

# From Mirror Theory to Oedipus Complex: A Lacanian Interpretation of *Night, Mother*

LIU Mu-zi

North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China

Jacques Lacan reinterpreted Freud's psychoanalytic theory based on Saussure's linguistics, and his theories such as the Mirror stage and the Oedipus complex had a significant impact on contemporary psychoanalysis. In the play *Night, Mother*, the reasons for Jessie's tragedy are diverse, among which the excessive protection of Jessie by her mother Thelma is an important reason for Jessie's tragedy. Starting from Lacan's Mirror stage theory and the Oedipus complex, this paper will explore how this intimate but heavy maternal love influenced Jessie's path to finding her true "ego".

*Keywords:* Mirror stage, Oedipus complex, mother-daughter relationships, identity construction

## Introduction

*Night, Mother* is the representative work of American playwright Marsha Norman. The play was created in the 1980s and won the Pulitzer Prize in 1983. Norman showcased her best female writing style and conducted a serious exploration of family, marriage, and life. This play mainly tells the story of the heroine Jessie who told her mother one night that she had decided to commit suicide. Her mother Thelma felt surprised and incomprehensible, and then began to talk with Jessie and tried to find the reason why she wanted to commit suicide. Thelma hoped to persuade her daughter to continue living before the night came. These two women, who have lived together for many years, had a deep inner conversation for the first time, and they revealed their emotions on that night. However, all the efforts of Thelma to dissuade Jessie from committing suicide failed. After hastily saying "night" to her mother, Jessie shot herself.

This paper analyzes the causes of Jessie's tragedy from the perspectives of Lacan's the mirror stage theory and the Oedipus complex. Lacan believes that the mirror stage is logically related to the Oedipus complex. In the mirror stage, children are still in "the Imagination", and only with the intervention of language—the mother's words, and after the mother reveals "Name-of-the-Father", the child enters the Oedipus complex, from "the Imagination" to "symbolic", then realizing the birth of "ego". In this play, due to Thelma's excessive protection and dependence on Jessie, the mirror relationship between mother and daughter, as well as the "ideal ego" shaped by Thelma, have always influenced Jessie, which results in her inability to find her true "ego". Ultimately, Jessie chooses to express her desire to build her own identity through the extreme way of suicide.

### **A Harbor or a Maze? An Analysis of the Mother-daughter Relationship from the Mirror Stage Theory**

Lacan believes that in the Infant stage, the subject in the real world does not yet have “self-consciousness”, everything is in chaos, and there is no complete consciousness of “ego”. At this time, the subject is not yet a “person”. But at this stage, the caregiver (father or mother) of the young child has already built a series of social relationships for the child, such as the child’s name, what kind of lifestyle they should have, or what kind of person they should become in the future. At the same time, the external “semiotic relation” has already sent the invitation to the ignorant child. As young children grow up, they gradually become confused about some words spoken by their caregivers, such as not understanding what “baby” means. These special words, unlike meaningless sounds, seem to always point to a special social relationship. Children gradually feel the “implication” of these words, and this wonderful feeling leads them from “real” to “imaginary”. Gradually, young children accepted the wonderful feeling that “baby” is “themselves”. Lacan proposed that this feeling of “self” is actually an “ideal ego”. The “ideal ego” is an effect of external relationships presented in the child’s “imaginary”. Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage states that the “ideal ego” is the result of mirror identification; The “ego” regards the specular image in the mirror as the prototype of the “ideal ego”, unaware that this ideal image is just a misconception of the “ego”. The unity we attribute to our “ego” is actually an illusion. In summary, we rely on the “mirror” formed by the “symbolic” to reflect us in “real” as a “specular image” in “imaginary”. Subsequently, we gradually identify with this “specular image”, essentially recognizing the rationality of the mirror itself and “the big Other”. Eagleton once expressed Lacan’s viewpoint as follows:

The child, who is still physically uncoordinated, finds reflected back to itself in the mirror a gratifyingly unified image of itself; and although its relation to this image is still of an ‘imaginary’ kind—the image in the mirror both is and is not itself, a blurring of subject and object still obtains - it has begun the process of constructing a centre of self. (Eagleton, 2004, p. 127).

And mothers are precisely the first “mirror” in our lives. When young children and mothers are in a symbiotic relationship, mothers mean the entire external world to young children. Young children first realize their “ideal ego” in their mother’s words.

