'Night, Mother Study Guide

'Night, Mother by Marsha Norman

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Contents

'Night, Mother Study Guide....1

Contents....2

Introduction....3

Author Biography....4

Plot Summary....5

Summary....7

Characters....13

Themes....15

Style....18

Historical Context....21

Critical Overview....23

Criticism....25

Critical Essay #1....26

Critical Essay #2....29

Critical Essay #3....33

Adaptations....35

Topics for Further Study....36

What Do I Read Next?....37

Further Study....38

Bibliography....40

Copyright Information....41

Introduction

'*night, Mother*, written in 1981, was Marsha Norman's fifth play. The work received generally favorable reviews when it was first produced on stage in 1983. Among the numerous honors bestowed upon the play, it was awarded the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for drama. Critics have lauded the play for its emotional honesty and realistic dialogue, with much of the praise focused on the play's unflinching depiction of a family specifically a mother and daughter in crisis. This lack of sentimentality and the play's focus on the loneliness and emptiness of the two women's lives are often cited by those praising '*night, Mother*. In contrast, those who did not like the play most often complain that it is drab and lacks any significant development in its two characters. While this was not intended as a condemnation of the play, dissenting critics also said that those reviewers who praised the play so lavishly were over-reacting to a dramatic work that was adequate but not great let alone deserving of a Pulitzer. On balance, however, '*night, Mother* was well-received, by audiences and critics alike, for its realism and honesty.

When *'night, Mother* premiered in Canada in 1984 the notices were favorable. Although reviewers in the United States had not generally reviewed the play as feminist, Canadian critics did note that the work presented men only as peripheral characters in the women's lives and that women were central to the play's themes. Although the topic of '*night, Mother* is unhappiness that results in suicide, Norman manages to interject some macabre humor through sharp dialogue. Despite its impartial (even negative) stance toward suicide, '*night, Mother* nevertheless became a source of controversy due to its inclusion of that subject. The issue was intensified by the Pulitzer Prize going to the play. Yet Norman's work is viewed by most as a depiction of a failed mother/daughter relationship, a chronical of the daughter's deep unhappmess, and, ultimately, her inability to deal with her lot in life. In this sense the play is valued as both a gritty work of fiction and a cautionary tale that has bearing on real life.

Author Biography

The isolation and loneliness of life, topics of her play '*night, Mother*, are issues that are familiar to Marsha Norman, since they spring from her own childhood. Norman was born September 21, 1947, in Louisville, Kentucky. Her family chose to isolate Norman rather than expose her to ideas that challenged their own as religious fundamentalists. She received a B.A. from Agnes Scott College in Georgia in 1969, and a M.A. from the University of Louisville in 1971. Norman worked with gifted and emotionally disturbed children for two years at Kentucky State Hospital. She has been married three times and has two children.

By 1976 Norman was working full time as a writer contributing articles to a local newspaper. Her first play, *Getting Out* (1977) is based on a woman she knew while working at Kentucky State Hospital. In 1978 she was awarded a National Endowment for the Arts grant that enabled her to work with the Actors' Theatre in Louisville (ATL), an influential organization that produces the work of up and coming playwrights. Norman quickly followed with three more plays written during her association with ATL: *Third and Oak: The Laundromat [and] The Pool Hall* (1978), *Circus Valentine* (1979), and *The Holdup* (1980). From 1980 to 1981, she also served as a resident director with the company, She wrote *'night Mother* after moving to New York City with her second husband, theatrical producer Dann Byck.

Other plays that Norman has written include *Traveler in the Dark* (1984), *Sarah and Abraham* (1988), and *D. Boom* (1992). She has also written the book and lyrics for two musicals, the children's production *The Secret Garden* (1991), and *The Red Shoes* (1993). In 1987 Norman published her first novel, *The Fortune Teller*. She also authored two teleplays, *In Trouble at Fifteen* (1980) and *Face of a Stranger* (1991). In 1986, she adapted her own work for the film version of '*night, Mother*, which was produced by Universal Pictures and starred Sissy Spacek.

Norman received the American Theatre Critics Association award for the best play produced in regional theatre in 1977-78 for *Getting Out*, That work also brought Norman the John Gassner New Playwrights Medallion, the Outer Critics Circle, and the George Oppenheimer-Newsday Award in 1979. Norman received a Pulitzer Prize for drama for '*night, Mother* in 1983; the play was also honored with the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, a Tony Award nomination for best play, and the Elizabeth Hull-Kate Warriner Award from the Dramatist Guild. She also received a Tony award for Best Book of a Musical in 1991 for *The Secret Garden*. In addition to her work on the film adaptation of '*night, Mothe*r, Norman has written several unproduced screenplays.

Plot Summary

'*night, Mother* takes place in the living room and kitchen in the rural home of mother Thelma Cates and her daughter, Jessie. The play follows real time as displayed on a clock on stage. The hour and a half length of the play matches exactly the hour and a half of dialogue and action between Thelma's opening lines and her final call to Jessie's brother to inform him of his sister's death.

'*night, Mother* opens with Jessie Cates asking her mother for a piece of plastic sheeting and for the location of her father's gun. After Jessie finds the gun hidden away in an old shoe box in the attic, she begins cleaning the weapon. As she does, she calmly tells her mother that it is her intention to commit suicide later that evening. She accompanies this announcement with a stream of idle chatter that describes the ease with which she has purchased the ammunition and even had it delivered to their rural home. Thelma, is at first disbelieving. When she realizes that Jessie is serious, she attempts to dissuade her. Taking little note of her mother's arguments, Jessie continues with her preparations for death. She cleans the refrigerator and instructs her mother on how to order groceries, how to use the washer and dryer, and when to put out the garbage. She tells Thelma that she has stopped delivery of the daily paper, ordered her favorite candy for her, and arranged to continue the delivery of milk although her mother prefers soda or orangeade. Jessie has even prepared a Christmas list of gift suggestions for her brother for the next several years.

To keep her mother busy and to create a semblance of order, Jessie asks her to make some hot chocolate for them yet neither women drinks it because neither likes milk. The purpose in making the chocolate, clearly, was to distract her mother from the announcement Jessie has just made. While these activities are going on, Jessie keeps up a flow of gossip about her mother's friends and her family. This gossip reveals to the audience that Jessie is in her thirties, divorced, unemployed, and that she hates her life. Jt also reveals that her mother's closest friend will no longer visit her because Jessie's presence makes her uncomfortable. The dialogue paints a picture of a mother who has assumed an air of helplessness so that she can provide a purpose in life for her daughter. She can do the little things that Jessie does for her, obtaining her prescibtions and shopping, yet she allows her daughter to assume these chores.

Jessie sees herself as having no future. She is an epileptic who only leaves their rural house to go to the hospital after a seizure. She is divorced from a man she still loves, but the audience learns that when given the ultimatum of either continuing her smoking habit or quitting and staying with her husband, Jessie chose smoking. We learn from Thelma, however, that the husband, Cecil, was unfaithful, having had an affair with a neighbor's daughter. Jessie's son, Ricky, is a thief and a drug addict, and while Jessie's mother thinks the boy will outgrow these tendencies, Jessie sees little hope. That lack of hope is the crux of this one act play. Jessie tells her mother that she is committing suicide because she sees no point in continuing with a life as empty as hers has become. She can visualize only another fifty years of the same emptiness and can see no point in continuing. Jessie uses the metaphor of a bus trip to describe the reason for

killing herself. She states that it does not matter if you are fifty blocks from your stop when you get off because for her the stop will be the same right now as it will be in those fifty blocks/fifty years. Jessie's is a life that, from her perspective, holds no promise and no future.

Jessie's mother, Thelma, divulges family secrets in her attempt to stop Jessie's planned suicide. She tells Jessie that her seizures are not the result of a fall from a horse but that she has had them from early childhood. Thelma also tells her daughter that the epilepsy is inherited and that her father also suffered from the disease. As Thelma reveals how empty her marriage was, the audience learns of Thelma's jealousy of her daughter's close relationship with her father. As her husband lay dying, Thelma left him to watch the western series *Gunsmoke* on television, since he refused to talk to her. Yet she asks Jessie what she and her father said to one another in those last moments just before he died. Thelma refused to share her husband's last minutes and cannot understand why her daughter did not make the same choice.

