The work of playwright Marsha Norman ranges from gritty urban dramas like *night Mother*, which won the Pulitzer Prize, to musicals like *The Secret Garden*, which won the Tony Award. Recalling her girlhood in Louisville, playwright Marsha Norman once said, “I would sit in the theater and think, ‘I could do that; I would be really good at that.’” (1) But at first she didn’t believe she would ever have the chance to write plays. “I didn’t know any writers, and I certainly had no local playwrights as role models,” (2) she has said;
“Kentucky’s writing tradition was mainly a mountain one; I thought...I was from a working-class family. I figured playwrights mostly came from wealthy East Coast families who had big libraries in their homes and whose children went to prestigious colleges....I was 29 years old before I finally believed I could have a life as a writer.” (3) 

During periods when women's equality has been a powerful social issue, feminist concerns are often central to plays by women. Deborah Kolb has observed a close relationship in America between the rise and fall of the professional feminist movement in the early twentieth century and the "rise and fall of the New Woman in drama." (4) This characterization, often attributed to the influence of Ibsen's Nora in A Doll House, was developed by American dramatists of both sexes who were inspired by the impact on the public of the early Women's Movement. The contemporary feminist movement has created an audience for women playwrights who write from their experiences as women. (5) 

However, feminism as theme could not be understood as simply a call for women's rights on the part of the playwright or her characters. Rather, it is a statement about feminine consciousness, the feelings and perceptions associated with a female character's identity as a woman. As Sydney Kaplan asserts, the feminism of a writer may be reflected in "a consideration of the effect upon women's psyches of the external events around them." (6) 

The experience of woman as outsider, devalued, objectified and often subservient is a recurrent theme in women's drama. It is a protest to an imposed silence, an expression of the need to create new lives, public lives that underlie the playwrights' depiction of women's experience. These concerns constitute feminist themes in that they portray the social and
psychological restrictions placed upon women in a male dominant society, as well as the attitudes and values of women who confront these restrictions.

By 1916, with the establishment of New York's avant-garde little theatre groups, the actor-manager's theatre was giving way to the playwright's theatre. One development in this burgeoning American drama was the proliferation of women playwrights. For women playwrights this often meant exploring the condition of women as a social and psychological phenomenon at the base of a movement for social change.

In Marsha Norman's plays issues of feminist concern often constitute the central conflict. The play of Norman takes woman as a protagonist, which itself suggests a concern with the exploration of women's lives. These inner conflicts may be interpreted as a response to external forces: a social order which deems that women are solely responsible for the domestic sphere, limiting their chances of success.

Norman portrays the various aspects of feminine consciousness and the specifically female experience out of which that consciousness evolves. Free of the constraints of the conventional theatre, Norman explores forms such as realism and expressionism, which are conducive to portraying the psychology of women. As a dramatist of ideas, her characterizations embody a statement about women's condition and women's frustration at the heart of Norman's plays.

Norman depicts the psychological motives for a woman's attempt to suicide by giving the significance of home and family in women's lives, and the female network through which women form close and supportive relationships. In the sparsely populated Prairie, the women in Third and Oak: the Laundromat understand the stillness of existence, and the psychological repercussions of her enforced isolation from other women.

Norman has portrayed a woman's acute consciousness of self and a rudimentary feminism in her understanding of a relationship based upon power. Sarah in Sarah and Abraham, is a woman who is aware of the social and psychological role that her husband requires her to act out and of the effect of that role on their relationship. In The Secret Garden however, the female protagonist struggles to break free of deceptions. She refuses to accommodate herself to stagnant norms that confine her, and struggles to
create new forms, new meaning, new reality. Her goals are boundless, and it is only this boundlessness that she seeks to preserve. Unlike Arlene in Getting out, Trudy in Trudy Blue, Mary in The Secret Garden and Sarah in Sarah and Abraham is very much alive, though somewhat detached from those around her. In fact, she is completely absorbed in her routine activities.

