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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Is Jessie right to end her life?

Iddo Landau

Department of Philosophy, University of Haifa, Haifa, Israel

Correspondence
Iddo Landau, Department of Philosophy, University of Haifa, 199 Aba Khoushy Avenue, Haifa 3498838, Israel.
Email: ilandau@research.haifa.ac.il

Abstract

Presupposing that our consideration of ethical issues can be enriched by examining literary works, this paper focuses on Marsha Norman's play *'night, Mother*. The play describes the last hour and a half in the life of Jessie, a young woman who decides to die by suicide. Before ending her life, Jessie explains to her mother her reasons for her suicide. In the context of the play, these are presented as quite weighty and as, perhaps, justifying her decision. Scholarly research on the play has also treated Jessie's suicide favorably. In this paper I argue that Jessie, and people in similar conditions, are wrong to die by suicide. Among other points, I criticize Jessie's arguments from the impossibility to improve life; the assured termination of suffering; the badness of the world; and the right for suicide. I also criticize arguments in the scholarly literature that view Jessie's suicide favorably, such as the arguments from independence, heroism, authenticity, and emotional closeness.

KEYWORDS
ethics, meaning in life, suicide

1 | INTRODUCTION

This paper presupposes that our understanding and consideration of culture and reality, as well as, more specifically, of ethical issues, can be enriched by considering literary works. Not all accept this supposition. Some, such as Stolnitz (1992, pp. 292–200), Lamarque and Stein (1997), and Rosenberg (2012, p. 307), sometimes referred to as *anti-cognitivists*, doubt that literature has much to teach us about the world or morality, holding that literature's value is purely esthetic. But

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many others, including Goodman (1968, pp. 255–265), Nussbaum (1990), Carroll (1998, p. 136), Kieran (2005, pp. 220–223), Gaut (2006), Pillow (2009, p. 350), and Gibson (2009, p. 467) argue that literature is often highly relevant to our understanding of human reality, including its moral sphere. Many of the latter, often referred to as *cognitivists* or *humanists*, specifically mention the relevance of literature to our moral thinking. Thus Pillow (2009, p. 350), for example, mentions literary works as "challenge to the status quo," Kieran (2005, p. 220) discusses the "moral insight" they allow, and Cohen (2009, p. 491) points out that we often understand empathetically the characters we read about in literary works.

Considering the ethical issues raised in literary texts as philosophers and ethicists, we may choose to interpret what could be read either as personal justifications or as reasoned arguments as the latter, sometimes even partly reconstructing and sharpening the arguments. And as philosophers and ethicists, we aim not only at moral insight, empathy, and the like; we also want to critically evaluate the moral notions we encounter in literature. As Kivy (1997, p. 125) writes, "one of the things fiction sometimes does is to propose to the reader live hypotheses … which the reader … attempts to confirm or disconfirm." Likewise, Cohen (2009, p. 487) emphasizes that "if one might learn, say, from Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* that unrestrained capitalism is morally vicious, then one might learn that free-market capitalism is essential … by reading Ayn Rand's *Fountainhead*." Further, "if one can acquire sympathy for the plight of women from Henrik Ibsen … then one can learn of women's deep need for sexual subjugation from Pauline Réage's *The Story of O*." Both as philosophers and as plain readers, then, we should not just discern the ethical views found in a literary text but also critically consider whether we find them to be correct. After noting the questions, examples, arguments, attitudes, themes, and views that literature presents, we should examine them philosophically as we would any other ethical issue, in some cases presenting qualifications and disagreement.

This is how I aim to consider in this paper Marsha Norman's Pulitzer Prize winning play *'night, Mother* (Norman, 1983).[1] The play narrates the last hour and a half in the life of Jessie Cates, a young woman who has decided to die by suicide. Jessie uses this time to explain to her pleading mother, Thelma, why she believes that her suicide is justified and to give her mother detailed instructions for what to do after Jessie dies. The two also come to talk more openly than they ever have and become emotionally closer. Then, Jessie carries out her decision. Thelma's many arguments and efforts to prevent the suicide fail; she watches helplessly as her daughter calmly proceeds to organize things for her death and then ends her life.