Their interaction makes clear that Thelma and Jessie love one another, but, to Jessie, her mother's love is not reason enough to continue living. Thelma pleads with Jessie; she cajoles her with stories, and offers to change their lives. The desperation of the mother is clear, as is her love for her daughter. In the last moments of the play, a desperate Thelma clings to her impassive daughter and is pushed aside as Jessie leaves the room with the muted farewell "night, Mother." She goes and locks herself in her room. The play ends with the sound of a gunshot followed by Thelma's grief-stricken call to her son.

Summary

This play is set in a fairly new house on a country road with the action taking place in the living room, although the kitchen and the hall to the bedroom can be seen. There are two characters: Jessie Cates, in her late thirties, and her mother, Thelma Cates (Mama), in her early fifties.

Jessie is preparing to commit suicide. She has told her mother about her plans and then goes about getting things ready, so her mother can get by without her, at least for awhile. She lays in supplies of cupcakes and candy, which seem to be the staples in Thelma's diet.

At first, Thelma thinks Jesse is joking about killing herself. Then Thelma suggests that Jessie needs to take her medicine. Since that doesn't work, Thelma tries to convince Jessie that the gun is broken - that her father broke it before he died. Then Thelma threatens to call Dawson, Jessie's brother, but Jessie tells her that won't stop her - she'll just do it immediately, before he gets there. When all else fails, Thelma tries to dissuade Jessie, telling Jessie that she will botch it and end up a vegetable or cock the pistol and then "have a fit." It doesn't work - Jesse's mind is made up.

Jessie has epilepsy due to a fall from a horse, she believes. However, in the course of the play, her mother reveals that Jessie has always had epilepsy but hasn't always been aware of it. Thelma explains that Jessie's father also had a form of epilepsy, so Jessie probably inherited it from him. This is all news to Jessie. She has no memory of the episodes, and is curious about what one is like, so Thelma describes it for her in detail. However, Jessie is taking Phenobarbital and has not had a seizure for a year. Jessie says she is feeling good now - the effects of the epilepsy seem to have subsided. In fact, Jessie says, her memory's back. If she didn't have her memory back, she probably wouldn't be planning to kill herself, Jessie adds.

Jessie retrieves her father's gun from the attic. Jessie has obtained bullets on the pretext that she needs protection from prowlers. Her brother, Dawson, agrees that having the gun for protection is a good idea and orders the bullets for her from a local feed store. Thelma is shocked when she realizes that not only has Thelma told Jessie where her father's gun is, but Dawson, her only son, has secured the bullets for her. Jessie sees the humor in this: "See? Everybody's doing what they can." Dawson took her request for his help as an indication that Jessie is getting back into things. "He said we ought to talk like this more often."

Then Thelma tells Jessie that she isn't really going to do it because Jessie isn't even upset. Thelma says that people don't kill themselves unless they're retarded or deranged, and that Jessie is normal for the most part. Thelma says, "We're all afraid to die."

But Jessie tells her that she's not afraid to die - it's what she wants. She says that she's cold all the time and dead is "dark and quiet." Thelma tells Jessie that she doesn't know

what dead is like. It might be noisy, and there would be nothing you could do about it. But Jessie replies, "Dead is everybody and everything I ever knew, gone. Dead is dead quiet."

Then Thelma argues that it's a sin and she'll go to hell. Jessie responds, "Jesus was a suicide, if you ask me." Jessie can't believe she said that; she didn't know until that moment that she believed that way. Since nothing else is working, Thelma says the gun belongs to her, and Jessie can't use it, and the towels are hers, and Jessie can't use them. Then Thelma tells Jessie she can't do it in Thelma's house. To that, Jessie replies, "If I'd known you were going to act like this, I wouldn't have told you."

Jessie has planned carefully. She is going to go into the bedroom and lock the door, so they won't arrest Thelma. Jessie surmises that they'll probably test her mother's hands for gunpowder, but they won't find any. In addition to the towels she has collected, she has also secured a plastic sheet. She is preparing her mother for living alone by showing her how the washer works, how to call the repairman, and when to order groceries.

Thelma wants to know why Jessie is doing it. Thelma thinks it's something Thelma did or because she doesn't like Dawson and his wife. Jessie complains that family knows too much about you, and you have no control over what they know, and the information doesn't belong to them. But that's not why she's killing herself. So Thelma thinks it's because Ricky has turned out so badly, but Jessie says no, that's not it. So she thinks it's because her marriage to Cecil failed, but Jessie says that's not it. She says, "Mama, I'm just not having a very good time, and I don't have any reason to think it'll get anything but worse. I'm tired. I'm hurt. I'm sad. I feel used." She reads the paper, she says, and it's no better out there than it is here.

Now Thelma says they'll stop taking newspapers and get rid of the television set. She suggests that they might get another dog. She reminds Jessie that she had liked their big dog, King. Thelma says Jessie does too much for Thelma, and Thelma can do the things like filling the pill bottles herself. "You don't have to do another thing in this house if you don't want to," Thelma tells her. Jessie tries to explain her decision to kill herself by using a metaphor of riding on a bus. It's unpleasant and you want to get off, but you have fifty more blocks to go before you get where you want to go. But I can get off right now if I want to, she tells her mother. I can get off when I've had enough, and I've had enough.

Now Thelma changes her tactics by telling Jessie she can take control of her life and change it - Jessie can take up something she likes to do such as crocheting, going to the A&P, rearranging the furniture, or getting a job. Thelma reminds Jessie that Jessie kept her father's books until he died. But Jessie replies that when he died, they took that away from her. Thelma reminds Jessie that there were not more books to keep after he died. Jessie knows that she can't do anything about her life to change it or make it better or even make herself feel better. But she can end it, and she intends to do that.

Since she can't do anything about Jessie's decision, Thelma offers to make her favorite foods - hot chocolate and a caramel apple. She suggests that she try to renew her marriage with Cecil, but Jessie says that wouldn't work. She says that Cecil loved her, but he just "didn't know how things fall down around me like they do."

Thelma's best friend is Agnes, who won't come over because of Jessie's epilepsy. Agnes says that Jessie's hands are cold, an indication that Jessie has shaken the hand of death, and Agnes is afraid she might catch it. Jessie is amused that Agnes, who is clearly unbalanced, is afraid of her.

At last, Thelma gets angry and sweeps all the pans off the counter and tells Jessie to get rid of all of them because Jessie is not going to cook anymore. But Jessie puts the pans back in the cabinets and suggests that Agnes can come and cook for Thelma when Jessie is gone or even move in with Thelma. Thelma tells Jessie that getting Thelma a new babysitter is not going to let Jessie off the hook.

Jessie asks Thelma whether she loved Jessie's father, and the answer is no. Thelma says he married Thelma because he felt sorry for her; he wanted a plain country woman, and that's what he got. "How could I love him, Jessie? I didn't have a thing he wanted." Then he held it against her, she says. All he ever did was farm and sit. He had a "Gone Fishing" sign on the barn, and Thelma says he might as well have had it around his neck when he was sitting in his chair. He never actually went fishing; he would just go and sit by the lake in his car and make pipe cleaner figures.

Jessie tells her that Jessie liked him better than her mother did Thelma replies that Jessie actually loved him enough for both of them. Jessie remembers that he made her a boyfriend out of pipe cleaners and confesses that she was angry when he died; she loved him and she misses him. She's sorry Thelma didn't love him because he seemed like a nice man. Thelma thinks she wouldn't be killing herself if her father were still alive, but Jessie says that's not true.

Now Jessie wants to know what her father said to Thelma the night he died. Jessie remembers that Thelma had left his room angry and had gone and watched Gunsmoke. Thelma said he didn't say a thing, which was why she was angry. He had his last chance not to say anything to her and he took it.

Thelma tells Jessie she doesn't have to give up, that there are other things she can do. Jessie agrees, but she says this is what she thinks about Dawson and his wife, and the Red Chinese, and epilepsy, and Ricky and Cecil, and Thelma and hope: "I say no!" she tells her mother.

Jessie rehearses the funeral with her mother, even telling her what to say when people come and tell her how sorry they are. Jessie tells Thelma when they ask about the last night, just tell them that they just sat around like every other night, that Jessie kissed her and said, "'Night, Mother."

Jessie instructs Thelma that when she hears the shot, she is to call Dawson, then the police, and then Agnes. She brings a box of her things and tells her mother what to do

with each of them. She also has a bag of little gifts for her mother to open from time to time. Thelma panics and tries to stop her, but to no avail. Jessie goes to her room, and a shot is heard.

