

'I THOUGHT YOU WERE MINE': ACHIEVING FEMALE IDENTITY AND AUTONOMY THROUGH SUICIDE IN NORMAN'S 'NIGHT, MOTHER

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Traditionally linked to madness and still associated to mental illness, the topic of suicide, especially of female suicide, has always been a matter of religious, moral and psychological concerns. Literature is not an exception. From examples like Shakespeare's Juliet and Flaubert's Emma Bovary, to more recent ones in American literary history like Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* or Lily Bart in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, we find a wide range of suicidal subjects to explore. Within all these cases, we have Jessie Cates, the protagonist of *'night Mother* by Marsha Norman.

In this paper, we will try to analyze how female suicide is not just linked to madness. Committing suicide might also be considered a means to acquire freedom and autonomy and this is precisely the main point of the paper: to try to prove how Jessie Cates achieves autonomy through suicide.

Keywords: Suicide; autonomy; American drama; madness; identity.

1. Introduction

Female suicide has been a recurrent topic in literature for a long time. In some cases such as Juliet's (*Romeo and Juliet*, William Shakespeare, 1591-1595), Emma Bovary's (*Madame Bovary*, Gustave Flaubert, 1857), or Adela's (*La Casa de Bernarda Alba*, Federico García Lorca, 1936), it seems easy for some critics to find an explanation for the heroines' attempt to take their own lives: these women commit suicide for love. However, there are many other cases in which finding an explanation proves much more difficult. Within the latter, we can include Edna Pontellier (*The Awakening*, Kate Chopin, 1899), Lily Bart (*The House of Mirth*, Edith Wharton, 1905) and the case study for this paper: Jessie Cates (*'nigh, Mother*, Marsha Norman, 1983).

Despite being such a common topic in literature, female suicide is still considered a taboo. For some critics, "Suicide, like woman ..., is both fetish and taboo. ... It is doubly so for women who inscribe on their own bodies cultural reflections and projections, affirmation and negation." (Suleiman, 1986: 68). It seems, then, that the resilience of the taboo related to female suicidal individuals has something to do with gender questions. During the Victorian era, suicide was considered to be a 'female malady'. Classified as such, it was treated in the same way as hysteria or madness:

Beginning in the eighteenth century, this violation of social norms [suicide] is treated as a malady, the victims of suicidal depressions are subject to 'vapors' to be treated by better food, travel or elevated literature. To 'cure' the symptoms of such radical choice is to deny their voluntary nature. (Suleiman, 1986: 70).

However, statistics prove that, at that time, logically, not only women committed self-killing. Nonetheless, male suicides were attributed not to a natural tendency to madness

but to cases of insanity produced by intemperance. Moreover, women were said to be cowards when they carried out self killing. This idea of the cowardice and weakness of women with respect to suicide was reinforced by saying that females used to commit suicide by, for example, drowning, but they did not commit bloody, ‘more courageous’ suicides as men did. In this paper, we will see how Jessie Cates breaks the rules as she does not commit suicide in the traditional considered ‘female way’.

This definition of suicide described above as “female malady” emerges from the traditional consideration of suicide as a “moral, theological and criminal issue” (Marsh 2010: 27). Nonetheless, this consideration of suicide seems to be obsolete nowadays and a new vision has appeared after much research carried out throughout the 20th century: the consideration of suicide as a mental illness. Hence, as Ian Marsh explains, as it happens with any other illness, there are both some possible treatments for it and also the possibility of prevention: “Treatment of suicidal behaviour is addressed by reference to pharmacotherapy, psychotherapy and general hospital management, and prevention at both individual and population levels” (2010: 30). The conflict appears when other specialists start to consider wilfulness as a criterion to approach suicide. As Marsh points out: “If suicide can be conceived as voluntary then the door is also opened to consideration of the act in political terms ... Such a position ... opens up the possibility of interpreting suicide in terms of resistance, refutation or protest.” (73)

Thus, if we take into account wilfulness as a factor, essentially, suicide can be considered as an act of proving that your body is your own. From that perspective, suicide would be an act of achieving autonomy and identity over oneself and this is what we will try to show in this paper with our case study: Jessie Cates.