During the play, we, the audience—like Thelma—hope that something will come up that will lead Jessie to choose life. We wonder what we, in Thelma's place, could have said or done in order to dissuade Jessie, or another loved person whom we may know personally, from carrying out such a decision. Perhaps some people in the audience who are in a difficult position in their own lives are also wondering whether, if what Jessie says sounds familiar and correct, they should follow her example. Norman certainly does not make things easy for them. Jessie does not seem at all emotionally imbalanced, confused, or irrational. On the contrary, she sounds extremely coherent, presenting for her decision many arguments that, for some, may sound sensible and convincing. Thelma, who is desperately trying to persuade Jessie not to shoot herself, is not represented as the wiser of the two but, on the contrary, as emotional and somewhat confused. Norman also leaves Jessie's arguments for her suicide unanswered; in many of the exchanges it is Jessie who has the last word. We can find in the play a very strong case for ending one's life when things are going as badly as they have for Jessie, along with an important unanswered question put to the audience: Is Jessie right to end her life?

Surprisingly (for me), scholarly discussions of *'night, Mother* that evaluate the propriety of Jessie's suicide treat it favorably.[2] McDonnell (1987, p. 103), for example, argues that Jessie "manage[s] to find herself" and "finds her own meaning" in ending her life. Ginter-Brown (2001, pp. 190, 194)

writes, "on this particular night, she [Jessie] maintains perfect control" and "she triumphs because she, alone, decides what constitutes her proper nourishment." Smith (1991, p. 287) talks of Jessie's suicide as a "bold act of emancipation." Demastes (1993, p. 116) says that Jessie "finally decided that after a lifetime of being told what to do (and doing it badly), the one action she can do without outside influence/interference is to commit suicide." Both Morrow (1988, p. 29) and Browder (1989, p. 110) see the suicide as an act that allows Jessie to have power and control over her life. According to Kundert-Gibbs (1995, p. 61), both Jessie and her mother "achieve a deeper humanity" through Jessie's suicide. And Whited (1997, p. 65) sees Jessie's suicide as "a heroic act, perhaps the only truly independent act of her life." I failed to find in the scholarly literature on the play even one criticism of Jessie's decision.[3]

In what follows, I defend the diametrically opposite view to those just mentioned. I argue that Jessie was wrong to end her life. I first describe Jessie's general condition (Section 2). Then I examine the justifications Jessie gives for her suicide and explain why I think they are problematic (Section 3). In Section 4, I discuss some positive evaluations of Jessie's decision that appear in the research literature on the play and explain why I disagree with them as well. Section 5 concludes the discussion.

2 | JESSIE'S CONDITION

Jessie's life has not been good for many years and in many important respects. She is unemployed, having failed in two jobs (Norman, 1983, p. 35). She suffered from epilepsy for many years (1983, p. 66). She lives in a small, out of the way place with her mother, Thelma, with whom she has not been having an open, direct relationship for years. She also does not enjoy very much her relationship with her brother, Dawson and especially his wife, Loretta (1983, p. 20). Her former husband, Cecil, was unfaithful to her (1983, p. 57), and at a certain point left the marriage. Her son, Rickie, is a criminal who steals even from his own family (1983, p. 9).

Another problem in Jessie's life is her self-condemnation, even self-loathing. She holds herself to be responsible for Rickie's crime life, takes herself to be completely unemployable although she failed in only two jobs, and believes that she cannot succeed in anything except in ending her life (1983, p. 75). She thinks that she was not good enough for Cecil, and takes the entire fault for the failure of her marriage to be her own, although we hear of Cecil's infidelity (1983, pp. 57; 60–61). She explains that Cecil did not take her when he left because people who leave a house do not take with them the garbage, thus referring to herself as detestable (1983, p. 61). I have met in my life many people whose lot in terms of family, health and profession was much worse than Jessie's and who had to cope with far more problems and limitations than she does, but who treated themselves with much more generosity, compassion, and love than Jessie does. This, indeed, is another important problem in her life.

