The Suicidal Vision Towards Autonomy in Marsha Norman’s ‘Night, Mother’

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Abstract:
A new vision has been created in the 1980s’ drama to overcome the sense of entrapment that the modern man feels in the attempts to keep his/her will and free choice liberated from severe confiscation. Though considered as a possibly negative vision, suicide started to be seen as to hand man the sense of control that is aspired at least over the end of one’s life. A further control was well reflected by the female figures in the late 20th century drama as it appeared in Marsha Norman’s ‘Night, Mother’ (1985).

This study traces the suicidal vision undertaken by a 40-year-old lady whose identity and sense of selfhood has been long confiscated by her mother and her whole universe. She tries to revive a romantic vision, rooted much in her strong tie with her dead father, in an attempt to reunite herself to her autonomous entity.

Keywords: autonomy, privacy, entrapment, patriarchy, archetypal image, suicide.

The beginnings of the 20th century witnessed developing contrastive theatrical trends of how to encounter the passivity and meaninglessness of life. One trend was by the complete surrender to one’s fate, as had been postulated by the absurdist’s plays, and the other was by making a choice of the will. This liberation of the will progressed towards the middle and end of the twentieth century to hold a suicidal vision that guarantees for one to be at least in control of the end of his life, sparing himself, in this way, the feeling of frustration and despair. Suicide is now postulated as an act of rejection of, more than surrender to, one’s burdens and suffering. It is viewed by the late 20th century playwrights, as Marsha Norman (1947- ), as assertion to one’s humanity and existence.

This suicidal vision in the theatre created a very harsh assault of criticism against modern American drama of the 1980s’ claiming strictly such a vision, especially for women, to be negative and insanely rebellious. Yet, some critics, like William Demastes, in his discussion of Norman’s plays, sided with such a choice, asserting that Death does not negate the idea that [a woman] exercises her will to the last… by deciding what will become of her life.
Not she chooses to die, but she chooses to die. Therefore, if there is advocacy in the play, it is certainly not in favor of death, but in favor of autonomy.” (Demastes 151-52)

It has become so initial for the playwrights of the 1980s’, who embraced suicidal visions as a kind of individual and psychological recovery, to find a way by which they would simplify such a complex issue into readily understandable terms by employing characters who are so ordinary and even banal and whose burdening experiences and clarity of vision make them extraordinary in reverse to their simplicity. Accordingly, the protagonists of the 1980s’ could be calm rebels standing against the degeneration of nature and seeking their psychological integrity.

Norman's protagonists are mostly women, who are all "fragile introvert trapped in their own skin" (Mehta 151), and who are in need for an articulation of their voices, for whose sake Norman believes thoroughly that her responsibility is to ‘grant a voice’. In this respect, Norman dramatizes suicide as a cry for her female protagonists' humanity and individuality. In order to make her dramatic framework more conceivable and acceptable, she sometimes injects her characters' suicidal attempts with a remaining hope in life especially for those who survive their attempts (Demastes 140), as it happens in Getting Out (1977) and the Fortune Teller (1987) in which Arlene, the main character, in the first play, follows her attempt by a hope of renewal, and the mother, in the second play, surrenders to reality that she must release her daughter, allowing her to live the way she chooses. But, in her one act play "Night, Mother"(1985), hope could not find its way to Jessie's dissent, as this precise hope for which she has long waited, could be only ascertained through her romantic vision of death.

Norman’s ‘Nigh, Mother has a very simple plot; as one night, Jessie Cate announces to her mother, Thelma, that she will kill herself at the end of the evening. The action of the play rolls around the struggle between mother and daughter coming as Thelma does everything she can to prevent Jessie from fulfilling her plan. They both revisit old wounding memories in the style of story-telling to reveal secrets about Jessie’s father, Jessie’s husband, and their lives together. This revelation of secrets is only a desperate attempt by Thelma to dissuade her daughter from killing herself. In this play Norman never spares the unbearable pain she reveals in the dissection of failed hopes and dreams.

