

The Meaning of Grief in the Song Lyrics of "Paint It Black" by The Rolling Stones

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Abstract

Song lyrics serve as a medium for expressing complex emotions, including grief and loss. This study aims to analyse the representation of grief in "Paint It Black" by The Rolling Stones using Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's Five Stages of Grief model. The data consist of 9 stanzas of the song's lyrics that were analysed using a qualitative descriptive method, examining the lyrics by identifying signifiers and signifieds and interpreting their meanings through the process of signification. The findings reveal that grief is represented through recurring symbols such as black cars, funeral flowers, darkness, and color imagery, which signify mourning, emotional suffering, hopelessness, and irreversible loss. The analysis identifies four stages of grief, denial, anger, bargaining, and depression, with depression emerging as the dominant stage. This research contributes to semiotic and literary studies by demonstrating how Saussurean semiotics can be integrated with psychological grief models to analyse emotional expression in song lyrics. The study concludes that "Paint It Black" portrays grief as a transformative experience communicated through a rich system of symbolic signs.

Keywords: Semiotics, Grief, Song, Signs, Ferdinand De Saussure, Kübler-Ross, Five Stages of Grief.

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INTRODUCTION

A song is generally understood as a form of artistic expression that combines musical elements with linguistic components to convey emotions, experiences, ideas, and messages. Griffiee (1992) distinguished songs, pieces of music with lyrics, from purely instrumental music such as symphonies or solo guitar, emphasizing that lyrics carry communicative weight that melody alone cannot. Songs function simultaneously as entertainment and as a medium of communication that mirrors personal and social realities (Astuti & Antika, 2025). Yuliasari (2023) described songs as an artistic outlet through which composers externalize feelings and thoughts, encoding meaning for listeners to interpret. Song lyrics occupy a space between speech and poetry. Like speech, they are vocally performed and linguistically structured; like poetry, they are crafted with deliberate word choice, rhyme, imagery, and metaphor to create layers of meaning that ordinary language cannot reach (Kayla & Simatupang, 2025; Sitorus, 2019). Through stylistic devices and symbolic

vocabulary, songwriters bend language beyond its everyday limits, making lyrics a rich textual object for interpretive analysis.

Among the many themes explored in song lyrics, grief and loss have remained one of the most enduring subjects in musical history. From the perspective of Pop-jordanova (2021), grief is a complex and multidimensional psychological process that arises as a natural human response to various forms of loss, such as death, relationship breakdown, job loss, or unexpected life changes. Neimeyer (2005) further observed that grieving is not only an individual experience but also a social process, as family and community responses can either support or hinder a person's ability to cope with bereavement. One of the most influential frameworks for understanding grief is Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's Five Stages model, which proposes that individuals may experience denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance following a significant loss. However, Kübler-Ross & Kessler (2005) explicitly emphasize that these stages are not linear or sequential; they can emerge in varying orders, recur, overlap, or appear in alternation. This non-linear nature is particularly relevant when analyzing lyrical texts, as a song may capture the fluid and oscillating emotional states of a grieving narrator without following a fixed progression.

One of the most iconic songs that expresses themes of grief and loss is "Paint It Black" by The Rolling Stones. The song was recorded at RCA Studios in Los Angeles in early March 1966 during the sessions for the album "Aftermath" and was released as a single on May 7, 1966 in the United States and May 13 in the United Kingdom (Harper, 2025). Its creation took place against the backdrop of profound social and political upheaval in the 1960s, marked by the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, and widespread countercultural protests, which shaped a collective mood of disillusionment, anxiety, and existential uncertainty. Critically, "Paint It Black" has been regarded as one of the earliest rock songs to explicitly confront mortality and psychological despair, challenging the optimistic pop conventions of its time through its ominous sitar-driven melody and bleak lyrical imagery (Casalena, 2025). The song rapidly reached number one on the charts in both the US and the UK, becoming the band's last chart-topping single for two years (Harper, 2025). While its commercial success is notable, it is the song's emotional texture, its unrelenting representation of sorrow, hopelessness, and the narrator's struggle with irreversible loss, that makes it a compelling object of semiotic inquiry.