Thelma says, "Jessie, Jessie, child . . . Forgive me. I thought you were mine."

Then Thelma calls Dawson.

Analysis

When people talk about suicide, they usually talk about depression. When you go online and read about this topic, you find that most of the information is about depression. But that's not the subject of Norman's play. It's about human relationships and dealing with living in the world. Jessie was not deprived of anything. She had parents who loved her and looked after her. She had a marriage and a child. She doesn't want for anything. She can call a grocery store and have anything delivered that she wants, even luxuries such as snowball cupcakes and candy. All of Jessie's rationales for committing suicide match the criteria for clinical depression, but Norman is not writing about depression.

Jessie is not committing suicide because of something; it is because of nothing. This nothingness is symbolized by a passive father who spent his life farming, sitting in his chair or at the edge of the lake making figures from pipe cleaners. He was a nice man, according to Jessie, but he was more a lump than a human being. As far as the play is concerned, the only times he showed even the faintest signs of life were when he interacted with Jessie, and even at those times, it was low-key and dispassionate. Add to that the coldness of the relationship between her parents, and the theme of the play becomes clear. Jessie's cold hands are a symbol of the home she grew up in.

This story is also about isolation and its devastating effects on human beings. The setting underscores this theme. The home is remote and stands alone on a road with no neighbors in sight. Its inhabitants do not go out. They have everything they need brought in. The grocery store delivers, the milkman comes to their door, the feed store even delivers the bullets that Jessie will use to kill herself. Thelma and Jessie do not interact with these delivery people. The delivery people merely enable the isolation. When Jessie kills herself for no reason, she is reflecting this theme. Death is not different, she says. It's just a way to stop. Like being on a bus and getting off.

Norman has Thelma uttering all the clichys that people use to talk about suicide, including religion - it's a sin, which is irrelevant to this protagonist. Get a life is another thing people say to a despondent person. Get a job, get a hobby, get a pet. But none of this penetrates Jessie's thinking. She knows that all of that is also irrelevant.

Thelma uses the argument of unintended consequences. Jessie will botch it, Thelma says, and Jessie will end up more miserable and dependent. But Jessie has confidence that she can carry it out according to her plan.

Perhaps the most eerie and chilling thing about this play is the methodical and casual way Jessie goes about the suicide plan. Jessie prepares her mother to survive as if Jessie were just going away on a trip. In fact, when Jessie orders extra supplies, she tells the grocer that her reason for ordering so much stuff is that she's going on a trip. She matter-of-factly fills her mother in on all the things Thelma will need to know once Jessie is gone. Jessie has had the dress her mother wore to her father's funeral cleaned, so Thelma can wear it to Jessie's funeral. The very last thing Jessie does is script her mother for getting through the funeral and the visitation.

The conflicts in this story are between the two characters who are onstage. There are, of course, other characters, but they are not involved in the action on the stage. Jessie's absent father is very present in the play. But the conflicts are between Jessie, who is determined to kill herself, and her mother, who is determined to keep Jessie from doing it, but only up to a point. For example, she does not call for help, even though she has opportunities to do so. We know that Thelma could have called Dawson to come and intervene, but she does not do so. This is about the relationship between mother and daughter, and the mother's taking on the task of saving her daughter all by herself. She uses every trick in her repertory to stop the suicide, from reason to anger to guilt to pity, but nothing works. In the play, we relive, not only their relationship from the day of her birth, but also the relationship with the father while he was alive. Interestingly, Dawson is mentioned only in the present, not in those past recollections. We have no indication that the mother does not love Jessie. She calls her "hon," "honey," and "sugar."

The climax comes when the gun goes off. Jessie has won. Jessie has taken her life, in spite of anything her mother tried to do to stop Jessie. On the surface, this was a relationship that was working. The mother was always supportive. Although she kept the secret of the epilepsy from her daughter, she did it because she thought it was better that Jessie not know. Thelma was trying to protect Jessie. But even a seemingly successful mother/daughter relationship did not prevent the tragedy.

The play can be seen as a metaphor for modern life. We don't communicate with each other; our communication is delivered, just as the groceries are in 'Night Mother. We live isolated, reclusive lives behind our closed doors; we don't know our neighbors - we might as well live on a country road with no one within sight. Our relationships are dispassionate and unrewarding. We are not stirred by major events occurring around the world, unless they inconvenience us. Life is like a bus ride - it's unpleasant, and we can stay on until we reach our destinations or we can end it whenever we choose.

In the opening scene, Thelma is getting a packaged snowball cupcake from the cupboard and complains that the coconut is falling off. "Why does the coconut fall off?" she wonders. This is clearly symbolically foreshadowing what is coming. She doesn't understand why she is losing her daughter to suicide - why Jessie is "falling off."

Thelma makes the final meal for the condemned, just as prisons do for prisoners who are to be executed. This is a clue as to how this is going to end. This is truly the final meal for Jessie.

The point of view in drama is inevitably objective. Rarely does a character step forward and tell the audience what is going on in his/her mind. We must watch what the actors are doing and derive from that what they are thinking and what their motivations are. However, a skilled playwright will at least raise questions about motivation, and this play ends with many questions and not many answers. Exactly why does this character commit suicide? Is she killing herself out of revenge for the way life has treated her? Is she sending a message to her husband and son? Is she telling her brother and his wife that they have let her down? Is she, possibly, punishing her mother because Thelma didn't make her father happy? We know that it's not for a religious reason such as a reunion with her father on the other side because we know that religion is not entering into Jessie's decision. We don't know what the motivation is. We only know that Jessie says she's doing it because life is unsatisfactory and she has no reason to expect that it will get better.

Characters

Jessie Cates

Jessie is somewhere in her mid-thirties or early forties. She suffers from epilepsy, and this, combined with her perceived failure in relationships, provokes her decision to commit suicide. She views this act as the ultimate means of asserting control over her life. She has an ex-husband whom she still loves. Her marriage was precipitated by her mother if not outright arranged when Thelma hired Cecil to build a porch she did not need. Jessie has a son, Ricky, who is a petty thief and has problems with drugs. For most of her life Jessie's epilepsy has made it impossible for her to work. As the play's action begins, drags seem to have brought the disease under control, yet Jessie is too frightened of the outside world to venture into it. She sees her life as empty, without purpose, and without a future; an existence that is utterly beyond her control to alter. Jessie has suffered several losses: the death of her father (perhaps the closest relationship in her life), the break-up of her marriage, an absent son whom she regards as a failure, and the death of her dog. Her combined depression and fear of interaction with people other than her mother has led her to believe that the future holds no hope of change or any increase in autonomy; Jessie feels that she is a puppet acting out a life over which she has no authorship.

Thelma Cates

Thelma is Jessie's mother. She is a widow and has one other child, a son named Dawson who lives with his wife. In the course of the play, she reveals that she never loved Jessie's father and that they had little communication. She spends much of her time on needlework, and her creations clutter the family home. At first appearance she seems to be an elderly woman dependent on her daughter for many everyday necessities. It becomes clear through the course of the play, however, that she has allowed Jessie to take over these chores, not because she is incapable, but because she felt that Jessie needed a purpose.

At Jessie's announcement that she intends to commit suicide, Thelma displays a series of emotions: disbelief, anger, fear, desperation, and, finally, a degree of acceptance. She loves her daughter and makes every attempt to talk her out of killing herself. Yet there are intimations throughout the play that many of Jessie's problems may have been caused by Thelma's behavior toward and treatment of her daughter.

Mama

See Thelma Cates

Mother

See Thelma Cates

Themes

Alienation and Loneliness

Alienation and loneliness are important themes in '*night, Mother*, Jessie has become totally isolated as a result of her epilepsy and her failed attempt at raising a family. Her mother hid the disease to protect Jessie, but in doing so, she also isolated the child from the world. She is so alone that the only way she can meet a man and marry is for her mother to hire him to so some construction work on the house. Jessie cannot work because of her disease and by the time her epilepsy is under control, she is too frightened and set in her ways to attempt life in the outside world. Jessie's decision to kill herself results from the isolation and loneliness of her life.