Some aspects of Jessie's life, however, are good. Notwithstanding the many problems in her and Thelma's relationship, it is clear that they love and care for each other. Likewise, notwithstanding the difficulties between Jessie and Dawson, they, too, seem to love and care for each other. Furthermore, as Jessie herself mentions (1983, pp. 66–67), her situation has improved. We also note the improvement by comparing how she functioned in the past (according to her and Thelma's descriptions) with the way she now plans efficiently and meticulously her suicide and its aftermath, takes care of her mother and gives her precise advice for the future, and presents arguments. Jessie emerges now as a decisive, well-organized, clever, determined and focused person. Moreover, although she suffered from epilepsy for many years, she has now finally identified the right medication and the dosage helpful for her (1983, p. 66). The improvement in Jessie's situation suggests that it can be altered further and that there is a chance that it would continue to improve.

3 | JESSIE'S JUSTIFICATIONS FOR SUICIDE

3.1 | Things cannot improve

Jessie declares that the bad things in her life will continue just as they have or perhaps even get worse (Norman, 1983, pp. 28, 35–36). She believes that she cannot improve her life in any relevant way. However, as suggested at the end of the previous section, this seems to be incorrect. Furthermore, her belief is unwarranted; she has no sufficient evidence for it since, as far as we know from what she and Thelma say in the play, she has not seriously explored the many different ways open to her of improving things. She has not, for example, checked out the option of moving from her isolated house to another, more populated place, perhaps a large town or a city. As Whited (1997, pp. 70–73) points out, living in a relatively secluded house and communicating only with Thelma means that Jessie does not have the opportunity to interact with a supportive community. I should add that seclusion can easily lead to desolation such as that Jessie seems to suffer from. Of course, moving to another place may require Jessie to leave Thelma, whom Jessie now helps and for whom she seems to feel responsible. But that is also true of Jessie's suicide, which would harm Thelma much more. Furthermore, Jessie could move to a more populated place with Thelma.

Jessie could also experiment with some spiritual or religious options before choosing suicide. Many gain much from such engagements. She could also examine whether she might benefit from helping other people who are in even worse situations than she is; many people find that they gain much from interacting with others and from witnessing the positive impact they have on others' lives. Many are also significantly helped by various types of counseling, and some even by plain physical activity. It is uncertain, of course, that the alternatives listed above, or others, would indeed improve Jessie's life. They may turn out not to be helpful. But they have helped and improved many other people's lives, and Jessie could know whether they are helpful for her too only after she seriously tries them out.

Thus, I disagree with Hart (1987, p. 75) that "as the play opens, Jessie has exhausted all the images that might have sustained her." I suggest that Jessie has not exhausted all, or even many, of the options or images that might have sustained her; she may not even have considered *most* of them and certainly has not tested them. Take, for example, Jessie's certainty that she will never be able to hold any job (Norman, 1983, p. 26). Her firm conviction is based only on her failure to hold two jobs years earlier—one as a salesperson in a gift shop and the other in telemarketing. But she has not tried any job since then and certainly has not tried other types of jobs. Both of the jobs she did try were in sales or marketing, which would seem to be better suited to people who are more confident, easygoing, and comfortable with people than Jessie is. But many jobs do not require the proficiencies and attitudes of salespersons and Jessie could succeed in many of them. As mentioned above, from the way in which, throughout the play, she presents arguments, takes care of Thelma, instructs Thelma how to behave after Jessie's death, and carefully plans her own suicide, Jessie emerges as a clever, determined, organized, and focused person; perhaps her condition improved, and she could now hold many jobs. We also learn, for example, that Jessie was good at keeping her father's books (1983, pp. 25–26). At least now, Jessie is not a person who is incapable of succeeding in many types of work.

Decisions about important issues call for more careful research than do decisions about unimportant issues. For example, buying a house requires more research and comparing (and, if possible, testing) of alternatives than does buying a cell phone, and buying a cell phone more than buying gum. Likewise, irreversible actions require more research than reversible actions. For example, buying a carpet with which we will have to live for the rest of our lives calls for more research and comparison among alternatives than does buying a carpet that we can return to the store whenever we like. The

decision about suicide relates to an extremely important (if not the most important) issue and involves an irreversible action. This means that before making a decision about suicide research should be extremely thorough, perhaps more so than for any other decision one could ever make. It is unfortunate, then, that Jessie declares, without sufficient research and evidence, that the bad things in her life will always continue just as they have.

