

## Psychoanalytic and Psychological Analysis of Marsha Norman's 'Night, Mother' (1982)

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### Abstract:

'Night, Mother', a play written by Marsha Norman in 1982, provides a deep exploration towards the inner psychoanalytic and psychological analysis. The research paper is an analysis of the character Jessie Cates and the dynamic mother-daughter complexities portrayed in the drama. Through the characters Jessie Cates and her mother Thelma, the paper aims at investigating the emotional, psychological and existential crisis faced within the ordinary household structure. The research intends to provide a detailed examination of character context by associating their behaviour with the psychological realism framework and Freudian Psychoanalytic theory. The paper aims to explore the concepts of repression, Thanatos (the death drive) and parental attachment and how they are represented in the play's real-time structure through the lens of character creation. The paper also highlights how modern plays represent the failure of modern society in addressing mental disparities and demonstrate the significance of cementing the contemporary discourse on mental and domestic trauma, suicide and female autonomy.

**Keywords:** *Psycho-analysis, Trauma, Freud's theory, Modern society, psychological realism*

### Introduction:

The Pulitzer award-winning play, *Night, Mother* (1982) by Marsha Norman, can be discussed as one of the most significant works of contemporary American drama focusing on emotional, psychological, and existential crises that lurk behind the scenes of everyday family life. Set over one evening and in the small suburban household, the play enacts a dramatic and disturbing dialogue between the main character, Jessie Cates and her mother, Thelma. Jessie casually tells her that she is going to kill herself that very night, and the whole play runs as it happens, with Thelma wildly attempting to persuade her daughter to live.

The research paper examines the play, *Night, Mother*, in the same context of psychological complexity and the psychoanalytic theory, with a particular focus on Freudian theories of repression, death drive (Thanatos), parental attachment, and unresolved trauma. Minimalistic design, concentration on the real and pursuit of mental illness can also be attributed to Norman, who also explores themes that were central to modern drama: alienation, existential desperation, and the fragmentation of the self (Fatah, S.,2023). Using the psychological and psychoanalytic approaches, it can be shown that Norman builds an immensely rich narrative that reveals the inner struggles of its characters and provides a sharp critique of the modern society that fails to tackle the issue of mental health.

### **Psychological Complexity in '*Night, Mother*'**

Psychological realism is one of the key elements of the play by Norman, and the motives, fears, and fears of the characters are discussed in the most honest way possible. The choice taken by Jesse is not depicted as impulsive or irrational; on the contrary, it comes out as the result of years of mental torture.

#### Jessie's Depression and Existential Emptiness

Jessie presents with clinical findings of chronic depression:

- emotional detachment
- social withdrawal
- feelings of hopelessness
- loss of interest in life
- a sense of being a burden

Jessie speaks in a calm and clear manner throughout the play, showing a psychological numbness as opposed to emotional turmoil. She says that she is not afraid of dying, she just is glad that she may put to an end what she thinks is a meaningless and unproductive life. This makes the viewer face the harsh reality that suicidal contemplations do not arise out of emotional hysterics but a long-term mental hopelessness (Sulaiman, N.F., 2024).

A sense of existential emptiness is also supported by her life story. Jessie lacks an occupation, friends, a love interest, and a meaning of life. Her isolation was also caused by her epilepsy, which restricted her self-reliance and prevented her from working steadily. These feelings were further fuelled by the fact that her marriage had broken up and she no longer had custody of

her son. All these have made her believe that death is the only means of having control over her life.

### **Thelma's Co-dependent Behaviour**

Thelma is co-dependent, and her character is a psychological trend where a person is so dependent on another individual to get emotional validation. She has developed a sense of needing to be there by cooking for Jessie, keeping the house, and warming herself with trivial activities that conceal real underlying emotional malfunctions (Soheil, K., 2021).

Her desperate efforts to prevent the suicide of Jessie show that there was not only the maternal fear but the panic of Thelma, who is panicking because she is losing the main goal of her existence. Thelma tends to belittle or ignore the psychological suffering of Jessie, a failure to address the emotional trauma or approach it. Rather, she hangs onto simple chores and small talk as she attempts to evade other things.

### **Communication and Emotional Isolation**

The next strong side of the play is that two women inhabit the play but are emotionally isolated. Although mother and daughter have been living under the same roof for years, they hardly recognise each other's inner world. Their conversation reveals years and years of oppression, unspoken conflict, and feelings of oppression. Such an emotional distance is used to show how family may be cohabiting yet alienated, the same theme as contemporary drama (Liu, X., 2025).

### **Alienation and Fragmentation Themes**

The play also contains the recurrent themes of modern drama:

- Alienation: Jessie is out of touch with herself, her family and society.
- Existentialism: She tries to find meaning, which does not exist.
- Fragmentation: She is disconnected, developed by disease, collapse, and abandonment of feelings.

These motives echo the drama of the 20th century, existentialism (Sartre, Camus), and the psychological tragedy of Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller.

### **Contemporary Theatre and Cultural Relevance**

The play, *Night, Mother*, has been a significant influence on the modern theatre and discourse of mental health.

## Impact on the Contemporary American Theatre

Norman's play:

- set the stage for psychological, trauma-based narratives.
- affected dramatists, whose interest lay in the disillusionment and mental disorder of home-
- empowered the position of one-location-characterised plays.
- was part of feminist theatre, putting complex women in the forefront.

The extreme realism of the play influenced subsequent plays that addressed the topics of suicide, chronic illness, and mother-daughter relationships (Harriott, E.,2024).

## The Contribution to Feminist Drama

The play is described as one of the more important American feminist theatre texts as it:

- depicts the emotional load on women.
- subverts traditional female positions like caretaker, daughter and homemaker.
- reveals the mental effects of gendered demands.
- vindicates the plight of women that is not recognised in society.

The suicide that can be referred to as tragic in the case of Jesse is the way in which society dictated to her the way to be.

## Applicability to Current Problems

The play is very timely as it explores:

- mental health and suicide.
- psychological support systems deficiency.
- stigmatisation of depression.
- family communication that is dysfunctional.
- women's autonomy and right of self-determination (Harriott, E., 2024).

In the contemporary world, where mental health issues become more and more apparent, *Night, Mother* is a very strong reminder of the effects of silence, repression, and disregard towards emotions.

## Conclusion

*Night, Mother* by Marsha Norman is an emotional and quite psychological contemporary play that delves into the problems of depression, trauma, and mother-daughter relations. Through the prism of psychological realism and psychoanalytic theory, the play reveals the dramatic

urges inside her and makes the viewer aware that suicide appears to remain the sole way out for her. The generational tendencies of repression, denial and emotional avoidance are disclosed by the role Thelma plays in the drama and give knowledge of how family life may affect mental health. The bareness of the construction of the play, the immediate action, and the focus on emotional speech are the aspects of the play which reverberate some of the strong tendencies in contemporary drama, in the movement towards realism and psychological richness. It exerts a powerful influence on the contemporary theatre, as it inspired the playwrights that came after it to discuss the issues of mental illness and domestic trauma with the same level of frankness.

Ultimately, *Night, Mother* can be considered as a very intense cultural text, which can appeal to the contemporary problems of mental illness, loneliness, family communication, and the independence of women. All these elements of psychology, philosophy and feminism have enabled Norman to come up with a work that continues to receive favour among the listeners and scholars.

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