

# Marsha norman essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Marsha Norman best known for her plays *Getting Out* (1977) and *Night, Mother* (1983) is considered to be one of the most successful and creative contemporary playwrights and a major contributor to the introduction of women playwrights bringing “women’s drama within the male theater establishment. (Bigsby, CW) Through her works, “Marsha Norman is among the many women who energized contemporary theater with plays that embody and explore female expressions.” (Stages of Drama) Most would consider that a playwright as creative as Norman to have had a wonderful and colorful childhood, however Norman’s childhood was quite different.

Born in 1947 in Louisville, Kentucky Norman’s mother a Methodist fundamentalist believed that the neighborhood children were not good enough for her daughter and due to her religious beliefs did not allow her to watch TV or movies made for a lonesome childhood. Being a self described “loner” Norman found solitude with her imaginary friend and spending hours reading and playing the piano. After high school Norman attended Agnes Scott College, a liberal arts college for women and received her B. A in philosophy.

After returning to Louisville and divorcing her first husband, in 1971 Norman received her M. A. Norman’s education brought her to work at Kentucky Central State Hospital as a teacher where she worked with “children who never talked at all,” and the more distinguished and devastating “violent kids”. (Stages of Drama) In 1973 Norman moved on with her career teaching film making and creating an arts and humanities curriculum at a school for gifted children. Norman had traveled many roads that led her and gave her the inspirations to become a successful playwright.

Although at the time she had not seen herself as a playwright, her writings started out as a means of escape from the solitude and loneliness of her childhood, using some of her personal experiences as guidance in the creation of her stories and characters. Her work at Kentucky Central State Hospital was a major inspiration to her and her creations of the characters in *Getting Out*, which “ focused on the psychic life a rehabilitated parolee. ” (Stages of Drama) Norman not only used her works and studies as inspiration to her work, but also focused on women rights and the identity of women in the man’s world, the theatre.

Before the Feminist Movement during the twentieth century, which was a movement created in order to support the rights of women, women were not known in the theatre world, which was considered a male establishment. Along with the Feminist Movement came the Feminist Theater in which women fought for individual achievement and recognition. Marsha Norman is acknowledged and credited for challenging the “ theatre” to acknowledge and recognize women playwrights, but also challenged women writers, “ as women writers, we must demand the best course ourselves. We must travel and learn and listen. And then we must claim our place on the American Stage.

We have to be more aggressive in regard and help each other more than we have, and not just side with the boys because we expect them to win. ” (Norman) Through the feminist movement Norman not only challenged the men of theatre to allow equality, but encouraged women to demand it. Marsha Norman’s works also caused a stir with her work created in *night, Mother* which is considered as “ typical of liberal and cultural feminist

drama" in which it demonstrates how the " liberal feminist press ironically defused Norman's imposition on the male theatrical sphere by highlighting the woman rather than the play. (Dolan) In this asserted and set forth the role of gender and revealed the gender issues that have surfaced within the theater, asserting the voice of women within the theatre. Through Norman's contemporary writings, *night, Mother* and *Getting Out* were seen as " feminist plays that emphasize the issues of autonomy and connection, the ways in which each protagonist must assert her independence and define her boundaries with establishing a caring relationship with significant others," (Brown) which in term brought on an example of feminist theater.

By using playwrights, Norman was able to bring in a woman as the protagonist rather than a man, in her way Norman conveys dignity in her work through her choices of woman and shows how woman can have the same amount of importance as a man in theatre. *night, Mother* (1983) is recognized as the play that had brought the most recognition to Norman. *night, Mother* is a one act play in which Jessie Cates lives with her mother Thelma.

Jesse admits to her mother that at the day's end she will be killing herself, which sets off a struggle between mother and daughter leaving Thelma no choice but to face the lies that she has told Jessie in hopes to change her mind. Norman touched many personal themes throughout *night, Mother*, which touches the realism of the drama and anticipation for the outcome of the story. Communication is something that Jesse and Thelma never had throughout their relations, Thelma in hopes of discouraging her daughter from suicide communicates the lies in which she blames for Jessie feeling

suicide is the only way out. Thelma admits to Jessie that she had suspected that her father suffered from seizures just like the seizures that have been haunting Jessie all her life.

Mortality is touched throughout the conversation, but more specifically when Thelma brings up her own mortality into question when pointing out to Jessie, “ you’re supposed to help me die when the time comes,” and questions “ 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 saw it. (night, Mother) As Thelma questions the mortality of both mother and daughter in her own way she is pleading with her daughter to stay. The main theme however of the play night, Mother is the loneliness, seclusion and hopelessness that is felt by Jessie that makes her decide that suicide is her only option.

The loneliness depicted when Jessie points out to her mother “ 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. (night, Mother) Because of shame and despair, Jessie had been secluded most of her life due to her seizures, barricading herself because she felt hopeless that her life would be nothing more than it is at the time. Although the play does not show the pain and suffering Jessie went through in the earlier years, it brings forth that the loneliness and hopelessness she has been feeling is not something that has just happened, the pain and suffering she has been feeling is something that has affected her for her whole life,

she has been suffering not just on the day she decides it is time to commit suicide.

Although *Night, Mother* had won a Pulitzer Prize, it did not go without great criticism. In theme with her feminist background Norman addresses the question concerning women in a male dominated world. Although no men appear in *Night, Mother* male dominance is implied through the constant referencing of Jessie's father and when Thelma turns to her son after the suicide.

In all, Norman's plays "emphasize the issues of autonomy and of connection, the ways in which each protagonist must assert her independence and define her boundaries while establishing a caring relationship with significant others." (Brown) Norman has made great strides in bring women recognition in the theatre, but she has successfully shown through all of her works that there is a place where women can successfully be the protagonist; she has show that women do belong in the theater.