In *Night, Mother*, Jessie and her mother are in a symbiotic relationship. At the beginning of this play, Marsha Norman wrote: “There is a familiarity between these two women that comes from having lived together for a long time. There is a shorthand to the talk and a sense of routine comfort in the way they relate to each other physically.” In the play, Thelma protected Jessie, like a baby in a swaddle, in the name of love. In the early years, Jessie was introverted and didn’t like to interact with people. Her mother Thelma took her own initiative in Jessie’s marriage and married her to someone she was satisfied with; For many years, she had been concealing the truth about Jessie’s epilepsy, others’ opinions on Jessie, the truth that Cecil left her, the fact that she did not love Jessie’s father, and fabricating various people and things with lies. Jessie was like an ignorant child in the world constructed by her mother. Her mother was like a huge “mirror”, and Jessie could only see the “ideal ego” that her mother wanted to present to her. Under her mother’s protection, she would not worry about illness and did not understand the complexity of the world. Her father often talked to Jessie before his death, and they had a close and harmonious relationship. She was a little girl protected by love. She used to long for a happy life and

deeply loved her husband and son. Jessie once said, “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” (Norman, 1983, p. 59). Jessie, who was once protected by her mother, was her mother’s child and treasure. Jessie said to her mother, “I am what became of your child. 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... That’s who I started out...” (Norman, 1983, p. 76). Jessie once lived in the world her mother had built for her. She treated her mother’s desires as her own, and treated the image described by her mother as her true “ego”. However, this intimate relationship has always been with Jessie, causing her to often wander between “imaginary” and “symbolic”, unable to find her true “ego”. The “utopia” created by her mother ultimately turned into a maze, leading Jessie to a life full of pain and confusion.

### **The Oedipus Complex of “the Person in the Mirror”**

Lacan’s Oedipus complex is based on Freud. In his fifth seminar on the unconscious configuration, Lacan discussed the three periods of subject composition in the Oedipus complex: preoedipal phase, privation and castration. In the mirror stage theory mentioned earlier, young children recognize “the big Other”, which is the caregiver of young children. At this time, young children believe that they and their caregivers constitute the entire world, which enters what many theorists call the “preoedipal phase”. In the preoedipal phase, both boys and girls formed a symbiotic relationship with their mothers. Nancy Chodorow believes that:

Instead, they now treated their daughters and cathected them as narcissistic physical and mental extensions of themselves, attributing their own body feelings to them...The mother employs the ‘transitivity’ of the psychotic—“I am you and you are me”—in her experiencing and treatment of her daughter. (Chodorow, 1979, p. 100).

This relationship still exists after the end of the preoedipal phase and continues to affect women’s lives. In this play, Thelma manipulates Jessie in various details, such as judging Jessie’s clothing, teaching Jessie how to educate Ricky, and how many pieces of fudge should be added to the hot cocoa. Thelma regards Jessie as her eternal treasure and the projection of her desires.

Although the influence of the preoedipal phase may extend throughout people’s lives, people will not stay in this phase forever. Lacan believed that after the end of the preoedipal phase, infants will go through two important phases—privation and castration. Lacan introduced the term “Name-of-the-Father” here, in which he said, “From the clinical standpoint, it is clear that a young child encounters its mother’s desire, and that beyond that desire, it comes up against something which it feels its mother is obeying: the law of the father” (Feldstein, Fink, & Jaanus, 1994, p. 66). Through the introduction of the “Name-of-the-Father”, children gradually imagine the existence of the “the big Other” who governs their mother. The “Symbolic order” is what Lacan calls the “the big Other”, it is the invisible order that structures our experience of reality, it is the complex network of rules and meanings (Slavoj, 2014, p. 51). The “the big Other” of infants gradually completes its translocation (no longer the caregiver), and infants identify with the new “the big Other”—“Name-of-the-Father”. The meaning of “Name-of-the-Father” lies in giving children a law—a law of desire.

In this play, “Name-of-the-Father” refers to the patriarchal society outside of the mother. At this point, the difference in the Oedipus complex between men and women is also evident here. Men identify with the “father”, choose to enter the “symbolic order”, and become a members of the patriarchal society. Women, on the other

hand, either choose to take second place and develop a “normal” feminine temperament to serve the patriarchal society; or choose to shape a “male” image and stand firm in the “symbolic order” as a “male” identity. Due to the excessive protection and dependence on Thelma, Jessie never broke through the mother-daughter symbiotic relationship. This led Jessie, who was still hovering in the preoedipal phase, to enter the “symbolic order” under the guidance and protection of her mother’s words. At this time, she was not truly “castrated” by the “father’s law”. She didn’t know how cruel a patriarchal society is, where ‘Name-of-the-Father’ dominates her mother, not knowing that she will be in a restricted and oppressed position in a society filled with “patriarchal laws”, and not knowing that the process of finding her “ego” will be placed in the position of “the other” in a patriarchal society. The strong sense of identity and symbiosis brought to Jessie by her mother made her only follow her mother’s guidance and become a “normal female” who succumbed to patriarchal society. The arrangement of Jessie’s life by her mother and the words her mother said to her made her believe that this was the “ideal ego” she should become. Jessie’s life, like replicating her mother’s, also confirms Lacan’s “imaginary identification”—the configuration of completing the “ideal ego” by mirroring the other.