Jessie's belief that the bad things in her life will continue just as they have is also unwarranted because experience shows that many people can, and do, improve their lives. Moreover, as noted above, Jessie herself admits that her condition has clearly already been improving and things have been changing for the better for her (1983, pp. 66–67), and this suggests that there is a chance that they will continue to improve even further. Jessie might respond here that the improvement in her condition is only due to her approaching suicide: "it's the next part [i.e., death] that made the last part so good" (1983, pp. 75). However, she has no evidence for this claim, too. To know whether the improvement in her condition was caused by her decision to end her life, Jessie would need to postpone her decision for a while; try to make some other, positive changes in her life; and then see whether the improvement disappears or, to the contrary, persists (or even progresses).

There is, indeed, one way in which Jessie wishes to change that will probably not occur: she mentions that she would like to be in the condition that she imagines she was in as a baby (1983, p. 76). I agree that she will not be able to achieve this condition, which she describes in idealized terms. However, I think that she grossly romanticizes what babies are like and what she probably was like; babies, too, endure many sharp frustrations and pains. More importantly, even if being similar to the baby that Jessie describes is a good condition and one that Jessie cannot attain, there are also many other ways of having a good life.

Note that Jessie is excessively pessimistic about the possibility of improving not only her own life but also that of her son, Rickie. She is absolutely certain that Rickie will continue his life of crime and, moreover, that he will move from theft to murder (1983, pp. 25, 60). However, in fact, not all juvenile delinquents continue to commit crimes as adults, and many thieves do not in fact deteriorate into murderers. Much depends on the delinquents' environment, the kind of support they do or do not receive, and other circumstances. Jessie prematurely and dogmatically gives up on Rickie, just as she does on herself.

3.2 | Jessie has considered suicide for a long time

Jessie emphasizes that she has been thinking about her suicide for a long time—around ten years (Norman, 1983, p. 29). She is not acting on a whim or a sudden impulse. She holds that if for ten years ending her life has continued to seem to her to be the right thing to do, there are good reasons to think that she might be right.

However, the length of the time over which one has been entertaining a thought is no proof of its correctness. Many people have held wrong views about colonialism or slavery, for example, although they had thought about these views for a long time. Moreover, thinking about something for a long time is unhelpful if—as I suggest has been the case with Jessie—that thinking does not involve researching, comparing, and experimenting with alternatives to the option that one has been considering. In all those ten years in which Jessie has been thinking about suicide, she has just continued to do what she has always done, without considering what could be changed and trying it out. She has considered suicide in the sense of asking herself repeatedly whether she is still suffering, whether she can continue to stand it, and whether she still wants to die. She has also considered suicide in the sense of planning it, that is, thinking about *how* rather than *whether* to do it. But that too, of course, differs

from the type of consideration needed for deciding about her suicide in a helpful and rational way. She has not seriously tried to do with her very life what she would have done with the kitchen faucet if it were leaking: that is, tried to fix it.

3.3 | Suicide is certain to end Jessie's suffering

Jessie points out that suicide has an important advantage over trying to improve life: suicide is certain to put an end to suffering, while efforts to improve life may or may not succeed (Norman, 1983, p. 75). One might add here that if the efforts to improve life would not succeed, one will experience more pain which suicide would have prevented.[4] This, indeed, is an advantage that suicide has over trying to improve life. However, trying to improve life has other advantages that, I believe, override this advantage of suicide.

Many do not only want the pain in their life to stop. They also want other things. These may include befriending and being befriended, learning, developing, keeping a job, sensing some enjoyment, being respected by others and being able to respect themselves for having succeeded in attaining some goals and achievements. But this suggests that suicide has a serious disadvantage over trying to improve things: suicide does not allow these other ends to be achieved. Jessie is convinced that she could never attain these other ends, but as we saw in the previous sections, her conviction—although strongly held—is unwarranted. If she makes some changes in her life she may well attain many of these other ends, as well as have the pain in her life diminished or even ended. Thus, suicide does indeed end suffering for certain, but it does not allow one the possibility to gain the other things in life one wants. This is a very significant disadvantage in suicide, a disadvantage that would seem to override the advantage of the certainty of ending suffering.

