



# **APPRAISAL SYSTEM IN KURT COBAIN'S SUICIDE LETTER**

**A JOURNAL ARTICLE**

**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Sarjana Sastra (S.S.) in English Language**

by

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SEMARANG  
2014**

**PAGE OF APPROVAL**

**Title of Journal Article** : Appraisal System in Kurt Cobain's Suicide Letter  
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**Student ID Number** : C11.2010.00019

This journal article has been approved by the adviser on August 5, 2014.

Adviser



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## APPRAISAL SYSTEM IN KURT COBAIN'S SUICIDE LETTER

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### ABSTRACT

*This study aims to describe appraisal devices used by the writer (Kurt Cobain) in his suicide letter and to discover the meanings of the content of Kurt Cobain's suicide letter. This research used descriptive qualitative method. The collected data were in form of sentences, phrases, clauses, words, and then they were classified into their categories to get conclusion. The data were collected by searching and downloading Kurt Cobain's suicide letter from internet as source of data, retyping, reading and comprehending the text, and then collecting appraisal items. The data were analyzed by identifying appraisal items used by Kurt Cobain in his suicide letter, classifying appraisal items into appraisal devices, interpreting appraisal items, and then drawing the conclusion. The result of this research shows that there are 132 appraisal devices produced by Kurt Cobain in his suicide letter. The analysis of data shows that Kurt Cobain produces more attitude (42%) than graduation (30%) and engagement (28%). It means that almost every Kurt Cobain's utterance has more than one attitude and graduation. The most engagement is mono-gloss because all of source of attitude is from the writer (Kurt Cobain). In the data, Kurt Cobain shows more negative than positive attitude. The most attitude expressed by Kurt Cobain is judgement (57%), followed by affect (30%), and the fewest attitude is appreciation (13%). It means that Kurt Cobain tends to evaluate character or behavior. In giving judgement, he tends to give negative judgements for his capacity. In amplifying attitude, Kurt Cobain uses more force (87%) than focus (13%). It means that in amplifying his attitudes, Kurt Cobain tends to use gradable words than non-gradable words.*

**Keywords:** *appraisal, attitude, engagement, graduation, kurt cobain's suicide letter*

### INTRODUCTION

People as social beings who cannot alive alone need to communicate with others. The use of communication is to fulfill and to share what people want, need, and feel. The realization of communication is by using language. As a means of communication, language has effective and important role to express what someone wants, needs, and feels.

Language can be performed by spoken or written way. Spoken language can be found in face to face communication, telephone, radio, television, etc., while written language can be found in books, magazines, articles, letters, etc.

Letter is a kind of written communication. In a letter, there are meanings of the writer. To get the meanings of the letter, the reader has to comprehend wisely the letter content. The message of the letter will not be understood, or it will be misunderstood, if the reader does not comprehend wisely.

One of interesting letters is a suicide letter of Kurt Cobain, a vocalist of Nirvana band. The letter is interesting because it contains the fact of Kurt Cobain's life. In the letter, Kurt Cobain expresses his feelings before he commits suicide and during he becomes a vocalist of Nirvana band.

The reason of analyzing the letter of Kurt Cobain is not because the matter of being Kurt Cobain's fan, but it is because there are interpersonal meanings that need to comprehend wisely in the letter. It contains positive or negative stances of Kurt Cobain and fully what Kurt Cobain thinks and feels when he is still alive before commits suicide. This research wants to reveal how Kurt Cobain expresses and negotiates his stances through a letter. It will be comprehended and analyzed through language aspects used by Kurt Cobain in his letter.

To comprehend the content of the letter and the writer's stances, it can be seen from appraisal system produced by the writer. Appraisal is a system of interpersonal meaning in which it deals with how language users express their attitude. According to Martin and Rose (2003: 22), appraisal is concerned with evaluation: the kinds of attitudes that are negotiated in a text, the strength of the feeling involved, and the ways in which values are sourced and readers aligned. Appraisal is the linguistic elements in a text that show the stances of the speaker/the writer concerning to the issues he discusses in the text. It relates to the power of a text and makes the text meaningful. Martin & White (2005: 38) divide appraisal system into three kinds: engagement, attitude, and graduation. Engagement refers to the presence or absence of other voices in a text, for example: "*Only because it seems so easy for people to get along that have empathy*" (heterogloss:intra-vocalise:open:appearance). Attitude is a resource of language that enables writers to express their attitudes towards people, events, and other phenomena, for example: "*I LOVE YOU, I LOVE YOU!*" (affect:happiness). Graduation is about how attitudes are amplified, for example: "*Only because I love and feel sorry for people too much I guess*" (force:raise:intensifier).