Free Will

Jessie's choice to kill herself is her attempt to take control of her life. In a small way she took control when she chose smoking instead of her husband, but that provided a bitter and hollow victory, since she still loved Cecil. Her epilepsy and her mother's efforts to shelter her from any knowledge of her disease in some way deprived Jessie of the free will to make decisions about her disease and, more broadly, her life. Free will means assuming responsibility for an individual's actions and an acceptance of the consequences; Jessie's choice of suicide is her effort to assert control and act upon the free will that she feels has been absent from her life.

Death

The theme of death by definition the utter lack of life lies at the center of '*night, Mother*. Preparation for her death is the reason for Jessie's actions and the purpose behind the dialogue that carries the play's action. It is her effort to provide closure that motivates Jessie to tell her mother of her pending suicide. The play is an hour and a half of preparation for the act of dying. The audience also sees and hears the emotions that are usually reserved for after the death of a loved one: the pain, the grief, the fear, the anger, and the reluctant acceptance.

Human Condition

The human condition is often identified as a component of the basic human need for survival. In '*night, Mother*, Thelma's hour and a half effort to save her daughter's life reveals much about the nature of the human condition. The audience is given a glimpse of the nature of the Cates's lives, their pain and anguish and the barren quality of their existence as Thelma tries to find a reason to deter her daughter's suicide. That Jessie can so easily dismiss her mother's pleas and offers of help discloses that there is no

single reason as to *why* she wants to die; in Jessie's mind the overwhelming sensation is that there is no single reason for her to continue living.

Identity

An important issue for Jessie is her attempt to create an identity. She tells her mother that her brother calls her "Jess like he knows who he's talking to." She also says that her son Ricky is "as much like me as it's possible for any human to be"; Jessie identifies them both as failures. She so identifies herself with her husband that when he decides to leave her she writes herself a note telling her what she knows he feels. Jessie's identity is so tied up in the identities of those she loves and she is too weary to attempt to assert a new identity in life that she feels the only way to separate herself is through death.

Limitations and Opportunities

Jessie's choice to die is a direct result of the lack of opportunity in her life. She can see no future and no change and thus no purpose in her continued existence. Her epilepsy and her life's choices have resulted in an existence bound by limits and lost opportunities. Although her disease is now under control, a lifetime of limitations have conditioned Jessie to not look beyond the moment. Suicides are often characterized as individuals who cannot see that they have another choice. Jessie certainly fits this model.

Natural Law

Natural law is often described as the survival of the fittest (as Charles Darwin notes in his study of evolution *The Origin of Species*). It can be applied as simply an evolutionary term that accounts for the survival of one species over another. It is sometimes used to account for why one individual survives and another does not. Certainly there are applications to '*night, Mother*, since not all epileptics commit suicide (most lead normal lives that involve active socialization and work), nor do all women who are divorced or have failed personal relationships kill themselves. Jessie's death can be described as keeping with the natural law of survival it should be noted, however, that it is Jessie who feels the world holds no place for her, not vice versa. Were she willing to make the effort, it is clear that Jessie could function in and be a part of the world. The manner in which natural law plays a part in the play is wholly created in Jessie's mind; part of her reasoning is that she is not strong enough she has been condition to believe that she is too weak to live.

Success and Failure

Success and failure are important themes in '*night, Mother* because they account for the reasons behind Jessie's actions. Jessie chooses suicide to escape a life that is empty

and which she sees as likely to remain empty. While she does not describe her life as a failure, it is clear from her failed marriage and her son's behavior that she sees little reason to celebrate her life achievements as successes. She regards her life as a failure and even describes her inability to work as a failing. That she cares for her mother cannot be regarded as a success, since Jessie also recognizes that her mother allows Jessie to care for her as a means to keep her busy, not out of any actual need.

Style

Act

A major division in a drama. In classic Greek plays the sections of the drama were signified by the appearance of the chorus and were usually divided into five acts. This is the formula for most serious drama from the Greeks to the Romans, as well as to Elizabethan playwrights such as William Shakespeare. The five acts denote the structure of dramatic action. They are exposition, complication, climax, falling action, and catastrophe. The five act structure was followed until the nineteenth century when Henrik Ibsen combined some of the acts. '*night, Mother* is a one act play. The exposition, complication, climax, falling action, and catastrophe are combined in one act when Jessie reveals her intention to kill herself. The drama and the elements of the traditional five acts plays out during the next ninety minutes.

Analogy

Analogy is a comparison of two things. Often something unfamiliar is explained by comparing it to something familiar. In '*night, Mother Jessie* uses the analogy of a bus trip for her future years as a means to explain why she is going to kill herself.

Character

A character by strict definition is person in a dramatic work. The actions of each character are what constitute the story. Character can also include the idea of a particular individual's morality and other traits that shape and define their personality. Characters can range from simple stereotypical figures (a New York City cab driver or a brisk, smart-aleck waitress) to more complex ones. "Characterization" is the process of creating a life forging a person from an author's imagination. To accomplish this the author provides the character with personality traits that help define who she will be and how she will behave in a given situation. For instance, Thelma is initially made to seem silly and helpless. As the action progresses, however, Thelma reveals that she is actually quite capable and rather than a doddering old woman, is a shrewd and calculating person.

Dialogue

Dialogue is a conversation between two or more people. In '*night, Mother* dialogue assumes the role of debate. Jessie and her mother engage in a debate over whether she is justified in planning a suicide. One important feature of this play is that the dialogue is realistic. Mothers and daughters (and others in close, long-term relationships) do talk in a sort of conversational short-hand that evolves over a number

of years. Jessie and Thelma engage in just this sort of dialogue, which enhances the reality of the action rather than interfering with it.

Drama

A drama is often defined as any work designed to be presented on the stage. It consists of a story, of actors portraying characters, and of action. But historically, drama can also consist of tragedy, comedy, religious pageant, and spectacle. In modern usage, a "drama" (like the "Drama" section of a video store) is something that explores serious topics and themes but does not achieve the same level as tragedy, '*night, Mother* incorporates aspects of drama according to this definition, while also working in elements of tragedy.

Naturalism

Naturalism was a literary movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This is the application of scientific principles to literature. For instance, in nature behavior is determined by environmental pressures or internal factors, none of which can be controlled or even clearly understood. There is a clear cause and effect association: either the indifference of nature or biological determinism influence behavior. In either case, there is no human responsibility for the actions of the individual. European Naturalism emphasized biological determinism, while American Naturalism emphasized environmental influences. Jessie's realization that she has inherited her father's epilepsy is a component of naturalism.

Plot

This term refers to a pattern of events that make up a story. Generally plots should have a beginning, a middle, and a conclusion, but they can sometimes be made of a series of episodes connected together (as director Quentin Tarantino did with his film *Pulp Fiction*, which strings a series of episodes into one larger plot). Basically, the plot provides the author with the means to explore primary themes. Students are often confused between the two terms; but themes explore ideas, and plots simply relate what happens in a very obvious manner. The plot of '*night, Mother* revolves around Jessie's preparations to commit suicide. But the themes are those of identity, death, choice, and loneliness.

Realism

Realism is a nineteenth century literary term that identifies an author's attempt to portray characters, events, and settings in a realistic way. Simply put, realism is attention to detail, with description intended to be honest and frank at all levels; at its best, realism will provoke recognition in an audience. There is an emphasis on character, especially behavior. In '*night, Mother*, the dialogue between Thelma and Jessie is recognizable as

real to the audience. These are events, people, and a home that, as Norman hopes, will be familiar to the audience. The living room and kitchen are similar to one found in most homes in America. Thelma is familiar to most women, and her fears of losing her daughter are universal.

Setting

The time, place, and culture in which the action of the play takes place is called the setting. The elements of setting may include geographic location, physical or mental environments, prevailing cultural attitudes, or the historical time in which the action takes place. The location for *'night, Mother is* an unnamed midwestern city. The action begins in the evening and concludes ninety minutes later; the one act takes place in the living room and kitchen of the Cates's residence. Norman's situation is created to be universal, so the time is relatively unimportant, and the location could be any town, the evening any evening. Norman states in her stage directions that she does not want either character identified by setting, dress, or regional accent. They are simply two women who could be anyone.

Unities

The three unities of dramatic structure include unity of time, place, and action. The unities are generally credited to the Greek playwright Aristotle, who penned them in his *Poetics*. The "unity of time" refers to all the action taking place within one twenty-four hour period. Since '*night, Mother takes* place during a ninety minute period without intermission, this play adheres to the unity of time. The "unity of place" limits the action to one location, in this case, the Cates's living room and kitchen. The most important is the "unity of action." The action should have a beginning, a middle, and an end. In '*night, Mother* the action begins with Jessie's announcement that she will commit suicide. The middle details her mother's attempts to dissuade her and her preparations for death; the end is the shot that concludes the play. Thus '*night, Mother* adheres to all three unities.