It might be objected here that this reply works only for people who indeed want not only the pain to stop but also other things such as befriending and being befriended, learning, developing, sensing some enjoyment, and succeeding in attaining some goals and achievements; perhaps Jessie does not want any of those other things and their like. But I think that this is improbable. Almost all people want more things in life than just not to experience pain. Perhaps Jessie is convinced that she could never attain those other things, and thus, despaired, she has reached a condition in which she does not actively want them anymore. But as I have argued above, her view that she cannot attain what she wants seems unwarranted.

3.4 | The world is bad

Jessie does not only think that her own life is bad; she also thinks that the world is bad. As an example, she mentions events in China (Norman, 1983, p. 30). Even if she can improve her life, surely she cannot do much to change the whole world.

Indeed, many things happening in the world are bad. However, much in it is also good. Moreover, if we look at the trends of the last several decades, many aspects of the world at large have in fact improved and may well continue to do so. They may, of course, also worsen, and some have indeed worsened, such as those having to do with the environment, pollution, climate, and the extinction of species. But in many other important aspects the world has been improving considerably, and this may give us some hope. For example, as Max Roser and Esteban Ortiz-Ospina show, human rights have on average improved, enormous progress has been made in women's equality and rights (including in developing countries),[5] and literacy has increased dramatically (Ortiz-Ospina & Roser, 2018;

Roser, n.d.; Roser & Ortiz-Ospina, 2018). Further, as argued by Pinker (2011), violence has significantly decreased: we are now in the least violent era in all of human history. These are only a few of the many important aspects in which the world has been improving. I should stress that I do not mean to suggest that things in the world are only good; surely we still have a very long way to go. Further, as mentioned above, in some spheres the direction now is not good, and the future might change. Nevertheless, the picture is complex; in many important spheres, things are not deteriorating but, rather, improving dramatically. Even if what is bad in the world still overbalances what is good in it (which I am not at all sure is the case), the progress in many important spheres of life does give us some hope. Jessie does not seem to note at all what is good in the world, nor the important ways in which the world has been improving.

Further, as Landau (2017, pp. 174–176) points out, when considering the badness of the world one should remember the negative bias in news reporting. The news reports much more on wrongdoing, evil, suffering, and natural catastrophes than it does on goodness and contentment. For example, increases in unemployment receive larger headlines and longer columns than do decreases in unemployment. The news does not report on the thousand people who have not embezzled, but on the one who has. It focuses on crime and ignores orderly and decent conduct. Harmony, warmth, responsibility, and truth telling are not considered news and do not sell. Conflict, cruelty, negligence, and lies are considered news and do sell (and the more shocking they are, the better). When considering the state of the world, then, we should remember that our primary source of knowledge is slanted; the news media largely screen out a principal aspect of reality—that having to do with decency, goodness, and contentment. And there is much of that aspect of reality, too.

Moreover, the many bad events that do happen in the world need not in themselves be seen as making Jessie's life bad. They are very saddening, of course, but there is a high degree of independence of many of the world's parts from each other, so that the badness of some parts of it need not make other parts of it bad as well, and certainly does not make each and every life in the world bad (just as the ugly pictures in the world do not render beautiful pictures, or all pictures, in the world ugly). Furthermore, under the plausible assumption that we should, when we can, resist badness rather than endorse it or succumb to it, it seems that the correct reaction to the badness of some parts of the world is to fight it or just live well. Succumbing to this badness instead of just living well or fighting against it makes it more effective and harmful, and thus also adds to the badness in the world and enhances it. Often, the resistance to badness itself can add meaning to life. One need not drop everything and dedicate oneself only to improving the world; contributing to the goodness of the world even by donating according to one's ability to a good cause or engaging in some social or political activism often already makes a difference. Even if one does not engage in any of these ways of improving the world but just lives honestly, happily, and meaningfully, one is already confirming goodness in the world since one is thereby making the world better and not succumbing to the badness. In ending one's life because of bad events in the world, however, one is making the badness of the world even worse.