Norman has created an expressionist setting which not only reflects but also extends Jessie’s psychological state. Jessie has been moved by a powerful force which finally wrenches her apart. She seeks relief in committing suicide rather than lived in her isolation and alienation. Critics have regarded Norman as an "extreme feminist," (7) but it is not Jessie’s rejection of husband, lover and child that constitutes a feminist stance. Nor does her mental illness necessarily reflect the consequences of her aspirations. Rather, this portrayal renders the impulses of a woman like Jessie who painfully feels her bounds. It is the awareness of her immanence and her desire for transcendence that make this characterization feminist. Norman dramatizes her feminist outlook around concrete issues. For example, her characters express conflicts about the double standard, and raise questions regarding the effects of woman's economic independence upon traditional sex roles, as well as upon her own identity and aspirations. In some instances, this search for identity is expressed through a character’s writing or art, a device which gives the character an additional platform from which to expound.

Norman reflects the social forces that shape women's activities, aspirations and values. She also dramatizes the conflicts of a woman who has made commitments of being a wife and mother, but who is still in the process of defining her role and ordering her priorities. In Getting Out, the protagonist Arlene wants to start life anew, but her violent self, Arlie moves around in the prison cell and at times lingers about Arlene like a cruel memory. The play ends on a hopeful note, with Arlene finding a way to own up to her old self without giving in to it. Marsha Norman reflects; “My whole life I felt locked up. I think the writing of Getting Out for me was my own opening of the door.” (8)

Norman is one of the first female dramatists to make relationships in women's lives and the social and economic constraints on middle-and lower-class women into appropriate matter for powerful plays.
Characters in several of Norman's plays wrestle with issues of religious faith and redemption. In *Getting Out* Arlene remembers the prison chaplain who tells her that Arlie was the evil inside her, which could be banished for Arlene's salvation.

Frequently in Norman's plays women and men have conflicting expectations and understandings; their conversations are characterized by misunderstanding, manipulation, or hostility. In *Traveler in the Dark*, Sam and his wife, Glory, never connect. Even in *'night, Mother*, where there are no male characters onstage, the men in Thelma and Jessie's lives are remembered and discussed with a mixture of hurt, confusion, and contempt. In *Trudy Blue* too Ginger suffers from midlife crisis, an alienation with her husband.

In *Getting Out*, an oppressive system of patriarchal beliefs controls and inhibits the female characters. Arlene and Ruby submit to the identities constructed for them by the society. Through the establishment of a supportive female community with Ruby, Arlene is able to redeem part of her former self and come away with a fuller sense of identity. Through Arlene's union of her two selves as well as through her friendship with Ruby, Norman depicts a beginning of female autonomy and suggests the hope for a future and more successful challenge to patriarchy.

Similarly in *'night, Mother*, Jessie is divorced, she suffers from epilepsy, her son has turned into a drug addict and thief, she has tried to hold a job, but can't, and she has no friends. She decides to commit suicide. She calmly informs her mother that she plans to kill herself later that evening. Norman reflects on the patriarchal forces that lead a normal woman to such a stage of desperation, that she wants to kill herself than allow those forces to kill her, thereby gaining victory over them. Even before she dies, she has such feminine sensitivities that she is concern about her mother to such an extent that she puts the house in order - arranging grocery delivery, writing directions for where to find things, while her mother tries to undo her daughter's decision, to distract her from it, to argue, cajole, beg. The dialogue moves naturally through Mama's efforts to put a positive face on their conflicts and losses, but Jessie remains adamant. By the end of the play, Jessie rejects every argument for living her mother could come up with. The play evokes pity
for these isolated souls and ignites a deeper understanding of, and appreciation for, what it means to be alive. Here also the female characters are controlled by a male-centered belief system. While Thelma has contended herself with her stifled existence, Jessie chooses to defy authority, through her suicide, however, she not only negates her identity and paves the way for Thelma’s despairing future; but also destroys the hope of female solidarity and with that, female autonomy.