2. Jessie Cates: A case study

Jessie Cates and her mother Thelma are the only characters on stage in the 1983 play *‘night, Mother* by Marsha Norman. The basic plot revolves around Jessie’s fixed idea of committing suicide. We witness the fight between mother and daughter, one determined to carry out her will of killing herself and the other trying strongly and failing in preventing this from happening.

Jessie is introduced as a woman “in her late thirties or early forties, pale and vaguely unsteady, physically. It is only in the last year that she has gained control of her mind and body, and tonight, she is determined to hold onto that control” (Norman, 1983: 4). This determination includes committing suicide to prove that her body is her own, the physical representation of her female identity and autonomy. From the beginning, we see how Jessie has planned to commit suicide and she has everything calculated to carry out her deed. In fact, her first words pronounced indicate that she is more than resolved to end up with her life:

We got any old towels? ... And a big piece of plastic like a rubber sheet or something. Garbage bags would do. ... What about some old pillows anywhere or a foam cushion out of a yard chair would be real good. ... Where’s Daddy’s gun? ... I’m going to kill myself, Mama. (Norman, 1983: 9-13)

Besides, in order to facilitate things for her mother, she indicates to her what to do after she kills herself: “Dawson [her brother] will get here just in time to help you clean up. Go ahead, call him. Then call the police. Then call the funeral home” (Norman, 1983: 15). It seems that there is no hesitation whatsoever although Thelma, the mother, tries to convince Jessie not to commit such a crime.

To a certain extent, throughout the whole play, Thelma performs a role similar to a therapist who tries to find out the roots of the problem of Jessie’s intention of killing

herself. As a matter of fact, there may be plenty of reasons why Jessie wants to commit suicide: she is a divorced woman living with her mother in her mother’s place, that is, she cannot afford a place of her own; her only son, Ricky, is a criminal and, in addition, she suffers from epilepsy. The combination of all these factors makes her think that she is totally useless: “You know I couldn’t work. I can’t do anything. ... I could have a seizure anytime. What good would a job do? The kind of job I could get would make me feel worse” (Norman, 1983: 26).

However, Jessie does not see epilepsy as the cause for her decision to commit suicide because, after all, “It’s just a sickness, not a curse. Epilepsy doesn’t mean anything. It just is” (Norman, 1983: 47). Furthermore, she blames herself for her failed marriage, although her mother insists that the only reason why Jessie’s husband abandoned her and eloped with a neighbour is that he didn’t love her:

MAMA: He didn’t love you, Jessie, or he wouldn’t have left.

JESSIE: He wasn’t the wrong man, Mama. I loved Cecil so much. And I tried to get more exercise and I tried to stay awake. I tried to learn to ride a horse. And I tried to stay outside with him, and but he always knew I was trying so it didn’t work. (Norman, 1983: 39).

Jessie has tried very hard to succeed in life and Thelma, suddenly, realizes that Jessie’s failure in life could be her fault since she has been all her life forcing Jessie to do things, to be someone she actually was not. Thelma blames herself when she sees that she can do nothing to prevent Jessie from committing suicide:

MAMA: I’m talking about this killing yourself. It has to be me that’s the matter here. ... I didn’t tell you things or I married you off to the wrong man or I took you in and let your life get away from you or all of it put together. I don’t know what I did, but I did it, I know. This is all my fault, Jessie, but I don’t know what to do about it, now!

JESSIE: ... It doesn’t have anything to do with you! (Norman, 1983: 47).

Thelma is incapable of understanding that this firm decision of killing herself has nothing to do with Jessie’s illness, with her failed marriage or with her criminal child. It is the first time in her whole life that Jessie has made a choice and she has chosen to die. It is something that Jessie has decided exclusively for herself, not for anyone else. As we can read in Murphy (1999: 230), “what is central here is the extent to which a woman decides her own fate. ... Why ... would she choose simply to wait out her time when life seems to offer nothing but a narcotised stasis, or spiralling decline”. In this case, it is clear that it is Jessie’s choice to end her own life, instead of going on living a failed one

As the play progresses, we discover that the mother has been hiding from Jessie the truth that her illness has not been caused by a horse drop. Jessie has been blaming her husband for this illness and the truth is that she has been ill since her childhood. She had inherited the illness from her father, the person she loved most. However, Thelma didn’t love her husband because the illness made him weak and she could not stand the fact that her daughter would be the same. Thus, she disguises the truth and, until their present time, she lets Jessie believe that her epilepsy has been her husband’s fault for forcing her to ride a horse. But, before committing suicide, there is something more Jessie needs and wants to know:

JESSIE: ... Did you love Daddy?

