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## THE CONFLICT OF A MOTHER IN HER FAMILY AS SEEN IN MARSHA NORMAN'S 'NIGHT, MOTHER

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### Abstract

*The problem in 'Night, Mother is the external and internal conflict of mother in her family, the reason in choosing this topic is because the fact that drama shows the two sides that the mother has. On one side, the mother has to sacrifice everything in order to keep the family well, she has to show the role model that the kid can see in herself. However, on the other side, the mother also has the weakness, there are lots of burdens, and this can lead to the climax that she has fed up with her life, and she chooses to end it all.*

*The purpose of this writing is the suffering on of modern mothers based on psychological analysis. It was divided into external conflict of disappointment from husband and son, internal conflict of suffering because of disease, and the conflict that leads to her suicide.*

*This analysis uses psychological theory, Daiches said that psychological theory was based on the assumption that literary work always talks about human life events because it concerns about people and their lives, it must contain psychological aspects in the story. Psychology was expected to help us to know the characters well. In the method of research, qualitative method is used because Creswell said that it is attempted to trace the source of information in the form of document which were relevant to the object of the research.*

*In finding in this analysis, this analysis will be focused on the psychological background of the character particularly the main character. First, the external conflict of disappointment from husband and son, Jessie feels lonely after her husband and son leave her. Second, internal conflict of suffering because of disease, the other factor that causes suffering to Jessie character is the disease that has become the trigger for her to commit suicide. Third, the conflict that leads to her suicide, Jessie as the mother is strong, however she needs support from her whole family, without that support, she feels dead inside and finally chooses to commit suicide. The problems faced by modern woman are loneliness, instable family structure, and crisis in emotionality.*

*Keywords: Self-Actualization, Self-Confidence, Self-Image*

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## I INTRODUCTION

In this background of problem, the writer describes the problems to be analyzed in this writing. 'Night, Mother is centered on the problem of suffering from the modern women. The problems faced by modern woman are alienation, loneliness, estrangement, instable family structure, crisis in emotionality and sterile nature of human existence. There are two main characters in this play are Jessie as the mother

and Thelma as the grandmother. The problem happens when Jessie told Thelma about her preparation for suicide, Thelma at first did not believe. Thelma took this decision of Jessie as a kind of joke.

When the conversation between them prolonged seriously Thelma had to believe that Jessie Cates is really preparing for suicide. Thelma did everything within her reach in an

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attempt to dissuade Jessie from treading on the path of suicide. No matter what logics and arguments Thelma puts forward, Jessie remains unwavering in her commitment to elevate her life by committing suicide. After knowing that Jessie is hell-bent upon committing suicide, Thelma became terribly frightened of loneliness within her. Once Thelma became dangerously afraid of killing loneliness after her husband died. With an expectation from her son, Dawson, Thelma tried to fill the void of her loneliness resulting from her husband's death. This expectation also failed to get materialized because Thelma's son Dawson began to live with his wife separately from her. Again Thelma grew painfully

conscious of her loneliness. To seal the void of this loneliness Thelma turned toward Jessie. She kept Jessie with her. She gave some daily household chores to Jessie so that Jessie could feel purposeful life by doing those household chores. By getting Jessie engaged in household works Thelma was actually creating purpose in purposeless life of Jessie. In an indirect way Thelma herself was also taking advantage. Thelma was fiercely afraid of loneliness. By Keeping Jessie with her in point of fact, keeping her own loneliness at bay. Jessie's absence due to her suicide could mean a tormenting resurgence of embedded loneliness.

## II RESEARCH METHODS

The external conflict from Jessie character is not just loneliness as the story shows in the drama the conflict itself is because the dissapointment about her husband and her son. Jessie makes a conscious choice to be alone from her husband and, ultimately, it is clear she has made a conscious choice to alienate herself from her mother. The consequence of that choice is her belief that there is only one way out of being alone for the rest of her life.

Marsha Norman's 'night, Mother illustrates a central point about the nature of what creates drama in a play: the anticipation of an outcome. In this case, that means that Mama, and the story's audience, learns early on of Jessie's plans. And because of learning Jessie's plans, both Mama and the story's audience are thrust deep into the heart of this story's question: Will Jessie really kill herself, or can Mama find a way to stop her? What's at stake in this story is also made very clear: Jessie's going to kill herself. Can Mama talk her out of it? The central issue that 'night, Mother delivers is that the more reasons Mama tries to grasp to convince Jessie not to kill herself, the more she reaffirms Jessie's belief that her life is useless and it's simply better to end her suffering with a clear mind.

