of his life he wrote works that challenged death and the fear of it. One example of this challenge is his Holy Sonnet X ,Death Be Not Proud'.

As Stephen Greenblatt affirms, "with his strange and playful intelligence, expressed in puns, paradoxes, and the elaborately sustained metaphors known as ,conceits', Donne has enthralled and sometimes enraged readers from his day to our own (Greenblatt, 2006, p. 1260).

3.2.2 John Donne's Sonnets in *Wit*

As Vivian is a scholar, professor of the seventeenth-century poetry, with specialization in John Donne's Holy Sonnets, quotations of three of the sonnets play an important role in the play. Rimmon-Kenan (2006, p. 349) observes Donne's Holy Sonnets in *Wit* as a manifestation of language glory, and appreciates Vivian's comments on the sonnets quotations in the play.

The name of the poet known for his "obsession with death" (Williamson, 1958) is first mentioned when Vivian introduces herself in the opening monologue.

VIVIAN: [...] I am a professor of seventeenth-century poetry, specialising in the Holy Sonnets of John Donne. (Edson, 2000, p. 1)

Three Holy sonnets are directly quoted in the play – 'Death be not proud...', 'If poisonous minerals...', 'This is my play's last scene...', and one stanza from 'Valediction: Forbidding Mourning'. Eads (2002, p. 242) proposes that Donne's verse in the play symbolise both intellectual life and Christian faith.

Donne is presented in the play as a difficult author, the touchstone of intellectual creativity and the measure of academic success. In Vivian's words:

VIVIAN: The scholarly study of poetic texts requires a capacity for scrupulously detailed examination, particularly the poetry of John Donne. The salient characteristic of the poems is wit: 'Itchy outbreaks of far-fetched wit' as Donne himself said.

[...] 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.

(Edson, 2000, p. 12)

Donne's Sonnet X 'Death be not proud...' first appears at its early beginning, when Vivian is undergoing pelvic examination by her former student Jason Posner. She begins to recite Sonnet X, but in a while changes her mind and opts for Sonnet VI. Too stressed by the embarrassing situation, Vivian arms herself with the poems that express her bravery. And, as Romanowska (2013, p. 119) mentions, Sonnet X, will always be associated with Vivian's embarrassment. This is apparent in the following illustration.

This important text – Sonnet X – is delivered again in a flashback from Vivian’s graduate school days. She remembers her own undergraduate interpretation of ‘Death be not proud’, based on an inauthentic interpretation. Professor Ashford comments on the deficiency in Vivian’s thinking and observes that Vivian has relied on an inferior edition that uses incorrect punctuation in the last line of the poem which in Vivian’s text runs:

‘And Death-capital D-shall be no more-semicolon-Death-capital D-comma-thou shalt die-exclamation point’.

Instead of using a comma in the last line which would have preserved the poet’s intent to communicate that death is just a pause between this life and the next, the editor of the specious edition has inserted a semicolon which changes the meaning completely. In the version Vivian used, a semicolon, capital letters and exclamation point signify that life and death are opposing forces, melodramatic in their conflict. As Professor Ashford explains, a semicolon is too dramatic, it is too hysterical in its portrayal of death. Death, suggests a comma, is not an insuperable barrier to overcome but a transition to eternal life separated by a breath.

E.M.: [...] You must begin with the text, Miss Bearing, not with a feeling. [...]

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 stage, with exclamation points. It’s a comma, a pause.

This way, the uncompromising way, one learns something from this poem, wouldn’t you say? Life, death. Soul, God. Past, present. Not insuperable barriers, not semicolons, just a comma. [...] It is *not wit*, Miss Bearing. It is truth. (Edson, 2000, p. 7-8)

The scene quoted above is one of the crucial scenes in the play. Professor Ashford wanted Vivian to think about the poem and, as Eads (2002, p. 250) states, enabled Vivian a deeper insight into Donne’s poetry which provides lessons about life and eternity, God, and human soul. However, Vivian missed the point, and, as Romanowska suggests, “among all Ashford’s teachings about the interpretation of the sonnet, her advice on the necessity to begin with the text, not with the feeling, must have been highly formative for Vivian’s professional life“ (Romanowska, 2013, p. 120). Vivian’s incomprehension what professor Ashford tried to explain led to an uncompromising and overcomplicating approach towards her life and work.

