

ENGLISH ADVANCED: *DONNE AND W;T*

Connections between texts arise from notions of death, self-worth and relationships, uncovering universal values and appealing to perennial human experiences. Despite paradigmatic shifts between theocentricism and secularism, John Donne's 17th century metaphysical poetry and Margaret Edson's 1995 postmodern play *W;t* similarly explore existential notions regarding mortality, illuminating the ineffectual use of intellect alongside the necessity of strong relationships and a process of self-effacement as one approaches death. Thus, through paralleled thematic and structural devices, both texts canvass enduring quandaries regarding life and death, precipitating multifarious links.

Within both texts, the analogous intellectualisation of existential quandaries is exposed as a futile attempt to mask fear in anticipation of death. Framed by contextual theistic values, Donne's *Death, Be Not Proud* extols triumph over mortality, employing subversive intellect and dramatic apostrophe in the paradox "Death, thou shalt die" to obscure Donne's own apprehensions regarding death, diminished due to the existence of the afterlife. This arrogance reappears in *If Poisonous Minerals*, underpinned by religious debates between Catholicism and Protestantism, to refute God's divine judgement, yet an initially defiant tone becomes reverential in "Mercy being easy, and glorious to God", ironically exposing the simplicity of salvation and the inability of over-intellectualisation to resolve anxieties. Comparatively, *W;t*'s Vivian Bearing, a scholar of Donne's poetry within a modern, scientifically reliant context, attempts to conquer death through academic impassivity, shown through the language motif originating at her diagnosis with cancer in "Antineoplastic. Anti: against, Neo: new, Plastic: to mould", distancing herself from her condition's direness through semantically analysing medical jargon. However, in Vivian's critique of *If Poisonous Minerals*, the accumulation of "aggressive intellect, pious melodrama, and a final fearful point" posits that her academia, linked to Donne's through perspicacious wit, fails to effectively resolve qualms regarding mortality. This is furthered in the breakdown of Vivian's acumen; the truncated sentences "It's as if... I can't... There aren't", conveying her vulnerability as death encroaches. Hence, both texts similarly depict the inevitable erosion of intellectual façades, uncovering their inability to overcome pervasive fears of impending mortality.

Concurrently, the limits of intellect highlight the value of profound connections, both human and spiritual, in providing solace, subsequently easing the transition from life to death. Donne's *A Valediction* conveys the necessity of relationships through the extended metaphor of twin compasses; "thy firmness makes my circle just", revealing that support is intrinsic to the fulfilment of one's life. Further, Donne reflects the value of redemption in *This is My Playes Last Scene* through accumulation in "fall my sins... impute me righteous... thus I leave the world", conveying that, through religiosity, one can find salvation. Contrastingly, Vivian is initially depicted as emotionally isolated through her dramatic costuming of an IV catheter over her left breast, symbolic of the heart, representing her lack of human connections, as exacerbated by the impersonal nature of modern-day science. However, within a secular context, Vivian yearns for human, as opposed to religious, relationships as she suffers, seen through the childlike sharing of a popsicle with Nurse Susie, a symbolic act of Vivian's renouncement of her self-sufficiency and arrogant intellect, instead welcoming compassionate human bonds. Resultantly, this incites her choice to prevent resuscitation in the euphemism "Just let it stop", conveying her ultimate recognition of her impending mortality. Moreover, Donne mirrors this final acceptance of death in *Hymn to God* through the metaphor "that he may raise, what the Lord throws down", portraying the graceful transition between death and rebirth facilitated by spiritual connections, akin to Jacobean belief in the afterlife. Thus, the necessity of profound relationships, whether human or secular, in resolving metaphysical anxieties denotes further connections between the texts.

Furthermore, the universal pursuit of self-worthiness as death nears is foregrounded by both composers as prompting a similarly humbling process of self-effacement or repentance. Despite

theologically conflicting contexts, legacy and self-reflection in face of judgement after death is a value held highly in both texts, as acknowledged in Donne's *This is My Playes Last Scene*, which employs biblical allusions in the extended metaphor of "my pilgrimage's last mile", revealing the notion of a spiritual journey in preparation for death. Donne's staunchly Christian era pursues this through atonement, exemplified in *Round Earths Imagin'd Corners*, where the pleading tone in "teach me how to repent" conveys the self-effacement necessitated for worthiness in the afterlife. Conversely, the central modern value of knowledge and the dominance of the scientific paradigm reduce Vivian's life to academic worth, acknowledged through her sardonic alliteration in "published and perished", conveying her perceived nugatory personal legacy. However, didactic flashbacks cause her to re-evaluate her life, metatheatrically revealing the rejection of her ingrained pride through the regretful tone in "I look back, I see these scenes, and I...", mirroring Donne's spiritual process, though independent of religiosity. Resultantly, this allows her to attain personal redemption, visually symbolised through the stage direction- "naked and beautiful, reaching for the light"- as she dies, asserting that spiritual reconciliation and heightened self-worth arises from introspection. Further, this evokes Donne's image of mortality in *Hymn to God in the paradox* "death doth touch the resurrection", suggesting that despite shifting societal values, belief in the restoration of life after death through humility pervades the human consciousness. Hence, the texts mutually assert that spiritual worth arises from reflection and re-evaluation of one's life.

Surmounting disparate contexts and values, Donne's poetry and Edson's *W;t* equally elucidate notions regarding life and death, revealing the necessity of humility, rather than intellect, in overcoming apprehensions and attaining a sense of metaphysical wellbeing. Thus, perspicacious textual connections arise from the exploration of resonating quandaries concurrent with the increasing propinquity of death.