The play opens on what appears to be a typical Saturday night for Jessie and Mama. Mama finds the last snowball, some junk food, in the fridge, Jessie asks for some black plastic bags. It's on their schedule that Jessie will give Mama a manicure.

Then Jessie asks about the location of her father gun. Life for Jessie and Mama is such a dull routine, Mama doesn't even pause to consider the request odd. She evens helps Jessie figure out where the gun is kept.

Mama responds that the likelihood is that Jessie will only shoot off her ear and turn herself into a vegetable. This is an important exchange, because it sets the story on a course of exploring the emotional terrain of both Jessie's life and her life with her mother. And from the moment Jessie made her pronouncement about her impending suicide, everything about the terrain now stands in bold relief. Mama continues trying to find something that will give her leverage over Jessie. Jessie isn't allowed to use her towels when she kills herself. She then switches tactics, to try and find out why Jessie wants to kill herself. This continues the story's exploration of Jessie's life and her relationship with her mother.

This brilliantly written line cuts right through to the heart of Jessie's reasons for wanting to die. In the next series of exchanges, it comes out why a friend of Mama's refuses to come into her house, because she's seen the death in Jessie's eyes. The struggle to find peace in death has caused Jessie to explore the reality of her life. For probably the first time ever in their relationship, Mama begins to speak a deeper truth to Jessie. This leads Jessie to ask whether her mother ever loved her father. Again, Mama speaks a truth she's never voiced before. It leads

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up to a revelation that Mama suspected that Jessie's father also suffered from the seizures that have plagued Jessie's life. The secrets Mama has kept hidden spill out in a torrent. She reveals that Jessie's father never really went fishing, he just sits by a lake in his car. Mama even starts to get into this new mood, by threatening to not cook again, or do other things. It comes out that Jessie has mentioned Mama's friend as a way to introduce the friend living with Mama when Jessie is gone.

Next, Jessie and Mama talk about Jessie's ex-husband, who Mama conspired to introduce to Jessie. During the marriage, Jessie fell off a horse, and the accident was thought to have led to her seizure disorder. But one of the truths that has come out was that Jessie began having seizures as a child, but Mama covered it up. It was something she didn't want to think about, so she found a way to simply go on.

As Jessie talks about her former husband, another area of her life comes into stark relief. Again, the author has found a way to use Jessie's impending death to give each revelation about her life a jewel-like quality of clarity. When it comes out that because of her medication Jessie can now think more clearly, Mama jumps on that as a reason to live. But for Jessie, the medication had another effect: "JESSIE: If I'd ever had a year like this, to think straight and all, before now, I'd be gone already." As the time nears when the "night" will be over, in desperation Mama tries to find some way to forestall Jessie: "MAMA: I didn't tell you things or I married you off to the wrong man or I took you in and let your life get away from you or all of it put together."

### III RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In *'Night Mother* by Marsha Norman is a thought provoking play. The entire drama is contained in the single act of the mother (Mama) and daughter (Jessie) talking. The subject of their conversation surrounds the casual yet sudden announcement by Jessie that she is going to end her life. One of the hallmarks of good theatre is depth of characterization. In *'night Mother* the readers find rich psychological profiles of the two main characters. The play also excels in another measure, namely, its minimalism. Just

But as that final moment of Jessie's life draws near, Mama becomes calm and pliant. She simply accepts that Jessie will end her life. She repeats back to Jessie her suggestions about what Mama should say to the people who come to Jessie's funeral. Jessie goes into her room to do the deed. Mama collapses and cries out: "MAMA: Jessie, child.... Forgive me. (pause) I thought you were mine." The gunshot answers with a sound like "no." Mama, following Jessie's instructions, goes to the phone and calls the home of her son and asks to speak to Dawson.

This is a profoundly moving play. The principle that I want to point out one last time is that it develops its drama not from hiding what's at stake, Jessie's impending death, but by setting it out in a way that the storyteller develops drama around the outcome of the question: Will Jessie kill herself?

