

SUICIDE IN CLASSIC AND MODERN TRAGEDIES: COMPARING THE PLAYS, *HAMLET* AND '*NIGHT, MOTHER*

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Abstract

Throughout history the theme of suicide has been handled by different authors yet they have developed different attitudes towards the theme. Naturally; the theme of suicide is a common subject both in classic and modern tragedies. However; it functions distinctively. In classic tragedies; it is handled according to religious and social norms and it is perceived as a stigma in the society. Namely; it has bad connotations in classic tragedies. On the other hand, it is not a social or religious taboo any more in modern ones with the changing perspectives and it can be examined even in a positive way such as 'achieving autonomy by suicide'.

This paper is about the theme of suicide in Marsha Norman's '*Night, Mother* which won the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1983 and in *Hamlet*, a famous tragedy of Shakespeare. Although written in different times, they can be analyzed in terms of a common problem of humanity: suicide. The aim of this essay is to examine the role of suicide in these plays in order to display changing approaches.

Key Words: Suicide, Alienation, Inability to communicate, Hamlet, 'Night Mother

KLASİK VE MODERN TRAJEDİLERDE İNTİHAR: *HAMLET* VE '*NIGHT, MOTHER* OYUNLARININ KARŞILAŞTIRILMASI

Özet

Tarih boyunca intihar teması farklı yazarlar tarafından işlenmiş ancak zaman içinde yazarlar intihar temasına farklı bakış açıları geliştirmişlerdir. Doğal olarak; intihar teması hem klasik hem de modern trajedilerde ortak bir konudur. Ancak bu konunun işlevi farklıdır. Klasik trajedilerde, dinsel ve sosyal normlara göre ele alınır ve toplumda bir damga olarak algılanır. Yani tema, klasik trajedilerde olumsuz çağrışımlara sahiptir. Diğer yandan, değişen bakış açılarıyla modern trajedilerde artık sosyal ya da dinsel bir tabu değildir ve hatta tema 'intihar ile kendini gerçekleştirme' gibi olumlu bir tarzda bile incelenebilir.

Bu makale; Marsha Norman'ın 1983 yılında Pulitzer drama ödülünü kazanan *Night, Mother* adlı eserinde ve Shakespeare'in ünlü trajedilerinden biri olan *Hamlet*' de intihar temasını ele alacaktır. Aynı zamanlarda yazılmalarına rağmen, intihar teması bağlamında birlikte incelenebilirler. Makalemin amacı, intihar temasına yönelik değişen bakış açılarını sergilemek için bu oyunlarda intihar temasının rolünü incelemektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İntihar, Yabancılaşma, İletişim yetersizliği, Hamlet, 'Night Mother

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Introduction

We believe some background information about 'suicide' might provide us with a good understanding of the theme of suicide in theatre, revealing various perspectives from different times. Through these distinctive perspectives, we can analyze the issue of suicide in certain plays, taking into consideration the time they were written. Hence, to understand the message of suicide appropriately, the history of suicide should be scrutinized well.

Surprisingly the thoughts of ancient people on suicide were not so strict. In fact, it was not regarded as a cultural taboo. Ancient Egyptians thought that it was just a way to die if you had an unendurable life. In ancient Greece, generally it was not regarded a wrong action if the excuses were justifiable enough. The first person to debate the morality of suicide was the Greek philosopher, Socrates (469-399). He believed that human beings were property of God and simply they had no right to commit suicide. Ironically, he was accused of impiety and forced to take his own life by drinking hemlock.

Eight suicides are mentioned in the Old Testament. "But, none of the passages in the Bible, describing these suicides, makes any adverse comments on the morality of these acts. There are no explicit biblical condemnations against suicide - only prohibitions of killing which really apply to the unlawful slaughter of others" (<http://soars.org.uk>). Early Christians choose suicide instead of suffering an oppression of a religious life they did not adopt. The number of suicides is seen to increase among the Jewish faction, and the rulers forbid marriages for those who commit suicide. The first Christian who publicly announced suicide as a sin was St. Augustine in the 4th century. Augustine's influence on church doctrine resulted in a series of conciliar developments. Although it was used to prevent committing suicide, this condemnation failed to decrease the number of suicides.

There have been thousands of research studies and books on suicide, and many conferences have been held, especially in the United States and Western Europe since the 1930s. In England, the Voluntary Euthanasia Society, the first right-to-die organization in the world, was formed in 1935. Since the mid-1970s, there is the World

Federation of Right-to-Die Societies which is now an umbrella group for 48 national organizations in 27 countries.

After numerous studies it was realised that suicide is an object of multidisciplinary scientific studies involving sociology, anthropology, psychology, and psychiatry, each providing important insights into suicide and education is the key point for raising awareness for it.

Having been written in quite different times *Hamlet* (1601) and *Night, Mother* (1983) might seem completely different at first sight but there are several similarities when they are compared in detail notably in terms of suicide.