The play is a 90-minute-play that runs without any intermission, starting with a daughter making her ultimate act of separation from her mother by following a meticulously planned suicide. The play begins as Jessie gathers the equipment necessary for her suicide, from
jewels and plastic sheeting to a gun and its ammunition. At first, she suggests that the gun is for protection, as in a sense it is thus for her, but later, and within few minutes, she confesses to its real purpose, even gives a deadline of a couple of hours for its use and, suddenly, the space between the theatrical and real time collapses as it is counting down the minutes on the stage. The block of time which holds Jessie and Thelma’s talk has been fully scheduled by Jessie as a final conversation within which Jessie can for the first and last time explain herself to her mother. In addition to the timing element, Norman unifies the setting of the play to signify Jessie’s focus on her decision with no delay. Then, the whole structure holds strictly Jessie’s persistent needs to take a step forward. In response, the condensed time and the looming tragedy forces Thelma to confront events from the past which she has deliberately chosen to ignore in her breezy and superficial attitude toward her family and her own life.

The play is mainly a conversation revealing aspects of a mother and daughter’s past, and probing their sense of abandonment and entrapment. Jessie, in her late thirties, early forties, is an epileptic spending her life depending on medications to keep temporary equanimity. Along the way, her marriage has collapsed and her only son turned to crime. When she appears on the stage, this is the first time she is in control of herself. Norman emphasizes in her stage directions that: “It is only in the last year that Jessie has gained control of her mind and body, and tonight she is determined to hold onto that control.” (4)

Yet, ‘Determining to hold onto that control’ as Norman states in the stage directions of her play, is one of the most chilling features of the play in its logic and inevitability as Jessie is fully conscious of the steps to embrace her death and is acting quite deliberately and decisively. The clarity of the mind, that the new medicine endows her with, helps her to arrange for all the eventualities of this decision in scrutiny and accuracy. Her action has never been traced in the play to be "of an emotionally distraught or hysterical figure, but rather the action is of one who has apparently reasoned out the most effective strategy for suicide (italics mine)" (Mehta 52)

Jessie has lived with her mother for years since her divorce. She used to arrange everything in advance for her mother, so that Thelma will go on smoothly after Jessie is gone_ dead. She also makes sure that they will not be interrupted in this final conversation, because she is against any intrusion in this affair; “This is private…. Dawson is not invited. I don't want anybody else over here. Just you.” (15) Within the frame of this very private talk, Jessie immediately starts with the announcement of suicide. She makes the outset of this conversation the denouement of the whole problem and then she goes to the
explanation of her problem. The conversation shows her as being fully inapt to listen to any other solutions than to ‘kill herself’. The matter is taken by Thelma as being ‘very funny’, and especially that Jessie is telling her this while she was preparing her mother's towels to make her a "manicure". But she affirms seriously to her Mama that “I told you... the gun is for me.... I am going to kill myself.” (13) When the matter is clarified to Thelma as a matter of death and life, she starts to struggle with her daughter desperately from committing suicide, but her attempts prove to be in vain as Jessie admits with a full determination that death is the only decent choice that she can comfortably take.

Jessie is a woman who embattled in repressive and even oppressive situations, a woman who is entrapped in a life without a release. She is forced whether by her epilepsy or by her mother to “confront not simply a bad day, but an irrecoverably sad life” (Greene 46). The first impression that an audience may get out of Jessie's determination for death is that she has been cruelly injured and she is striving for a healing solution to the depression she feels due to this injury.

Underneath the structural unity of the play lies the mental scheme the goes through the events of the past which are external to the play; mental, and not physical, details of these recollections help to understand the psychological dilemmas that lead the protagonist to decide her willful suicide. Further, the play is naturally divided into a psychological sequence. This sequence ranges in its seriousness from the elaborate stage direction that "Mama looks for a pan to make cocoa"(27) to Jessie's decisive and dangerous spontaneity in telling her mother about her decision of suicide, thus, it approaches gradually to its climatic determination to suicide in spite of the alternatives offered by Thelma which are ironical enough to reinforce Jessie's decision.

