

## **WIT BY Margaret Edson**

**Edson – kindergarten teacher**

**Mother – medical social worker; father newspaper columnist; childhood friend – Julia Louis-Dreyfus**

**In 1985 she took a job as a clerk on an oncology/AIDS unit at a research hospital in Washington. The unit was doing clinical trials of the drug AZT for AIDS patients and developing new protocols for the treatment of ovarian cancer. Edson was able to watch the interactions of very sick patients with their caregivers, and to observe how patients coped with their illnesses and the often dehumanizing environment of a bustling hospital. Only there 1 year.**

**Wrote Wit just before turned 30. At the time, Edson was working as a sales clerk in a Washington bike shop. Eventually produced first in 1995 at South Coast Repertory. Won many awards, including Drama Critics Circle Award and Pulitzer Prize.**

**Themes:**

- 1) Balance of head and heart; Vivian thinks because she has studied Donne's sonnets, she knows "all about life and death"**  
**Vivian: "Now is not the time for verbal swordplay, for unlikely flights of imagination and wildly shifting perspectives, for metaphysical conceit, for wit. . . . Now is the time for simplicity. Now is the time for, dare I say it, kindness. I thought being extremely smart would take care of it. But I see that I have been found out."**
- 2) Isolation and community; "no man is an island"**
- 3) Loss of control, loss of authority**
- 4) Grace, relationship with God**
- 5) Meanings of wit – irony, cleverness, intelligence; use of apparently in apropos conceits to develop an idea**
- 6) Doctor-patient relationship – Jason (fellow) takes refuge in science, avoids messy human relationships; no understanding of bedside manner; both scholar and doctor are arrogant and unfeeling**
- 7) Conflict between patient wellbeing and research goals – importance of taking "the full dose"**

## **The Holy Sonnets**

**The sonnet was a fashionable poetic form in the early 17th Century, consisting of 14 lines of a certain meter and rhyme scheme. Donne used the Italian sonnet schema (Shakespeare wrote in the English sonnet form), in which the sonnet is divided into an octave of eight lines with its own rhyme scheme and a concluding sestet of six lines with a different rhyme scheme.**

**John Donne is frequently referred to as the dominant figure of a school of 17th century English writers known as the metaphysical poets. This label is misleading in that the poets did not think of themselves as belonging to any school, nor did they write for or with one another. They are linked by their style, that is, their use of wit, rather than any thematic ideology. Scholar Louis Marz describes**

wit as "intellect, reason, powerful mental capacity, cleverness, ingenuity, intellectual quickness, inventive and constructive ability, a talent for uttering brilliant things, the power of amusing surprise."

For Donne and other poets, the word "metaphysical" implies a highly intellectual approach to poetry. During the Renaissance, the term "wit" referred to intelligence or wisdom. As applied to the metaphysical poets, it has the connotation of intellectual and verbal ingenuity. "Donne's wit," according to professor Achsah Guibbory, "involves surprise, a desire to startle readers, to make them look at things in a new, unconventional way," In poetic terms, wit was applied toward the development of a metaphysical conceit--an insightful use of analogy, metaphor or inventive joining of dissimilar images to make a point in a poem.

Donne's sonnets were the ruminations of a man in spiritual crisis, the product of his innate melancholy temperament, his reduced circumstances and lack of direction in his professional life. The Donne of the Holy Sonnets wrestles with questions about faith, God's mercy and judgment, human mortality and the immortality of the soul, sin, damnation, absolution and salvation. Donne expresses despair about his own salvation, and reveals his fear of death. The Holy Sonnets are the product of a doubter, one who has not yet found inner peace. He queries God, "But who am I, that dare dispute with thee?" After fifteen years of preaching and by the end of his life, "he discerned a divine purpose directing it. He felt that God had used him as an instrument of his power and grace, and had brought him to a safe haven," according to Bald. With the assurance of salvation, came his understanding that life was a preparation for life-everlasting, and that death was not something to be feared.

Some of the scholarship on Donne focuses on when he wrote the Holy Sonnets and how Jack Donne, man-of-the-world, became Dr. Donne, dedicated servant of the church. Since the spiritual anguish and skepticism expressed in the Holy Sonnets does not match the passionate devotion of his sermons and later writings, it is now supposed that the sonnets were written early, probably between 1607-1610. None were published during Donne's life and they were known only by a small circle.