

Analysis 2 on *'night Mother* by Marsha Norman

I. Unifying Principle

A unifying principle for Norman's *'night Mother* is **"piercing the floodgate."** By piercing, I mean to poke a hole in, and by floodgate I mean a structure that prevents an outpour of something. In the play, there is a pattern of truths coming to light, which in turn causes a release. The driving force of the play is Jesse's decision to kill herself, which to her is a way to release herself from the noises of the world. However, prior to her committing suicide, we see Thelma and Jesse "release" many other secrets. Each of these secrets is like a hole being punched into the floodgate. The dam doesn't break all at once, but the more holes in the gate, the quicker the water flows, and by the end of the play the world around the gates is destroyed, as if there was a devastating flood.

II. Selection

A significant selection choice that Norman makes is to have a late point of attack. In the play, Jesse's choice to kill herself is not a spur of the moment decision. Jesse says she has been thinking about it "Off and on, ten years. On all the time, since Christmas." Yet, Norman only chooses to include the hours before Jesse's death in the plot. This shifts the focus of the play away from the questions of "why does Jesse want to die?" and "is Jesse justified in killing herself?". Instead, the late point of attack focuses the plot on what things are revealed between Jesse and Thelma. We learn things only through the pair's ability to (finally) communicate openly and honestly in the last few moments they have together. And while some of these truths help hint at answers to the questions listed above, we don't actually see those things play out on

stage. In relation to the unifying principle, the play is not about how the dam gets filled with water; it is about how it is released. In just a few hours, the piercing of the floodgates leads to the chaos/"destruction" at the end of the play.

III. Sequence

The most significant sequence choice in *'night Mother* is the decision to have the plot be not just linear, but completely continuous. Norman chooses to have the play be one, non-stop scene in which all the action takes place within a few hours. She even emphasizes the importance of this in the stage directions where she states that there should be clocks on the stage showing the passage of time. The purpose of this choice is to keep the stakes high, and to keep the play feeling very real. Towards the start of the play, Jesse announces to Thelma that she is going to kill herself at the end of the night. The continuity of the play creates a countdown effect, where every moment that passes is one moment closer to Jesse's death. In fact, Jesse and Thelma know they only have a few hours to say everything they've ever wanted to say to each other. This choice creates a world where honesty is vital and emotions are poignant. Just like you can't stop water from flowing out of a hole, the action of the play cannot be stopped. Jesse pierces a hole by telling Thelma of her plans, and the water just keeps flowing until it's gone.

IV. Tempo

A significant change in tempo in *'night Mother* comes on page 20 when Thelma reveals that Jesse had seizures as a child. Prior to this moment, the tempo is relatively constant with characters both talking and doing things around the house (laundry, cooking, etc). However, when we get to this moment, things slow down. The characters' lines get on average longer, and they are doing less activities. Thelma even throws down the manicure tray, saying that she doesn't want a manicure. In these last few moments before the climax when Jesse goes to kill

herself, Norman chooses to slow the play down and let Jesse and Thelma have their last conversation. This forces an emphasis on the dialogue and the seriousness of the revelations happening on stage. This conversation is a last, prime example of the miscommunication between Thelma and Jesse, and their inability to communicate. Throughout the play, there have been several holes pierced through the floodgates. Water has been rushing out quickly and constantly, but now there is little water left to be drained. Now towards the end, water trickles out slowly.

V. Duration

An idea in '*night Mother*' that gets a significant amount of stage time is conversations about Jesse's epilepsy. In fact, many of the truths that are revealed in the play are about Jesse's illness. Thelma reveals to Jesse that she has had seizures for her entire life, not just after her accident. Jesse also learns through Thelma that Jesse's dad had seizures. In addition, throughout the entirety of the play there are many small moments where they make references to her epilepsy. The reason this is given so much stage time is because it clearly highlights the depth of the miscommunication between Jesse and Thelma. When Jesse announces she is going to kill herself, Thelma immediately assumes it is because of Jesse's illness. And even when Jesse explains that it goes deeper than that, Thelma cannot understand. Further, the secrets revealed about Jesse's epilepsy are huge things for Thelma to hide. These instances reinforce how different Thelma and Jesse are, and it shows their inability to understand each other. Epilepsy is the cause of many of the holes pierced in the gate, and these punched holes allow Thelma and Jesse to release their bottled up emotions.

VI. Tension

A significant choice in regards to tension is the change in intensity when Jesse leaves to end her life. In general, the play has a high level of intensity. Near the beginning of the play, Jesse lets the audience know that she is going to kill herself in a few hours. After this, the tension fluctuates up and down as conversations stray from and circle back to Jesse's decision. Near the end of the play, when Jesse and Thelma are discussing the presents Jesse has planned for Thelma, there is relatively low tension. The characters are sitting down, having a normal discussion. Further, there has been a significant amount of time since Jesse's initial announcement. This allows the characters and the audience to gain a sense of comfortability with the idea of Jesse's choice. It's become the normal world of this play. However, when Jesse stands up and says she is leaving, the tension spikes up. It is no longer that 'Jesse is going to kill herself eventually'. It becomes 'Jesse is killing herself right now'. This is Jesse's final release. She has gotten out everything she needed to say, and now she just needs to pierce one more hole to release herself from the world. And after this happens, the world of the play is completely changed.

VII. Patterns

One recurring pattern in the play is the idea of lists. In preparation for her death, Jesse has prepared several lists to get things organized before she dies. We see grocery lists; we see lists of instructions, lists of presents, etc. These lists first serve to show Jesse as a practical and methodical person, which helps the audience see her decision to kill herself as one she has thought out thoroughly. These lists also aim to elevate tension. The lists represent the things Jesse has to get done before she dies. Each thing she checks off is one thing less to do before she kills herself. We are inching closer and closer to the climax. There is also the non-physical "list"

of things that Jesse and Thelma need to reveal to each other, the holes that need to be pierced. In order for Jesse to feel ready to kill herself, every item must also be checked off that list.

VIII. Ambiguity/Complexity

In 'night Mother, Norman does not answer the question she poses: "Will Thelma be okay after Jesse dies"? There is a significant amount of the script that deals with Jesse explaining to Thelma why she wants to end her life, and Thelma trying to talk her out of it. For example, on page 22 Thelma says, "If you've got the guts to kill yourself, Jessie, you've got the guts to stay alive." We also see through dialogue and Jesse's lists that Thelma relies on Jesse for a lot of day-to-day things. Through both of these choices, it is clear that both characters are concerned about how Thelma will go on after Jesse kills herself. Thelma's concern may be more emotionally motivated, while Jesse's concern is more practical, but both are clearly worried. However, Norman chooses to end the play right after Jesse shoots herself. We don't get to see if Thelma moves on, falls into a depression, is unable to complete necessary tasks, etc. The holes that are being pierced in the floodgate lead to a flood--a negative change in the world of the play. However, we do not get to see if the world recovers from this flood.

IX. Conclude Unifying Principle

The idea of **piercing the floodgates** is the best unifying principle for *'night Mother* by Marsha Norman. At its core the play is about resolving miscommunication and getting old secrets off one's chest before it is too late. Figuratively, each secret that is revealed, each item checked off the list is like a hole being punched in a barrier. Once a hole is punched, the barrier becomes ineffective; you cannot stop the secrets or the honesty from flowing out. And the more holes you make in the wall, the less effective the wall becomes. Once everything has been released, like how Thelma and Jesse get all their secrets out, the world is different. In terms of

the unifying principle, there has been a flood, and floods destroy things. In the literal sense of the play, Jesse is gone and Thelma is left alone and upset.