



Analysis of Jessie's Suicide in 'Night, Mother' from the Perspective of Family Systems Theory

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Abstract

'Night, Mother' is one of Marsha Norman's plays, which explores the final, heart-wrenching conversation between Jessie and her mother, Thelma, on the last night of her life. This paper employs family systems theory to delve into the complex conflicts at play, particularly focusing on the psychological factors contributing to Jessie's tragic decision to end her life. The relationships among family members are analysed from the perspective of self-differentiation, emotional triangle and emotional cutoff, which highlights how unresolved issues of the family of origin lead to her ultimate despair and how familial patterns can influence the mental health of individuals in order to avoid similar tragedies from happening in today's society by deepening the understanding of familial relationships and their critical role in shaping an individual's identity and choices.

Keywords: 'Night, Mother'; family systems theory; self-differentiation; emotional triangle; emotional cutoff

Marsha Norman (1947-), one of the most prominent American playwrights of the post-World War II era, has made an indelible mark on contemporary theater with her rich body of work, which includes over ten plays, three operas, and one novel since her debut in 1977 with *Getting Out*. Her contributions have not only redefined American drama but also deeply influenced feminist discourse in the arts. Contemporary drama critic Jenny Brown asserts that Norman is "perhaps the most successful

playwright of serious feminist drama today" (60), which shows her ability to tackle profound themes through narratives that capture the complexity of women's experiences and the nuances of feminist ethics. Norman's work often focuses on the lives of those marginalized by various societal factors such as poverty, exploitation, and illness. She is highly commended for authentically portraying these struggles and giving voice to characters who might otherwise remain unheard. Throughout

her career, Norman has received Pulitzer Prize, the Tony Award, and the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, all of which underscore her significant impact on American drama.

Among her most notable works, *Night, Mother*, which premiered on Broadway in 1979, has solidified its place as a modern classic. This poignant play has been translated into multiple languages and performed across the globe. The play presents a seemingly ordinary conversation between a mother and her daughter, yet it encapsulates a profound struggle between life and death. The play's enduring status stems from its exploration of deeply relatable themes such as loneliness, free will, mortality, the complexities of life circumstances, and the quest for identity—elements that resonate with audiences across different cultures and eras. The issues within Jessie's family of origin are central to the themes explored in the play.

Marsha Norman is widely recognized as a prominent figure in contemporary American drama, particularly for her exploration of intricate psychological themes. While much of the scholarship on Norman's work focuses on her contributions to feminist drama (Brown 1995), studies also mention her portrayal of familial relationships and mental health, especially in *Night, Mother* (Keller 2003), where the theme of suicide takes center stage. Other critical analyses have examined the naturalistic elements in her plays (Thompson 2008), as well as the portrayal of gender problems (Croft 2001). Building upon these studies, this paper aims to employ Bowen's Family systems theory to analyze the low self-differentiation family system in Jessie's family, reconstructs the rise and fall of the emotional triangles, and examines Jessie's extreme emotional cutoff and the psychological ramifications of her family of origin, ultimately clarifying the reasons for her tragic decision to commit suicide.

I. Family systems theory

Family systems theory, first proposed by psychiatrist Murray Bowen, represents a significant advancement in the understanding of human relationships. Bowen dedicated his career to integrating human behavior research into a framework that could be recognized as scientific. His work sought to unravel the complexities of familial interactions and their profound impact on individual psychology. At the core of Bowen's theory are two competing forces that exist within families. As Kerr and Murray state, "The individual has a natural desire to belong, but that desire must be balanced with the need for independence to achieve a well-differentiated self" (496). These forces create a dynamic push-pull relationship among family members as they navigate the delicate balance between seeking connection and maintaining personal identity. Ideally, healthy family relationships find equilibrium between these two forces, allowing members to achieve self-differentiation while still fostering a strong sense of unity and support, a strong emotional triangular. This balance enables family members to express their individuality without sacrificing their emotional ties to one another.