Drama only works if there's a reason the story action was set into motion. I don't mean a blunt or obvious reason. `night, *Mother* is an example of where something blunt and obvious, Jessie's impending death, can give dramatic meaning to mundane events, making some cocoa, eating a caramel apple. The author who fails to set up the issue at the core of a story in a way that it connects with an audience risks assembling words and images that create characters and events to no particular dramatic purpose. By making what's at stake in a story clear and direct, the author frees themselves to begin the real task: Bringing an audience fully into and involved with the world a story's characters inhabit and seek to shape.

through a single day's conversation between a mother and a daughter, the playwright is able to paint a rich persona and emotional tapestries of the main characters. By articulating the psychological motivations for their thoughts and actions, Marsha Norman is able to showcase the characters' depth. Norman's plays, including *'Night Mother*, feature recurring motifs. Some prominent motifs are: "the relationship between parent and child, usually mother and daughter, the inescapable encroachment of the past the

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present, and, perhaps most tellingly, the struggle between rationalism and faith. The plays encourage the possibility of religious faith, but with choice as an essential ingredient: Faith, like feminism, demands autonomy.”

In *'Night Mother*, the readers see all of these motifs at work. There are also references to Christianity and Jesus Christ, but the author keeps them at the periphery of the main narrative. Likewise, monologues are employed to capture the character and personality of the speaker. In *'night Mother* monologues serve as key devices for improving the theatrical and dramatic effect of the play. Through this device, the readers learn how, Jessie, despite her drastic resolution to end her life, is actually trying to gain control over her life. This is a reflection of how things outside her circle of influence have straddled on her will, autonomy and dignity.

Through the exposition of the particular life circumstances of Jessie and her mother, Marsha Norman is treating universal human concerns. For example, one of the main reasons why Jessie decides to end her life is the deep sense of loneliness and helplessness she experiences frequently. She makes it clear to her mother that her company doesn't alleviate her loneliness even a little. Jessie's physical ailment in the form of epilepsy has led to a restricted lifestyle and limited job opportunities. These in turn have created numerous frustrations for her, which have led to frequent bouts of depression and suicidal ideation. But Jessie's is not an unusual case in modern society. In America today, tens of millions of psychiatric prescriptions get written each year. People go through a high degree of stress in their workplaces. The work-life balance is often skewed in favour of the former. The institutions of family and marriage are falling apart gradually. In such a society, people increasingly feel alienated, confused and desperate. When health complications like that faced by Jessie are added to the mix, life does appear hopeless and bleak. What Marsha Norman seems to be suggesting is that Jessie's life is a symbol of a broader social fact. In this vein, *'Night Mother* is a poignant dissection into modern human condition.

Through the past and present lives of Jessie and her mother, a 'bi-regional' perspective is evidenced in the play. The bi-regional perspective in *'Night, Mother* is found in the

“philosophical intersection of Midwest and South, though the regional poles are never identified as such or specifically grounded in either history or tradition. ‘night, Mother enacts a more existential impasse that never gets resolved. In order to understand the fascinating bi-regionalism of this award-winning play, the readers must position its characters, themes, and world-views in the context of two distinct American sub-cultures. ‘night, Mother showcases a stark conflict between world views, both “epistemological and ontological,” grounded in disparate geographic traditions.”

For example, Jessie and her mother espouse very different social perspectives which are rooted in regional sensibilities. This abrasion of the Midwest with the South produces interesting dramatic outcomes as they play directly against one another. Indeed, *'Night, Mother* has this conflict at its core, though the author doesn't dwell on cultural differences. Instead, the focus is more on the personal differences the characters' regional backgrounds lend them. Interestingly, “this seemingly unconscious juxtaposition may result in large measure from Louisville's own double-sided perspective as a geographical melding of Midwest and South.”

The manner of construction of dialogues and monologues help dramatize this conflict. For instance, Jessie's announcement to her mother about her impending suicide is concluded with the remark “I can't say it any better” (28). This suggests her perceived inadequacy with language. The descriptions of her mother and father are consistent with the literary and cultural traditions of the American Midwest. For example, her late father is remembered as “Big old faded blue man in the chair” who liked to spend time thinking about “His corn. His boots.” (47) Her mother, on the other hand, is a typical Southern housewife, in that she is very chatty and curious. Her mother is also one who is indirect and tactful, a quality symbolized by her love of all things sweet tasting.

It is fair to claim that *'Night Mother* is deeply concerned with the human condition on account of it “helping to open up a national dialogue about forbidden issues”. Two of these key issues are suicide and to a lesser extent epilepsy. In fact, if the play were written now, “Jessie's decision to exert control over her life by choosing her right to die would undoubtedly be

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judged in the context of the “how to” suicide manual *Final Exit*, and Dr. Jack Kevorkian, who made headlines recently as a proponent of doctor-assisted suicide.”

