

**'NIGHT, MOTHER by Marsha Norman**  
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## 1. Main Themes

- Communication
- Mother-Daughter Relationship
- Suffering
- Suicide
- Family
- Complex morality

## 2. Characters

### JESSIE

Jessie is in her late thirties or early 40's. She's pale and a little unsteady. You can tell that she's not well physically. She is wearing slacks and a long black sweater and has a notepad and pencil in the pocket of her sweater.

### THELMA

Thelma is Jessie's mother. She is in her late fifties or early 60's. She has begun to feel her age and takes it easy and lets other people do for her whatever she can. Thelma likes talking, and she's a sturdy person who knows this is her house.

### RICKY

Jessie's son

### DAWSON

Jessie's brother / Thelma's son

### AGNES

a neighbour

### LORETTA

Dawson's wife

### CECIL

Jessie's (ex)husband

### 3. About the author



Born in 1947 as the daughter of a fundamentalist Methodist, Marsha Norman had a solitary childhood in Louisville, Kentucky. Her mother's religious views prohibited Norman from playing with other children and watching television and movies, and she credits her loneliness as a child as the reason why she became a writer. Playing the piano, reading books, and attending the theatre were permitted to her and she saw children's plays at the Actors Theatre ([www.actorstheatre.org](http://www.actorstheatre.org)) of Louisville, as well as later productions of Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* and Archibald MacLeish's *J.B.*, an adaptation of *The Book of Job*. A philosophy major at Agnes Scott College ([www.agnesscott.edu](http://www.agnesscott.edu)) in Georgia, Norman began to work as a journalist after graduation, writing articles and reviews of books, plays, and films for the *Louisville Times*.

Norman's first play, *Getting Out* (1977), resulted from a suggestion by Jon Jory, a theatre director who asked her to write a play for the Actors Theatre. At first she felt she had no models to follow as a playwright, but she soon found that she could draw on her experience working with disturbed adolescents at Kentucky Central State Hospital. This background enabled her to create a vivid portrait of a woman parolee who served an eight-year prison sentence for robbery, kidnapping, and manslaughter. *Getting Out* was voted the best new play produced by a regional theatre by the American Theatre Critics Association and appeared in a shortened version in *The Best Plays of 1977-1978*.

After the success of this play, Norman moved to New York City because, as she said, she "needed to be in the world of living writers ... I like seeing that there are some people who do what I do, who are still alive." She wrote some one-act plays for the Actors Theatre and another full-length play, *Circus Valentine* (1979), before *'night, Mother* (1983), which won the Pulitzer Prize in addition to several other awards and four Tony Award nominations. Four years later she published her first novel, *The Fortune Teller*, and followed it with *Four Plays* (1988), the Broadway musical *The Secret Garden* (1991), and *Trudy Blue* (1994).

Since 1994 Marsha Norman has served on the faculty of The Juilliard School ([www.juilliard.edu](http://www.juilliard.edu)).

## 4. About the play

In brief, 'night, Mother is a one-act play with two characters on stage: Jessie Cates, late thirties to early forties, who lives with her mother, Thelma. The play opens with Jessie asking her mother where a particular gun is kept. She finds it with Thelma's help. As she cleans the gun, she quietly announces she's going to kill herself at the end of the evening. Jessie's announcement sets off a fierce struggle between mother and daughter, with Thelma using every strategy she can conceive of to talk Jessie out of her plan. Thelma becomes so desperate, she even resorts to telling Jessie the truth about a number of issues that have affected her life.

This play illustrates one possible central facet about the nature of what creates drama in a story: the anticipation of the outcome of a dramatic situation. In this case, that means that Thelma, and the audience, learn early on of Jessie's plans. And because they do, both Thelma and the audience are thrust deep into the heart of the story's central question: Will Jessie really kill herself, or can Thelma find a way to stop her?

## 5. Reading

Suggested divisions of the text:

- p37            Mama: "Cocoa. O.K."
- p53            Mama (As Jessie walks to the refrigerator): "Ready for your apple now?"
- p72/73        Jessie (Carefully taking her arm away): I have a box of things I want people to have. I'm just going to go get it for you. You ... just rest a minute.

## 6. Possible Teaching Objectives

- To acquaint students with a Pulitzer Prize-winning play
- To review and reinforce ideas about contemporary (domestic) realism
- To appreciate the arts (to understand that it is not necessarily most important to dazzle the audience with a romantic story line or spectacular special effects)
- To raise the question: How much control should a person have over his/her destiny?
- To approach the question: What gives meaning to our lives?
- To illustrate that underneath an ordinary surface, many unexpected things may be hidden

## 7. Dialogues for Discussion

### Theme: Family

Mama: "Family is just accident, Jessie. It's nothing personal, hon. They don't mean to get on your nerves. They don't even mean to be your family, they just are."