The scene at the university finishes with Ashford’s advice for Vivian – not to go back to the library but enjoy herself with friends instead. Ashford hints that Vivian needs to learn to understand the truth of Donne’s insights in human, as well as in intellectual, terms. However,

Vivian didn't follow the professor's wise words. By opting for the library to achieve her dream of academic success, Vivian missed the opportunity to fulfil her human potential.

Another sonnet by Donne, 'This is my play's last scene...', compares death to the end of the play. At one moment Vivian realizes she becomes very ill and recollects the sonnet.

VIVIAN: This is my play's last scene, here heavens appoint

My pilgrimages last mile, and my race [...]

I have always particularly liked that poem. In the abstract. Now I find the image of 'my minute's last point' a little too, shall we say, *pointed*. (Edson, 2000, p. 34)

And she refers to this sonnet later again, at the time she is in horrible pain, disconcerted and fearful.

VIVIAN: [...] I apologise in advance for what this palliative treatment modality does to the dramatic coherence of my play's last scene. It can't be helped. They have to do something. I'm in terrible pain. (Edson, 2000, p. 46)

By reciting the poem, Vivian admits that she knows that her death is near and unavoidable. She seems not to be able to express it openly, but she helps herself with Donne's poetry, as she used to do all her life.

The third quoted poem, Holy Sonnet IX 'If poisonous minerals' which deals with sin and forgiveness, is the one she analyses in the flashback lecture. It stresses about John Donne "In his poems, metaphysical quandaries are addressed, but never resolved" (Edson, 2000, p. 31). The speaker in this poem, she argues, is sure that God will not punish human sin if he overlooks the deadly actions of poisons and serpents. Very quickly the speaker loses his certainty, as he recognizes the gravity of his sins. Unable to escape God's judgement through wit, instead of pleading for God's mercy, he prefers to hide, as Sykes (2006, p. 168) explains. Donne's struggle with mortality comes with no satisfying conclusion, his questions have no answers and he hides behind his intellect and wit, which is the same situation that Vivian experienced in her past. Being now in the desperate state, she is forced to contend with the reality of mortality, of her death.

John D. Sykes (2006, p. 168) comments on the analogy between the speaker of the poem and Vivian's situation that Vivian's loneliness is self-inflicted and it has roots in her pride. She proudly hides behind her intellect, as the speaker of the poem does, and her behaviour only deepens the state of isolation.

In the long run her illness ruins her pride. “Although Bearing does not invite God’s excruciating remediation, as Donne does [...] the ordeal of cancer ultimately has this effect on the once aloof professor“ (Sykes, 2006, p. 167). In this point of view, Vivian’s pain is a good thing for her, as her suffering brings her salvation.

John Donne in his Sonnets deals with themes such as Life, Death, Sin, and Forgiveness. His poems are witty reaction to his mortality. He did not fear death itself, but God and his judgement, due to religiously influenced society within the seventeenth century. Vivian Bearing, a scholar who devoted all her life to studies and examinations of John Donne’s poetry, lives four hundred years later. Values of the twentieth century cannot be compared to those of John Donne’s generation. Decline in religious and moral beliefs has occurred, death has become something which can be delayed due to scientific developments. Vivian understands Donne’s poems in an intellectual way. As Gottlieb (2015, p. 331) writes, for Vivian Donne’s portrayal of death and salvation expresses merely an intellectual puzzle. However, she missed the point of humanity in them. As the scene with professor Ashford implies, she has believed nearly all her life that death is a mere reality. Her illness brings Vivian cognition of her own mortality, fear of death, struggle to fight it with wit and later admission that she was wrong and completely misunderstood Donne’s poetry. As Sykes (2003, p. 169) points out that Vivian’s hard spiritual lesson comes out of her false position in her past.

3.3 Complexity versus simplicity in *Wit*

Complexity, in the play represented by the complex language of Vivian Bearing and medical researchers, refers not only to the language but also to life approach – based on knowledge, analytic reasoning, detached manners, lacking qualities of humanity and simple interpersonal contact. During the play, the main character is taught a life lecture. Her own mistakes are turned into a valuable life lesson.

