A Struggle With Control

Margaret Edson’s *Wit* portrays a woman struggling to cope with advanced metastatic ovarian cancer. Vivian Bearing, Ph.D. and professor of seventeenth-century poetry, is the narrator of the play. Contrary to the norm, the protagonist acknowledges the audience and speaks directly to them. Doing so allows Vivian to assert her control over the storyline. As the play continues, Vivian fails to accept her cancer diagnosis, and instead turns to words for comfort. Towards the end of the play Vivan gives in to her feelings and accepts her illness. By depicting Vivian’s worsening cancer, Edson accurately captures Vivian’s loss of control throughout the progression of the play. Vivian’s derisive nature is her way of asserting her intellectual power. When she sees Jason, she realizes that she had alienated herself from everyone else in her life. As the play progresses, Vivian slowly softens and releases her power. She accepts her fate and eases into death.

Dr. Vivian Bearing is an accomplished professor and academic scholar. Despite her successes, she has lived a life of isolation, seeking company among books rather than her peers. Her isolation leads her to seek solace in the audience . Throughout the play Vivian speaks directly to the audience, confessing, reflecting, and even bantering with the viewers. The play opens with Vivian asking the audience, “Hi, how are you today?” (1500). Wit deconstructs the typical tale of staying strong through cancer treatment, overcoming the odds, and surviving. Edson skillfully constructs a story of repair and restoration of the individual not through treatment of the body ravaged by cancer, but by admitting one’s weaknesses, exposing oneself, and, perhaps most frightening of all, relinquishing control and, in the process, becoming vulnerable. By having Vivian speak directly to the audience, Edson reveals that Vivian is used to having control in her life. She even has control over the plot-line, saying, “I is not my intention to give away the plot; but I think I die at the end” (1501). Vivian wears a baseball cap while saying this. By doing so, she tries to hold on to some morsel of control and familiarity, showing her defiance to accept her circumstance.

Vivian later describes learning that she has cancer. The scene progresses at a swift pace, illustrating Dr. Harvey Kelekian’s terse dialogue diagnoses of Professor Bearing. In rapid succession, Dr. Kelekian begins explaining an experimental research protocol. Shocked by the sudden blow of her diagnosis, and not having had time to fully process the situation and assess her options, Dr. Bearing starts to retreat into herself. As Dr. Kelekian explains the specifics of her treatment, Vivian stops listening and begins dissecting his lexicon. For example, when Kelekian uses the word antineoplastic, she thinks, ‘Antineoplastic. Anti: against. Neo: new. Plastic. To mold. Shaping. Antineoplastic. Against new shaping” (1502). Vivian wrests control away not only from Dr. Kelekian, but also from Edson. Professor Bearing becomes the director of the play by staging the action and interjecting her own commentary as the narrator. Vivian is overwhelmed by the doctor’s words and retreating to comfort of words is her way of coping with the situation. By doing this, Vivian isn’t forced to face the fact that she has cancer. She understands words, and by thinking of them, Vivian is able to take control of her feelings and fate. She deflects Kelekian’s words to keep from thinking about the repercussions of having cancer. Vivian is in discomfort, withdrawing into the safety of words as a result of the emotional destabilization. She closes herself from truly understanding her cancer and the treatments. Vivian’s need for control inadvertently absolves her from coming to terms with the reality of her death.

After meeting with the doctor, Vivian goes through a medical examination. Vivian Bearing’s shift from a position of comfort in her identity as a “doctor of philosophy...a scholar of seventeenth century poetry” (1505) who has “made an immeasurable contribution to the discipline” (1505) to the unfamiliar position of patient and specimen. Vivian is uncomfortable with the clinical, succinct manner by which she is examined. She is scared and unsure of the procedure and long silences. For that, Professor Bearing retreats to what she is sure of: her academia. She reminds herself of her achievements, as a means of reassuring and comforting herself. Essentially this is Vivian’s way to holding onto power. She is taking control of the situation the only way she knows how. Vivian keeps her mind distracted from the technicians’ examination of her. By doing so, Vivian remains in denial of her cancer, ultimately only hindering her treatment. Instead of making the most out of the time she has left, Vivian refuses to accept what is happening to her and doesn’t give much thought to the time she has left nor the treatment she is receiving.

As the play continues, the audience is given glimpses of Vivian’s past. In one instance, Professor Bearing returns to her time as a timid undergraduate being chastised by her professor, the prolific scholar of seventeenth-century poetry, Dr. E.M. Ashford. After being told to go out and think outside of the was is written in the library, Vivian explains, “I, ah, went outside...I just couldn’t...I went back to the library” (1505). Professor Bearing alludes back to another moment when she was confused and overwhelmed. Rather than admitting that she is feeling vulnerable, or does not understand what is happening in the hospital environment, Professor Bearing uses flashbacks to cope with the unfamiliar and regain control by situating the unknowable present in the knowable past. The problem here is that Vivian retreated into herself, into the comfort of the library instead of hearing her professor out. She does the same thing now. Vivian falls back on the words that provide her solace instead of hearing Dr. Kelekian’s analysis of her spreading cancer. She turns a blind eye to her disease and relies on what she is able to control to cope with her cancer.

After many cycles of treatment, Nurse Susie Monahan comes to chat with Vivian. She asks Professor Bearing whether the doctors should resuscitate her heart in the event it stops beating, to which Bearing replies, “Just let it stop” (1525). This is Vivian’s way of dying a dignified death, her last attempt to salvage some control over her life. If she had agreed to let doctors resuscitate her heart, Vivian would just be a lifeless body used for research. Vivian objects to this, as she is terrified of losing control of her mind. This gets Vivian thinking however, as it puts into perspective the seriousness of her cancer.Vivian begins to tear down her walls and accept her death, giving up control over her life.

Soon after Suzie leaves Vivian, she imagines seeing her old mentor, Professor Ashford Vivian transitions from her guarded, isolated state to one where she is fully exposed. She admits, “I feel so bad” (1529) then begins to cry. For the remainder of the scene she is completely exposed in her vulnerability. This scene is free of wit and displays of intelligence. Instead, Vivian whimpers, and allows Professor Ashford to comfort her. Thinking she will find solace in the classics, Professor Ashford offers to recite one of Donne’s sonnets. However, now that Professor Bearing is vulnerable, without any pretenses or facade to maintain, she refuses the offer and instead welcomes Professor Ashford’s reading of the children’s book *The Runaway Bunny*. Vivian’s moment of vulnerability is directly related to her death. Vivian finally comes to terms with having cancer and has let go of her need to control her life. It is only after she accepts her humanity and weakness that she can also accept her mortality.

Vivian’s words become important to her in her time of distress, as a means of comfort. They are something she understands and come to see as familiar. Vivian speaking directly to the audience reveals her defiance to accept her cancer and her blatant disregard for her situation. During her struggle with cancer, Vivian hid behind her words in an attempt to control what was happening to her. This became her coping mechanism which held Vivian back from accepting her cancer and living her life to the fullest, ultimately hindering her treatment. By the end of the play however, this changes. Vivian lets go of the comfort words provide and gives up control over her life. She accepts her fate by acknowledging her cancer and impending death. By doing so, Professor Bearing has proven herself to be a dynamic character. She grows throughout the play and dies a peaceful death as a changed person. Vivian becomes human by allowing human connection.

Edson, Margaret, *Wit*: a Play. New York: Faber and Faber, 1999. Print.

I improved upon my thesis and intro. I built up to my thesis by introducing the major points I made in my essay. I also fixed incorrect information from the novel I cited in my essay. Additionally, fixed errors in my syntax, grammar, and word choice.