However, when these forces become unbalanced—tipping too far toward belonging or, conversely, toward independence—family can suffer significantly. In such cases, relationships may devolve into patterns characterized by one member being overly functional while another becomes overly dysfunctional. This imbalance can create emotional relationships of "pursuers and escapers", where some family members may strive to maintain closeness whereas others retreat into emotional withdrawal. As a result, emotional distress often emerges from poor differentiation between the self and others, leading to conflicts and misunderstandings.

Bowen conceptualizes the family as an emotional unit, employing a systemic approach

to dissect the intricate interactions within this unit. To clarify the emotional processes that unfold between nuclear and extended families, Bowen introduces eight interrelated concepts: self-differentiation, emotional triangle, nuclear family emotional system, family projection process, emotional cutoff, multigenerational transmission process, sibling position, and societal regression. Self-differentiation pertains to an individual's ability to maintain their identity within the family context. Emotional triangle describes the involvement of a third party in a two-person relationship to manage and separate anxiety. Nuclear family emotional system outlines the emotional patterns specific to the immediate family. Family projection process is when parents project their anxieties onto their children. Emotional cutoff refers to the distancing of individuals from their families to manage unresolved emotional issues. Multigenerational transmission process illustrates how emotional patterns are passed down through generations. Sibling position considers the roles siblings play within the family structure. Societal regression addresses how family can reflect broader societal issues.

With his innovative framework, Bowen has profoundly shaped people's understanding of the interplay between family and personal development. Through this paper, readers will gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of familial relationships and the broader societal issues that impact women's lives, through Bowen's Family systems theory.

II. Low Self-Differentiation Family System

The concept of self-differentiation suggests that individuals are endowed with an inherent life force that propels them toward emotional independence. This journey encourages them to cultivate their own thoughts, feelings, and actions, ultimately allowing them to emerge as distinct individuals. The process of self-differentiation is a lifelong journey, where individuals strive to balance emotional autonomy with the need for

emotional connection (Nichols 119). However, this pursuit of individuality is met with a counterbalancing instinct: a powerful drive to maintain emotional connections with one's family. The interplay of these opposing forces creates a complex conflict where complete emotional separation from one's family of origin is virtually unattainable. Bowen's theory articulates that families inherently contain both the longing for belonging and the urge for independence, leading to a push-pull situation that can profoundly influence the relationships among family members.

In this story of Jessie and her mother, Thelma, though the male figures, particularly the deceased father and brother Dawson, are less emphasized, their influence is still great. From the fragments of dialogue, the family structure is pieced together: a mother, a deceased father, a brother married to Lolita, and Jessie herself. This family is analyzed through three main subsystems: the spousal, mother-daughter, and sibling subsystems, revealing how a family of low self-differentiation collapses.

In terms of the spousal subsystem, Thelma is the "pursuer" and her husband the "escaper". Her husband's neglect lowers her value of self and deepens her anxiety, which enlarges her longing for belonging, that is, intensifies her low self-differentiation. Thelma's husband epitomizes the traditional patriarch: reticent and emotionally distant. He keeps other family members away, living a life only revolving around himself. "He wanted a plain country woman and that's what he married, and then he held it against me the rest of my life like I was supposed to change and surprise him somehow" (46). "He never said a word he didn't have to, Jessie" (ibid.). Through Thelma's words, it can be seen that he disrespects his wife, neglecting even the smallest emotional needs of her. "I want to hang a big sign around my neck, like Daddy's on the barn, gone fishing" (27). In Jessie's eyes, her father would rather leave messages on a board than speak directly to

Thelma. Thelma, as a quintessential woman shaped by the patriarchal society, is fully immersed in her roles as a wife. However, out of her husband's neglect, her value as a traditional wife is impossible to be realized. She, overwhelmed by her needs for value and belonging, therefore, shifts her focus entirely onto Jessie, her daughter, creating another subsystem of low self-differentiation. Her husband's death intensifies the situation.

The second subsystem is the mother-daughter subsystem with mother being the "pursuer" and daughter the "escaper". A well-differentiated person can remain calm and objective in emotionally charged situations, which allows for healthier relationships and clearer decision-making (Brown 41). Unfortunately, Thelma's low self-differentiation shows itself as her excessive desire for controlling Jessie, which hinders the latter from forging a robust, independent self-identity. "I never let you out of my sight. I caught you every time" (70). Therefore, another subsystem of low self-differentiation emerges.