This research concerns on appraisal system that consists of engagement, attitude, and graduation produced by Kurt Cobain in his suicide letter because it is to discover what the meanings of the content of Kurt Cobain's suicide letter and to evaluate how Kurt Cobain expresses and negotiates what he feels and thinks through his suicide letter.

## **METHOD**

The researcher used a descriptive qualitative method to identify appraisal devices in Kurt Cobain's suicide letter. It used qualitative method because the collected data were in the form of sentences, phrases, clauses, words, and then they

were classified into their categories to get conclusion. It used descriptive method because the data were gathered, composed, analyzed, and interpreted.

In this research, the researcher analyzed appraisal devices in Kurt Cobain's suicide letter based on the appraisal system offered by Martin and White (2005). For development of analysis, the researcher also used appraisal theories from White (1998) and Martin and Rose (2003).

Unit of analysis of this research are sentences, phrases, clauses, and words produced by Kurt Cobain in his suicide letter.

The data of this research is written data. It is a suicide letter of Kurt Cobain. The letter was found on April 8, 1994. The actual hand written suicide letter was downloaded from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2592105/Seattle-police-release-35-never-scene-photos-scene-Kurt-Cobains-1994-suicide.html>. The letter was published on March 29, 2014 and the researcher accessed it on April 14, 2014.

The data of this research was collected through some steps. First, searching a suicide letter of Kurt Cobain from internet and then downloading it. Second, retyping the letter because it was difficult enough to be read. To facilitate retyping, the researcher downloaded the typed suicide letter from internet. It was retrieved from [http://kurtcobainssuicidenote.com/kurt\\_cobains\\_suicide\\_note.html](http://kurtcobainssuicidenote.com/kurt_cobains_suicide_note.html). Third, reading and comprehending the texts of the letter. Fourth, collecting the data by segmenting every sentence, clause, phrase that has appraisal items in the letter.

The data was analyzed through some steps. First, identifying appraisal items. Second, classifying those appraisal items into appraisal devices. Third, interpreting those appraisal items. The last is drawing the conclusion.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Appraisal system in Kurt Cobain's suicide letter is presented in the following table.

**Table of Appraisal in Kurt Cobain's Suicide Letter**

No	Appraisal	Total	Percentage	
1	Engagement	Mono-gloss	35	26%
		Hetero-gloss	2	2%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>28%</b>	
2	Attitude	Affect	17	13%
		Judgement	32	24%
		Appreciation	7	5%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>42%</b>	
3	Graduation	Force	34	26%
		Focus	5	4%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>30%</b>	
<b>Total Appraisal</b>		<b>132</b>	<b>100%</b>	

From the table above, there are 132 appraisal devices found in Kurt Cobain’s suicide letter. The most appraisal devices are attitudes (42%), followed by graduation (30%). The fewest appraisal devices are engagements (28%). The finding of the table above shows that attitude is more than engagement and graduation. It can be concluded that there are some engagements that have more than one attitude and graduation. It means that every Kurt Cobain’s utterance has more than one attitude and amplification of attitude.

### 1. Engagement

Engagement is about source of attitude. The findings of engagement are presented in the following table:

**Table of Engagement in Kurt Cobain’s Suicide Letter**

No	Engagement	Total	Percentage
1	Mono-gloss	35	95%
2	Hetero-gloss	2	5%
<b>Total</b>		37	100%

From the table above, there are 37 engagements found in Kurt Cobain’s suicide letter. The most engagement is mono-gloss. The total is 35 (95%). For, hetero-gloss, the total is only 2 (5%). The finding of those engagements shows that almost the entire source of attitude is the writer (Kurt Cobain) because the letter is personal letter.