Jessie: "They know too much."

Mama: "About what?"

Jessie: "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. They were there when it happened and it don't belong to them, it belongs to you, only they got it. Like my mail-order bra got delivered to their house."

Mama: "By accident"!

Jessie: "All the same ... they opened it. They saw the little rose buds on it. [...]"

### Theme: Free will, fate, determinism

#### Page 69

Mama: [...] It's *his* fault, not mine.

#### Page 71

Mama: Maybe I did drop you, you don't know.

Jessie: If you say you didn't, you didn't.

Mama (Beginning to break down): Maybe I fed you the wrong thing. Maybe you had a fever sometime and I didn't know it soon enough. Maybe it's a punishment.

Jessie: For what?

Mama: I don't know. Because of how I felt about your father. Because I didn't want any more children. Because I smoked too much or didn't eat right when I was carrying you. It has to be something I did.

Jessie: It does not. It's just a sickness, not a curse. Epilepsy doesn't mean anything. It just is.

Mama: I'm not talking about the fits here, Jessie! I'm talking about this killing yourself. It has to be me that's the matter here. You wouldn't be doing this if it wasn't. [...]

### Complex morality

#### Pages 73-74

Mama: [...] You're supposed to go around and lock up so I know we're safe for the night, and when I wake up, you're supposed to be out there making the coffee and watching me get older every day, and you're supposed to help me die when the time comes. I can't do that by myself, Jessie. I'm not like you, Jessie. I hate the quiet and I don't want to die and I don't want you to go, Jessie. How can I ... (Has to stop a moment) How can I get up every day knowing you had to kill yourself to make it stop hurting and I was here all the time and I never even saw it. And then you gave me this chance to make it better, convince you to stay alive, and I couldn't do it. How can I live with myself after this, Jessie?

Jessie: I only told you so I could explain it, so you wouldn't blame yourself, so you wouldn't feel bad. There wasn't anything you could say to change my mind. I didn't want you to save me. I just wanted you to know.

Page 79

Mama: [...] You know who they're going to feel sorry for? Me! How about that! Not you, me! They're going to be *ashamed* of you. Yes. *Ashamed!* If somebody asks Dawson about it, he'll change the subject as fast as he can. He'll talk about how much he has to pay to park his car these days.

Jessie: Leave me alone.

Mama: It's the truth!

Jessie: I should've just left you a note!

Mama (Screaming): Yes! (Then suddenly understanding what she has said, nearly paralyzed by the thought of it, she turns slowly to face Jessie, nearly whispering) No. No. I ... might not have thought of all the things you've said.

Page 85

Jessie (Taking it off): My watch. (Putting it in the sack and taking a ribbon out of the sack to tie around the top of it)

Mama: He'll sell it!

Jessie: That's the idea. I appreciate him not stealing it already. I'd like to buy him a good meal.

Mama: But he'll buy dope with it!

Jessie: Well, then, I hope he gets some good dope with it, Mama. [...]

### Greatness / fall

Page 75

Mama: [...] Try it for two more weeks. We could have more talks like tonight.

Jessie: No, Mama.

Mama: I'll pay more attention to you. Tell the truth when you ask me. Let you have your say.

Jessie: No, Mama! We wouldn't have more talks like tonight, because it's the next part that's made this last part so good, Mama. No, Mama. *This* is how I have my say. This is how I say what I thought about it *all* and I say no. To Dawson and Loretta and the Red Chinese and epilepsy and Ricky and Cecil and you. And me. And hope. I say no! [...]

### Resolution

Page 89

Mama: Loretta, let me talk to Dawson, honey.

### Humor

Page 10

Mama: I'm not trying to help, sugar. (No answer) We don't have anything anybody'd want, Jessie. I mean, I don't even want what we got, Jessie.

Pages 63-64

Jessie (Interrupting): Most of the time I wouldn't even know I'd had one, except I wake up with different clothes on, feeling like I've been run over. Sometimes I feel my head start to turn around or hear myself scream. And sometimes there is this dizzy stupid feeling a little before it, but if the TV's on, well, it's easy to miss.

Page 69

Mama: You did! You were eating a popsicle and down you went. [...]

