

A Study of Suicide As Seen in Anne Sexton's Poems: "Wanting to Die" and "Suicide Note".

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on Anne Sexton's suicidal thoughts as seen in Anne Sexton's poems entitled *Wanting to Die* and *Suicide Note*. The objectives of the study are to find out *suicidal thoughts* as seen in Anne Sexton's poems. The thesis writer applies qualitative approach to analyze the data. The two poems portray the suicide, it can be seen through Anne Sexton's desire to die as seen in her two poems. The thesis writer hopes that it can be an additional reference for those who want to use the term suicide as the topic of research especially if the theory used is the theory of suicide proposed by Emile Durkheim. It is also hoped that the thesis gives inspiring enlightenment of what suicide is and how people should avoid doing it.

Keywords :Suicide, Poems Poetry

A. INTRODUCTION

"Jakarta Police rule death of Metro TV editor as suicide" was a headline of The Jakarta Post on Sunday, July 26, 2020. Earlier on Monday, March 30, 2020, The Jakarta Post also uploaded a headline stating that German minister commits suicide after 'virus crisis worries". Another suicide case was also reported in a headline of MbS News stating that "Falling from 6th Floor of Surabaya Hajj Hospital, Covid-19 Patient Killed".

It is an unfortunate fact that suicide cases have happened all the times. Suicide has become sad and yet common phenomenon happened not only in Indonesia but also worldwide. Klonsky (2019: 308) in his article entitled *Suicide, Suicide Attempts, and Suicidal Idea* stated as follows

Suicidal behavior is a global cause of death and disability. Worldwide, suicide is the fifteenth leading cause of death, accounting for 1.4% of all deaths (WHO 2014). In total, more than 800,000 people die by suicide each year. The annual global age-standardized death rate for 2019 is estimated to be 11.4 per 100,000, and the World Health Organization (WHO) projects this rate to remain steady through 2030 (WHO 2018, 2019).

Moreover, suicide is known as a fundamental general health problem in all over the world is a disturbance and serious problem for psychotherapists, psychologists and other specialists who are involved in youth's welfare and psychological health problem (Levine, 2015: 65). Suicide is also considered as the third major cause of death among the adolescents and youths (Waldvogel et al, 2014: 119). Suicide is apparently a serious global public health issue. It is among the top leading causes of death worldwide.

Based on the above description of suicide phenomena and the role of suicide as the leading death cause, the thesis writer is interested in taking the suicide as the topic of her thesis. The thesis writer intends to analyze the issue of suicide happened in real life through its portrayal in literary works. The thesis writer's interest in choosing literary work as the data source of her research is because of two reasons.

The first reason for the thesis writer to choose literary work as the source of the data is due to the fact that there are many famous novelists and poets who are death by committing suicide such as Ernest Hemingway, Yukio Mishima, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Path, Anne Sexton and John Kennedy Toole. Those eminent novelists and poets had struggled with depression and seductions of suicide and they made up their mind to end their lives by committing suicide.

The second reason for choosing literary work is that the issue of suicide has also become one of major topics portrayed in literary works. Some well-known literary works whose theme are suicide are *A Long Way Down* written by Nick Hornby, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, and *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin. Therefore, the thesis writer intends to analyze suicide phenomenon often happened in reality through the portrayal of suicide in literary work.

Literary works can be divided into four main types. Turco (1999: 9) stated that “The types of writing to be found in literature are called genre; the primary genres are fiction, drama, poetry, and nonfiction”. Among those genres of literary work, the thesis writer has made up her mind to choose poetry as her source of data. The thesis writer prefers to choose poetry because poetry is literary work that contains artistic value and it deals with human expression such as human’s existence, life’s reality, and human’s expectation as stated by Perrine (1956: 523),

Poetry has been regarded as something having unique value to the fully realized life, something that we are better off for having and without which we are spiritually impoverished.

The unique value of poetry is expressed by the poet through the combination of words, emotion, and ideas. The poet uses poetry to share his or her perspective about events that happen in human life.

There are other three personal reasons why the thesis writer chooses poetry. The first reason is based on **Percy Bysshe Shelley’s opinion (2006: 12)** that “Poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted.” It means that no matter how sad the reality is, poetry will be able to make it look beautiful. The second reason is based on Arnold’s statement (1986: 103) that “Poetry is at bottom a criticism of life; that the greatness of a poet lies in his powerful and beautiful application of ideas to life — to the question: How to live.” It means that poetry actually gives its readers the improved ability to understand what poet wants to say about life. It also gives the readers the patience to look into someone else’s mind and cultivate empathy for another person. The third reason is that poetry helps the thesis writer understand the significance of words themselves.

Dealing with poetry as literary work, there are many great poems written by great poets. Among those poems, the thesis writer decides to choose poems written by Anne Sexton to analyze. The poems are ‘*Wanting to Die*’ and ‘*Suicide Note*’. The reasons for

choosing those poems are firstly because the chosen poems contain the ideas of suicide and secondly because the poems have won Pulitzer Prize in 1967.