Thelma's control of Jessie is mainly reflected in three aspects: Jessie's daily life, marriage and privacy. First, in Jessie's daily life, Thelma's pervasive control extends to even trivial decisions. For example, she tries to control Jessie's diet when the latter drinks hot cocoa and eats apples with sugar. Even when informed of Jessie's decision of suicide, she continues to monitor her daughter on her trivial choices. "Why do you read the newspaper? Why don't you wear that sweater I made for you?" (56).

Second, as to her daughter's marriage, she finds a husband for Jessie and insists on bringing her back home after the latter's divorce. "I can see how you might want a place of your own" (28). Although Thelma knows Jessie's longing for living alone, her desire for control drives her to keep the latter in her house.

Third, Jessie's privacy, that is, her disease, is kept unknown to herself for her

mother's concealment. All Jessie's life is based on her mother's fabrications regarding her epilepsy. Jessie's unawareness of her disease leads to her downfall from the back of the horse but also her downfall in the marriage, shattering her fragile self-esteem into pieces. Consequently, Thelma drags Jessie into a low self-differentiation system, exchanging anxiety and dysfunction that spiral toward the tragedy.

The third low self-differentiation subsystem is the sibling subsystem. Dawson, Jessie's brother, lacks respect for boundaries and encroaches on Jessie's privacy, which is mostly because he is the one who shares with Thelma the secret and burden of Jessie's epilepsy. Jessie says, "They know things about you, and they learned it before you had a chance to say whether you wanted them to know it or not" (23). Dawson is always the witness of Jessie's messy situation after seizures. Besides, he used to open Jessie's personal package with her lingerie in it and, together with his wife Lolita, "saw the little rosebuds on it" (24). His lack of respect for boundaries is also a presentation of familial overreach. Jessie asserts to her mother who intends to call Dawson for help, "If you call him, I'll just have to do it before he gets here" (16). In this subsystem, Jessie is also an "escaper". This statement conveys her profound sense of isolation and the urgency of her emotional turmoil, underscoring the stifling familial environment shaped by low self-differentiation.

III. Emotional Triangle in Thelma's Family

The triangle is the smallest and the most stable relational system and serves as the cornerstone of the family emotional or relational system. According to Kerr and Bowen, in a family, when a two-person subsystem encounters stress, a third person is drawn into the system to reduce emotional intensity and anxiety and to achieve stability (203).

In Thelma's family, there existed two emotional triangles, but they both went downhill at last. In the end of this play, no stable

triangle remains in this family. With no third party's intervening in the tension between mother and daughter, they have to confront directly to each other. The final conversation also proves it impossible to solve the problems rooted in their family merely by two low self-differentiation persons. Thus, Jessie's suicide is doomed.

The first emotional triangle consists of Thelma, Jessie, and Jessie's father. The triangle remains relatively stable before the death of Jessie's father. Though he represents a negative patriarchal figure, he spends considerable time with Jessie, talking to her and playing games with her. Jessie cherishes these fond memories of their time together and speaks of her father with warmth, often expressing confusion at her mother's rare mentions of him. Emotional triangles often perpetuate conflict and anxiety, as they create a situation where the focus is diverted from the original issue, preventing direct resolution between the primary parties (65). The father's presence disperses the tension between Thelma and Jessie, allowing the former to focus less intensely on her daughter while the latter has the opportunity to seek companionship from a different family member. The father's death marks the collapse of this emotional triangle. "When an emotional triangle collapses, the individuals involved are often left with heightened anxiety and unresolved conflicts, forcing them to confront the issues they previously avoided" (Kerr and Bowen, 102). Without him, Thelma turns her full attention to Jessie, projecting her anxieties onto her daughter, which eventually overwhelms Jessie, leading her to end her life.