Page 69

Mama: It wasn't *all the time*, Jessie. And they changed when you started to school. More like your daddy's. Oh, that was some swell time, sitting here with the two of you turning off and on like light bulbs some nights.

Page 84

Jessie: [...] And all my house slippers are in a sack for her in my closet. Tell her I know they'll fit and I've never worn any of them, and make sure Dawson hears you tell her that. I'm glad he loves Loretta so much, but I wish he knew not everybody has her size feet.

### Sentimentality

Page 82

Jessie: It's private. Tonight is private, yours and mine, and I don't want anybody else to have any of it.

Page 86

Mama: I'm not sure I want them. They'll make me think of you.

Jessie: No they won't. They're just things, like a free tube of toothpaste I found hanging on the door one day.

### Learning

Pages 44-45

Jessie (As Mama takes her first sip): Did you love Daddy?

Mama: No.

Jessie (Pleased that Mama understands the rules better now): I didn't think so. [...]

Pages 88, 89

Mama: [...] Jessie! Stop this! I didn't know! I was here with you all the time. How could I know you were so alone? ...

Jessie! Please! ...

Jessie, Jessie, child ... Forgive me. (Pause) I thought you were mine.

### Suicide

## Pages 18-19

Jessie: Dead is everybody and everything I ever know, gone. Dead is dead quiet.

Mama: It's a sin. You'll go to hell.

Jessie: Jesus was a suicide, if you ask me.

Mama: You'll go to hell just for saying that. Jessie!

Jessie (With genuine surprise): I didn't know I thought that.

## Pages 26-27

Mama. Your eyes don't look right. I thought so yesterday.

Jessie: That was just the ragweed. I'm not sick.

Mama: Epilepsy is sick, Jessie.

Jessie: It won't kill me. (A pause) If it would, I wouldn't have to.

Mama: You don't *have* to.

Jessie: No, I don't. That's what I like about it.

## Page 33 (Bus metaphor)

Jessie: Mama, I know you used to ride the bus. Riding the bus and it's hot and bumpy and crowded and too noisy and more than anything in the world you want to get off and the only reason in the world you don't get off is it's still fifty blocks from where you're going? Well, I can get off right now if I want to, because even if I ride fifty more years and get off then, it's the same place when I step down to it. Whenever I feel like it, I can get off. As soon as I've had enough, it's my stop. I've had enough.

## Pages 35-36

Jessie (Putting the pill bottles away): You know I couldn't work. I can't do anything. I've never been around people my whole life except when I went to the hospital. I could have a seizure any time. What good would a job do? The kind of job I could get would make me feel worse.

Mama: Jessie!

Jessie: It's true!

Mama: It's what you think is true!

Jessie (Struck by the clarity of that): That's right. It's what I think is true.

Mama (Hysterically): But I can't do anything about that!

Jessie (Quietly): No. You can't. (Mama slumps, if not physically, at least emotionally) And I can't do anything either, about my life, to change it, make it better, make me feel better about it. Like it better, make it work. But I can stop it. Shut it down, turn it off like the radio when there's nothing on I want to listen to. It's all I really have that belongs to me and I'm going to say what happens to it. And it's going to stop. And I'm going to stop it. So. Let's just have a good time.

## Page 39

Mama: The houses they lived in, you knew they were going to fall down anyway, so why wait for it, is all I could ever make out about it. [...]

## Page 79

Mama: [...] You know who they're going to feel sorry for? Me! How about that! Not you, me! They're going to be *ashamed* of you. Yes. *Ashamed!* If somebody asks



Dawson about it, he'll change the subject as fast as he can. He'll talk about how much he has to pay to park his car these days.

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## **8. Assignments**

### While reading the play

- Character description  
Jessie and/or Thelma in detail.  
Identify Dawson, Ricky, Cecil, Loretta and Agnes.
- What preparations has Jesse been making for her suicide? Why has she been so careful in her planning? Why did she wait until this particular time to commit suicide?
- One of Jessie's statements in the play is: "This is how I have my say ... and I say no!" (Page 75) To what is Jessie saying "No"? Why is she committing suicide?
- What specific things does Jessie tell Mama she is to do after she has committed suicide? Why does Jessie give Mama such specific instructions?
- What are some of the tactics Mama uses during the play to delay Jessie's final act? What final tactic does she use after Jessie has gone in her room at the end of the play?
- One of Mama's final statements in the play (after she hears the shot in Jessie's bedroom) is: "Jessie, Jessie, child ... forgive me. I thought you were mine."  
Explain what Mama means by this statement.
- Contrast Jessie and Mama's view on life.