3.5 | Three metaphors

Some other justifications for suicide that Jessie presents rely on metaphors. In one, reminiscent of Epictetus's (1998, bk. 1 ch. 25) smoky room metaphor that suggests that when there is too much smoke in a room one should just leave it, Jessie compares her life to an unpleasant bus ride. “It's hot and bumpy and crowded and too noisy and more than anything in the world you want to get off” (Norman, 1983, p. 33). The only reason people do not get off the bus is that their stop, which Jessie compares to natural death, has not arrived. But Jessie points out that she can get off the bus whenever she wants and that it makes sense to do so if the ride is unpleasant.

However, to continue the metaphor, Jessie could just as well switch to another bus line instead of getting off the bus. Not all lines are bumpy, crowded, and noisy. She could also take the driver's seat and change the bus's course, opting for less bumpy roads with more beautiful views. Jessie seems to assume that she is only a passenger on a fixed line over whose course and quality she has no power at all. But this is incorrect. Her metaphor also presupposes that the ride will never improve on its own. But this, too, is incorrect; many rides do change over time. Sometimes many passengers get off and the bus becomes less crowded. Sometimes only part of the road is bumpy, and the ride later becomes smooth and pleasant.

Another metaphor that Jessie employs is that of turning off the radio when there is nothing playing to which one wants to listen (Norman, 1983, p. 36). But again, to continue her own metaphor, Jessie has not even tried many of the other channels on the radio before deciding to turn it off. She seems to hold that if the radio is on, it must continue broadcasting only on the channel to which someone once set it, and that the only alternative to hearing the unpleasant music on that channel is to disconnect the radio completely. Note also that liking something, or finding interest in something, does not have to be only a passive matter. To a certain degree, one can choose to interest oneself in what one hears on the radio and can come to like it (without faking it) by focusing on it and taking an active attitude toward it.

Both metaphors suggest that Jessie's life is unpleasant. In order to get rid of this unpleasantness she chooses to destroy the substrate on which this unpleasantness inheres, namely her life. But she does so without trying to see whether there are other ways of getting rid of the unpleasantness while keeping one's life and, perhaps, developing in it some pleasant aspects. The metaphors also suggest that, notwithstanding some of the things Jessie says, she does not want to die; what she wants is for the unpleasantness to stop, and the only way of stopping it she opts for is dying. But if ceasing the unpleasantness is her goal, other means of realizing this goal may well be available.

In a third metaphor, Jessie explains her decision to end her life by saying that she wants quiet (Norman, 1983, p. 18). She probably means that she wants her suffering, or "noise," to cease. However, it is possible to stop a noise not only by ending one's life but also by changing how one lives. One could also move to a less noisy place, or turn down the unpleasant noise, or switch to nice music.

What is this "noise" that Jessie wants to stop? I think that an important part of it is Jessie's own badmouthing of herself. Throughout the play, Jessie keeps maligning herself, telling herself and Thelma that she has been a bad employee, a bad wife, a bad mother, and (as she refers to herself) garbage (Norman, 1983, p. 61). Spencer and Morrow suggest that Jessie has not developed her own identity or voice. This is true in some ways, but in one sense she has developed her own identity and voice: it is unlikely that any other person in her life—her father, mother, brother, ex-husband, or son—has ever talked to her as disdainfully and cruelly as she talks to herself. It is this self-spitefulness that Jessie finds hard to tolerate any longer and from which she wants relief. But instead of ending her life in order to get rid of the characterizations that belittle her, Jessie could try to cease saying them to herself, or to replace them with other characterizations.