During this one evening of homely chatter, behind which lurks Jessie's grim suicidal determination and Thelma's equally grim determination to wheedle and blackmail her daughter into living, Jessie discovers the truth about her life in a number of ways, and each discovery edges her closer towards her death. She has been contemplating the idea of suicide through all the last six months, and this night she hears all the truth that makes her sure that by killing herself, she at least owns her choice in life as a human being, although it is not necessarily considered by others a logical choice.

It can be strongly thought that the play is merely a battle for autonomy. Yet, the first impression Jessie gives is that this is not merely an attempt to prove one's independence because such an issue of autonomy can be gained or restored in one way or another other
than killing one's self. Norman implies the idea that had Jessie and Thelma ever managed to have an honest and loving relationship, Jessie would not have regarded suicide as the only logical solution to gain autonomy (Greene 26). In fact, the play gives a more viable impression, there is a struggle towards one's humanity, an issue of either to live completely humanly or die because someone's humanity and its choices have been long confiscated and the only solution to restore them is by terminating its reminiscences.

For Norman, death, in Jessie's case, denotes a stronger link to humanity than the link her life could offer. Through all her life, Jessie cannot infer a worthy meaning that makes her value her life. She tried to cultivate a hope in her life to assert her humanity, but chances are so rare in her case because of her epilepsy and because of the role imposed on her by the social view as a woman. She could once grasp the choice given to her by the social tent of marriage. But later, she realizes that she had trusted a hope in a failure with her husband who betrays her and finally abandons her in a serious emergency fit. Also, this failure trespasses to encompass her maternal relation with her only son whom she realizes to be "a lost delinquent" (Demastes 9). Eventually, Jessie concludes that waiting has failed to satisfy the hope she yearned to cultivate and grow. She asks herself why she chooses simply to wait out her time when life seems to offer but a looming decline. Figuring out the truth leaguing around her existence, Jessie refuses any delay in taking the decision about embracing her life as far as her existence gives her no role.

Years earlier, Jessie has been the victim to her doctor's prescriptions, her husband's needs and desires, her son's wayward behavior and above all to her mother's misguided and unfocussed love (Bigsby 230). Within the realm of all these failures, Jessie withdraws her world and prefers not to talk because she has not yet developed into the one who represents the only thing in her life that is worth waiting. Therefore, she offers the world around her a silent ironic response which is largely misread by those around her, never caring any more whether they know anything about her or not. Jessie’s quiet response becomes one important aspect in her personality and is always denigrated by her mother by casually dismissing it. Selfishly seeing herself to be the core of Jessie’s life, Thelma relates this silence to her rather than acknowledging it as a unique trait of her daughter. She tells her daughter: “I am not like you, Jessie. I hate quiet.”(48) In fact, Jessie’s love of quiet is associated with her contemplative nature; she asks a lot of questions about life, while Thelma has never been contemplative (Felix 72). Instead of seeking to understand her daughter better, she again denigrates her by pushing off this distinctive trait of her personality and keeps denying Jessie’s desire to
know things: “Why do you have to know so much about things, Jessie? There’s just not much to things that I could ever see” (44). Denying to know is part of the lack of communication between the mother and daughter which creates a critical gap of deprivation of her human individuality. Ignorant enough, Thelma fails to validate Jessie’s significance in approaching a better understanding to life; she devours almost all the parts of her daughter’s spirit and prevents her to see herself as an autonomous person.

Norman puts Thelma’s consistent ignorance and negligence to everything related to her daughter’s spiritual needs, within the framework of destroying the archetypal image of the Great Mother. Most often, the mother in Norman’s plays is made absent and deficient as an affectionate figure in the family; or her role is terminated and completely annihilated into a mere physical entity void of the spiritual or moral significance (Brown 145).