### After seeing the show

- Write a review about the play (see more details below).

## **9. Writing a Review**

Reviews are expected to be:

- Honest
- Clear (not ambiguous)

- Justify Opinions (say Why)
- Comprehensive
- Thorough

## OUTLINE OF HOW TO WRITE A REVIEW

1. Overall  
Your overall feeling about the show, include name of show and where it's playing.
2. What makes it special?  
Anything really unusual or unique about the show goes in here. For instance, puppetry, accents, anything an audience might find offensive, etc. Or if the set is really amazing, move that section here, etc.
3. Plot summary (if it's a new play; often omitted when the play is old)  
This can be separate or incorporated into acting review.
4. Acting review  
Cover all main characters and how well they did their roles. Cover any other roles that are outstanding (good or bad) for any reason. Make sure to list both the role and the actor's name when first mentioned.
5. Set  
Is it one or many sets? How well do they transition from one to another? Does anything about the set(s) stand out as very good or bad? How realistic is it? How elaborate? Suggestions for improvement?
6. Lighting  
same questions as 5. Set
7. Sound  
same questions as 5. Set. Are there any problems with hearing the actors? How did any other background sounds fit the show?
8. Special effects  
Anything outstanding?
9. Anything Else  
Anything else not previously stated that should be mentioned would go here.
10. Summary  
Why someone should or shouldn't see it. Why they might like or not like it.  
Closure line.
11. Byline  
by [Your name]
12. Title  
After you have written your review, reread it and come up with a title and put it at the top of the paper.

Before handing in your review, check the following:

- Does it make sense?
- Are there any contradictions?
- Do the ideas flow and transition well?
- Is the spelling of all names correct?

- Is spelling correct in general?
- Is the grammar correct?
- Are the verb tenses consistent and do they fit?
- Do you have minimal use of “I think”? (Basically any review IS an opinion, so you don't need to keep saying “I think” this or that.)
- Try to develop your own style of writing!

## 10. Vocabulary

English	German
cupcake	kleiner runder Kuchen
peanut brittle	Erdnuss-Krokant
treats	Leckereien, Süßwaren
foam cushion	Schaumstoffkissen
to go stale	versauern, schlecht werden
attic	Dachboden
to knit, knitting	stricken
Salvation Army	Heilsarmee
ladder	Leiter
to have a fit	hier: einen epileptischen Anfall haben
someplace dress-up	ein Ort, wo man sich schön kleidet
to turn somebody in	jemanden an die Polizei verraten
chamber	hier: Patronenkammer
barrel	Pistolenlauf
push rod	hier: Stäbchen zum Reinigen der Pistole
flea market	Flohmarkt
churn	Butterfass, Rührtrommel
mud	Schlamm
to cock the pistol	den Hahn spannen
feed store	Futterhandlung
prowler	Herumtreiber
stunt	Trick, Aktion
receiver	Telefonhörer
firm <i>adj.</i>	hart, standhaft
to wind up	enden (als)
approach	Annäherung, Methode
to be retarded	zurückgeblieben sein
to be deranged	geistig verwirrt sein
ridiculous	lächerlich
suicide	Selbstmord
genuine surprise	aufrichtiges Erstaunen
apparently	anscheinend
to replace	austauschen
cradle	Wiege, hier: Telefongabel
to snitch	klauen
to bother	quälen, nerven, beschäftigen

lint tray	Fusselauffang im Wäschetrockner
rosebud	die Rosenknospe
ragweed	Weinkraut (Jessie ist allergisch)
epilepsy	Epilepsie
barn	Scheune
red hots, sour balls, horehound, toffee, licorice	verschiedene Süßwaren
divorce	Scheidung
extension cord	Verlängerungskabel
lighter	Feuerzeug
sandpaper	Schleifpapier, Schmirgelpapier
masking tape	Abdeckband
Elmer's glue	besondere Art von Klebstoff
thumbtacks	Reißnägel
mousetrap	Mausefalle
sink	Waschbecken, Abwasch
light bulb	Glühbirne
fuse	elektrische Sicherung
desperately	verzweifelt
affectionately	liebevoll
handi-wipes	Reinigungstücher, Wischtücher
sponge	Schwamm
pill jar	Pillendose
to tire somebody out	Jemanden ermüden
plumber's helper	Saugglocke
crochet	Häkeln
the A & P	eine Supermarktkette
Thanksgiving	Erntedankfest
to interrupt	unterbrechen
brat	Balg, Göre
miserable	armselig, elend
dishes	Geschirr
glare	Blendung, Spiegelung
seizure	Epileptischer Anfall
to be struck by	betroffen sein von
to slump	einbrechen, zusammensinken
to fuss, fussing	sich aufregen
in despair	verzweifelt
a bite of supper	Bissen
counter	Tresen
truce	Waffenstillstand
to buy time	Zeit gewinnen
Trimline	Fitnessgerät
to be due for	fällig sein für
porch	Veranda
accomplishment	Vollendung, Vollbringung