MAMA: No

JESSIE: ... I didn't think so. (Norman, 1983: 31)

Once Jessie has heard these words, she feels even more determined to complete her suicide. She resembles her father very much; she is as “weak” as her father. At this point, we can contribute some critical opinions that consider that, by committing suicide, Jessie is trying to punish her mother for not loving her father. After all, suicide is a way of exercising violence against yourself and against the people who surround you. “Violence,” Bloom claims, “is violence even if it takes the form of cutting one's own wrists, or abusing one's own body in other ways” (2004: 16). I think that both opinions can be compatible in the sense that Jessie's suicide might be a way of “killing two birds with one stone”: she finally achieves independence and female autonomy and she punishes her mother at the same time.

As the climactic moment of the play approaches, we observe that Jessie feels better. The symptoms of her illness seem to withdraw and all her fears and preoccupations evade. She is now, more than ever, totally convinced that suicide is the best option for her and she explains that:

I sure am feeling good. I really am. The double vision's gone and my gums aren't swelling. No rashes or anything. I'm feeling as good as I ever felt in my life. I'm even feeling like worrying or getting mad and I'm not afraid it will start a fit if I do. I just go ahead. (Norman, 1983: 44)

Thelma feels horrified after hearing her daughter pronounce these words. There is nothing she can do to stop Jessie. She tries to convince her by saying that this is her house, that she can be mad at her mother and scream at her whenever she wants to. But Jessie has got everything, even her mind, ready. She has even made some lists to remind her mother about birthdays and things she has to do and she has prepared a special list for her brother with future birthday presents for their mother. Nothing has escaped her. Everything is settled. Before committing suicide, Jessie confesses that:

I found an old baby picture of me. And it was somebody else, not me. It was somebody pink and fat who never heard of sick or lonely, somebody who cried and got fed, and reached up and got held and kicked but didn't hurt anybody, and slept whenever she wanted to, just by closing her eyes. Somebody who mainly just laid there and laughed at the colors waving around over her head and chewed on a polka-dot whale and woke up knowing some new trick nearly every day and rolled over and drooled on the sheet and felt your hand pulling my quilt back up over me. That's who I started out and this is who is left. ... That's what this is about. It's somebody I lost ... 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 much matter what else happens in the world or in this house ... 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, except to keep you company, and that's ...not reason enough because I'm not ...very good company. (Norman, 1983: 50)

Jessie has been living a life that she feels was not really hers, but somebody else's. She has been trying hard to be someone she really is not. Thus, although her mother sadly affirms “I thought you were mine” (Norman, 1983: 58), resigning herself to accept her daughter's decision, the truth is that Jessie, like any other human being, is not anyone else's property. Hence, “her suicide is to be both a sign and primary evidence that she is in control” (Murphy, 1999: 233). By committing suicide with her father's old

gun she breaks the rules not only because she performs a bloody suicide (which was not expected from women) but because, by killing herself, she is in total control of her life.

3. Conclusion

Suicide is a very controversial topic, which has been linked to the words taboo, mental illness, hysteria and women without trying to go deeper into the implications the act of killing oneself implied. For a long time, whenever a woman committed suicide this was not badly seen in society, but considered a way of cleaning the family's name. Nonetheless, as we have tried to prove in this essay, this social consideration of suicide has changed especially due to religious implications, until a different way of seeing it has emerged nowadays, one which is not exempt from controversy.

In this play there are some hints of depression that would justify the vision of suicide as a mental illness. Besides, Jessie makes clear from the very beginning that she is performing a voluntary act to take control over herself and her own life. It is not a question of ending a life that has no meaning; it is a question of acquiring autonomy and independence over her self, of doing something exclusively for herself and without thinking of anyone else as she has been doing throughout her whole life. For the first time in her life, Jessie does not play the role the others want her to be: as she dies, she finally gets to be who she really is.

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