3.6 | Jessie has a right to end her life

Jessie also points out that her life is *hers*, and she has a right to do with it as she pleases. "I can stop it. Shut it down… . It's all I really have that belongs to me and I'm going to say what happens to it" (Norman, 1983, p. 36).[6] Grant, at least for the sake of discussion, that people do have a moral right to end their lives. But just having the right to do something is not a good reason for doing it. For example, many people have the right to give or receive a loan, visit a neighbor, or carry a certain heavy bag,

but they may still think that doing so is a bad idea. They also have the right not to do those things; having the right to do something is just a necessary, rather than a sufficient, condition for doing it. I suggest that the same is true for Jessie. She has the right to end her life but also not to end her life. Just having the right to end her life is not a sufficient reason to do so. To justify suicide, more arguments need to be presented.

4 | CLAIMS IN THE SCHOLARLY LITERATURE

The preceding discussion also helps to show why I am in disagreement with many of the favorable evaluations of Jessie's suicide found in the scholarly literature on the play. Whited (1997, p. 65), for example, presents Jessie's suicide as both heroic and independent. I agree that her suicide involves, in one respect, some courage and the overcoming of fear. But it seems to me that in many other ways it involves a discouraged attitude that succumbs to fear in the face of difficulty and of the possibility of failure, and thus is not heroic. Refraining from trying more than just two jobs, from trying to move to other places, or from trying to change one's life in other ways does not show courage, coping with fear, or heroism. Jessie opts, all in all, for the less heroic option of escaping to her own death.

For somewhat similar reasons, I disagree with Whited's claim that Jessie's action is highly independent (1997, p. 65). Again, I agree that the suicide does require some independence from fears, social conventions, and the opinions of others. But in this play it is done by a person who is in many ways the opposite of independent—a person who feels caged in a condition that she knows to be bad but believes (without sufficient evidence) that she cannot change. Jessie is moved to suicide because she holds that the only alternative to suicide is to continue to live in a way she abhors, while overlooking the independence she does have to at least try to change her life. I suggest that Jessie's refraining from trying out other options to solve her problem, and her acceptance of her present life as an unalterable given that can be replaced only by death, do not show much independence.

Similar considerations lead me to believe that it is wrong to see Jessie's suicide as attesting to, or as allowing her, to have much freedom, control, or power over her life, as Browder (1989, p. 110) and Morrow (1988, p. 29) hold. The act does show some control and power. But other actions, such as moving to another place, or trying other jobs, would have both attested to and allowed Jessie to have much more power and control over her life. Such considerations also lead me to disagree with Ginter-Brown's (2001, p. 190) suggestion that "on this particular night, she [Jessie] maintains perfect control," or that "she triumphs" (p. 194), as well as with Smith's (1991) description of Jessie's suicide as a "bold act of emancipation" (287).

Another strain in the favorable evaluations of Jessie's suicide sees the act as authentic. Thus McDonnell (1987, p. 103) claims that in dying by suicide Jessie "manage[s] to find herself" and "finds her own meaning." Such claims seem to assume that Jessie has some "genuine" self, that she or we know what it is, and thus that we can judge that in ending her life Jessie is motivated by it rather than by a false, non-genuine self. But it is very hard to know what one's genuine self is, if there is such a thing at all. (It may well be, for example, that people do not have one genuine self but, rather, a collection of many different and often conflicting and changing voices or aspects to their personality.) Assuming that Jessie does have a genuine self, her decision to die by suicide may well issue not from it but, rather, from an incorrect negative self-image, implanted by family or society, that suggests to her that she is an irredeemably worthless worker, wife, mother, and person. There are, of course, also other notions of authenticity (Levy, 2011, pp. 313–317), emphasizing not remaining or becoming oneself or one's "true" self but, as in Sartre (1956, part one, ch. 2), acting from and thus realizing one's radical freedom. However, Jessie also does not seem to act from what Sartre would see as authentic

radical freedom. The considerations above show that she does not, for example, constitute herself by her own choice (Sartre, 1956, p. 328), determine herself to wish some things rather than others (Sartre, 1956, p. 483), or choose herself her own projects (Sartre, 1956, pp. 488–489).