### **When the Mirror Shattered, What is the true “Ego”?**

Lacan believes that the “imaginary” of the subject will ultimately be influenced by the intervention of “Name-of-the-Father”, causing the infant to leave “imaginary” of identifying with the mother and enter “symbolic” of identifying with the “father”. Jessie gradually realized that this society was always dominated by patriarchy. She once wanted to take over her father’s bookkeeping, but the bills were collected due to her father’s death; In marriage, she needed to live as Cecil expected; She and Thelma had no privacy. Brother Dawson always called Jessie “Jess” in a condescending manner, always wanting to interfere with Jessie’s life. Mother Thelma’s mail-order bra was also opened by the Dawsons without permission; Ricky embarked on the path of a juvenile delinquent. And even Thelma doesn’t know the real significance of life, she uses desserts and crochets to kill the boring time. Jessie gradually realized that her life had become a “specular image” of her mother—always leaning towards what others expected. If she didn’t have what men wanted, she would have to be abandoned and live a dull life. Jessie’s “ideal ego” seen in the “mirror” was disillusioned. Jessie gradually realized that the happiness she thought before was just the illusion of foam, and the image in the mirror given to her by her mother was doomed to be unrealized. Her perfect “specular image” was shattered. Jessie identifies with others and affirms herself in “imaginary”, but because the “imaginary” itself is illusory and cannot be realized, there is no possibility for her “ego” to be realized. When Jessie was a child, she did not resist when she was implanted with the consciousness of her mother. However, as she gradually realized the truth of life, she was eager to release herself and enter the “symbolic order”. She had to rely on following her father to break free from her mother’s “Name-of-the-Father”.

Jessie’s Oedipus complex in her subconscious gradually became clear: she wanted to break through the “web” of symbiosis, break her mother’s “specular image”, follow her father, and yearn to enter the “symbolic order”. Jessie, with fond memories of her father, chose to develop a “masculine temperament” and enter the “symbolic order” as a “male”. In this play, Norman wrote: “She wears pants and a long black sweater with deep pockets, which contain scraps of paper, and there may be a pencil behind her ear or a pen clipped to one of the pockets of the sweater” (Norman, 1983, p. 2). Jessie kept moving closer to her father in appearance, and she once

told her mother that she should also hang a sign like her father that said “GO FISHING”; She liked smoking and believed that smoking is happy and enjoyable. She once went out to work and wanted to be self-reliant; When she was with her mother, she also managed all kinds of things at home, from making phone calls to ordering items to trimming her mother’s nails, acting like a “male” master. In Jessie’s mind, she loved her father and believed that he also loved her. She had a deep emotional connection with her father, as her mother said, “You loved him enough for both of us” (Norman, 1983, p. 46). With the love for her father, Jessie urgently wanted to become someone like him, entering the “symbolic order” with a brand new “ego”. However, reality is cruel. Her mother’s perfect “specular image” had already merged with her, and her mother’s concealment of the truth has led her to seek independence as her “ideal ego”. Jessie’s pursuit of her father was ultimately superficial, and her efforts to reshape herself had also ended in failure. At work, she was dismissed due to her terrifying smile. Thelma still treated her as a child; The birthday gift she received was also something that “normal” women should have, such as puff pyjamas; Thelma’s friend Agnes was afraid of her because of her epilepsy and didn’t dare to visit. Jessie understood that she could never find a new “ego” by following her father and entering a patriarchal society with a masculine demeanour.

In this play, Thelma kept persuading Jessie and hoping that Jessie would return to her own embrace, to the symbiotic relationship. But Jessie already understood that her mother only gave her lies, only the false “specular image” that she wanted to present to her. Her mother closed off the authenticity of the external world in the name of love. Selma once said, “Things don’t have to be true to talk about ‘em, you know” (Norman, 1983, p. 41). But Jessie could no longer accept the “ideal self”. When Jessie gradually “deduced” the truth from her mother, the Oedipus complex belonging to Jessie seemed to have finally been completed at this moment. From breaking her mother’s “specular image” to yearning to enter the “symbolic order” to pursue her “ego”, and then being “castrated” by the real patriarchal society, the two paths available for women to choose after the Oedipus phase were all blocked. “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” (Norman, 1983, p. 76). This is Jessie’s confession, who lost the direction of seeking “ego” and longed to break free from her mother and ultimately embarked on the path of suicide.

### **Conclusion**

Jessie’s tragedy cannot be changed. Under her mother’s excessive care and protection, she urgently wants to break the “specular image” of her mother. However, as she seeks independence with her “ideal ego”, she is destined not to be accepted by the real and cruel patriarchal society. Then she loses herself in the “maze” given by her mother. As Jessie said, “If I’d known I was an epileptic, Mama, I wouldn’t have ridden any horses” (Norman, 1983, p. 71). If it weren’t for years of protection from her mother, Jessie could have seen her “ego” and society earlier, no longer compromising or catering, but resisting and fighting. Perhaps she could have truly grasped her own body instead of becoming a confused “person in the mirror”.

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