At the beginning of the play, main character, Vivian Bearing, expresses herself as a very tough and self-confident woman, a scholar who, according to Romanowska (2013, p. 112), examined vital human questions merely via the works of John Donne. At the midpoint of her life and career there came a question how to respond to her diagnosis. As she used to act all her life, she clings to an intellectual approach to solve problems.

The main character is riveted by difficult texts and complex language which mean for her a challenge, and her rhetorical devices help Vivian to reveal the essence of meaning. As the following example depicts, listening to the diagnosis and description of the experimental chemotherapy treatment which occurs at the beginning of the play, she ponders on the medical terms expressed by Dr Kelekian.

VIVIAN Insidious. Hmm. Curious word choice. Cancer. Cancel.

Must read something about cancer. Must get some books, articles. Assemble a bibliography.

Antineoplastic. Anti: against. Neo: new. Plastic. To mold. Shaping. Antineoplastic. Against new shaping. (Edson, 2000, p. 8-9).

Due to her respect for knowledge, she is not surprised by the impersonality of the doctors orientated in research more than in emotional involvement. Their behaviour mirror hers – as a scholar she was uncompromising, valuing only students' mental acuity and their hard effort. However -

VIVIAN: [...] But I admired only the studied application, not its spontaneous eruption.

(Edson, 2000, p. 41)

The medical researchers' lack of any emotional participation is demonstrated, besides others, by perfunctory greetings which become meaningless through routine habits.

VIVIAN: [...] I have been asked 'How are you feeling today?' while I was throwing up into a plastic washbasin. I have been asked as I was emerging from a four-hour operation with a tube in every orifice, 'How are you feeling today?'

I am waiting for the moment when someone asks me this question and I am dead.

I'm a little sorry I'll miss that. (Edson, 2000, p. 1)

In the play, the question 'How are you feeling today?' is just an automated habit with no intention to demand an answer or information, as Ojrzynska (2016, p. 293) states. The question portrays the inhumane climate of the hospital where no social bonding between the patients and the staff occurs.

Vivian's habit is to use words to shield her emotions. She has no family, no one to love, no one to love her, only a reputation of a tough professor. After receiving her harsh diagnosis, Vivian does not react emotionally, she hides behind intellectual operations – examinations of Dr Kelekian's medical jargon. She refuses to see herself as a victim of her disease and she meets

it as if it was a difficult passage of metaphysical poetry, and her attitude prevents an emotional response to her growing pain and suffering.

The time spent in hospital is incredibly lonely. It is an abundant free time when there is nothing to do, only waiting for something to happen, or someone to come. This time is filled up with Vivian's narrations about the experience:

VIVIAN: [...] But as I am a scholar before ... an impresario, I feel obliged to document what it is like here most of the time, between the dramatic climaxes. Between the spectacles.

In truth it is like this:

She ceremoniously lies back and stares at the ceiling.

You cannot imagine how time... can be...so still. It hangs. It weighs. And yet there is so little of it. It goes slowly, and yet it is so scarce.

If I were writing this scene, it would last a full fifteen minutes. I would lie here, and you would sit there.

She looks at the audience, daring at them.

Not to worry. Brevity is the soul of wit. But if you think eight months of cancer treatment is tedious for the *audience*, consider how it feels to play my part. (Edson, 2000, pp. 21-22)

As a narrator, Vivian uses direct audience address. With no problems she narrates her activity in the scene. She also tries to express a sense of loneliness and isolation, although it is apparent how difficult it is to explain her feelings. Her language is not as complex as it was at the beginning of the play.

The only person in the hospital who shows compassion towards Vivian is the primary nurse Susie Monahan. At the same time, she is the least educated person in the play. As the play progresses, Vivian is appalled by everything she endures during her treatment and hospitalisation. Slowly she understands that she must embrace her suffering and experience the emotions she had avoided in her life. Being abandoned by her professional achievements and intellectual skills, she did not realize the deficiency of simple human connection. Although Suzie doesn't know the definition of 'soporific' and does not hold an academic title, she emerges as the most powerful force. She provides tissues when Vivian cries, she puts lotion on Vivian's hands, when Vivian is in a morphine-induced coma, she calls Vivian a 'sweetheart' and offers her a popsicle when Vivian's gastrointestinal tract is injured by chemotherapy. Suzie's language is straightforward and simple. Eventually, Vivian has to admit qualities of simplicity – of simple human touch, word, and participation.