Kundert-Gibbs (1995, p. 61) holds that Jessie and Thelma "achieve a deeper humanity" through Jessie's suicide. I think that Kundert-Gibbs refers to the emotional closeness that Jessie and her mother indeed achieve before Jessie's suicide. They talk to each other truthfully, as they have not for many years, asking questions they have not dared to ask, and replying in ways they have not dared to reply. I too think that this is an important achievement for Jessie and Thelma. But Jessie's suicide is surely not the only way of achieving such emotional closeness. Therapists often succeed in bringing people to emotional closeness and to talking frankly, painfully, and truthfully to each other by using far less radical and destructive means. Even if Jessie's suicide were the only way to achieve such emotional closeness between Jessie and Thelma, I do not think that would have been worth Jessie's death and Thelma's considerable suffering afterwards.

5 | CONCLUSION

I have discussed in this paper a central question that *'night, Mother* presents to us, namely, whether Jessie is right to commit suicide. This discussion seems to me important not only for scholarly reasons. Viewing Jessie's act as justified and appropriate might also suggest to others that they would do well to commit suicide in similar conditions. As with many other discussions of literature, this one, too, has practical implications for people's lives in the real world. To examine the appropriateness of Jessie's decision to commit suicide, I have presented her justifications for her decision as they appear in the play and evaluated each. I found them all insufficient and problematic. I also reviewed arguments in the scholarly literature that present Jessie's decision as the right, even admirable one to take, and explained why I think that they are incorrect. I suggest, therefore, that the reply to the suicide question in *'night, Mother* is negative. Perhaps some decisions to commit suicide are justified. But Jessie's decision does not seem to be one of them. I believe that Jessie's condition is indeed difficult, as is the condition of many other people in comparable circumstances. But I have argued in this paper that it is not a condition that should lead people to end their lives.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

I declare that I have no conflict of interests.

ORCID

Iddo Landau https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6238-8632

ENDNOTES

[1] Norman also won the 1983 Susan Smith Blackburn Prize for her work and the play was nominated for the 1983 Tony Award for Best Play.

[2] The suicide question is not the only issue that *'night, Mother* raises. Many scholarly works on the play focus on other themes that appear in it, such as mother-daughter relationships (Browder, 1989, p. 109–113; Kundert-Gibbs, 1995, pp. 47–62; Spencer, 1987, pp. 366–372); women's formation of their autonomous, independent

identity (Brown & Stevenson, 1995, pp. 182–199; Hart, 1987, pp. 74–78; Smith, 1991, pp. 282–288); Jessie's psychological condition (Demastes, 1993, p. 115; Greiff, 1989, pp. 224–228; Morrow, 1988, pp. 27–33); violence (Burkman, 1990, p. 257; Smith, 1991, pp. 286–288; Spencer, 1987, pp. 368–369); hunger and food (Ginter-Brown, 2001, pp. 184–189; Hart, 1987, pp. 75–78; Morrow, 1988, pp. 23–32); passivity and self-victimization (Demastes, 1993, p. 117; Kundert-Gibbs, 1995, p. 55; Smith, 1991, pp. 284–285); social disadvantage (Demastes, 1993, pp. 109–119; Spencer, 1987, pp. 366–367, 374); father-daughter relationships (Greiff, 1989, pp. 224–228); and power (Burkman, 1990, pp. 259–260; Ginter-Brown, 2001, pp. 184–185; Morrow, 1988, pp. 28–29). I find these themes, too, to be important and interesting. However, since they are not essential to addressing the specific question the present essay focuses on, namely, whether Jessie, and people in similar conditions, are right to end their lives, I do not take up these other themes here.

[3] An anonymous referee has pointed out that seeing Jessie's suicide as emancipation or heroism differs from seeing her suicide as the right thing to do. I have to disagree. We would not usually typify an act that we hold to be unjustified, wrong, harmful, or even just silly as an example of heroism or emancipation. In Section 4, I explain why I also think that it is incorrect to see Jessie's decision as heroic, as showing emancipation, etc.

[4] I am grateful to an anonymous referee for pressing me to see this point.

[5] Although, admittedly, at the time these lines are written (July 2022), this is not true, as far as abortions are concerned, of the United States.

[6] Jessie's claim can be interpreted either as a defense of the legitimacy of her decision to end her life or as a further reason to end her life. I interpret it here in the latter way since this is how some people who talked with me about suicide used it.

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