Historical Context

Alienation, Isolation, and Anorexia

Although the United States had more than 228 million people in the early 1980s, Americans still largely defined themselves as human beings who were self-reliant and in control of their own destiny. The search for autonomy in a country where government has become so huge and intrusive is a concern for many people. But the question of autonomy is of particular interest to women who by the last half of the twentieth century were attempting in large numbers to assert themselves as individuals One important issue for women occurred in the early 1980s, when the Equal Rights Amendment failed to be ratified. This sent a message to women that equality still remained an elusive factor in their lives. This is particularly evident in the increasing numbers of women who show symptoms of eating disorders. Women and young girls who suffer from anorexia or bulimia often cite the issue of control as a motivating factor in their eating patterns. In adopting anorexia as a means of control, women are often starving themselves to death. This is a passive means of suicide. A woman need not use a gun or another weapon such as pills; rather she can die through neglect. The intent is the same, but the means offers a long-term effort at assuming control. The correlation between anorexia and suicide is evident with Jessie. Much of '*night, Mother* focuses on food but only with regard to Jessie's mother. Jessie does not consume the candy and junk food that permeates the Cates's home. In fact, Jessie's mother complains that Jessie never did like to eat. This line offers a clue that connects Jessie to other women trapped by anorexia: Jessie represents the image of a woman attempting to regain control.

Women Smokers

Since women have historically been defined as property, first of their fathers and, later m life, of their husbands, it is perhaps understandable that modern women should seek a means to define themselves as free individuals. By the early 1980s, women smokers were out-numbering their male counterparts. This trend did not evolve out of any particular love for cigarettes. Instead women began smoking for a complex set of reasons. The image of success that is evoked by cigarette advertisers certainly played a role: women could share in the same successful world populated by men But another reason may have been that smoking represents choice. A primary argument to emerge from the women's struggle of the 1960s and 1970s was a woman's right to choose. Whether that choice involved birth control, employment, or smoking mattered little. In fact for women, smoking became a right that was not legislated and was not dependent on men. When Jessie is asked to choose between her husband and smoking, she chooses smoking. Quite simply, smoking became a freedom of choice that Jessie found lacking in her life; it represented autonomy in her life. Given the choice between smoking, which she decided to do on her own, and staying with Cecil, whom she married as a result of her mother's arrangments, Jessie opts for one of the few things she came to on her own.

Right to Die

If anything, the right to die has become an even larger issue in the fifteen years since Norman wrote *'night, Mother*. Technology and its ability to keep a body alive long after the brain ceases to function is an important impetus for those who claim the right to die. In 1981, the case of Karen Ann Quinlan was still recent news. Quinlan was a young woman who suffered major brain trauma. Although her brain was unable to monitor basic bodily fuctions such as breathing, life support machines kept her alive. Her family fought to have her life support withdrawn, arguing that Karen's quality of life was negligible. This issue has persisted in the 1990s with the prominence of Dr. Jack Kevorkian, a retired pathologist from Michigan who has assisted people in committing suicide if they are terminally ill or in chronic, unrelievable pain. Those who support right to death issues consistently state that it is a person's choice to end their own life if they deem it devoid of value. While Jessie is not terminally ill or brain dead, the manner in which she percieves her situation through a cloud of depression is analogous to those seeking euthanasia (which means merciful death): she feels that her quality of life is negligible. Jessie chooses to die, not because she is ill or mentally deficient in some manner, but because she has the right to choose. Norman makes clear in her text that there is no primary, reason for Jessie's choice. But what she does offer is a woman who chooses to act rather than be acted upon: there is no reason for Jessie to die except that she chooses to do so. In her neutral description of Jessie, Norman is creating a woman who could be anyone. She is also forcing her audience to question the choice of who has a right to die. The play inevitably evokes that discussion, since Norman has set her play in an indeterminate time and place. Again, Jessie's choice to commit suicide can be discussed within the larger issue of individual autonomy. Jessie could easily be lost as an individual. In deciding to die, she sets herself apart and creates an identity of her own.

Critical Overview

'*night, Mother* was first produced in January of 1983, at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts. This first production received favorable reviews with many of the reviewers focusing on the honesty of the relationship between mother and daughter. William Henry, who commented on Norman's realistic dialogue in his *Time* review, referred to the characters' speech as "spare, suspenseful, and entirely honest." Henry continued, praising Norman's script as "miraculously free of melodrama." However, the critic credited the performance of Kathy Bates as Jessie, whose "deceptive calm gives the play its force," with elevating the production above the ordinary. Other critics also praised the cast which included Bates and Anna Pitoniak as Thelma. As further proof of the play's success, Norman was awarded the first Susan Smith Blackburn prize, which is given annually to a woman playwright, in January, 1983.

Two months later, '*night, Mother* opened on Broadway with the same cast. Again the reviews were mostly favorable, but a few critics did wonder what merited all the fuss. Although many reviwers continued to praise the play's realistic depiction, detractors of the play based their disfavor on the argument that the play was so realistic as to be ordinary. In his review for the *Nation*, Richard Oilman stated that *'night, Mother* has nothing wrong with it, but that there is "not much to get excited about either." Oilman refers to Thelma as "silly, self-indulgent and totally reliant on her daughter in practical matters"; he describes Jessie as "heavy-set, slow-moving and morose." (Oilman imposed Bates's reality on to the character of Jessie who is meant only as a representative type; Norman neither describes nor alludes to Jessie's weight in the play; rather she states in her stage direction that Jessie is "pale and vaguely unsteady physically.") Gilman did state that he found the play "interesting as a moral inquiry" into the right to die issue but that the dialogue off-sets this point with conversation that is commonplace and predictable. For other critics the play is a manipulation of the audience. For example, Stanley Kauffman, writing for the *Saturday Review*, claimed that Jessie's statement regarding her intention to kill herself is purely an act of vengeance and that the ninety minutes spent in preparation are intended as torture. Instead of a heroine, Jessie becomes a "vengeful neurotic." That the audience sympathizes, cares about these characters, or despairs for them is, in Kauffman's view, a manipulation of the audience by Norman. However, the dissenters were in the minority. Most critics and the public favored the play enough that it had a ten month run on Broadway. As a further endorsement, '*night, Mother* was awarded the 1983 Pulitzer prize for drama.

In April 1984, the play opened off-Broadway still with the original cast. The play has since been produced by touring companies and in regional theatres across the United States. Although American critics had not labeled *'night, Mother* as feminist, Patricia Keeney Smith, in her review of the Canadian production (which opened in October, 1984) did note that the play was "a story of women, full of valour, irony and liberating laughter."

When *'night, Mother* was eventually adapted for film, Norman wrote the screenplay. The film received mixed reviews from several of the same critics repeating their earlier

reviews of the theatrical production. And although Norman had emphasized in her stage directions that the women were indistinguishable from any other women, much of the criticism of the film focused on the two actresses playing Jessie and Thelma, Sissy Spacek and Anne Bancroft, respectively. Critics either embraced the two as ideal for the parts or rejected them as the worst possible choices. The film was a commercial success, but that may have been in large part due the marketability of its stars.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Metzger holds a Ph.D. and has a strong background in literature and drama education. In this essay she discusses issues of identity and autonomy.

A critical issue in '*night, Mother* is the relationship between Jessie and her mother, Thelma. It is evident in Jessie's preparations for her suicide that she regards herself as her mother's primary caretaker. Jessie is responsible for her mother's diet, for the maintenance of the home, and for her mother's health, or so her Thelma lets her believe. In assuming so much control over her mother, Jessie has reversed the mother-daughter relationship and has become a mother to her own mother. It is little wonder, then, that she cannot-imagine an identity separate from her mother's. In deciding that she will kill herself, Jessie is finally establishing an identity of her own and setting a boundary between them that her mother cannot cross. When Jessie announces her decision to kill herself at the end of the evening that she sets in motion a series of events that must end with her death; there is never any doubt that Jessie will die at the play's conclusion because it is necessary for her to die to free herself. The choice she makes is one that only she can make; her mother has no say m the matter. Their dialogue establishes that this may have been the first significant decision Jessie has ever made independent of her mother.