The selfless giving associated with the Mother archetype is absent in Thelma’s attachment to Jessie. Her relation is rather based on her own neediness to Jessie. She is unwilling to share her world with her daughter, and would rather prefer to insulate her within their safe domestic nest. Jessie is essential to her mother’s passive survival. In the heat of their discussion, Jessie discovers her mother has been concealing secrets about her and her father’s epilepsy, and that these fits of epilepsy, which are thought to have been got caused by a fall from a horse when she was riding with her husband, were coming to her from an early age and were hereditarily passed on to her by her father. Thelma does not rock the boat, because life would be easier for her, and only her, if truth remains under the tides. Being so long unaware of the depth of her mother’s betrayal, Jessie is shocked that even her bodily disease has been concealed from her:

You mean to tell me I had fits all the time as a kid and you just told me I fell down or something and it wasn’t til [sic] I had the fit when Cecil was looking that anybody bothered to find out what was the matter with me? (46)

Thelma tells her that it is not for shame, but because it is not anybody’s business and “Least of all, you.” Jessie in an emotional outburst objects to her mother’s flipping concern of her daughter’s individuality; her disease is part of her body and her personal health history. Although the mother appears harmless, yet she has the power to cut her daughter down like razors, with her wanton disregard of Jessie’s privacy, uniqueness and pain. The quiet betrayals, offhand remarks and lack of interest in her daughter’s depth are all traits in Thelma that personify the mother who can destroy the life she creates as easily as she can nurture and replenish it. She endows Jessie with powerlessness and passivity that she herself imitates from her
oppressor, the patriarchy of her own life. Yet, Thelma shows her acceptance of the patriarchal order and its values through the process of facilitating the match of marriage between Jessie and Cecil. She practices, in this way, a similar patriarchal role on Jessie believing that the decisions she makes for Jessie are all in her daughter’s best interest, as believes patriarchy:

Jessie: You didn’t need a porch, Mama.
Mama: All right! I wanted you to have a husband.
Jessie: And I couldn’t have one on my own, of course.
Mama: How were you going to get a husband never opening your mouth to a living soul?
Jessie: So, I was quiet about it, so what?
Mama: So I should have let you just sit here? Sit like your Daddy?
Sit here?
Jessie: Maybe.
Mama: Well I didn’t think so. (39)

‘Nigh, Mother is thought to focus, as most of Norman’s other plays, on actions “crucially determined by absent male characters” (Rosefeldt 64), and that Jessie’s suicide is inevitably “determined in terms of the absent men to which most of the dialogue refers” (Spencer 156), and is seen to be driven by the same patriarchy that suffocates her mother. For Thelma her entrapment in this patriarchal society resides in her loveless marriage which she often remembers with distaste. Having no other alternative to this marriage, Thelma had the better part of her life chained to a man that neither values nor even resents her. All that Thelma desired out of her married life was for her husband to take the time to communicate with her. But her efforts during all these years of marriage had proved to be in vain. In this respect, Thelma is so much like her daughter in experiencing great frustration and an irrecoverable scar of failure.

But the difference lies in their reaction to such failure and helplessness. For Thelma, her choice is at hand by resigning to the only chance that she has got and sufficing herself with an endless waiting till the end of her husband’s life. In fact, Thelma’s resignation flows from her passive and selfish attitude to life. She tends to take no action and remains completely dependent on others to take the hold of her life. She remains keen in keeping her physical life safe no matter what type of a spiritual and psychological loss she is undergoing.

In contrast to Thelma’s response, Jessie’s responds with no blame to the offstage male characters that had a role in her life but never driving her in to take the decision of suicide. It is more probable that the animation of these males’ role is employed, at least on Jessie’s part to discuss thoroughly her concerns of human freedom and autonomy. The only male character she obviously blames and towards
whom she directs her anger, is her brother Dawson, but her blame and anger are not because her stands for social and familial patriarchy, but because he invades her privacy, which is a very sensitive case for her. Thereby, he represents another evasive aspect of familial entrapment she is suffering from. Dawson’s interference is devastating to Jessie as it touches a crucial aspect of her fragile sense of the independent self and autonomy. This invasion would create an obstacle in her path towards her psychological and spiritual integrity. The tiny details of Jessie’s lingerie and the mail-ordered bra, the most feminine items, or her or even the ring her son stole from her in a bad fit of epilepsy, are meant to be for her alone, whereas she discovers that even this superficial aspect of her womanhood and individuality is made oppressively part of the collective concept of the family. She feels that she is invaded by outsiders when her family become in the state of knowing or touching her personal possessions.

