

A Portrayal of Kurt Cobain's Suicide In Nirvana's Song
Lyrics: "*I Hate Myself and I Want To Die*", "*Lithium*",
and "*Pennyroyal Tea*".

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Abstract

This research focuses on Kurt Cobain's suicide as portrayed in Nirvana's song lyrics. The researchers conduct a qualitative research using Nirvana's song lyrics entitled "I Hate Myself and I Want To Die," "Lithium," and "Pennyroyal Tea" as sources of data. The researchers apply the theory of suicide stated by Emile Durkheim. The findings show that Kurt Cobain's suicide in Nirvana's song lyrics depicts direct or indirect death resulting from the victim's positive or negative actions, intentional suicide, and self-destructive behaviors.

Keywords: Suicide, Song Lyrics

A. INTRODUCTION

Every year, 703,000 people commit suicide, and many more attempt to do so. Each suicide is a tragedy that affects families, communities, and entire nations, with long-lasting effects on those left behind. Suicide is a serious public health problem; however, it can be prevented with timely, evidence-based, and often low-cost interventions. The aforementioned facts indicate that suicide is a leading cause of death, either directly or indirectly resulting from the actions of the victim himself. As seen in Durkheim (1951:43), suicide is defined as applicable to all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result. Emile Durkheim also defines suicide as an act in which the person chooses death over life. He states that suicide is always the act of a person who prefers death to life (Durkheim, 1951:240).

Suicide occurs not only in real life but also in literature. Literature encompasses works of art such as drama, fiction, essays, poetry, biography, and movies, as stated by Hornby (1987:496). Lyrics or song lyrics can be considered poetry, and vice versa. Poetry or song lyrics are also part of literature and include works of art that contain artistic value and are related to human expressions, such as human existence, the reality of life, and human hopes. Poetry also holds unique value, consisting of a collection of words, figures of speech, symbols, and ideas that have meaning for events that occur in human life, such as suicide, which is related to individual and social life. To explain one's detachment from life, the individual accuses their immediate

surrounding circumstances; life is sad to them because they are sad. Their sadness often stems not from within their career but rather from the group to which they belong (Durkheim, 1951:264). From Durkheim's definition above, it can be concluded that in the case of suicide, the social environment influences many individuals to commit suicide. Therefore, if someone is sad in their life, suicidal thoughts may suddenly come to them. Even sadness comes to individuals because there is an influence from the social environment that affects individual psychology and ultimately motivates them to commit suicide.

The researchers prefer Nirvana, a band from the City of Aberdeen, Washington, United States, because Nirvana achieved success in the City of Seattle, United States, which is famous for the flow of grunge music, also known as Seattle Sound. Among Nirvana's songs, the thesis writer chooses the song lyrics of the Nirvana Band entitled "I Hate Myself and I Want To Die," "Lithium," and "Pennyroyal Tea," which are related to the suicide case of Kurt Cobain on April 5, 1994. Kurt Cobain, the lead singer, and guitarist for the American rock band Nirvana, was found dead at his home in Seattle, Washington. He had put a shotgun in his mouth and shot himself, killing himself instantaneously. Since he was young, Kurt had been depressed and suffered from chronic stomach pain for his age. The situation worsened when he was seven years old, following his parents' divorce. Kurt's father remarried, and his mother married a young man who was seven years his senior. After his parents' divorce, Kurt became depressed and lonely because he never felt loved and felt abandoned by his family. He became increasingly difficult and anti-social. Kurt also stated that his parents' traumatic separation was as painful and anger-inducing as the music of Nirvana.

Among Nirvana's songs, the researcher prefers song lyrics from the Nirvana Band entitled "I Hate Myself and I Want To Die," "Lithium," and "Pennyroyal Tea," which are related to Kurt Cobain's suicide in April 5, 1994. Kurt Cobain, the lead singer, and guitarist of the American rock band Nirvana, was found dead in his home in Seattle, Washington. It was confirmed that he had died three days before. The Seattle Police Department incident report stated that Cobain was found with a shotgun all over his body, suffered a gunshot wound to the head, and a suicide note was found nearby. Regarding Kurt Cobain's suicide, it could have happened due to the desire to hurt himself by committing suicide. According to Smith (1983), suicide is the act of intentionally destroying oneself, a violent self-inflicted destructive action resulting in death, and the act of killing oneself (p. 129). It can be said that suicide is a result of mental illness where people cannot accept themselves and the actions of others and the environment that intentionally cause death.