In Getting Out, the psychological continuity between the staged Arlie and Arlene scenes reveals first, that the process of internalizing social norms grips the very depth of Arlene’s relationship to her self and others, and second, that the family is the first and most vicious site wherein certain “emotional restrictions” (9) become instituted and regulated. Through Arlene’s partial reclamation of Arlie’s strength, Norman communicates a more satisfying message to the feminist spectator of the play. The spectator sees that women like Arlene have the potential to challenge in perhaps a more constructive way than before, the boundaries that prevent them from progressing in society, Arlene stands as a model of female solidarity that enables female autonomy.

While a burgeoning female community enables self assertion in Getting Out, a lack of female community entails the women’s destruction by restrictive patriarchal ideals in night, Mother. Ultimately, through opposing methods Norman communicates in night, Mother, and Getting Out, the need for female solidarity to successfully confront patriarchy and preserve female autonomy. The social institutions that Arlene encounters ensure that hostility and violence stay in place. The sexism of Arlene’s world manifests itself in a necessary gender split that secures the violence through male domination. In the play, Norman depicts a social world that justifies the systematic violation and oppression of women through its most moral institutions: religion, society and the family. Through the protagonist, Arlene Holsclaw, and her alter-self Arlie, Norman presents a psychodrama that explores the complex psychological process of female socialization. Together Arlie and Arlene create a psychological continuity that reveals the awful price Arlene as exconvict pays for her successful socialization: her inwardness.
Norman’s approach to the closure of Arlene’s predicament shifts from one that she has developed throughout her dramatization of Arlene’s psychological processes and conflicts, which suggest that her subjectivity is neither wholly ideologically constituted nor biologically or familial determined; she explores the multilayered forces that create a psyche in process. In this sense, Norman has developed her own dialectical and psychodramatic method, exploring Arlene’s psyche dialectically and psychodynamically. The play discloses the complex dialectical processes of the psyche; its ending reflects a reductive linear approach to Arlen’s psyche.

Marsha Norman’s female characters progress further in their psychic journey. Ultimately, they come closer to a more cohesive self. Norman accomplishes this feat in ways similar to those of her literary progenitor particularly in cases where a female suffers because of family relationships. Many times that relationship is fore-grounded through a mother and daughter. *Getting Out*, serves as an example in which the daughter’s identity surfaces as a completely split self in case of Arlene and her alter – self Arlene. Thelma and Jessie Cates, the mother and daughter in Norman’s *night, Mother*, also wrestles with problems surrounding the daughter’s identity. Unlike Arlie, however, Jessie opts out of life through a carefully planned suicide rather than remain in an unfulfilled life. In both these works the mother is present and on stage. However, in *Third & Oak: The Laundromat*, Norman presents us with an absent mother-one who never appears on stage but who controls the daughter’s life nevertheless. Norman through plays like *night, Mother* and *Getting Out*, create representations of women working to fill that psychic hunger experienced when faced with the limited options for self-determination present in patriarchal society. Norman’s character, Jessie Cates, assumes control of her life and chooses death rather than face an unfulfilled life like her mother’s. Even though Jessie chooses death, she triumphs because she, alone, decides what constitutes her proper nourishment.

Jessie’s suicide, however predictable it may appear, is an extreme act by definition abnormal. As a psychological case study of deviant behavior, (10) however, ‘*night, Mother*’ differs markedly from such plays as *Equus* or *Agnes of God*. Without institutional representatives to provide
measures of deviation, without an analyst figure to focus questions and issues, without distancing devices of any kind, Marsha Norman invites her audience to identify directly with the characters on stage, relying on our own inner resources, to share their experience in unmediated fashion. The subjective quality of the event is heightened by the absence of community; no social or political framework provides a broader perspective, and even the references to the world outside of Mama's living room are remarkably vague: "I read the paper," Jessie says, "I don't like how things are. And they're not any better out there than they are in here". (11) This is a psychological drama aimed directly at the psyche, the very antithesis of Brechtian theatre. (12)