Suicide in *Hamlet* and ‘*Night, Mother*’

Hamlet, the original name of which is *The Tragical History of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* is thought to have been written by [William Shakespeare](#) sometime between 1599 and 1601. It tells about Hamlet’s vengeance after his uncle Claudius’ ascending the throne killing Hamlet’s father and marrying his mother. Setting in Denmark, the play deals such issues as grief, madness, hatred, revenge, incest, betrayal and suicide.

American playwright Marsha Norman’s *Night, Mother* tells the final night of Jessie, a divorcee suffering from epilepsy and existential predicaments, and her mother Thelma with whom she lives together. The play begins with Jessie’s talking about her explanation that the next morning she will die killing herself that night. Suffering from epileptic fits and loneliness, Jessie tells all about this in an indifferent way. The rest of the play focuses on the dialogue between the mother and the daughter revealing the details that night.

Hamlet and *Night, Mother* depict the tragedy of human being skilfully, emphasizing the psychological conditions of a lonely individual. Both Hamlet and Jessie are fulfilled with distress, loneliness, unhappiness and despair for different reasons. Hamlet contemplates on suicide as he has a terrible depression after his father’s death. We see his first contemplation of self-destruction in his soliloquy after he has heard about his father’s death and his mother and uncle’s sudden and unexpected marriage:

Oh, that this too too solid flesh, would melt
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew:
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter. O God, God!
How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable
Seems to me all the uses of this world!... (35)

It is simply understood that Hamlet feels desperate and life is worthless, so he thinks of suicide as an alternative and wishes that his “flesh would melt”.

In *Hamlet*, Ophelia is another character who is filled with despair and melancholy and who sees the suicide as a solution and salvation for a sorrowful life. The term ‘madness’ is also effective on her suicide and it is a bit different from those of Hamlet and Jessie. In addition to her feelings of hopelessness, Hamlet’s abusive and cruel behaviours, and finally her father’s death drive her mad. Ophelia’s words clarify the situation:

And will he not come again,
And will he not come again?
No, no, he is dead,
Go to thy dead bed...
He is gone, he is gone,
And we cast away moan,
Gramercy on his soul. (124)

In *Night, Mother* Jessie is also under distress of existential problems. She cannot communicate even with her mother. The following statement of Jessie shows how desperate she is: “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'm sad. I feel used” (22).

Another similarity of these plays is the fragility of family relations which leads to contemplation on suicide. There is also a deformed mother-son (Hamlet-Gertrude) relation in the play *Hamlet* as well since Hamlet is betrayed by his own mother. Hamlet’s relationship with his mother is degenerated since Gertrude does not seem to be an ideal mother. Hamlet talks about his mother and uncle and expresses his disgust on their marriage. In fact, their untimely marriage causes him to suspect that his father’s death is not a natural death, but a murder:

... Frailty, thy name is woman.
 A little month, or ere those shoes were old,
 With which she followed my poor father's body
 Like Niobe, all tears. Why she, even she,
 (O Heaven! A beast that wants discourse of reason
 Would have mourn'd longer) married with mine uncle,
 My father's brother: but no more like my father,
 Than I to Hercules: Within a month!
 Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
 Had left the flushing in her galled eyes,
 She married. O, most wicked speed, to post
 With such dexterity to incestuous sheets:
 It is not, nor it cannot come to good.
 But break my heart, for I must hold my tongue... (36)

'*Night, Mother* also depicts a failed mother-daughter relationship. Jessie and her mother have not got a proper relationship in most ways. The lack of communication ruins relations as it keeps them far away from each other. The playwright "perfectly captures the intimate details of two individual, ordinary women, this playwright locates the emptiness that fills too many ordinary homes on too many faceless streets in the vast country we live in now" (Rich 1983). After Jessie's announcement about her planned suicide, they begin to communicate and ask questions they have never asked before. Thelma asks questions such as "Why do you read the newspaper? Why don't you wear that sweater I made for you? Do you remember how I used to look or am I just any old woman now? When you have a fit do you see stars or what? How did you fall off the horse, really? Why did Cecil leave you?..." (37-38) and Jessie tries to assure her doubts asking "Did you love Daddy? (31). We learn that Thelma hides the truths of their lives and she reveals them only in the final hours. Only then does Thelma begin to understand her daughter and blames herself: "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. 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!" (47).

Both Hamlet and Jessie are not capable of coping with their inner conflicts, which is an important factor in planning their self-destruction as Jessie reveals:

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 much 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, except to keep you company, and that's ... not reason enough because I'm not ... very good company... (50)

Hamlet's following famous soliloquy also displays how desperate and indecisive he is. He likens death to sleeping and wants to die as if he sleeps for a dream in which all his pains and grieves are forgotten:

To be, or not to be, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous Fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them: to die to to sleep;
No more; and by a sleep, to say we end
The heart-ache, and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to? 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd... (81)

Hamlet's inner conflicts and the melancholy he felt are clearly shown throughout the play as Burton R. Pollin puts: "It seems to me that from the beginning to the end, his desperate desire to escape from an intolerable burden of life has motivated Hamlet. While his nobility of mind and spirit maintains him as the hero, the depth of his tortured feelings and the scope of his frustrated longings mark him as the epitome of mankind-
-too often a willing victim for its own, self-inflicted destruction" (1965: 255).