In conclusion, the indications for suicide include direct or indirect death from the victim's positive or negative actions, a person or group taking their life, self-intentional suicide, and self-destructive actions.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

The researchers conduct qualitative research. The source of data is taken from Nirvana's song lyrics entitled *I Hate Myself and Want to Die*, *Lithium*, and *Pennyroyal Tea*. These songs are written by vocalist and guitarist Kurt Cobain.

C. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The researchers aim to analyse Kurt Cobain's suicide as portrayed in Nirvana's song lyrics. To understand the depiction of Kurt Cobain's suicide, the researchers utilize Emile Durkheim's theory. Below is the presentation table showing the identification results of the portrayal of Kurt Cobain's suicide in his three song lyrics.

No.	Suicide indicator	Song Title		
		<i>"I Hate Myself and I Want To Die"</i>	<i>"Lithium"</i>	<i>"Pennyroyal Tea"</i>
1.	Self Destructive Actions	6	-	1
2.	Intentional Suicide	1	-	-
3.	Direct or Indirectly Death From Positive or Negative Victim's	-	8	4

1. The Portrayal of Kurt Cobain's Suicide in *I Hate Myself and I Want To Die* (1993)

"I Hate Myself And I Want To Die" is a Nirvana song. Kurt often wrote the phrase "I hate myself and I want to die" in his diary; it repeats itself until it becomes obsessed with suicide (Cross, 2005). Kurt describes this song as someone who is always afraid, delusional, confused thinking, and also wants to kill himself every time, so that someone is none other than Kurt Cobain himself. Based on the table above, it can be seen that in the song lyrics entitled "I Hate Myself and I Want To Die," there are two indicators of suicide which are thought to be a

description of Kurt Cobain's suicide, namely self-destructive acts and intentional suicide. The portrayal of Kurt Cobain's suicide by self-destructive actions can be seen in the first stanza, the third, and fourth line.

*You can **cough** on me again*

*I still haven't had my **fulfill***

(First Stanza, Third & Fourth Lines, Kurt Cobain: 1993)

Kurt is seen using the word "cough," which means "to force air out suddenly and hard through the throat." In the two lines above, Kurt explains the use of cocaine and heroin by smoking them until his nose runs. Kurt experienced an effect after taking heroin, which he expressed by associating it with his desire to die through this cough. Kurt was finally able to fulfill his wish to obtain heroin forever, satisfying his obsession with suicide and hoping to escape addiction one day. In the second and fourth stanzas, Kurt spoke about his death; one day, people would hear the news that he had killed himself.

Broken heart and broken bones

*Think of how a castrated **horse** feels*

One more quirky I'd phrase

*You're the one I wanna **refill***

(Second Stanza, First until fourth lines, Kurt Cobain: 1993)

The term "broken heart" refers to someone who has experienced emotional pain after being left by someone they love, while "broken bone" describes the condition of having fractured bones in the body after an accident. In this line, Kurt describes his intense sadness and vulnerability due to his unresolved problems. Kurt uses the word "horse" in his song lyrics as a symbol of masculinity, where he should be a brave, steadfast, and responsible leader for his family, serving as a role model. However, Kurt feels dissatisfied and has been unhappy for a long time. The portrayal of Kurt Cobain's intentional suicide is evident in the following quote.

*With common wood, screws can make a child look like a **deer***

(Fourth stanza, Fourth line, Kurt Cobain: 1993)

In this context, the word "deer" can be interpreted as a symbol of Kurt's public image within his family and among his fans, depicting his struggle to be a good father to his children. Deer are often hunted in forests, similar to how Kurt, as a famous rock star, is constantly pursued by the public and the media. This constant attention makes him uncomfortable, akin to the restless life

of a deer always being chased. Kurt realizes the expectations placed upon him as a public figure, where he should serve as a positive role model for both the media and his family. However, he perceives this label as a burden due to the constant pressure it entails. Consequently, he seeks to relieve himself of this burden by contemplating suicide, desiring to free himself from the weight on his body and soul.