Family intruding into her personal affairs and possessions discards not only her concept of the family as an embracing entity, but also influences her concept of her own existence. If her life loses its personal and private sense, then, it is nothing more than a “continued existence” (Bigsby 237). Jessie feels offended as her family causes her a deep frustration in aspiring to get a real recovery by their aid. She explains her disappointment to her mother resenting Dawson’s feigned intimacy, “he just calls me Jess, like he knows who he’s talking to.”(19) Naturally, Thelma, essentially unable consider Jessie a separate entity from herself, explains her own concept of the family as “just accident…. It’s nothing personal, hon. They don’t mean to get on your nerves. They don’t even mean to be your family.”(19) This flippant and accidental interpretation of the family infuriates Jessie as far as it expels her as an individual driven by her own motivations, following her own personal choices. Knowing is a very sensitive issue for Jessie as it constitutes the pillar of her need to conceive her humanity, and especially when the matter is related to her mother and other family members. For Jessie, knowing is rather a profound kind of love as it includes giving information about one’s own self (Brown 73), a matter she could no feel with the family members. Therefore, Jessie allows none such a grace of knowing about her. It is only her father that was willfully allowed to know about her, and now he is absent, and with his death, the supporting meaning for her life ceased.

In contrast to the father, Thelma fails to communicate anything positive to her daughter, becoming, thus, completely incompatible with Jessie’s efforts to become independent (Paige 99-100). Her imitation to patriarchy enlarges the gap of trust and understanding with Jessie. She surrenders completely to her lack of opportunities for self confirm envisioning no way to fight back and get her personal
rights, as Jessie finally does. Even when Thelma deals with her daughter’s epilepsy, she acts as a keen adherent to the doctors’ “prescriptions” regarding them as the only possible hope for J

In her contemplation of such an unbridgeable gap, Jessie’s retreat seems completely far from being thoughtful. She decides that she has only one chance to assert selfhood and autonomy and this chance would be to take the hold of her fate. Paradoxically enough, suicide represents the only episode in her life in which she acts out her human role like the individual whom she fails to become through living. She explains her logic to her mother:

Jessie: I can’t do anything either, about my life, to change 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. (26)

‘Having a good time’ shows Jessie as fully resolved and emotionally and psychologically prepared to transfer herself to her personal voyage to death, and she intends to spend these last moments with her mother all alone, without the knowledge of any one else.

It is assumed by many critics that the play is registered as an animated-male play because all the important actions and truths revealed in ‘Night, Mother’ directly relate Thelma and Jessie’s relationship with those male characters as “All the intimacies shared by Jessie and Thelma, somehow relate to the father, son and brother, whose impact on the narrative is integral to every relation and action the two women undertake” (Dolan 336). This can be articulated as part of the posture of most Norman’s female characters that seem removed from “significant action” that they are filled up with meaningless activity, surviving life within a framework of habitual marginality (Bigsby 237 and Spencer 151) showing itself in the details of daily life. Therefore, in addition to the limitation of women’s choices in the patriarchal society, the notion of women’s passivity is emphasized. Thelma chooses to be committed to the inevitability and passivity imposed on, or in many times chosen by, her. When Jessie fails in marriage, she is supposed to be rescued by Thelma who seems to have already prepared her a role in life. She thinks that for Jessie to take the responsibility of a mother, who is perfectly capable but feigning incapability, might give her daughter a role in life, and thus, a meaning of her existence. What matters for Thelma, in her breezy selfish attitude, is to preserve her and her daughter’s physical existence, no matter if it ever had any real meaning.
The razor silence, with which Thelma deals toward her daughter’s pain, deprives Jessie another shred of her selfhood is destroyed and robbed. Her silence directed against Jessie’s natural separation from her. Jessie is torn between her love to her mother and her need to break free from this humiliating tie. She becomes the fragmented self that is searching for someone to supply the missing link in her selfhood, and when she discovers that neither her mother nor any other living soul would support her, she chooses her great defiance to her mother’s control by taking her own life.