Beside these similarities, there are some differences in terms of the function of suicide in both plays. In fact, what prevents Hamlet from his own destruction gives the answer to the question what the main differences of these plays are. The most important difference is that committing suicide is against Hamlet's religion as he is a Christian while Jessie simply does not care about the religion when she decides to take her own life. She says that "Jesus was a suicide, if you ask me" (17). And this proves her attitude toward religion. Namely, this distinction highlights the decreasing importance of religious and social norms in modern societies. People used to arrange

their own actions according to certain religious and social rules in the past but now, they ignore all these norms. We can observe this change in the plays. Hamlet takes religion into consideration before committing suicide. He wishes that suicide were not a sin and tries to rationalize the idea of killing himself giving voice to his pains:

...Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter. O God! O God! (35)

Hamlet believes that if he commits suicide, he will be damned as it is a sin. On the other hand; Jessie plans her own destruction ignoring religious beliefs.

Hamlet's perception of suicide is different from that of Jessie. Hamlet is afraid of dying as he is uncertain of what will happen to him after his death. The other life is an unknown phenomenon and he thinks that those who are against God by taking their lives will go to hell and will be punished severely. Obviously Hamlet is living a terrible dilemma between choosing to live or die:

...who would these fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscovered country, from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have,
Than fly to others that we know not of.
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pith and moment,
With this regard their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action... (81-82).

Vincent F. Petronella in the article "Hamlet's 'To Be or Not to Be' Soliloquy: Once More Unto the Breach" focuses on three basic assumptions concerning the above mentioned soliloquy: "One of these explains the speech as a consideration of either acting or not acting against King Cladius; the second reads the speech as a contemplation of suicide; and the third is some kind of compromise between – or fusion of – the first two, explaining for example, that Hamlet thinks first about his revenge against Claudius, then examines the idea of suicide" (72).

On the other hand Jessie does not seem to show similar concerns which Hamlet has. In fact, the only thing she cares about is to get rid of her pains. She is certain that

she will kill herself so coldly that her mother will be astonished. Namely, she is not interested in what would be to her after she takes her own life. She explains her plan so coldly: “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 found the bullets..... I’m going to kill myself, Mama” (9, 10, 11, 13).

Having no aim in life can be seen the most crucial reason of suicide and maybe, having a goal is the very thing that may prevent somebody from doing it. Hamlet has a goal of taking revenge on his father’s death and this helps him get rid off the idea although he feels so lonely, betrayed and unhappy. On the contrary, Jessie has no aim in life and she is just a desperate woman because of her loneliness, so she does not give up.

Finally, whether they see committing suicide as a solution or not is another difference between Jessie and Hamlet. Hamlet considers all advantages and disadvantages of self-murder while Jessie does not think in that way as she is very decisive. Hamlet thinks that if he took his own life, it would not be a noble act, would not make sense as the criminal could get away with their cruelties, and he could not carry out the request of his father’s ghost. In his final soliloquy, he gives up the idea of suicide giving up his melancholy and eventually decides to take his father’s revenge:

...Rightly to be great,
Is not to stir without great argument,
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
When honour’s at the stake. How stand I then
That have a father kill’d, a mother stain’d,
Excitement of my reason, and my blood,
And let all sleep, while to my shame I see
The imminent death of twenty thousand men,
That for a fantasy and trick of fame
Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot
Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,
Which is not tomb enough and continent
To hide a slain? O from this time forth,
My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth. (117)

In Jessie’s case, it is not same. She does not think of good or bad sides of her plan as she has concentrated on her own life. She never thinks of effects of her suicide on people around her, especially on her mother either. Committing suicide is the best option for her useless life: “...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” (26).

Hamlet does not see the idea of suicide as a solution While Jessie sees it an absolute solution.

Conclusion

The theme of suicide is a universal one continuing its vitality in the modern world. Attitudes towards it have changed and different perspectives have appeared in ages. The role of suicide in plays and the message it conveys can be analyzed in order to see differences and similarities through changing perspectives. In this sense, Marsha Norman’s ‘*Night, Mother* and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* have several similarities despite they were written in different periods.

Both Norman and Shakespeare provide unique descriptions of the term suicide, associating the problem with the fragility of family relations, and psychological conditions of an individual, which still dominate the modern world. These plays depict the psychological situation of a lonely, unhappy, helpless and abandoned human being leading to the idea of suicide. On the other hand, they have differences in terms of the role and function of suicide. The characters’ perceptions and reactions to the idea of suicide differ and this difference changes the messages of these notable plays.

Having read the plays one is certain that Jessie is determined to commit suicide while in case of Hamlet only implications are at work. Whether Hamlet is contemplating self-murder or not remains to be solved. “Is he cowardly? Has he given up on life? Is he deliberating over the truth or falsehood of what the Ghost has told him? Is he making sure he has all his ducks in a row, all his i’s dotted and t’s crossed? We may never know...” (www.genius.com).

Fate, the role of women and achieving autonomy are possible research subjects that can be analyzed further for both plays.

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