The Holy Sonnets and other Poems by John Donne (1572-1631) as well as the post-modern theatrical production “Wit” by Margaret Edson (1995) explore the enduring themes of the human condition, such as human mortality, redemption and meaningful relationships. These themes manifest in a religious context through Donne’s English Renaissance (1590 – 1710) due to the religious beliefs of his time; such as life after death, redemption from god and an intrinsic potential for human bonds to be spiritual and transcend the physical. On the other hand, Edson’s 20th century society has moved away from these beliefs and onto scientific data. As such, through intertextual reading of both composers, a greater understanding of the way context shapes authorial purpose and meaning is achieved.

Both John Donne’s poetry as well as Margaret Edson’s Wit are connected in their exploration of issues related to human mortality. Within Donne’s sonnet “Death be Not Proud” the poet utilises religious research gained as a priest of St. Paul’s Cathedral to successfully challenge the contextual authority of death. Donne’s demeaning employment of metaphysical conceit in “One short sleep past, we wake eternally” employs the discernment of biblical teachings prevalent in his Counter-Reformation context to argue that death is merely a passage to the afterlife and thus should not be feared. Further, Donne’s use of iambic pentameter highlights humanity’s power against death, as, in the Jacobean era the use of iambic pentameter symbolised a position of power. Therefore, using this form allows Donne, and society, to adopt a powerful position when faced with the immediacy of death. As Donne states “we wake eternally”, the use of inclusive pronouns unifies the human race in accepting death as a transitory phenomenon. In contrast, Edson’s 1995 play Wit borrows on the conventions of post modernism, which is concerned with the totality of religious experience and overcoming the rigidity of institutionalisation. The modern era saw the dehumanisation of patients as medical practitioners became increasingly concerned with expanding knowledge and less concerned with human betterment. Modern society’s excessive desire for scientific knowledge is evident through the hypophora when Jason, a medical assistant, states “Lower the dose? No way. Full dose.” The declarative statements further characterise Jason’s medical care to be representative of the modern context. This imprecise desire for knowledge to prolong human’s earthly existence may cause a lack of appreciation for life itself, and an inability to have valuable human experiences. From an integrated study of the two texts, we are able to comprehend the transitory phenomenon of death.

The spiritual pilgrimage to service one’s passion for redemption is furthered by reconciliation facilitated by religious milieus. This idea is portrayed in Donne’s poem “This is my plays last scene” explores the religious search for reconciliation to achieve salvation through pleading with God for forgiveness in death pursuant to his religious context. The poet’s abandonment of earlier love poetry owing to his spiritual crisis wherein he transitions from Catholicism to Anglicanism is exemplified in Donne’s fearful personification “gluttonous death will instantly unjoin my body and soul”. The implicated notion that reflection upon one’s spiritual journey is essential in achieving salvation is furthered by the persona’s fear of unworthiness to ascend to heaven in the volta break “As my soul to heaven...takes flight” where an acknowledgement of death’s inevitability with the spiritual comfort of immortality orchestrates the persona’s release from sin. Akin to this, in Wit, Vivian’s shifting psyche whereby she discovers the need for emotional connection to attain liberation in a contemporary context is hindered by her concern with self-effacement and dignity in death. Thus, Edson employs a satirical intertextual reference to Donne’s sonnet “My Play’s Last Scene” in “my pilgrimages last mile...I have broken the record...but I flatter myself...” as the protagonist seeks repentance, illustrating her ineptitude in reaching personal fulfilment due to a lack of human connection. Edson adapts the religious values of Donne’s Renaissance poetry to suit a secular milieu.
Both the texts of Donne and Edson demonstrate the importance of love and meaningful relationships. Donne’s sonnet “The Sunne Rising” is an aubade, an Elizabethan love song to the sun, but Donne reverses this concept and makes the poem an irreverent address to the sun. The poem begins with a direct and dramatic address to the sun as a personified “busy old fool”, where an impudent tone is evident. The poet treats the sun with disdain because he believes the love he has is greater than anything the sun has to offer. This is reveals an idealistic and hyperbolic attitude towards love, which Donne develops throughout the poem. Through the metaphysical statement “shine here to us... this bed thy centre, these walls thy sphere”, Donne is further highlighting the importance of love. The poet represents the sun’s “sphere” as the lover’s bedroom because he believes that their love is central to the world. Here, Donne assumes the Copernican heliocentric view of the world, where the sun is central to the solar system. Similarly, Edison’s Wit also highlights the importance of love and meaningful relationships. While the idea of spiritual relationships decreased in the 20th century, the value of relationships is still portrayed to be equally present. Through the characterisation of Jason and Susie, Edson is able to communicate this value to the audience. Susie is implicitly used to portray a character, which, similar to Donne, rejects the Petrarchan view that the strength of love diminishes with distance. Even though Vivian Bearing is separated by a coma from Susie during her treatment, Susie treats her as though she is conscious by speaking to her “It’s not going to hurt, don’t you worry”. Her compassionate tone is contrasted with Jason’s when he ridicules her by saying, "Like she can hear you". Edson characterises Jason as a representation of the 20th century context, where the value of individualism has entrenched self-serving ambitions over the need for strong relationships. This is highlighted when he forgets to thank Vivian for being cooperative, and also when he does, he uses a professional tone “Thank you, Professor Bearing You've been very cooperative” which dehumanises the relationship between the two. The antithesis between Susie and Jason, serves to ultimately reinforce Donne’s message that love and meaningful relationships are central to having a fulfilled life.

In conclusion, through intertextual readings of interpersonal connections, responders gain an insightful understanding of the way context shapes meaning and how the appropriation of Donne has added to the understanding and reading of Edson’s Wit. Through both the religious context of Donne as well as the nihilistic and scientific beliefs of Edson, we come to a greater understanding of death, redemption and the enduring nature of human bonds.