#### a. Mono-gloss

Mono-gloss refers to the source of attitude derived from the writer. For example:

*“The worst crime I can think of would be to rip people off by faking it and pretending as if I’m having 100% fun”*

The clause above is mono-gloss because the source of attitude is from the writer. It is identified from the use of the word “*I*”. In this case, the writer gives evaluation about his crime and the source of evaluation is derived from himself. The worst crime was when he was playing music he pretended to be happy in front of audiences, whereas actually he was not happy.

#### b. Hetero-gloss

Hetero-gloss relates to the source of attitude from others. For example:

*“For example when we’re back stage and the lights go out and the manic roar of the crowd begins, it doesn’t affect me the way in which it did for Freddie Mercury who seemed to love, relish in the love and adoration from the crowd which is something I totally admire and envy”*

The clause above is hetero-gloss. It is identified through the word “*seemed*”. The writer (Kurt Cobain) gives source of attitude from other (Freddie Mercury). In this case, Freddy Mercury (a vocalist of Queen band) feels happy in front of his fans. The word “*seemed*” is included in hetero-gloss:intra-vocalise:open:appearance. Cobain integrates Freddy Mercury’s attitude into his utterance. He invites the readers to question the proposition about Freddy Mercury by giving appearance. By the word “*seemed*”, he shows indecisively evidential process that Freddie Mercury seems happy in front of audiences.

## 2. Attitude

Attitude is concerned with utterances which indicate some persons, things, situations, actions or states of affairs are viewed either positively or negatively.

**Table of Attitude in Kurt Cobain’s Suicide Letter**

No	Attitude	Total	Percentage
1	Affect	17	30%
2	Judgement	32	57%
3	Appreciation	7	13%
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>56</b>	<b>100%</b>

From the table above, there are 56 attitudes found in Kurt Cobain’s suicide letter. The most attitudes expressed by Kurt Cobain are judgements. The total is 32 (57%). The fewest attitudes expressed by Kurt Cobain in his letter are appreciations. The total is 7 (13%). For affect, the total is 17 (30%). From the finding of the table above, it shows that Kurt Cobain expresses more judgement than affect and appreciation. It means that he tends to give evaluation about behaviors or characters.

### a. Affect

Affect is concerned with positive or negative feeling. The findings of affect are presented in the following table.

**Table of Affect in Kurt Cobain’s Suicide Letter**

No	Affect	Total	Percentage
1	Disinclination	1	6%
	Inclination	4	24%
2	Unhappiness	5	29%
	Happiness	4	24%
3	Insecurity	1	6%
	Security	-	-
4	Dissatisfaction	2	11%
	Satisfaction	-	-
<b>Total</b>		<b>17</b>	<b>100%</b>

From the table above, there are 17 affects found in Kurt Cobain's suicide letter. The most affect expressed by Kurt Cobain in his letter is unhappiness. The total is 5. The fewest affect expressed is disinclination and insecurity. The total is 1. There are no security and satisfaction expressed by Kurt Cobain in his letter. From the finding of the table above, it shows that unhappiness is more felt by Kurt Cobain.

#### 1) Dis/inclination

Dis/inclination deals with how the speaker/the writer inclines or disinclines to something such as desire and fear. For example:

*"I have a goddess of a wife who sweats ambition and empathy and a daughter who reminds me too much of what i used to be, full of love and joy, kissing every person she meets because everyone is good and will do her no harm, and that terrifies me to the point to where I can barely function"*

The underlined words above indicate disinclination. Those words show a negative affect. The word "that" above refers to his daughter's character and behavior. So through the underlined words above Cobain expresses his fear. He feels fearful if his daughter will be like him; be self-destructive person and hates people.

#### 2) Un/happiness

Un/happiness covers the speaker's/the writer's emotions concerned with affairs of heart such as misery, antipathy, cheer, and affection. For example:

*"I haven't felt the excitement of listening to as well as creating music along with reading and writing for too many years now"*

The underlined words above indicate unhappiness. Those words show a negative affect. Through those words, Kurt Cobain expresses his sadness when he was playing music. He did not feel happiness in playing music.

#### 3) In/security

In/security covers the speaker's/the writer's emotions concerned with his eco-social well-being such as disquiet, surprise, confidence, and trust. For example:

*"I feel guilty beyond words about these things"*

The underlined word above indicates insecurity. It shows a negative affect. Through that word, Kurt Cobain expresses his insecurity. He expresses that he feels uncomfortable over his guilty. His guilty is he pretends to be happy in front of audiences whereas actually he is not happy.



