

Death and Dying – Wit Discussion Questions.

I am not in isolation because I have cancer, because I have a tumor the size of a grapefruit. No, I am in isolation because I am being treated for cancer. My treatment imperils my health.” ~Dr. Vivian Bearing

Vivian Bearing has formed her life around words and wit. Her devotion to the academic world of literary criticism reveals much about her intellectual capacity, but says little of her capacity for love. She is a strong woman, a John Donne scholar, a college professor and a cancer patient who is dying. And you are invited to watch her do it. You are invited to watch a treatment that ravages every ounce of her ever-diminishing frame. Do you dare? Why would you? What, exactly, could there possibly be for you to learn? The question is fair enough...and yet there is the inescapable reality that in watching this film, the viewer is being taught something of profound depth about living, dying and belonging. There are lessons here. What are they? Watch the film and use the questions here to guide your discussion and personal reflection.

Questions to Consider:

- How did you feel about the physicians style of diagnosis?
- As her ca progresses, how do you feel about the medical team’s approach?
- What are your thoughts about Jason? What about the “research subject” statement at her time of death?
- Did she die a “good death?” What is a “good death?”
- What are your thoughts about the professor visiting?

Discussion Question:

Did you like this film? Why or why not?

Has anyone seen or read the play this film was based on? Has anyone seen this film before? If so, did the film strike you differently the second time? How?

What was your evaluation of the following characters: Dr. Posner, Dr. Kelekian, Nurse Monahan and Vivian Bearing? Did any of them stand out to you more than the others? Why?

Were there any characters you identified with more than others? Who do you think you were meant to identify with?

All of these characters were a part of the film because they served a very specific purpose to the story—medical staff and patient. Were there any scenes or conversations you think really epitomized the true character of the people in this film (for instance, the “Cancer is Awesome” or “Popsicle” scenes)?

Vivian says she is in the hospital due to her treatment, not the disease itself. A professor once told me that a remedy tells you a lot about the severity of a malady. If the ravaging nature of chemotherapy is considered worth the benefit it gives, then that speaks volumes about the disease of cancer itself. What do we learn about cancer by watching this chemotherapy? What can we learn from this when we consider the human condition in general?

Vivian, facing the greatest challenge of her life, attempts to employ her inner strength and wit to get her through the suffering (notice she never turned her TV on). What do you think she is trying to accomplish with her wit? Did her wit sustain her? What do you think you would do in order to cope with intense suffering?

One movie reviewer (Sasha Stone) said of Wit: “Vivian begins to understand something about life—that it doesn’t matter, in the end, how much you know. Knowledge can’t possibly comfort you in death.” Do you agree with this assessment of the film? Why or why not? Do you agree with this assessment in general about life? Why or why not? What kinds of knowledge, if any, could bring comfort?

A reviewer for CineScenesaid: “It is, perhaps, the ending that is the most beautiful. You never see it coming. And you just barely understand it. Vivian ends as she began—with a primal need for love.” What “ending” is being referred to?

How did *The Runaway Bunny* scene make sense of this film as a whole? Dr. Ashford calls it “a little allegory of the soul.” What does she mean by this? Do you agree or disagree? Why?

Might the film grant a window of insight into how to bring hope and comfort to someone who is about to die? In what ways

There has been many discussions about this film, and without fail someone mentions how they could not bear to watch this film because it would remind them too much of real personal loss. Perhaps you feel this grief yourself. This is a hard film to watch. Some reviews do a great disservice to this film by focusing primarily on the “entertainment value”—obviously giving it fairly low marks. Yet films like this are important. There is a profoundly bittersweet message about the dignity of life in *Wit*. In fact, one central message found in this film was an insistence on the dignity of human life—not just in trying to preserve it, but also in letting life pass away.

Thinking about life and death is not for the faint of heart. There is an undercurrent of hope in this movie—and it comes through the kindness of strangers and long lost friends. It moves us to remember one of the ways we are made—needy. We need people in our lives because our lives are fragile. And this is one lesson *Wit* gives us.

Death Be Not Proud, Though Some Have Called Thee...

by John Donne (1572-1631)

Death be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so,
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow,
Die not, poor death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure, then from thee, much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.
Thou art slave to Fate, Chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
And poppy, or charms can make us sleep as well,
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?
One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
And death shall be no more; death, thou shalt die.

The Runaway Bunny

by Margaret Wise Brown Pictures by: Clement Hurd. Harper Festival Copyright 1942.

Excerpt: Once there was a little bunny who wanted to run away. So he said to his mother, “I’m running away.” “If you run away,” his mother said, “I will run after you. For you are my little bunny.” “If you run after me,” said the little bunny, “I will become a fish in the trout stream and I will swim away from you...”

Use the discussion questions to write a one page single spaced 10 pt font paper on *Death and Dying*. Due the following Friday after viewing the movie.