Jessie is completely objected to any type of restrictions, starting from her own disease, which symbolizes her overall entrapment in the world at large, to the mandatory roles imposed on her. Although Jessie is caught in a “social and psychological web that gives very little room to maneuver,” (Demastes 150) and fails to reach any type of independence from her mother’s pervasive control, yet, this confinement cultivates in Jessie an attitude of distrust and freedom. She finds that the only freedom she can trust is the one that is accomplished by her own choice, death. In opposition to her mother’s blunted consciousness and appreciation of her own spiritual existence, Jessie is fully conscious of and completely against the spiritual loss. She perceives that the spiritual loss would lie in preventing her to take a single final hold of her entity. For her, survival through one’s marginality is not a real existence. She prefers “non-existence yet with meaning” (Bigsby 237).

Months earlier, Jessie has made her decision that her universe and her entire being is just “not enough.” (31) While contemplating and planning to kill herself, she keeps wondering and awaiting anything that may mean enough to make her change her mind. Till the night of suicide, Norman presents Jessie with her “circular motion of filling candy jars, cooking and cleaning… actions that are marked by the rhythm and tempo of domestic work,” (Gibbs 50) and questioning whether anything could revive a thought that is worth living. She is inwardly working on the same hopes and fears over again. Her desires are so simple, that she says if she could find “something I really like, may be if I liked rice pudding or cornflakes for breakfast or something, that might be enough.” (76) As it appears, Jessie’s hunger is only a symbol of her psychic hunger. It signifies a persistent need for satisfaction “in search for her autonomous self” (Felix 67). But after all that waiting, she comes up lacking satisfaction. Jessie’s physical hunger identifies a humanistic link between the physical need of her body and her psychic and spiritual needs for autonomy. She starves for being the processor and possessor of her choices in life.

A positive approach is led by Norman to implement an “affirmation of life amidst suffering” by bringing together the “two
She brings together entrapment and freedom as recurrent themes in her ‘Night, Mother’. Both themes are metaphoric to human activities and concerns, like the physical hunger and suicide. Her humanism is made evident through this. The various types of hunger and her plea for different kinds of freedom are essentially an outcome of her humanistic vision. For a woman, it is a must to be free to realize her potential to be apt for a complete life (Mehta 194).

In her constant search for a psychic solidity and cohesion, Jessie realizes that she is able to “assume some measure of autonomy” even if it were at the expense of her relations with her family and especially with her mother. She decides that since her situation is irrecoverable, then staying alive without a real existence is in vain. She identifies herself with image of the houses that Agnes, her mother’s relative, burns, stating that why waiting for houses to collapse if “they were going to fall down anyway.” (28) Perhaps waiting is of no use when man recognizes the failure of all attempts to reconstruct his/her life reminiscences, as long, as in all cases, this reconstruction would collapse anyway. Jessie justifies her decision of suicide and declares that the reason behind it is that “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 feel used.” (22)

Underlying Jessie’s suicidal decision, there is a blend of powerful causes of failure, alienation, despair and anger. But above all, most of those go towards one tide, her decision to get autonomy and humanity. Some studies of Norman’s ‘Night, Mother posits suicide as being so closely linked to the issue of autonomy and individual control. The notion of control through suicide seems ambiguous because of the apparent destructiveness it includes (Higonnet 68). Jessie requires control over her destiny after she fails to have a similar control on the choices of her life. The true meaning of life has never been realized by Jessie because the rational link between her and her life has been mostly determined and directed by others:

That’s what this is all about. 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. So, see, it doesn’t matter what else happens in the world or in this house, even. I’m what was worth waiting for and I didn’t make it. Me… who might have made a difference to me… I’m not going to show up, so there’s no reason to stay. (76)
Jessie concludes that the only rational link between her and her real entity is through death; a sphere where her existence can acquire a purpose. Thereby, Jessie tries to pay herself the respect of believing that at least she can be the author of her own fate, endowing herself some sense of autonomy. She includes none of the people surrounding her to be the cause of her suicidal decision. She blames none and she is jealous of no one. She says that she is the only person who is responsible and her decision is completely individual. This responsibility denies the possibilities that anger and depression are the reasons underlying her suicide decision.

Although psychologists embrace the idea that the root of most suicides is anger, yet, Jessie expels anger to be the motivation to end her life. There are many signs of anger residing in the background of Jessie’s pain and suffering but they are apparent only when the matter is related to the violation of her privacy and personal possessions. Therefore, the possibility of asserting herself and controlling her own life are considered a more compatible message to convey through her suicide than anger may have (Krasner 395). Suicide can be seen, thus, as an autonomous step for assertion. Yet, critics who surmise that Jessie’s suicide is a “means of grasping autonomy”, see that it is, also, “simultaneously, an act of anger (though perhaps unconsciously so).” (Paige 97) Therefore, one can consider that the first underlying step to suicide is anger. Anger is enough to incite punishment on others for the wrongs they have done her, yet this suicidal act is paradoxically a positive move towards establishing her own autonomy instead of being a surrender to the predicaments of life with which Jessie is angry. (97)

When Thelma tries to change Jessie’s mind about suicide and pleads her to try something else and not to give up, she responds that; “I’m not giving up! This is the other thing I’m trying…. That will work. That’s why I picked it.”(77) Instead of despair, Jessie is cultivating hope in her decision of suicide because it is the ‘other thing [she’s] trying.’ Nevertheless, Thelma denies this responsibility trying to convince Jessie, or it might be for her, that this suicidal decision is only a consequence of something that she has done wrongly to her daughter. It may either be her lack of love for Jessie’s father or her wrong choice of Jessie’s husband:

> 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. That’s right! You might as well kill me as you, Jessie, it’s the same thing. This has to do with me. (47)

Here lies Thelma’s main fault, that she could not discern a border between herself and her daughter. Jessie is surely depressed by her mother’s incapability to make this distinction, yet, her decision to put
an end to her life is more an act of split apart from her mother and all what she symbolizes. (Demastes 151)

On the night of suicide, Jessie proclaims her good fortune as she feels well enough to do something about her body and metaphorically her whole existence, and from which she has long been alienated. She roams in her past reminiscences observing her baby pictures, confessing to Thelma that she “lost” that carefree baby long ago, a baby that was fully satisfied and happy:

I found an old baby picture of me. It was somebody pink and fat who never heard of sick and lonely, somebody who cried and got fed, and reached up and got held…. That’s who I started out and this who is left. (76)

During childhood, Jessie used to find her spiritual and psychological needs fully satisfied, a satisfaction that she derives from her father’s “peaceful and mysterious contemplations” (Greiff 225) and with his death this peace ceases to flow any more into her soul. The death of Jessie’s father creates a great void in her life. Her only attempt to survive her vacant existence is by the past recollections of her childhood in order to restore some sense of hope residing in illusion. The most influential part of her life was her quiet and assertive relation to her father. Yet, the memory of her mother’s detachment from both, the father and daughter do not escape these recollections. The memory of Jessie’s parents brought together denotes the idea that her parents are conflicting inside her. Each tries to draw her to her/his own side. But, the more Thelma draws Jessie to her, the more she feels attached to her father, enjoying his “fascinating world of imagination and peace” (Rosefeldt 66) endowing her similar peaceful and quiet attitude, as he chose:

absence as a mode of life and has bequeathed this heritage to his daughter. Because of her father’s symbolic absence or detachment from the world as well as his actual absence, Jessie ... doubles the father. Like her father, she is mostly silent. (Rosefeldt, 66)

For Jessie, the father is the essence of her childhood as he serves as the “source originating identity and power,” (Rosefeldt, 66) and losing him leaves her with the feeling of a great chasm that separates her from her serene and happy childhood that constitutes the genuine part of her soul. The quiet and imaginative attitude of Jessie’s father processed a shelter for both from the bitter realities of life, and this in return processed for Jessie, after his death, a romantic vision of life that probably drives her more towards deciding suicide.