In the aftermath of the collapse of the first triangle, Thelma manages to rebuild another triangle with Dawson. The second one is composed of Thelma, Dawson, and Jessie. Dawson takes on the role of the only male figure in the family after the father's death and Jessie's divorce. Whenever Jessie suffers an epileptic seizure and falls unconscious, Thelma would call Dawson to help lift Jessie onto the bed or

sofa before she wakes up. During these seizures, Jessie experiences short-term memory loss, remaining unaware of Dawson's involvement in this emotional triangle. On the final night of her life, after Thelma reveals the truth about her epilepsy, Jessie openly expresses her hatred for Dawson, resenting his presence as a third party standing in between her mother and her. The triangle involving Dawson is also particularly fragile, as he has already established his own family and deliberately severed the emotional ties with his family of origin. When Thelma, in desperation, tries to call her son for help, Jessie firmly states, "If Dawson comes over, it'll make me feel stupid for not doing it ten years ago" (17). Without Dawson's help, the second emotional triangle that Thelma has carefully maintained crumbles.

IV. Jessie's Emotional Cutoff Behavior

Emotional cutoff is a complex psychological process involving separation, isolation, withdrawal, and escape. Such escape can take various forms, such as physically leaving their parents' home or psychologically denying the impact of familial relationships on their current lives. "While emotional cutoff may provide individuals with a superficial relief, this relief is often superficial and not a true liberation" (Kerr and Bowen, 368). The issues within the family remain unresolved and are merely obscured. Emotional cutoff creates a false sense of security, making individuals feel that their anxiety and burdens associated with the family connections have lessened.

As Titelman argues, "individuals with higher levels of self-differentiation are better able to manage their own anxiety without resorting to emotional cutoff" (54). Accordingly, Jessie is obviously not a well-differentiated person. Her suicide is a typical example of emotional cutoff, deeply reflecting her pain of being both physically and psychologically trapped in a low self-differentiation family. She used to resort to other milder ways, such as work and marriage, to realize emotional cutoff

with her family, while they all end up in failure. As to her professional life, she faces repeated obstacles in her job search due to her disease. She is unable to find her place in society, feeling devoid of personal value. Without financial independence, she has to live with her family of origin. In terms of her marriage, even though she makes considerable efforts to change, exercising to stay sober, learning to ride horses to build confidence, trying to spend more time outdoors with Cecil, and seeking a sense of self-control, she still fails to control her own body when seizures come. Her dignity is shattered before her husband, stimulating her divorce and her moving back to her mother's house.

Researches indicate that those with unresolved trauma from their family of origin are more likely to contemplate suicide, as they may feel isolated and unsupported in their struggles (Sullivan et al. 89). Jessie's suicide is not only an extreme reaction to her mother's control but also a desperate expression of her powerlessness over herself. She never shares her true reasons for suicide, but her actions reflect a desperate need for emotional cutoff. It can be inferred from her words that the suicide had been planned since Christmas Eve ten years ago. Ordinary means could not pull her out of the mire of her family of origin; she could not start a new life or find self-identity, let alone gain control over her own fate. Thus, she chooses to end her life. For her, suicide is the only way to physically sever her from her mother and the negative influences of her family of origin, allowing her to finally reclaim autonomy over her body and put an end to the uncontrollable seizures.

V. Conclusion

The impact of the family of origin on individuals is undoubtedly profound. In *Night, Mother*, Jessie's suicide serves not only as an escape from her personal pain but also highlights the deeper issues within her family. Firstly, living in a low self-differentiation family, she is torn between the desire for

independence and the need for belonging among family members; the low self-differentiation hinders the establishment of healthy boundaries. Secondly, after the emotional triangles collapse, Jessie and her mother are incapable of solving the issues between them two; it is hard to maintain a stable system under the shadow of excessive anxiety toward each other. Thirdly, after repeated failure in seeking self-identity and independence, Jessie has no other choice but to resort to the most extreme form of emotional cutoff—suicide.

Norman's play serves as a wake-up call, reminding us that establishing a family is not just about the social obligation of marriage; each member must take on corresponding responsibilities and learn how to relate to one another. True growth and liberation come from acknowledging and actively confronting emotional attachments to one's family of origin, thereby achieving self-differentiation. People must recognize that communication, understanding, and support among family members are crucial. With proper intervention and open dialogue, people can promote healthy family relationship and help every member grow in love and understanding, balancing each member's desire for independence and need for belonging, thus preventing tragedies like Jessie's from happening.

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