Indeed, the conditions for Jessie’s suicide are naturalistically plausible by clinical standards. (13) As she has suffered a series of personal losses, she is not only depressed but also feels betrayed and abandoned. Or as she first explains: "I'm tired, I'm hurt. I'm sad. I feel used". (14)

Norman probes into the mental health and social behaviour of such alienated souls like Arlene, Jessie and Ginger. Although presently in
good health, Jessie's epilepsy has resulted in a lack of social experience and an increasing detachment from communal ties: her only "friends" (15) are medical personnel, she can't get a job or keep the ones she's had, and she so unnerves her mother's best friend Agnes that the neighbor no longer visits. Jessie's denials, cannot be discounted, her denials become a kind of refrain, underscoring each cause as both necessary and insufficient. Like that of most suicidal individuals, Jessie's emotional life is dominated by a sense of helplessness, hopelessness, and an overpowering lonely feeling. She expresses less than halfway through the play when she responds to Mama's growing hysteria with the following lines:

"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." (16)

This reflects the connection between Jessie's decision and her desire to establish some personal authority, even her life. Here Jessie sits for the first time in the play as Mama offers to make them hot chocolate and a candy apple, both trying to recover some loving, symbiotic moment from the past. But the temporary reversal, in which the daughter sees the mother as an extension of herself, is quickly shattered by Jessie's double realization that Mama's gesture is a "false" (17) and selfishly motivated one, and that neither of them likes the taste of milk (18).

According to Freud, “suicide represents unconscious hostility directed toward an interjected, ambivalently viewed love-object and as such, is the very symptom of an underdeveloped ego”. (19) In Jessie's conscious
mind, however, the suicide that ends the play is a deliberate, fully reasoned action. She describes it as private, personal, her own, freely chosen, and rational. However, Jessie’s suicide raises more questions than answers them.

Jessie’s will power and mental state, from the start, she has no desire to be saved, and as Mama occasionally recognizes, she is already gone. The comprehension to accept her daughter’s differences and giving her space and time is thus the play’s action. By the time the mother realizes her daughter’s needs, it is too late. The play’s action provokes, and to work through the brutal ambivalent feelings of mourning Jesse’s loss, to work through the brutality and ambiguity of the conflict that gives us, like Mama, a rather unrealistic detail, which frees us to identify with and accept Jessie’s action in the play. At the surface level, it is the inevitability of the relationship of mother and daughter, which provokes distinctly on one detail, which frees us to identify with and accept Jesse’s resolve, a rather unrealistic resolution. Perhaps it is the strength of Ralph Brown observes;
too involved in her problems, but also too submissive to revolt against her fate. Hence she cannot understand Jessie's response to her life.

Marsha Norman goes to great lengths to portray Mama as anything but ideal and Jessica as anything but sexy; but for the female viewer, the characters' sexual identity is simply never in question. Using T. J. Scheff's definition of cathartic effect as "crying, laughing and other emotional processes that occur when an unresolved emotional distress is re-awakened in a properly distanced context" (23) Norman's *night, Mother* is "aesthetically over-distanced for men (producing indifference) and aesthetically under-distanced for women (producing pain)." (24) Indeed, the power of the play for women rests not only on the ways in which Marsha Norman self-consciously addresses a female audience through subject matter, language, and situation.

The text also presents a psycho-dynamically charged situation that symbolically mirrors the female viewer's own, a narrative movement at least partly generated from the desires, fantasies, resentments, and fears originally connected with the very process of gender acquisition. *night, Mother* provides an interesting case since it both self-consciously addresses a female audience and subconsciously works upon the female psyche in powerful ways, positioning male and female viewers differently in the process. Similarly in *Third & Oak: The Laundromat* Norman presents two women, one a widow, the other trapped in a bad marriage. Actor James Earl Jones, who starred in a televised version of *The Pool Hall*, said, "Marsha writes deep, painful stuff that's not always 'up on the crust.' It's all bubbling beneath the surface." (25) In *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Helen Cixous has written;