Jessie has always been bound to her mother. She left her mother's home to marry the man her mother selected for her, and, when that marriage failed, she returned home to her mother. And with the example of her parent's unhappy and uncommunicative marriage before her, Jessie accepted that a retreat to her mother's house was her only option. According to developmental psychology, adult maturation is partially achieved through a separation from parental figures, as a person acquires independence and the ability to make independent decisions. This maturation process has been lacking in Jessie's life. She has been sheltered and protected, kept isolated in her mother's home, and closeted with only her family to provide socialization. Consequently, a complete break from her family is the only option if Jessie is to become an individual; the tragedy of this play is that for Jessie suicide is the only avenue to this independence.

The isolation of an existence without friends and a lack of the socialization that accompanies the emotional and physical growth of most young women is an important feature of Jessie's loneliness. The emptiness of her life is the primary reason she offers for her decision to kill herself. And it is the one argument her mother cannot combat. In the series of objections that Thelma raises regarding Jessie's suicide, the closest she can come to dealing with her daughter's loneliness is her suggestion of a dog to provide companionship.

Thelma recognizes and understands Jessie's isolation. She has lived a long time with solitude. Any thought that her daughter would provide companionship evaporated when Jessie demonstrated that she preferred the company of her silent father; but since Jessie, too, has a propensity for silence, it is unlikely that Jessie could ever have provided Thelma with a substantial form of companionship. Instead of conversation,

Thelma has satisfied her social needs and combated her loneliness with needlepoint, junk food, and candy. Bui for Jessie, the craving for something more in her life cannot be satisfied with food or cross-stitching. Indeed, Thelma states that Jessie has never been interested in eating. She needs to fill an emptiness that food cannot satisfy. And like many people who commit suicide, Jessie Cates sees this as the only option left to her; it is the only way to cancel a life filled with hopelessness, helplessness, and emptiness.

In an essay in *Modern Drama* that examines Jessie's need to establish her identity and autonomy. Jenny S. Spencer began by noting the different responses that men and women had to a performance of '*night, Mother* which she attended. She observed that men found the play predictable and without tension. They were not surprised by the suicide. But Spencer noted that the women with whom she spoke found the play realistic and disturbing. On some level, women can empathize and identify with both Jessie and Thelma. Spencer argued that when Jessie articulates her inability to change her life "[I] cannot make it better, make it work. But I can stop it" she is trying to establish some control over her life. This speech establishes the purpose motivating Jessie's decision. It provides her with authority, with autonomy, with identity. Spencer maintains that Jessie's suicide, "self-negating as it is, will specifically address that need to protect, to fix, to determine her identity."

That Jessie lacks an identity is evident from the information given regarding her past. She identifies so strongly with the husband she has lost but still loves that, when he left her, she wrote a note to herself justifying his choice and signing his name. She explains this by saying that she knew how he felt. She excuses her son's behavior by asserting that he is like her and thus doomed to failure. Jessie's self is so a part of her husband and child that she cannot exist separately from them. Thelma further robs Jessie of an identity when she tells Jessie that she is just like her father. She is silent as he was silent, but more importantly, the source of her disability, her epilepsy, is inherited from him; she has his disease. Even the epilepsy that she thought resulted from a fall from a horse is not her own. As she sees the situation, there is no part that is wholly hers. And, of course, she is also her mother. Jessie has become her mother, not only because she is now Thelma's caretaker, but because daughters are always bound in some inexplicable way to their mothers.

As Jessie's identity cannot be detached from her mother's, Thelma's cannot be isolated from Jessie's. Thelma's fear is the one that nags at all mothers: if my child dies, will I cease to be a mother? As Spencer observed: "Mama is engaged in the immediate struggle to save her child's life, a struggle in which her own identity is equally at stake." *'night, Mother* is not a play about suicide. It is a play, as Spencer wrote, "about mothers and daughters, about feminine identity and feminine autonomy." The realism of Norman's dialogue speaks to mothers and daughters who can immediately identify with the conflict and tensions that define the Cates's lives. Consequently, women recognize themselves in the dialogue, whereas men see and hear little with which to identify.

As *'night, Mother* is played out on stage, the audience is made aware of the passing of time. The play is constructed in one act without intermission. The clocks on stage

display real time. Although time is advancing, in many ways the clocks also serve as a kind of countdown. When time runs out, the shot will sound and Jessie will die somewhere off stage. The tension in the audience quickens during this period. As Mama's arguments are met with resistance, the audience becomes aware that Jessie's suicide is inevitable. Serving as counterbalance to this tension is Thelma's almost growing, though unnerving, acceptance of Jessie's decision. She does try a succession of arguments designed to change Jessie's mind, but when they fail, the two begin a conversation about how Thelma should report the death, who she should call, and how she should behave at the funeral. The conversation assumes an even more macabre tone when Mama says, "I'll talk about what I have on, that's always good. And I'll have some crochet work with me." The matter-of-fact nature of this conversation indicates that Thelma also realizes the inevitability of Jessie's loss and her attention turns to how to cope.

In an essay that examines Thelma's reliance on oral gratification as a substitute for emotional involvement, Laura Morrow asserted in *Studies in American Drama* that "mama prefers surface to substance." That is, Thelma uses immediate gratification in her case candy and junk food as a means to deny reality. Chatter serves much the same purpose. Mama cannot understand the silence of her husband and her daughter. She cannot understand that both use silence as a means of reflection. Mama, on the other hand, uses conversation in place of thought. It is simply easier for her to talk than to think. That Jessie recognizes these traits in her mother is evident in the preparations she makes before her death. Her immediate concern is with food. Jessie instructs her mother on how to order food and when to have it delivered. She orders a supply of her mother's favorite junk food and candy. Jessie even anticipates that her mother won't eat the foods that she needs and insists that the milkman continue to deliver milk even if her mother objects. But Jessie is also aware of her mother's other hunger, and so she suggests other people with whom Thelma can have conversations. Jessie's brother Dawson and his wife can also provide company, but Mama rejects this because they only have Sanka (instant coffee). Once again, food takes priority in her life. And yet, it is clear to the audience that Thelma loves Jessie and that Jessie returns that love. The audience can only assume that their love for one another is not enough for Jessie to transcend a lifetime of disappointment and pain.

'night, Mother is a profoundly disturbing play that forces its audience to confront the darker issues that arise in some families. And although Norman conditions the audience to expect it, the offstage sound of the gunshot at the play's end has a power and a shock all its own.

Source: Sheri Metzger, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale, 1997.

Critical Essay #2

In this excerpt, Browder examines the relationship between the mother and daughter characters in 'night, Mother, comparing them to traditional parent/child roles.

A frequent author on themes of personality and development, Browder is a clinical psychologist and program director specializing in women's psychiatric treatment.

In a nondescript house in anonymous America a conversation unfolds between two women. In the course of this routine and quiet evening at home the revelation shared by one offers up a jolting portrayal of a personal relationship and power. Jessie, a woman in her late thirties or early forties, announces to her mother that she is going to kill herself at the end of the evening. In the ensuing dialogue Thelma, her mother, moves from scoffing disbelief to the stunned realization that her daughter is serious.

No crisis has precipitated this decision. Indeed, nothing has happened at all. But Jessie explains her growing recognition that the prospects for her future are as bleak as her life has been disappointing and filled with failure to that point. She has lived with her mother for a long time. Divorced, alienated from her criminal son, struggling with and only recently having gained some control over her epileptic seizures, she lives in a world isolated from outside support and friendship. The father she loved as a child has died. She is not close to, indeed resents, her older, domineering brother and his wife, Jessie explains that she has been thinking about suicide for years and has chosen this moment simply because she now feels good enough to do it. As she relates in poignant understatement, "I'm just not having a very good time and I don't have any reason to think it'll get anything but worse. I'm tired I'm hurt. I'm sad. I feel used."

The power of the play *'night, Mother* lies in its relentless movement toward the final gunshot. No matter how much we do not want to believe it will come, we are forced to share with the mother a growing realization that the evening will end with Jessie's death. Death lends to all of human existence an urgency and poignancy, a sense of meaning that arises from the awareness that life will not last. In Jessie's case the knowledge and control over the timing of that end and its immediacy are themselves the source of meaning never before existent in her life. Her suicide arms her with a power, a sense of control over her life. It is the lens through which she offers a view of her existence, an existence so fraught with detachment and boredom that she chooses to continue meticulously in the tedious business of its day-to-day routine until that moment when she shuts it off. But when her life is compressed within the boundaries of that evening, what emerges are a few hours of honesty and intensity that burst like a meteoric glimpse of what this mother-daughter relationship is and what it might have been.