#### 4) Dis/satisfaction

Dis/satisfaction covers the speaker's/the writer's emotions concerned with the pursuit of goals such as ennui, displeasure, interest, pleasure. For example:

*“For example when we're back stage and the lights go out and the manic roar of the crowd begins, it doesn't affect me the way in which it did for Freddie Mercury, who seemed to love, relish in the love and adoration from the crowd which is something I totally admire and envy”*

The underlined words above indicate dissatisfaction. Those words show a negative affect. The word “it” refers to “the lights go out and the manic roar of the crowd begins”. Through the underlined words above Cobain expresses that he feels displeased and dissatisfied over the fanfare in his concert.

#### b. Judgement

Judgement is concerned with the expressions about norms or behaviors. The findings of judgement are presented in the following table.

**Table of Judgement in Kurt Cobain's Suicide Letter**

No	Judgement	Positive	Negative	Total	Percentage	
1	Social Esteem	Normality	1	2	3	9%
		Capacity	2	11	13	41%
		Tenacity	3	1	4	13%
2	Social Sanction	Veracity	0	2	2	6%
		Propriety	5	5	10	31%
<b>Total</b>		<b>11</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>100%</b>	
<b>Percentage</b>		<b>34%</b>	<b>66%</b>	<b>100%</b>		

From the table above, there are 32 judgements expressed by Kurt Cobain. Kurt Cobain shows more negative judgements than positive judgements. The total of negative judgements is 21 (66%), while the total of positive judgements is 11 (34%). In showing positive and negative judgement, the most judgements expressed by Kurt Cobain are capacity. The total is 13. The fewest judgements are veracity. The total is 2. From the finding of the table above, it shows that Cobain tends to give negative judgements for his capacity and it means that he feels pessimistic for his capacity.

##### 1) Normality

Normality deals with how unusual or special someone is. For example:

*“I'm too much of an erratic, moody, baby!”*

The words “erratic” and “moody” above indicate negative judgement of normality. Through those words, Kurt Cobain judges himself. He gives evaluation that he is someone who has uncertain character.

2) Capacity

Capacity deals with how capable someone is. For example:

*"I don't have the passion anymore, and so remember, it's better to burn out than to fade away"*

The word "*I don't have the passion*" above indicates a negative judgment about capacity. Through that word, Kurt Cobain judges himself. He judges that he is incapable to live his life. He feels that he does not have power and spirit anymore.

3) Tenacity

Tenacity deals with how resolute someone is. For example:

*"I've tried everything within my power to appreciate it (I do, God, believe me I do, but it's not enough)"*

The underlined words above indicate a positive judgement about tenacity. Through those words, Kurt Cobain judges himself. He shows his tenacity or his effort in respecting the audiences.

4) Veracity

Veracity deals with how truthful someone is. For example:

*"The worst crime I can think of would be to rip people off by faking it and pretending as if I'm having 100% fun"*

In the clause above, there are 2 negative judgement about veracity. They are identified by the words: (1) "*faking*", and (2) "*pretending*". Through both of those words, Kurt Cobain judges himself. He judges that he is dishonest and pretends in front of people. He pretends be happy in front of audiences when he plays music, whereas he is actually not happy.

5) Propriety

Propriety deals with how ethical someone is. For example:

*"I'm too sensitive"*

The underlined word above indicates a negative judgement about propriety. Through that word, Kurt Cobain judges himself. He gives evaluations that he is a sensitive man.

**c. Appreciation**

Appreciation is concerned with the expression about aesthetics, process, and natural phenomena. The findings of appreciation are presented in the following table.