VIVIAN: That certainly was a *maudlin* display. Popsicles? ‘Sweetheart?’ I can’t believe my life has become so...*corny*.

But it can’t be helped. I don’t see any way. We are discussing life and death, and not in the abstract, either; we are discussing *my* life and *my* death, [...]

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 time for simplicity. Now is 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. (Edson, 2000, p. 45)

Vivian realizes that her life and scholarship both missed the point. Her simple conversations with Susie help her to see the authentic function of language. As Susie anticipates Vivian’s needs and “serves as her advocate“ (Eads, 2002, p. 246), she is also the one who raises the question of DNR order to avoid ‘full code’, something Vivian’s doctors should have explained but they have not because of their detached manner and usage of complex language full of medical terminology. Thanks to Susie, the fact that she is going to die is delivered in a personal and compassionate way, by Susie’s simple and understandable language. Susie’s caring for her patient and built relationship between those two women allows the nurse to broach the delicate subject of not being resuscitated after Vivian’s heart stops. As Romanowska (2013, p. 125) mentions, when Vivian admits the fact she is dying, she realizes that it is futile to continue the full-dozed therapy.

In the latter half of the play, Vivian comes to a horrible pain.

VIVIAN: (*trying extremely hard*). I want to tell you how it feels. I want to explain it, to use *my* words. It’s as if...I can’t...There aren’t ... I’m like a student and this is the final exam and I don’t know what to put down because I don’t understand the question and *I’m running out of time*. (Edson, 2000, p. 46)

Vivian, previously extremely smart and being able to express and examine every trickiness of language, learns about how, facing extreme pain, language can be impoverished and “illness has taught Vivian the virtues of simplicity“ (Rimmon-Kennan, 2006, p. 351).

Vivian’s transformation is enhanced by another accident. When she was visited by her former professor Ashford at the end of the play. The professor lies in the bed besides Vivian and offers to recite a poem by Donne, but sensing Vivian’s reluctance, she chose a children’s book she purchased for her little grandson, *The Runaway Bunny*. Sykes (2003, p. 169) values

the book, in his point of view the story is simple where Donne is complex, and in contrast of Donne's provoking verse it is reassuring. Sykes (2003, p. 169) adds that the story offers the spiritual medicine that Vivian needs most of all. In the book, a little bunny wants to change its shape and escape from his mother but his mum assures him to find him everywhere. Professor Ashford sees in this tale "A little allegory of the soul. No matter where it hides, God will find it" (Edson, 2000, p. 52). Eads (2002, p. 249) emphasises a spiritual insight demonstrated by the old professor.

As quoted earlier in the play, now is the time for simplicity. Reading a children's book about bunnies seems to be an echo of Vivian's first experience with words, which can be explicated as a return to a simple childlike state. Sykes (2003, p. 163) emphasises that despite of passion for complex language and Donne's conceit, the last coherent sentence the audience can hear from the dying Vivian, is a rejection of reciting Donne's verse.

Later in this scene, Vivian's language is reduced to the sounds of pain and then to complete silence until her death. Physical suffering causes a regression of the main character's language in the play. As Rimmon-Kennan (2006, p. 352) proposes, Vivian is helpless against her pain and nearing death, and the language in *Wit* is gradually shrinking.

The play ends with Vivian's death. Vivian, after dying and enduring the undignified intervention from the emergency team, despite her decision to be DNR, gets up from her bed and moves to the spotlight downstage. She walks toward a light in search of redemption. As she moves, she removes her cap and bracelet, and unties her gown. Without any word her act physically embodies Donne's poem 'Death be not proud...'

As implied, complex language used by the main character and researchers at the hospital is closely connected to the title of the play – wit. In other words, creativity, intelligence and cleverness are required – according to Vivian Bearing – in order to be witty. Overestimation of the values such as power or knowledge leads to the loss of feeling for real values of compassion and humanity, as illustrated by Vivian's attitude to her students as containers to be filled with knowledge. While being treated by the doctors, her former situation mirrors the behaviour of the medical staff. The only exception, Nurse Susie, is not considered to be a representant of so much proclaimed wit. However, the nurse's qualities represented by human and cordial access, as time goes by, overgrow to a friendship on both sides. Susie's care far outweighs all the rigorous professional discipline of the medical specialists or Vivian's academic colleagues. What at first sight seems to be a lack of intelligence, or wit, during the play acquires more and

more importance. The complexity of language represents complexity of approach to life and death. The play demonstrates a shift in thinking of the main character. This change comes through suffering, when Vivian Bearing is nearing death. Feeling helpless and alone, Vivian no longer values literature over humanity, which, as she realises, is more comforting than the intellect she originally attempted.