It is natural that such romantic attitude would keep, in resentment, the mother away from both because she has never been happy with her husband and she has never been part of his romantic
world. She hates his quiet attitude and she is jealous of Jessie for enjoying her father’s silence:

> How could I love him, Jessie? I didn’t have the thing he wanted…. You loved enough for both of us. You followed him around like some… Jessie, all the man ever did was farm and sit…. Or just sit. (31)

Even in Jessie’s epilepsy, Thelma keeps on reminding her that it is an inheritance of her father, thinking that his influence is negative on his daughter. But, consciously or unconsciously, when in a fit, Jessie is granted a chance to be cut off from the world surrounding her. Symbolically enough, epilepsy works as the only protection left to Jessie from her father. After his death, life turns to be routine and predictable, a wasteland, to which Jessie metaphorically refers as a bus trip that is noisy and crowded, in which someone would be entrapped and unable to get off only because it is “Still fifty blocks from where you’re going. Well I can get off right now if I want to…. As soon as I’ve had enough, it is my stop. I’ve had enough.”(24)

Jessie is now completely resolved to die and nothing can stop her, and she empowers herself with this metaphor as it shows the possibility of freely choosing her stop. She decides that waiting for the stop to be decided by others is purposeless. She decides to cease living as a retreat to the tranquil world of her father that used to overwhelm her soul with peace, and death is the only choice that shelters her from all types of harm:

> I’m cold all the time, anyway…. It’s exactly what I want. It’s dark and quiet…. So quiet I don’t know it’s quiet. So nobody can get me…. Dead is everybody and everything I ever knew, gone. Dead is dead quiet. (16)

In the final minutes of the play, Thelma struggles with Jessie at the bedroom door trying to stop Jessie, but she fails. Contrastively enough, everything Thelma says to entice Jessie o give up her decision, inversely helps strengthening her resolve to kill herself. Jessie never stops making her way in and locks the door. The door is the most important element of the stage design to the extent that one would feel it as a third character that is evasive and crucial. The stage directions reflect the archetypal image of the door as the threshold to a new world, through which Jessie claims her right to autonomy:

> One of these bedroom doors opens directly…. It should be, in fact, the focal point of the entire set, and the lighting should make it disappear completely t times and draw the entire set into it at others. It is a point of both treat and promise. That door is the point of all action. (4)

The door in ‘Night, Mother, represents the threshold at which the dramatic conflict is relieved. This conflict is embodied in Jessie’s
simple need to step through and shoot herself towards her freedom, and, similarly, the equal yet opposite need of her mother to prevent her doing so. (Bigsby 219) Jessie makes her way through the door initiating her final freely chosen trip to the world of the unknown. After Jessie shoots herself, Thelma becomes aware of her unfair treatment to her daughter. She learns this too late and she remains incapable of compassion and her final regret serves only to bring herself the focus of pain and self-pity. Turning to a plea for forgiveness, Thelma realizes how she knows nothing about how Jessie has been emotionally dealing with her life.

In triggering her father’s gun and shooting herself, Jessie at last silences the monotonous burden of her universe that rolls her whole entity and it is no more hurting her soul. This gun, as Jessie announces from the outset of the play, is meant for ‘protection’ and it is assigned ‘for me’. It is associated with her father and serves as a substitution for his sheltering role in Jessie’s life. It becomes the means by which Jessie reunites herself to the world of her father and by which she gets her autonomous salvation

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