"Everything will be charged once woman gives Woman to the other woman. There is hidden and always ready in woman the source; the focus for the other. The mother, too, is a metaphor. It is necessary and sufficient that the best of herself be given to woman by another for her to be able to love herself and
return in love the body that was “born” to be her. “(26)

It is precisely this complex of “giving the mother” (27) to the other woman that is being staged in Norman’s Third & Oak: The Laundromat, despite the fact that neither woman is actually a mother to the other. In the midst of their own unmediated losses, DeeDee and Alberta mothers the other across the chasm of economic, social, and perhaps even spiritual disparities and find solace and solutions to their depression in life.

Norman has also focused on the jitters of a female writer in a male chauvinist world. Trudy Blue reveals the psychic journey of Ginger a novelist who not only goes through stress in her professional life, but a pathological misdiagnosis of cancer tips the scales of normality. The play came out of a turning point in Norman’s own life, at a time when she realized that she was “not attached enough to my own life, I’m not living in a way I have respect for,” (28) she said in a 2000 interview in Bomb magazine with April Gornik, an artist and friend. She further adds;

“It was the beginning of a serious exploration: how I really wanted to be living, what kind of work I wanted to do, how I wanted to relate to the people I was with, and what I was willing to do to get there” (29)

Ginger, dissatisfied with her life enters into her alter ego Trudy Blue, the protagonist of her novel Trudy Blue. Ginger’s mental and emotional state is a wreck. She finds solace in hallucinating imaginary happenings and conversing with imaginary people. Thereby adopting an escapist attitude to the realities of life. The play is based on Ginger’s stream of consciousness, trying her best to think the past, present and the future. Norman states; “Each of my plays is about the struggle of a person to save herself,” (30) She further adds; each plays examines “an act of personal salvation.” (31) Norman's
Trudy Blue reveals those emotions, feelings and thoughts that are deeply embedded in the inner successes of the sub-conscious.

Traveler in the Dark is a play that presents itself as a philosophical and theological debate, yet it is driven by deeper psychological conflicts. Norman presents us with a portrait of a narcissistic character, searching desperately for symbols that will restore his beloved mother. Norman paints this subtle psychological portrait moves her play beyond the merely philosophical into a personal realm. If we do not see ourselves in Sam’s philosophical debate, then certainly his deeper psychological dilemmas resonate for us on a personal level. Because Sam accepts that he will continue in the dark, his philosophical crisis is resolved. Similarly, Sam prefers to continue in the dark created by symbols of his mother, rather than face the truth of her death. Like Sam, if we look at all, we look only with reluctance into the dark through which we must travel.

Suffering is described as any emotional activity a character presents. Ginger in Trudy Blue, Mary in The Secret Garden, Arlie in Getting Out, and Alberta in Third & Oak: The Laundromat suffers a lot. Alberta’s suffering in Third & Oak: The Laundromat is her immense and overwhelming grief at the loss of her husband. This is exhibited by her jitters at the beginning of the play, and her desire for privacy. In her heart of hearts, she may want someone to talk to as badly as DeeDee, but her pride won’t allow her. Dee Dee’s suffering includes her need to find understanding and sympathy with someone else, someone she can confide in besides her mother. Dee Dee really wants a friend, and goes looking for one at three a.m. in a Laundromat.

It is Alberta that seems to resolve the conflict, although not much of a true resolution takes place. She simply puts an end to the conversation. Alberta does not reach out to Dee Dee, doesn’t give her any promises of friendship or her phone number or even any parting words of advice. She simply leaves as politely and gracefully as she can, perhaps knowing that she may hurt Dee Dee’s feelings, but still determined to leave. Alberta, in her late fifties, functions as an “idealized other” (32) to DeeDee, a young woman trapped in an unsatisfying marriage to a factory worker, Joe. DeeDee has a mother who “hover” (33) and tries to keep her daughter a little girl rather than allowing her to mature. Ultimately, Alberta empowers DeeDee to be true to
herself, to leave Joe, as she tells Dee Dee: “Your own face in the mirror is better company than a man who would eat a whole fried egg in one bite….but it won’t be easy.” (34)