By slowly changing the main character's vocabulary from complex to simple, and later an outright rejection of Donne's poem, a change of Vivian's innermost conviction is depicted. As she admits to a sense of fear and that she does not feel sure of herself anymore, at the same time she expresses between the lines that knowledge is power but not over death.

Language limitations are portrayed by Vivian's loss of ability to express herself in words, as she comes closer to death. She finds that her vocabulary is failing her which becomes obvious in the inability to define her pain, as well as her emotions. Physical suffering causes a regression of language in the play.

Though it is not the point of this thesis, the religious or theological dimension of the play should be mentioned. Sykes (2003, p. 166) suggests what is crucial to an understanding of *Wit* – he explains that human's suffering may be a vehicle of God's mercy. Sykes highlights the scene of Professor Ashford's visit at the hospital and the story of The Runaway Bunny. Where Ashford emphasizes that the story is 'a little allegory of the soul', Sykes (2003, pp. 169-170) delivers the message more precisely and states that the content of Runaway Bunny provides an answer to Donne's Sonnet 'If poisonous minerals...'; the answer is that it is not possible to hide from God, and that at the same time it is not necessary.

Chad Wriglesworth (2008, p. 213) calls *Wit* an example of 'theological humanism'. He states that "We have lost the language to express depth, and Edson's play, like much of art, confronts these issues more profoundly than most directly religious expressions of our time" (Wriglesworth, 2008, p. 213).

Drawing on this, *Wit* does not come to an easy, or simple, conclusion. The play suggests that crucial life themes, such as love, faith, or death, cannot be rationally understood. Intelligence and wit have no power over them. Despite Vivian's diligent examinations of Donne's Holy Sonnets which deal with mortality, facing her own mortality, the main character realizes that death cannot be understood in the abstract. In contrast to Donne's poetry, which can be analysed in life, death is irrational.

Conclusion

Margaret Edson's play represents a multi-layered piece of work which deals with important themes mingling together. For many reasons, language is a central point; not surprisingly, the main character is a university professor of literature, specializing in John Donne's Holy Sonnets. Passion for words and complex language influenced her perception of life, critically judging simplicity, regarding it as a sign of lack of intelligence. The main character is the narrator as well, commenting on the incidents on the scene, which supports the course of the play.

The thesis has focused on the role of language and literary devices used in the play – flashbacks, irony, juxtaposition, jargon and paradox. Flashbacks provide the background for the main character's life, her habits in the past and the reasons for their occurrence. Flashbacks are also used by the main character to recollect the mistakes she made. By using irony in her comments, the main character conceals her feeling of uncertainty. Irony is used as a shield to cope with grievous presence of fatal disease. The thesis has also found several cases of juxtapositions in the play. Some refer to similarities, such as the complex language and detached attitude of the main character and medical researchers in the hospital, especially of young doctor Jason Posner; the use of wit and intelligence in solving life questions by John Donne and the same manner of the main character. As clarified earlier, the main character and medical staff, especially Dr Kelekian and Dr Posner, speak complex language. They use literature or medical jargon which helps them to keep distance and provides a feeling of superiority. Complex language is a symbol of power and control over situation. Another literary device in the text is paradox. This is because of the personality of John Donne, who used paradox in his poems. By examining Donne's verse, Vivian understands paradox; however, paradoxically, only in the abstract. As the play progresses, she understands paradox in the concrete.

The use of John Donne's verse in the play was observed in the connection between John Donne's work and the main character's profession. Thanks to this connection, readers recognize and understand character of Vivian Bearing; to be an expert in John Donne's intricate and complex verse demands a smart, witty and extraordinary personality. Overestimation of mental skills is evident in Vivian Bearing's judging people around her. The next important feature of this connection is demonstrated by cohesion with the way how Vivian Bearing solves problems. She is convinced that wit and intelligence are enough to resolve every complexity. However,

as argued by the quotations from the play, she missed the point and did not understand John Donne's message in its depth.