**Table of Appreciation in Kurt Cobain’s Suicide Letter**

No	Appreciation	Positive	Negative	Total	Percentage	
1	Reaction	Impact	-	1	<b>1</b>	<b>14%</b>
		Quality	1	1	<b>2</b>	<b>29%</b>
2	Composition	Complexity	1	-	<b>1</b>	<b>14%</b>
		Balance	-	-	-	<b>0%</b>
3	Valuation	2	1	<b>3</b>	<b>43%</b>	
<b>Total</b>		<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>100%</b>	
<b>Percentage</b>		<b>57%</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>100%</b>		

From the table above, there are 7 appreciations found in Kurt Cobain’s suicide letter. Kurt Cobain expresses more positive than negative appreciations. The total of positive appreciation is 4 (57%), whereas the total of negative appreciation is 3 (43%). In showing positive and negative appreciations, the most appreciations expressed by Kurt Cobain are valuation. The total is 3. The fewest appreciations are reaction:impact and composition:balance. The total is 1. In the letter, Kurt Cobain never appreciates about composition:balance. From the finding of the table above, it shows that Kurt Cobain gives more about valuation.

1) Impact

Impact deals with whether the phenomenon grabs our attention or not. For example:

*“For example when we're back stage and the lights go out and the manic roar of the crowd begins, it doesn't affect me the way in which it did for Freddie Mercury, who seemed to love, relish in the love and adoration from the crowd which is something I totally admire and envy”*

The underlined words above indicate a negative appreciation about impact. The pronoun “it” refers to “*the lights go out and the manic roar of the crowd begins*”. The target of appreciation is the fanfare of concert. Kurt Cobain evaluates that the fanfare in his concert does not effect to him or does not make him happy.

2) Quality

Quality deals with whether the phenomenon is liked by the speaker/the writer or not. For example:

*“I have a goddess of a wife who sweats ambition and empathy and a daughter who reminds me too much of what i used to be, full of love and joy, kissing every person she meets because everyone is good and will do her no harm”*

The word “*a goddess of a wife*” above indicates a positive appreciation about quality. The target of appreciation is Kurt Cobain’s wife. Cobain gives evaluation that his wife is very beautiful.

### 3) Complexity

Complexity deals with whether the phenomenon is easy or difficult to comprehend. For example:

*“This note should be pretty easy to understand”*

The word “*pretty easy to understand*” above indicates positive appreciation about complexity. The target of appreciation is Kurt Cobain’s letter. Kurt Cobain gives evaluation that his note is easy enough to be understood by people.

### 4) Valuation

Valuation is related to cognition or our considered opinions. For example:

*“All the warnings from the punk rock 101 courses over the years, since my first introduction to the, shall we say, ethics involved with independence and the embracement of your community has proven to be very true”*

The word “*true*” above indicates a positive valuation. The target of appreciation is Punk Rock community. Kurt Cobain gives evaluation that all about independence and embracement of punk rock community is real.

## 3. Graduation

Graduation is concerned with how attitudes are amplified and blurred. The findings of graduation are presented in the following table.

**Table of Graduation in Kurt Cobain’s Suicide Letter**

No	Graduation	Total	Percentage
1	Force	34	87%
2	Focus	5	13%
<b>Total</b>		<b>39</b>	<b>100%</b>

From the table above, there are 39 graduations found in Kurt Cobain suicide letter. The writer (Kurt Cobain) more uses force than focus. The total of force is 34 (87%), whereas the total of focus is 5 (13%). From the table above, it shows that Kurt Cobain uses more force than focus in amplifying his attitude. It can be concluded that in giving evaluation the writer prefers to use gradable words than non-gradable words.

**a. Force**

Force is concerned with raising or lowering attitudes. The findings of force are presented in the following table.

**Table of Force in Kurt Cobain’s Suicide Letter**

No	Force	Intensifier	Attitudinal Lexis	Metaphor	Swearing	Total	Percentage
1	Raise	16	4	9	1	<b>30</b>	<b>88%</b>
2	Lower	3	1	0	0	<b>4</b>	<b>12%</b>
Total		<b>19</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>100%</b>
Percentage		<b>56%</b>	<b>15%</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>3%</b>	<b>100%</b>	

From the table above, there are 34 forces found in Kurt Cobain’s suicide letter. Kurt Cobain prefers to raise than to lower the force of his attitudes. The total of the raising of force is 30 (88%), whereas the total of the lowering of force is 4 (12%). In raising and lowering attitude, the most forces used by Kurt Cobain are intensifiers. The number is 19. The fewest force is swearing. The total is only 1. From the finding of table above, it shows that Kurt Cobain tends to use intensifiers in raising and lowering the force of his attitudes.