marshmallow	Marshmallow (Süßzeug)
exciting	aufregend, spannend
to be forced to admit	gezwungen sein zuzugeben
reluctant	widerwillig, zögernd
whistle	Pfeiferl
to convince	überzeugen
okra	eine Gemüsesorte, ähnlich der Zucchini
willy-nilly	mir-nichts-dir-nichts
average	Durchschnitt, durchschnittlich
to stir, stirring	umrühren
to coat your throat	den Hals belegt machen
downright	absolut, regelrecht, total
disgusting	abscheulich, ekelhaft
lunatic	der/die Wahnsinnige, der/die Irre
corpse	Leichnam
to owe somebody	jemandem etwas schuldig sein
a change of scene	Schauplatzwechsel
to drag something out of somebody	jemandem etwas aus der Nase ziehen
awkward	unangenehm
sip	kleiner Schluck
to figure something out	etwas herausfinden oder verstehen
to get one's share	seinen Teil abbekommen
pipe cleaners	Pfeifenreiniger
to roll in	heranrollen
corn	Mais
to wind	aufziehen
to be stuck with somebody	jemanden am Hals haben
to kid oneself	sich Illusionen machen
runt	kleines Ferkel
tackle box	Schachtel für Fischerausrüstung
bait	Köder
to sweep, sweeping	hier: herunterfegen
apple butter	Süßspeise aus Apfelsauce, Honig, Zimt
to clutter up	voll stopfen, überladen
to gather up	einsammeln
to bend down	hinunterbeugen
to pester	belästigen
Gunsmoke	TV-Westernserie (CBS), 1955-75
to pour	ausleeren
stretcher	Tragbahre
to spoil	verderben, schlecht werden
no earthly idea	überhaupt keine Ahnung
to be stunned	perplex, überwältigt sein
Milk of Magnesia	ein Abführmittel
toolshed	Geräteschuppen
carpenter	Zimmermann

a living soul	eine Menschenseele
to marry somebody off to	jemanden verheiraten mit
selfish	egoistisch
yellow pine	Gelbkiefer
forgery	Fälscherei
armed assault	bewaffneter Überfall
furious	aufgebracht, wütend
to plead	bitten, plädieren
lid	Deckel
relief	Erleichterung
unconsciously	unbewusst
blackout	Erinnerungslücke
“thinking spells”	“Denkanfälle”
slipcover	Schutzhülle, Überzug
dizzy	schwindlig
afghan	ein Teppich oder eine grosse Decke
to take charge of sth.	die Kontrolle übernehmen
reluctant	zögernd, widerwillig
to crumple in a heap	in einem Haufen zusammenfallen
firing squad	das Exekutionskommando
to gag, gagging	geknebelt sein, ersticken
jerks	Reflexe, Zuckungen
cattle prod	elektrischer Stab zum Rindertreiben
to foam	schäumen
to bubble	Blasen bilden
phenobarb	ein Sedativ/Beruhigungsmittel
double vision	Doppelt-Sehen
rash	Ausschlag
fried clams	frittierte Muscheln
to inherit	erben
popsicle	Eisschlecker
to be exasperated	verärgert, genervt, ausser sich sein
to stoop	sich bücken
begonia	die Begonie
polka-dot whale	gepunkteter Wal (ein Stofftier)
to drool	sabbern
quilt	Steppdecke
to be on the loose	frei herumlaufen
to screech	kreischen
devastation	Verwüstung, Zerstörung
to look numb	Benommen/betäubt dreinschauen
recovery	Besserung, Genesung
to appreciate	anerkennen, dankbar sein
crochet work	Häkeleien, Häkelarbeit
Irish yarn	irisches Garn
to be bound to ask	bestimmt fragen

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Sanka	koffeinfreie Kaffeemarke
rug	kleiner Teppich
dope	Drogen
to rake (the leaves)	(das Laub) zusammenkehren
to pound on the door	gegen die Tür schlagen
frantic	rasend, wild, ausser sich