Finally, while admitting the several positive features of the play, most important of which being its psychological probity and concern for the human condition, one of its flaws should be pointed as well. For example, feminists received the play somewhat ambiguously, with many uncomfortable with the easy choice of suicide as a solution to women’s problems. This, feminists perceived as a rather tame response, especially in the backdrop of the absence of supportive male characters for Jessie. For example, she is divorced from her husband, estranged from her brother, her father is dead and her son is delinquent. (Coen, 1992, p.23)

As for Jessie and Thelma in *night, Mothers* both have been denied autonomy. Thelma had to endure a loveless marriage, Jessie's separation from her husband forced her to live with her mother. Her disease prevents her from the ability to work and form relationships:"

THELMA: You know I couldn't work, I can't do anything. I've never been around people my whole life except when I went to the hospital. I could have a seizure at anytime. What good a job? The kind of job I could get would make me worse".

They both face the judgment of family members and friends. The absence of husbands and sons suggests their male relatives' condemnation. Jessie is sensitive to her brother (Dawson) and his wife's contempt. Jessie also faces her neighbors' disapproval as well Agnes clearly expresses her aversion to Jessie:

Jessie's shook the hand of the death and I can't take the chance it's Catching, Thelma, so I ain't cumin over and you can understand or Not, but I ain't cumin. I'll come the drive way, but that's as for as I go.

It is obvious that Jessie and Thelma are judged, excluded, and confined to an isolated existence in Thelma's house. Their house turned into a metaphoric jail in which both women are imprisoned. Consequently women are denied from their identity in that patriarchal society. In both plays women must accept the identities constructed for them by patriarchy.

### **1.1 The Impact of Commit Suicide from Mother Conflict**

Marsha Norman’s *'night, Mother* is a play about most people’s inability to communicate meaningfully, even when an obvious crisis requires it. Suicide is merely the catalyst that forces Jessie and Mama to talk with one another. It seems that Mama, at least at first, considers it a considerable sacrifice when she volunteers not to watch television that evening. It is no surprise, then, that the two women learn more about each other in less than two hours than they had in a lifetime of living together.

Jessie, and perhaps her mother as well, had never realized the degree to which the older woman had resented the special relationship of father and daughter. Yet, despite significant discoveries such as this.

one, neither woman experiences any great insight. Jessie never sees that her father’s withdrawals might have indicated a medical condition similar to her own. Mama remains childlike to the end, her wants are all sense-related and can be satisfied by eating a cupcake, watching television, or opening a trinket from the grab bag Jessie has left for her. There is no indication that Mama feels any guilt for Jessie’s death or that she will assume some new maturity. In this reversal of roles, the child, Jessie, becomes her mother’s guardian, but only long enough to make sure that all is in order. Jessie rises to a certain nobility, but its only lasting effect is self-destruction.

Some might consider that Norman suggests here that suicide is an acceptable alternative to living a life one considers intolerable, but Jessie’s view is not necessarily that of the playwright. Norman does not take an authorial point of view at all, she simply allows the women of her play to speak frankly. The result is that *'night, Mother* is a tragedy only in the sense that its characters have missed a lifetime of opportunities to understand each other and reach only a limited mutual insight in Jessie’s final hours. Unlike characters in classical tragedy, neither realizes the full extent of her loss.

The long conversation between mother and daughter demonstrates the fact that a mother can live in the same house with her daughter and think she knows her quite well while she actually knows very little about her. Jessie understands herself quite well, on this last evening of her life, she talks more than she ever has and

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demonstrates for the first time a sense of determination and purpose, a peaceful energy, her newly discovered self-confidence, and a "quirky" sense of humor that has never amused anyone except herself. She firmly believes that her decision to commit suicide is the best one she has ever made and that it is right for her. She also seems to be confident that her mother is capable of taking care of herself and that she will be better off doing so.

The previous lack of communication between the two is perhaps the major theme of the play. It is ironic that a woman who talks as much as Thelma has neglected to say so many truly meaningful things. Jessie has never asked questions, shared her opinions, or chosen to talk to anyone except her father. When Thelma asks what the two of them whispered about, Jessie replies that they were discussing important things such as why black socks are warmer than blue socks. Jessie has been very secure with her father's habit of just sitting, of being quiet, and of not doing anything, Thelma has never understood it. In making strings of paper "boyfriends" and animals for Jessie, her father has given her the only memory of her childhood that she seems to value.