Norman’s play Third & Oak: The Laundromat, demonstrates both the means and the limits of the conversation of experience into narrative that constitutes the access to difference. As Bordo Susan comments;

“By listening and telling stories, Alberta and Dee Dee, who come from immeasurably antithetical perspectives, are able to make contact and to go their separate ways without judgment, but with a sense of support from the one who is different, who is literally other. For both women, the listening and telling is difficult because they speak across great divisions”. (35)

The vast Wasteland of social class and generation that separates them from the very instant their paths intersect in the play is not overcome, but investigated by the tenacity of the lower-class woman and the educated experience of the middle-class woman, producing a catharsis for both in the period of the hour in which they meet and exchange stories of their lives.

Marsha Norman by making the laundromat the locale for the play’s development provides a particularly rich site upon which to foreground the confrontation of the two “socially other” (36) women, as the privatized activity of doing laundry is presented, contrastingly, in a publically accessible space. In this way, the laundromat not only represents an intersection for differing social groups of women, but also, of female-associated activity with male-identified public space. Each woman’s claim to the public space is neutralized in respect to the impeded by their status as women. When Alberta continues that she has never understood why men like to have women watch
them work, she again implies the traditionally public nature of male occupations. It is only men’s occasional relations with women that are considered off-limits within the public realm. As Bordo Susan further adds; “Of course in the usual distribution of power dynamics, a woman’s watching of a man will not diminish the man as his watching of her diminishes her.” (37)

The contradiction of this dynamic of social intercourse among women pervades the play’s composition. As a specific woman, each assembles her personal items to be laundered on a particular morning in a certain laundromat located on Third & Oak: The Laundromat in order to escape a distinctive personal loss, but like the woman before and after her, she is Everywoman doing her husband’s laundry, suffering loss alone or in silence, and finding the circumstances of her life unimportant or incomprehensible to the flurry of other lives around her. Norman’s choice of location is not simply the early feminist acknowledgement that the personal is political, but Norman, the humanist believes that any airing of female laundry must be given a public forum, even if that forum is only obtained in the momentary absence of male attendants. This shows a Norman true humanist.

Norman also deals with the significance of “sharing” and ‘confiding’ which influences a person during emotional crisis. Arlene’s ‘sharing’ and ‘confiding’ of her predicament to Ruby and the priest, has a positive influence. She comes to learns with Arlie and gathers enough resistance to face the difficulties of life. However, Jessie’s sharing of her feelings with her mother Thelma came too late. Actually she is not interested in sharing, rather informing in a decisive tone her determination to end her life.

Social support has been identified as a key predictor of psychological morbidity following adverse life-events. According to Collins & Miller “sharing” and ‘confiding’ to the other reduces stress. One who cannot do so end into perversion as Ginger does in Trudy Blue. Her relationship with her husband is alienated hence she finds comfort in her alter – ego Trudy, or as Arlene finds expression of her repression in Arlie in Getting Out. Self expression, sharing, confiding are motional needs. Marsha Norman has a deep understanding of feminine psyche and feminine sensitivity.

Marsha Norman probes into childhood trauma and the influence of parental relationship in several of her plays. In The Secret Garden, based
on a novel by Frances Hodgson Burnett, tells the story of an orphan, Mary, who comes to live with her uncle Archibald in an old English mansion. Norman presents Mary’s loss of her parents as traumatic and painful. Although she comes to live with her uncle Archibald in an old English mansion, she misses her mother who has died in an epidemic; she withdraws within herself, but finds solace in hallucination. She evokes all her happy memories of her childhood.

At its most simple, The Secret Garden is an exploration of the powerful effects of nature upon human beings. It is also a celebration of nature’s beauty, and it could be argued that it examines the wonder of all living things’ capacity for survival. In a way, the garden can be seen as a metaphorical representation of Colin.