2. The Portrayal of Kurt Cobain's Suicide in Lithium (1992)

Based on the table above, the suicide indicator used to depict Kurt Cobain's suicide in this song lyric is direct or indirect death resulting from the victim's positive or negative actions. This is evident in the second stanza:

*I'm so **lonely**, that's okay, I **shaved** my head*

And I'm not sad

*And just maybe I'm to **blame** for all I've **heard***

But I'm not sure

*I'm so **excited**, I can't wait to **meet you there***

*But I **don't care***

*I'm so **horny**, that's okay, my **will is good***

(Second stanza, Kurt Cobain: 1992)

Kurt felt "lonely" and his life felt empty because of all the problems that befell him, especially when he had to deal with his parents' divorce. In the word "Shaved," Kurt felt that his thoughts and ideas stored in his mind had been shaved off, and even almost finished, because he had been drained by disgust and depression from the events that had happened during his life. In the word "Heard," Kurt tries to stay strong when he hears many people talk about his badness. This excited word emphasizes Kurt's death because he felt that he was no longer useful to live, and he really wanted to meet his death. Kurt felt that no one else wanted to listen to what he was talking about and complaining about. It was as if the universe was not on his side. Here Kurt emphasizes that he really wanted to kill himself, and thought that he would be able to meet his god. Even though many were against him committing suicide, Kurt didn't care and wanted to keep doing it. Kurt firmly believes that the decision he wants to make right now is the best path for himself and others.

3. The Portrayal of Kurt Cobain's Suicide in Pennyroyal Tea (1994)

"Pennyroyal tea," Kurt's song title, refers to an abortion drug when used in large doses. The phrase "Pennyroyal Tea" can also be spelled "Penny Royalty," which means "head figure" in British currency. According to the table, the portrayal of Kurt Cobain's suicide as directly or indirectly resulting from the victim's positive or negative actions can be seen in the following quotation:

*Give me a Leonard Cohen **afterworld***

*So I can **sigh eternally***

(Third stanza, first & second lines, Kurt Cobain: 1994)

In this line, Kurt hints about death. Kurt himself often wrote about death and immortality. The lyrics contain the word "afterworld," which refers to life after death. Here Kurt shows his strong emotions towards death. Kurt had suicidal thoughts because he felt there was no point in living anymore. He thought dying quickly was the right way to deal with all the absurdities of life, so by committing suicide, he felt like he could live forever in death.

The next portrayal of Kurt Cobain's suicide, directly or indirectly resulting from the victim's positive or negative actions, can be seen in the following quotation:

*I'm so **tired** I can't sleep*

*I'm a **liar** and a **thief***

(Fourth stanza, First and Second lines, Kurt Cobain: 1994)

The first and second lines reveal Kurt's most difficult point in his career: he did not feel comfortable in his life as a rock star, despite being followed wherever he went. He and his wife continued to face criticism, especially from the media, for Courtney's actions while pregnant and still using heroin, and Kurt did the same. Pregnancy and the fetus were significant aspects of Kurt's life since Courtney was pregnant with their child. The connection between abortion, the herbal abortion pill, and Pennyroyal Tea are three themes present in Kurt's life. In the early days of Frances' pregnancy, Courtney often received offers of free morphine abortions from doctors concerned about her heroin use (Cross, 2005). Since Kurt became a drug addict, he became a person who liked to lie in public, pretending to be fine when in fact he was depressed and wanted to commit suicide. The next suicide indicator, through self-destructive actions, can be seen in the fifth stanza:

I'm on warm milk and laxatives

Cherry-flavored antacids

(Fifth stanza, First and second lines, Kurt Cobain: 1994)

The line describes suicide through self-destructive behavior using drugs. Specific drugs mentioned are "Laxatives" and "Antacids," which indicate suicidal thoughts. According to the quote, Kurt took laxatives, milk, and antacids simultaneously. While Kurt did suffer from a longstanding stomach problem, he also illustrates his suicidal thoughts here. By experimenting with drugs in this manner, he sought to harm himself and hasten death. Kurt believed this was the most dignified way to end his suffering, as he knew he would never fully recover from his pain.

D.CONCLUSION

Through the analysis above, the portrayal of Kurt Cobain's suicide in "I Hate Myself and I Want to Die" depicts self-destructive behavior using heroin, leading to overdose, as evident in the first, second, and fourth stanzas. Additionally, intentional suicide is apparent in the fourth stanza, as Kurt allows heroin to consume him slowly, resulting in suicide. In "Lithium," Kurt's suicide is portrayed as a direct or indirect result of his positive or negative actions, stemming from depression and family conflicts, particularly his parents' divorce, as seen in the third stanza. In "Pennyroyal Tea," Kurt's suicide is also depicted as a direct or indirect result of his actions, with intentional suicide evident in the first line of the fifth stanza. The portrayal of suicide in this song involves Kurt using laxatives and antacids to alleviate his stomach pain, representing a form of self-harm.

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