"We've got a good life here," says Thelma Cates to her daughter, Jessie, in Marsha Norman's new play, "Night, Mother." Many would agree. Thelma, who is a widow, and Jessie, who is divorced, live together in a spick-and-span house on a country road somewhere in the New South. There are no money problems. Nights are spent in such relaxed pursuits as crocheting and watching television.

But on the particular, ordinary Saturday night that the readers meet Thelma and Jessie, the readers learn that the good life may not be so good after all. As the daughter prepares to perform her weekly ritual of giving her mother a manicure, she says calmly, almost as a throwaway line, "I'm going to kill myself, Mama." And, over the next 90 minutes, Mama,

and the rest of us -must face the fact that Jessie is not kidding.

"Night, Mother," which has traveled to Broadway's John Golden Theater from

Harvard's American Repertory Theater, is a shattering evening, but it looks like simplicity itself. A totally realistic play, set in real time counted by onstage clocks, it shows us what happens after Jessie makes her announcement. What happens, unsurprisingly, is that the first skeptical and then terrified mother tries to cajole and talk her child out of suicide. "People don't really kill themselves," argues Thelma, "unless they're retarded or deranged."

But Jessie isn't deranged, she's never felt better in her life, and that's why "Night, Mother" is more complex than it looks, more harrowing than even its plot suggests. Miss Norman's play is simple only in the way that an Edward Hopper painting is simple. As she perfectly captures the intimate details of two individual, ordinary women, this playwright locates the emptiness that fills too many ordinary homes on too many faceless streets in the vast country the readers live in now.

Why does Jessie want to kill herself? There are many conceivable motives. She's a fat, lumpy, anonymous-looking woman in her 30's who spends her days indoors, eating junk food. Her son is a hoodlum. Her last job, working at a gift shop in a hospital, didn't work out. She misses her dead father, as well as the husband who left her. She suffers from epilepsy, though it's now been brought under control by medication.

As the play progresses, her mother enumerates all these disappointments, desperately offering to solve any of them she can. But Jessie will have none of it. She instead wants to use her last hours to help her mother get the house in order and to sit around chatting "like every other night of our lives." The daughter insists that they make cocoa, re-cover the couch and clean out the refrigerator.

#### IV CONCLUSION

From the previous chapter, the writer got the conclusion which relates to the findings:

1. Jessie external conflict is not just lonely, though she is plenty lonely. People can be lonely without also being alienated. The loneliness is not the cause of Jessie's suicidal tendencies: she has her mother and if she had been willing to give up smoking, she could have still have her husband. The loneliness is stimulated by her alienation from others. She makes a conscious choice to be alone from her husband and, ultimately, it is clear she has made a conscious choice to alienate herself from her mother. The consequence of that choice is her belief that there is only one way out of being alone for the rest of her life.
2. *'Night Mother* by Marsha Norman is a thought provoking play. The entire drama is contained in the single act of the mother (Mama) and daughter (Jessie) talking. The subject of their conversation surrounds the casual yet sudden announcement by Jessie that she is going to end her life. One of the hallmarks of good theatre is depth of characterization. In *'night Mother* the readers find rich psychological profiles of the two main characters. The play also excels in another measure, namely, its minimalism. Just through a single day's conversation between a mother and a daughter, the playwright is able to paint a rich persona and emotional tapestries of the main characters.

3. Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother* is a play about most people's inability to communicate meaningfully, even when an obvious crisis requires it. Suicide is merely the catalyst that forces Jessie and Mama to talk with one another. It seems that Mama, at least at first, considers it a considerable sacrifice when she volunteers not to watch television that evening. It is no surprise, then, that the two women learn more about each other in less than two hours than they had in a lifetime of living together.

For the writer, this thesis has been an effort to prove his study and at the same time to deepen his skill about literary work through writing. However, this analysis might not be perfect, so the writer wants certain inputs and critics from the readers in perfection of this writing. The writer hopes this analysis can add a new expression in literature world, especially English Department, Faculty of Literature, Ekasakti University. An Example, we can learn from the problems in the drama, how to live in loneliness, adapt to people around us, and we can be able to solve problems properly. For the reader, the writer also hopes that this research will give the contribution to the English Department students and whoever may be interested in the subject being discussed.

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