The thesis writer's decision to choose Anne Sexton is based on the facts that she was one of the poets who committed suicide. She took her own life on October 4, 1974. Another fact is that Anne Sexton is also among prominent poets who was awarded the monumental Pulitzer Prize in 1967 for her celebrated collection *Live or Die* (Houghton Mifflin, 1966), a fictionalized memoir about her experiences with mental illness. The collection includes many of Sexton's most popular poems, such as "*Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely woman,*" "*Wanting to Die,*" and "*Sylvia's Death.*"

Anne Sexton was indeed a heavily decorated poet. She was the recipient of numerous honors and awards, including the Frost Fellowship to the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, the Radcliffe Institute Fellowship, the Levinson Prize, the American Academy of Arts and Letters traveling fellowship, the Shelley Memorial Prize, and an invitation to give the Morris Gray reading at Harvard. She also received a Guggenheim Fellowship, grants from the Ford Foundation, honorary degrees, and held professorships at Colgate University and Boston University.

The thesis writer wants to examine the ideas of suicide on Anne Sexton's poems "*Wanting to Die*" and "*Suicide Note*" by using sociological perspective proposed by Emile Durkheim. Therefore, the theory used in analysing the topic is the theory of suicide proposed by Emile Durkheim.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

The researcher applies qualitative research to analyze the data. This approach is used since the data are collected in the form of words. The source of data is taken from Anne Sexton's poems entitled "*Wanting to Die*" and "*Suicide Note*".

C. ANALYSIS

A. The portrayal of *suicidal thoughts* as seen in Anne Sexton's poems: "*Wanting to Die*" and "Suicide Note"

1. The Portrayal of Suicidal thought in the poem "*Wanting to Die*"

Since you ask, most days I cannot remember.(1)
I walk in my clothing, unmarked by that voyage.(2)
Then the almost unnamable lust returns.(3)
(First Stanza, Anne Sexton: 1964)

Anne Sexton tells the reader for she cannot remember most days, as the days are uninteresting. In line 2, Anne Sexton describes herself as walking unconsciously through life, unimpressed and unaffected by the world around her. In line 3, Anne Sexton describes the thought of wanting to die as an unnamable lust, and an unnamable lust always returns to her mind, it means that desire to die is an addiction for her. The suicidal thought is seen in the second stanza below:

Even then I have nothing against life.(4)
I know well the grass blades you mention,(5)
the furniture you have placed under the sun.(6)
(Second Stanza, Anne Sexton: 1964)

In line 4, she explains that she has nothing against life for she feels tired to live her life and she has no hope in life. In the next line, she knows well the grass blades that symbolize the vitality of the living world, and in line 6, the furniture under the sun which gives the pleasant images of daily life but Anne Sexton uses them to assert her intention to die.

In the third stanza, the suicidal thought is seen in the following quotation:

But suicides have a special language.(7)
Like carpenters they want to know which tools.(8)
They never ask why build.(9)
(Third Stanza, Anne Sexton: 1964)

In line 7, Anne Sexton thinks that suicide has attraction for her so she says that suicides have a special language and only she can understand why she always want to end her

own life. In the next line, Sexton considers suicide as a creation, she uses her desire to die as the topic to create her poems. Sexton wants to know why she has an interest in suicide and create her poems about suicide.

2. The Portrayal of Suicidal thought in the poem “*Suicide Note*”

*Better,
despite the worms talking to
the mare's hoof in the field;
better,
despite the season of young girls
dropping their blood;
better somehow
to drop myself quickly
into an old room. Better (someone said)
not to be born
and far better
not to be born twice
at thirteen*

(Third stanza, Anne Sexton: 1965)

In this lines, Sexton says that it is despite the worms and the young girls's blood that she finds it, she thinks that it is better to die quickly. The worms and the young girls's blood are both have relation to life and death. The worms and the young girls's blood, both are at the intersection of fertility and decay. The worms talking to the mare's hoof are the rich yeast of the soil on which the horse walks and from which it gains sustenance; yet the worms will ultimately speak not only of nurture but of decay. The young girls's blood is symbolic of destruction. Despite the worms talking to the mare's hoof and the season of young girls dropping their blood whose affirm life as well as death, Sexton thinks that it is better to escape into the old room of her death quickly.

In 15-19, Sexton says that it is better not to be born at all, and far better not to be born twice. She would have been happy if she was not born. Sexton says that it is better for her not to be born, it means that she wants to die because there is no good reason to continue with

this futile life. Sexton thinks that to die quickly is the best thing to be done in the midst of all that absurdity of living, and it would have been even better if she was not born at all.

The next suicidal thought are seen in the fourth and in the ninth stanzas as seen in the following quotations:

*Dear friend,
I will have to sink with hundreds of others
on a dumbwaiter into hell.
I will be a light thing.
I will enter death
like someone's lost optical lens.*
(Fourth stanza, Anne Sexton: 1965)

*But surely you know that everyone has a death,
his own death,
waiting for him.
So I will go now
without old age or disease,
wildly but accurately,
knowing my best route,*
(Ninth stanza, Anne Sexton: 1965)

In the fourth stanza, Anne Sexton tells her friend that she will have to sink with hundreds of others on a dumbwaiter into hell, it means that she will die by committing suicide and she doesn't care if she will have to go to hell.

In the ninth stanza, Sexton says that she cannot wait for death. She have to die by taking her own life without waiting for her old age or disease. Sexton knows her best route since her decision to kill herself had a great deal of dignity. She knows she is not going to get well so suicide is the best way for her to heal herself from pain.

D. CONCLUSION

The portrayal of suicide as seen in Anne Sexton's two poems. The two poems portray the suicide, that are, one takes himself, all cases of death which is a direct or indirect result from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, the intentional killing of oneself, and also a self-destructive action or course. It can be seen through Anne Sexton's desire to die as seen in her two poems entitled *Wanting to Die* and *Suicide Note*. To avoid suicide some people must recognize the warning signs and know how to respond if we spot them.

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