The thesis has also dealt with language, its complexity and simplicity, and with the limits of language, from the perspective of main character's inner development. At the beginning of the play, the main character appears a self-confident woman. Her self-confidence is based on her intellectual qualities, therefore complex language can be juxtaposed with her complex perception of simple life values, such as friendship, compassion or empathy. While undergoing aggressive chemotherapy, Vivian initially copes with the situation with witty, ironical comments. As the play progresses, Vivian comprehends that the therapy does not help and that she will die. She admits to fear and finds that the methods she used to rely on do not help her. She discovers values of kindness and humanity, in the play personalised by the character of primary nurse Susie. Which is more important, Vivian realizes that what she calls for – humanity and empathy – is the same subject that she missed all her life. At the end of her life she learns simplicity, through the simple truth that questions of life and death cannot be solved with brain and cannot be completely understood. Vivian's inner change is manifested outwardly, too. Her language becomes less complex and simpler. She learns how to ask for personal attention, how to accept kindness and empathy, but most of all, how to be attentive and frank towards others. In the play, this process is expressed by the relationship that develops between Vivian and Susie. Edson communicates the essential moment of Vivian's inner change in the scene of Professor Ashford's visit in hospital. In this scene, Vivian rejects reciting Donne's verse, preferring a simple children's story. Yet, the Story of the Runaway Bunny in its simplicity deals with the big truth about human's soul.

The limits of language are demonstrated by the main character's inability to fully voice her pain, fear and innermost feelings of loneliness and helplessness. Due to language limitations, expressing painful emotions and thoughts is difficult for every human being, which can lead to misunderstanding.

This thesis does not provide a complete and exhaustive analysis of language in Margaret Edson's play. It, however, attempts to inspect the most important points of the language in the context of development of the main character, to draw on relevant sources and to look at the aspects of language in a new light.

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Résumé

Bakalářská práce se zabývá jazykem v díle *Wit* (1991) spisovatelky Margaret Edson. Tato práce zkoumá jazyk z více úhlů pohledu. Nejprve se zaměřila na řečnické figury, které se v díle objevují, a vysvětluje jejich použití. Zvláštní úlohu ve hře *Wit* hrají verše představitele metafyzických básníků 17. století Johna Donna. Tato práce se jimi zabývá z pohledu utváření charakteru hlavní postavy Vivian Bearing, jejího přístupu k životu, ke své profesi a k mezilidským vztahům. Následně práce poskytuje vhled do postupného vývoje hlavní postavy, její změny v myšlení a pochopení důležitých životních hodnot. Tato vnitřní změna se manifestuje navenek empatickým přístupem k ostatním lidem a, na což tato práce poukazuje, upuštěním od složitého jazyka překypujícího profesním žargonem, ve prospěch jazyka jednoduchého a srozumitelného.

Annotation

Jméno a příjmení:	Regina Lutková
Katedra nebo ústav:	Ústav cizích jazyků
Vedoucí práce:	Mgr. Petr Anténe, Ph.D.
Rok obhajoby:	2019

Název práce:	Jazyk v díle <i>Wit</i> (1991) od Margaret Edson
Název v angličtině:	Language in <i>Wit</i> (1991) by Margaret Edson
Anotace práce:	Bakalářská práce se zabývá analýzou jazyka ve hře <i>Wit</i> (1991) od Margaret Edson. Tato práce zkoumá řečnické figury, poezii Johna Donna citovanou v dané hře, použití složitého a jednoduchého jazyka a omezení jazyka s ohledem na vývoj hlavní postavy.
Klíčová slova:	Margaret Edson, vědecká odbornost, lékařský výzkum, jazyk, humanita, životní hodnoty, John Donne, Vivian Bearing
Anotace v angličtině:	The project aims to analyse the language in Margaret Edson's play <i>Wit</i> (1991). This thesis examines literary devices, John Donne's poetry quoted in the play, the use of complex and simple language, and the limitations of language within the perspective of the main character's development.
Klíčová slova v angličtině:	Margaret Edson, scholarship, medical research, language, humanity, life values, death, John Donne, Vivian Bearing
Rozsah práce:	38 s.
Jazyk práce:	Anglický jazyk