All of Marsha Norman’s plays and musicals take on the theme of imprisonment, either metaphorically or literally. “I’m always writing about confinement, about being trapped. When I’m writing about that, I’m really good,” she said. (38) She further adds;” My theme is how do I get out of here? Most writers get talent and a topic. When we’re writing out of that central core of our being, about our deepest personal questions, we can be great.”(39) The genesis of her confinement can be traced back to her childhood in Kentucky and her mother, a fire-and-brimstone religious fanatic subject to violent rages. “She was catastrophically sick,” (40) Ms. Norman said. She and her brother half-joke that they have successfully eradicated the “beat-the-children” (41) form of raising kids from their lineage.

In The Hold Up, Norman gives an “honest-to-God” (42) true Western story straight out of the mythical mystery. Norman presents a 20th century Lily who proves her mettle and hope. She brings the Outlaws Archie and Henry to face a new era of automobiles and airplanes. She brings than to the reality of life and inspires them to embrace new horizons. The play is about what happens when someone confuses fantasy and reality or perhaps when one seeks succor in fantasy to obliterate the harsh truths or fears of real life. Henry’s death is significant, for it creates a feeling of remorse in the Outlaw that, in keeping with Norman’s development of his characters, is explainable on both human and mythological levels. He reveals himself as Tom McCarty, a man he claims to have “buried …alive,” (43) which
demonstrates his conscious effort to bury his past and to put to rest the myth that he represents, a myth as old and worn out as he is. The Outlaw being Norman’s mouthpiece, arguing that the myth cannot and should not be put to rest despite the fast-paced changing world of 1914.

In an attempt to finish himself off, the Outlaw takes an overdose of morphine and it is up to Archie and Lily, the two characters for whom the future is eagerly anticipated, to keep him alive. Norman dramatizes the battle between the past and the present, a battle she prolongs so as to heighten audience concern about the outcome, which determines America’s direction and its attitude toward history. In The Hold Up, Marsha Norman argues for a return to the “good old days” (44) before nuclear bombs and unchecked epidemics.

Sarah and Abraham cover thematic territory encompassing feminism, motherhood, religious faith and theatre. For Norman the play is an attempt to bring feminist history up to date by rewriting- and righting-Sarah’s story, and at the same time an opportunity to use the development and subsequent success of the play-within-a- play as a metaphor for fame and commercial success.

The end of Norman’s plays is most positive, the protagonist learns to adapt, accept and resolve her dilemma. Some feminist resist imbuing Norman with the title “feminist writer,” (45) but Norman speaks to those charges by asserting that “If it’s a feminist to care about women’s lives, yes, I’m a feminist writer” (46) Norman realizes that, “On the whole the American theater, dominated by men, does not perceive women fighting for their lives as a central issue”. (47) However, she appreciates her fortune at being born during a time when she can give women a voice on the American stage. For her, this important task, to tell the truth, cannot be shoved aside until some more convenient time. She feels that she must “… capture the sunlight and focus it and burn the hole right through”. (48) At the same time, she feels that her work such as night, Mother she proves “… that the mother – daughter relationship is as deserving of attention as the father-son.” (49)

Determination, hope, and compassion characterize the women in Marsha Norman’s plays. For her, it is an act of determination to attempt to become a professional playwright in a theatre dominated by
male producers, directors, theatre critics, and playwrights. Norman’s plays characterized by hope - even those which depict in tragic form the consequences for women who step outside the accepted norms of society. Third and Oak: The Laundromat involves characters coming to terms with various types of bereavement and loss, and with their debts to the people in their past and present. The Hold Up is a feminist perspective on the frontier experience. night, Mother, which portrays daughter Jessie's preparations and conversations with her mother, Thelma, on the night Jessie plans to commit suicide, is Norman's most complete exploration of mother-daughter relations.

Norman the humanist and realist reflects women’s struggles through her plays, giving a new outlook to feminist issues. This is Norman’s greatest contribution to the male chauvinist American theater.
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