When Jessie chooses suicide, she not only defines the boundaries of her existence, she draws the boundaries between mother and daughter as well. She makes a choice that is not her mother's choice, Thelma does not disagree with Jessie's view of life. She, too, has had her share of disappointments. Her marriage was unhappy and she carries an unreasonable guilt that she was somehow responsible for Jessie's epilepsy. She

acknowledges the unattractiveness of her life: "We don't have anything anybody'd want, Jessie. I mean, I don't even want what we got, Jessie". Her life is characterized by limitations, by a sense of detachment and resignation that would have her observe that "there's just not that much to things that I could ever see". But while she does not understand it, she is resigned to getting through life, helped, so to speak, by her attempts to sweeten her existence with dishes of candy scattered throughout the house.

Jessie's decision is a repudiation of her mother's choices. It is her one clear statement that she will not be like her mother. This is in striking defiance of the mother's assumption of oneness in their relationship, an assumption that allows her to say presumptuously, "Everything you do has to do with me, Jessie: You can't do anything, wash your face or cut your finger, without doing it to me". In the end she cannot even keep her daughter alive.

As we are left to wonder how this daughter came to see all of the elements of her life as indicative of failure and alienation, and how this mother's experience contributes to this conclusion, we have only the evidence of this brief, private conversation. As Jessie says, "You're it, Mama. No more." The horrible bleakness of life, the emptiness Jessie experiences is not a peculiarity of female existence. But the significance of the mother-daughter relationship in the daughter's sense of powerlessness is unique to women. This play is not merely about the perils of parenthood or, more specifically, even the precariousness of motherhood in regard to daughters. It is about the problem and the elusiveness of autonomy, one of the stages on which the drama of human development unfolds....

At some point, most mothers and daughters recognize that they are pitted in an ageless struggle by their mutual efforts to maintain their relationship in its earliest form or to alter it. Like a complicated primitive dance, they perpetually pull together and move apart. The daughter resists her mother's attempts to control her life, yet at the same time resents the mother for what the mother has not been able to provide for her. The mother, on the other hand, simultaneously pushes her daughter away, in an effort to teach her not to expect nurture but to give it and yet strives to protect and cling to her daughter, to claim her as an extension or possession. From this struggle emerges the opportunity for daughters to make their own choices, develop a sense of themselves, and participate in relationships as more equal partners.

For daughters, and thus for all women, the struggle is played out continuously in relationships. It is the choice between security and risk, loyalty and self-assertion, submission and power. They must choose to replay intricate patterns of dependency and need or courageously engage in equitable partnerships. Given the unique dynamics of this first important relationship, women are in greatest peril of failing to develop an adequate sense of meaning and autonomy when they confront the temptation to accept a sense of meaning assigned to them by others, assigned to them initially by their mothers.

This is the tragic realization to which Jessie comes too late. Jessie's isolation and exclusive reliance upon her mother as sole companion are insufficient to provide her

with a sense of self, to provide her with a sense of power, a sense of meaning in life: "What if you are all I have and you're not enough?" "It's somebody I lost, all right, it's my own self. Who I never was, or who I tried to be and never got there. Somebody I waited for who never came. And never will."

The healthy course, to participate in relationships as an equal partner rather than as a dependent or recipient, requires giving up the security of an unequal relationship. It requires being strong and hopeful about one's own future while tolerating the pain of knowing the limitations and diminishment of the one with whom one may be most identified. It also implies staying around to confront the consequences of honesty, something of which Jessie's choice of suicide relieved her.

Honesty is a casualty of unequal relationships. The lack of honesty in mother-daughter relationships is not always intentional or malicious and usually arises out of a desire to protect. Mothers alter the truth in an effort to shield their daughters from what well may be a harsh reality. In doing so, however, they fail to equip their daughters to deal with reality, whatever it may be. I am reminded of a friend's story of how, as a young girl, she could not tolerate spending even one night away from home. When she called home her mother always insisted that everything was fine in the same tone of voice she always used, even in the presence of disaster. The mother's reassurances became red flags that pitched the young girl into a frenzy of anxiety and fear.

If Thelma is at fault, it is only in believing she could provide everything for this daughter, that she alone could be enough. So pervasive is this expectation, that even Jessie shares it, only realizing the bitter consequences of it on the evening of her death. She says of the decision to return to live with her mother, "If it was a mistake, we made it together."

In the end, whatever this particular mother did would have been wrong, just as whatever any mother does is wrong. As long as she is made to feel ultimately responsible for her daughter's well-being, a mother is thrust into unyielding, conflicting expectations. She encourages her daughter's dependency and identification with her while struggling with her own ambivalence about rearing a child who may serve to remind her of her own limitations. She must enable the daughter to develop a sense of self-sufficiency while being charged by society to engender qualities that may not contribute to a sense of power or well-being. The qualities that we think of as characterizing a good mother are not necessarily qualities that enable young daughters to attain autonomy. Mothers either love their children too much or not enough. And their daughters either love or hate them whatever they do.

As the interaction moves on to its jarring conclusion, we sense the inevitability of its outcome. It is not that there was anything missing from this relationship, though this might be a more reassuring assessment. Jessie and Thelma were not more or less honest than most other mothers and daughters. This mother did not deprive her daughter, at least not any differently from the ways many mothers deprive their daughters when they pass on to them their insecurities and needs and sense of resignation. Nevertheless, Thelma is left to wonder what she could have done wrong,

just as she has wondered all her life how she could have altered the reality of her daughter's epilepsy or failed marriage or any other experience in life she could not have controlled. Thelma's helpless questioning mirrors our own disturbing questions. How could it have been possible for Jessie to feel a sense of anticipation in her life of good things to come rather than the certainty of failure and deprivation? Confronted with such a small universe and a limited set of options, how could she have developed a strong enough sense of self to survive?

In the end, the only reality we can know is that self which we cannot help being, the self known first in that most primary of relationships, the private affair between mother and daughter, those two selves that merge and painfully pull apart and that ultimately cannot bear the burden of existence for each other. But the frightening prospect of randomness in this relationship is that it can lead in either of two ways. As that relationship is reenacted again, for every daughter, in all subsequent relationships, one either learns the courage to experience meaning in life and the power of a separate self, experienced in relation to others, or one shares the painful expression of this woman's reality that the only power one has is the power to say no.

Source: Sally Browder, "'I Thought You Were Mine'. Marsha Norman's '*night, Mother,*" *in Mother Puzzles: Daughters and Mothers in Contemporary American Literature*, edited by Mickey Pearlman, Greenwood Press, 1989, pp. 109-13.

Critical Essay #3

In this review, Oilman admires the artistic merits of 'night, Mother yet, in light of the play's subject matter, questions the accolades bestowed upon Norman's work.

Oilman is an American educator and critic whose works include The Making of Modern Drama (*1974*) *and* Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet (*1979*).

The hyperbole machine is operating on Broadway again, Upon a modest two-character play with nothing flagrantly wrong with it but not much to get excited about either the reviewers have lavished nearly their whole stock of ecstatic adjectives, to which encomiums a Pulitzer Prize has just been added. Even before MarshaNorman's '*night, Mother reached* New York City, Robert Brustein likened it to *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. (That Brustein's American Repertory Theater had given the play its premiere, in Boston, might have had something to do with that wild comparison.) Well, O'Neill's best play and Norman's do have something in common: they both bring us unpleasant news about the family.

The play takes place one evening in a house "way out on a country road" in the South. A middle-aged woman and her thirtyish daughter live here. The mother is silly, self-indulgent and totally reliant on her daughter in practical matters; the daughter is heavyset, slow-moving and morose. Early in the evening she informs her mother that she is going to kill herself that night. "I'm tired," she says. "I'm hurt. I'm sad. I feel used." From then on the play details the mother's frantic efforts to dissuade her daughter and the young woman's stolid insistence on carrying out her plan.