1) Raise

Raise relates with giving higher scaling of force. For example:

*“Speaking from the tongue of an experienced simpleton who obviously would rather be an emasculated, infantile complain-ee”*

The words “*obviously*” and “*rather*” are intensifiers that show higher scaling of force. In this case, Kurt Cobain uses those intensifiers to raise his judgement about himself. He raises judgement about his capacity being a complainer.

2) Lower

Lower deals with giving lower scaling of force. For example:

*“I need to be slightly numb in order to regain the enthusiasms I once had as a child”*

The word “*slightly*” is an intensifier that shows lower scaling of force. In this case, Kurt Cobain uses the intensifier “*slightly*” to lower force for his desire in regaining his enthusiasms in playing music.

## b. Focus

Focus is concerned with sharpening or softening attitudes. The findings of focus are presented in the following table.

**Table of Focus in Kurt Cobain's Suicide Letter**

No	Focus	Total	Percentage
1	Sharpen	5	100%
2	Soften	-	-
<b>Total</b>		5	100%

From the table above, there are 5 focuses found in Kurt Cobain's suicide letter. The writer (Kurt Cobain) only sharpens effect of the focus. The total is 5. In the letter, it does not found the softening effect of the focus. It means that the writer really wants to focus his attitudes in the letter.

The findings above show that Cobain only gives sharpening effect of the focus. For example:

*"There's good in all of us and I think I simply love people too much, so much that it makes me feel too fucking sad"*

Focus is amplified by the word "*simply*". It gives the sharpening effect of the focus. Kurt Cobain gives the sharpening effect for his feeling. He sharpens that he only loves people so much, nothing else.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and discussion it can be concluded that in writing the suicide letter, Kurt Cobain as the writer uses all appraisal devices: engagement, attitude, and graduation. There are 132 appraisal devices found in Kurt Cobain's suicide letter. The most appraisal devices produced by the writer (Kurt Cobain) are attitudes (42%), followed by graduations (30%), and the fewest appraisal devices are engagements (28%). From the quantity of those appraisal devices, it can be concluded that almost every Kurt Cobain's utterance has more than one attitude and graduation.

From the data, the most engagement used by the writer is mono-gloss (95%). The writer only uses little of hetero-gloss (5%). It can be concluded that the most sources of attitudes in the suicide letter is derived from the writer because the letter is a personal letter. Although, it is a personal letter, the writer also gives source of attitudes from the others.

From the analysis of attitude, the writer expresses more judgements (57%) than affects (30%) and appreciations (13%). It means the writer tends to evaluate characters or behaviors. The judgements are more addressed to himself than the others. In giving those judgements, the writer shows more negative judgements (66%) than positive judgements (34%). From the quantity and target of those judgements, it can be concluded that the writer feels that he have many bad

behaviors. For the analysis of judgement, the writer tends to judge for capacity, especially his capacity. In judging capacity, he gives more negative judgements than positive judgements. It means that the writer feels that he has many bad capacities. For the analysis of affect, the writer tends to express his unhappiness. It can be concluded that so many sadness that he feels. The writer never expresses satisfaction and security in his letter. For the analysis of appreciation, the writer never gives appreciations about balance.

From the analysis of graduation in the data, in amplifying attitudes the writer uses more force (87%) than focus (13%). It can be concluded that in giving evaluation the writer prefers to use gradable word than non-gradable word. In analyzing force, the writer tends to raise (88%) than to lower (12%) the force of attitude. It means that in the letter, the writer really wants to express what he feels by raising his attitudes. In analyzing focus, the writer tends to give sharpening effect of focus. He never gives softening effect of focus. It means that the writer really wants to focus his attitudes in the letter.

From the findings and the analysis of appraisal system in Kurt Cobain's suicide letter, the reason why the writer commits suicide also can be concluded. If it is seen from language aspects, especially appraisal produced by the writer, he commits suicide because he felt pessimistic in living his life. It can be proved from the content of his letter; he prefers to give negative judgements to his capacity. Satisfaction and security that he never felt also can be the reason he commits suicide. There are many mono-glosses in his letter show that the source of attitude is really from him, and many raising of attitudes show that his feelings' expressions are very strong and deep.

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