The mother makes absurd suggestions: the daughter could take up crocheting; they could get a dog, rearrange the furniture. The younger woman grimly makes her preparations, showing her mother where things are in the kitchen, telling her how to pay the bills and so on. As the mother begins to grasp her daughter's seriousness, her arguments become the "reasonable" ones any civilized person would make, but the daughter beats them back, saying she wants to turn life off "like the radio when there's nothing on I want to listen to."

Up to this point the play is moderately interesting as a moral inquiry (do we have the right to kill ourselves?) and moderately effective as a tale of suspense. But then the women begin to talk about the past, the daughter's childhood in particular, and what emerges is commonplace and predictable. I don't mean their lives are commonplace and predictable that's a given but dramatically the play falls into domestic cliche. The mother confesses that she and her husband, the girl's father, had no love for each other and, in response to the daughter's lament, says, "How could I know you were so alone?"

Next we learn that the daughter suffers from epilepsy. She says it's in remission and isn't the reason she's killing herself, but the fact of the illness, and especially the fact that the mother for a long time hid the truth about it from her, enters our consciousness

as a diminution of mystery. So too does the daughter's admission that her own husband left her partly because she refused to stop smoking.

The effect of these revelations is that the suicide becomes explicable on the one hand epileptics, neglected children and abandoned wives have a hard time "coping" and ludicrous on the other if nicotine is more important than marriage, what can you expect? The play might have had a richness, a fertile strangeness of moral and philosophical substance, had the suicide been undertaken as a more or less free act; had Norman not offered as the executor of this fascinating, dreadful decision a character with so many troubles. When the shot sounded (from behind a bedroom door) I wasn't startled, dismayed or much moved; it was all *sort of* sad, *sort o*/lugubrious.

Norman writes cleanly, with wry humor and no bathos. Kathy Bates as the daughter and Anne Pitoniak as the mother give finely shaded performances. But the only way I can account for the acclaim, *'night, Mother's* been getting, besides the hunger for "important," "affecting" dramas that gnaws at our educated theatergoers, is that this domestic tragedy doesn't succumb to the occupational disease of its genre: an "uplifting" or at least a consoling denouement. But what a negative virtue that is, and what a comment on our impoverished theater! Yes, the play's *honest*, yes it's sincere; but have we reached the point where we find such minimal virtues something to rave about?

Source: Richard Oilman, review of *'night, Mother* In the *Nation*, Vol. 236, no. 18, May 7,1983, p 586.

Adaptations

'night, Mother was adapted for film in 1986, with a screenplay by Norman and directed by Tom Moore. The film starred Sissy Spacek as Jessie and Anne Bancroft as Thelma. Although produced by Aaron Spelling, who is best known for melodramatic television series such as *Beverly Hills* 90210 and *Melrose Place*, the film is true to the content of Norman's original text. Criticism has centered on Spacek and Bancroft as too glamorous to portray the simple, average women depicted in the play. The film received mixed reviews. It is available from MCA/Universal Home Video.

Topics for Further Study

Research the issues surrounding the right to die. Jessie makes the choice to commit suicide but indicates that she makes this choice because she has no compelling reason to live. How does this reasoning fit the argument that proponents of an individual's right to die present?

In *'night, Mother* Jessie identifies herself in relationship to her father, husband, son, and especially her mother; she appears to have no identity of her own. Comment of Jessie's struggle to create an identity separate from these family members. Is suicide the only means available to her?

The emptiness of her life is an oppressive force for Jessie. Discuss the issue of alienation and isolation that defines Jessie's life.

Many critics have been divided in their reviews of *'night, Mother*. One reviewer actually noted that men seemed particularly unaffected and unsympathetic to Jessie's plight, Are women more sympathetic? And do they identify with these two women because they, too, are familiar with the mother-daughter dynamics? Or is this a play that transcends gender stereotyping?

What Do I Read Next?

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) is a novel that illuminates the heroines struggle to establish an identity separate from that of her father, husband, and son. Choice, free will, and suicide are important issues in this text.

Tillie Olson's short story, "I Stand Here Ironing" (1961) is concerned with the relationship between a mother and daughter. Olson relates events common to all women and explores how those events can serve to trap mothers and daughters in a relationship not of their making.

Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* (1982) depicts a mother and three daughters who struggle to create an identity that is not defined by their mother's suicide. Henley's play examines the other side of suicide that of the child who must contend with guilt and unresolved questions when a parent chooses to kill herself.

"To Room Nineteen," Doris Lessmg's 1963 short story presents a woman who subordinates her identity to the needs and identities of her husband and children. Her choice to abandon her family by committing suicide can promote a compelling discussion about free choice that often focuses on gender.

Carolyn Heilbrun's text, *Writing A Woman's Life* (1988) examines how women's lives are written, how the events, decisions, and relationships that define women's lives are told and presented to the public. This book provides the reader with an understanding of the struggle the writer must undertake to create a text. Individual chapters provide interesting insights into some of the most famous women writers of the last century and can help more advanced students develop an appreciation for the art of writing and perhaps instill a desire to write.

Further Study

Brown, Linda Ginter, Editor *Marsha Norman: A Casebook*, Garland (New York), 1996.

This is a collection of essays that explore different aspects of Norman's work. The collection includes essays on the Norman plays '*night, Mother, Getting Out, Third and Oak, The Holdup, Traveler m the Dark, Sarah and Abraham, and The Secret Garden.*

Burkman, Katherme H. "The Demeter Myth and Doubling in Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother*" in *Modem American Drama: The Female Canon*, edited by June Schlueter, Faileigh Dickinson University Press, 1990. p 254-63.

Burkman examines the nature of the mother-daughter relationship in *'night, Mother* by comparing Jessie and Thelma to the mythic Demeter and Persephone.

DeMastes, William W. "Jessie and Thelma Revisited: Marsha Norman's Conceptual Challenge in *'night, Mother*" in *Modern Drama*, Vol. 36, no 1,1993, pp 109-19

DeMastes examines feminist criticism of Norman's play and concludes that feminist who have condemned the play as subordinate to male constructs of realism should take another look at the play, which demonstrates that feminist writers can use realism to tell a woman's story.

Hart, Lynda. "Doing Time: Hunger for Power in Marsha Norman's Plays" in *Southern Quarterly*, Vol. 25, no 3, Spring, 1987, pp. 67-79.

Hart examines how food and the hunger to escape a repressive and oppressive life are central to several of Norman's plays. Among the plays she examines are *'night, Mother* and *Getting Out*.

Henry, William A "Reinventing the Classic" in *Tone*, February 7,1983, pp. 85.

Henry offers a positive review of Norman's play that commends the dialogue and the casting of Kathy Bates as Jessie.

Morrow, Laura "Orality and Identity in *'night, Mother* and *Crimes of the Heart" in Studies in American Drama* Vol. 3, 1988, pp 23-39.

Morrow examines the relationship between mothers and daughters and the search by daughters to create an identity separate from their mother's. The author compares these two plays and concludes that food and orality are important devices for both Norman's play and Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart*

Smith, Raynette Halvorsen "'*night, Mother* and *True West*: Mirror Images of Violence and Gender" in *Violence in Drama*, edited by James Redmond, Cambridge University Press, 1991. pp. 277-89.

Smith claims that violence and gender stereotyping in both Norman's play and Sam Shepard's *True West* function to deconstruct gender myths of feminine masochism of which both Norman and Shepard have been accused.

Spencer, Jenny S. "Norman's *'night, Mother*. Psycho-drama of Female Identity" in *Modem Drama*, Vol. 30, no. 3, September, 1987, pp. 364-75.

Spencer explores Jessie's struggle to establish her own identity, one separate from her father, husband, son, and mother. Spencer concludes that Norman's play is more about mothers and daughters and female autonomy than it is about suicide.

Wolfe, Irmgard H. "Marsha Norman" in American Playwrights since 1945- A *Guide to Scholarship, Criticism, and Performance*, edited by Philip C Kolin, Greenwood, 1989.p 339-48.

Wofle provides a production history, including excerpts from reviews of Norman's plays A bibliography is also included.

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Oilman, Richard "Review of *'night, Mother*" in the *Nation* May 7,1983, pp 585-86

Kauffman, Stanley. "More Trick than Tragedy" in the *Saturday Review*, Vol 9, no. 10, September-October, 1983, pp. 47-48.

Smith, Patricia Keeney. "Theatre of Extremity" in *Canadian Forum*, April, 1985, pp 37-40.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
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- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

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DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

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Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

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Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

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