As cultural texts composed of linguistic and symbolic elements, song lyrics can be systematically examined through semiotic theory to uncover the meanings embedded within their signs and representations (Ulfah & Dewi, 2025). Linguistic signs exist precisely to carry meaning, and meaning itself lies at the center of semiotic inquiry, not as a fixed fact, but as something to be decoded through careful analysis (Wang, 2016). This study adopts Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic framework, which hypothesizes that every sign consists of two interrelated components which are the signifier, referring to the physical form of a sign such as a word, sound, or image, and the signified, referring to the concept, idea, or emotion evoked by that form (Fauzan et al., 2023; Ramdani & Sakinah, 2023). Saussure also defines it as the science concerned with how signs function within society and how meaning is produced through them. For Saussure, semiotics would map out what signs are made of and the

principles that regulate how they operate (Saussure, 1916/1959). Crucially, Saussure's theory introduces the process of "signification", the dynamic and context-dependent relationship through which signifiers evoke specific signifieds, thereby generating meaning. In the context of lyrical analysis, signification allows the researcher to trace how particular words, colors, or images (signifiers) trigger culturally and emotionally grounded concepts (signifieds) within the framework of the song's narrative and the broader socio-cultural environment (Chandler, 2005). This analytical lens is particularly suited to song lyrics, as it enables the interpreter to move beyond literal denotation and uncover the connotative layers of grief, mourning, and emotional turmoil encoded in poetic language.

Several previous studies have applied Saussurean semiotics to song lyrics, though with different thematic focuses. Erlangga et al. (2021), in their analysis of the song "Melukis Senja," examined how linguistic signs constructed romantic values and emotional affection. Similarly, Hidayat (2014) employed Saussure's framework to explore motivational meanings, such as dreams, hope, and perseverance, in the lyrics of "Laskar Pelangi." Nugraha (2016) used the same semiotic approach to investigate nationalist values, patriotism, and national identity in the song "Bendera." These studies share a common methodological foundation with the present research, namely the identification of signifier-signified relationships on a stanza-by-stanza basis. However, they diverge significantly in their thematic objects, as they center on positive or socially cohesive values, romance, motivation, and nationalism, rather than on the darker psychological territory of grief and emotional suffering.

The research gap and novelty of this study lie precisely in this thematic and theoretical departure. While previous works have focused on affirmative emotions and ideologies, the present study turns to "Paint It Black" as a lyrical text that represents grief, loss, and despair. More importantly, the novelty of this research resides in its interdisciplinary integration: it combines Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic framework with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's Five Stages of Grief theory. This synthesis allows the study not only to identify what the lyrics signify linguistically through signifier-signified relations, but also to map those significations onto identifiable psychological stages of grief (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance). By bridging linguistic analysis with psychological interpretation, this research offers a more comprehensive understanding of how grief is constructed, symbolized, and communicated through song lyrics, a contribution that has not been systematically attempted in prior Saussurean studies of popular music. Accordingly, the overarching aim of this study is to uncover how grief is represented through linguistic signs in "Paint It Black" and to determine how the psychological dimensions of grief are reflected in the song's lyrics.

To achieve this aim, the study addresses two operational research questions. The first question examines how grief is represented through the linguistic signs, specifically the signifiers and their corresponding signifieds, in the lyrics of Paint It Black. The second question asks which of Kübler-Ross's Five Stages of Grief are reflected in the lyrics and how these stages are manifested through the song's linguistic and symbolic representations. By answering these questions, the study seeks to demonstrate the analytical value of combining semiotic and psychological

approaches in literary and cultural studies, while also contributing a detailed interpretation of one of the most enduringly melancholic songs in rock history.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research harnesses a qualitative descriptive method. Descriptive qualitative research, according to Hall & Liebenberg (2024) as cited in Chaniago et al. (2025), is a methodological approach that emphasizes giving thorough and in-depth explanations of participants' experiences without heavily depending on theoretical interpretation. Qualitative research is shaped by several defining features: purposeful sampling, open-ended data collection, textual or visual analysis, and interpretation grounded in the researcher's own reading of the findings. Together, these procedures prioritize depth of meaning over statistical measurement (Creswell, 1991). The qualitative descriptive design is particularly suited to this study because its object of analysis, the lyrics of "Paint It Black" by The Rolling Stones, is a literary text whose meaning is implicit and resistant to numerical measurement. Unlike quantitative approaches that seek to measure variables or test hypotheses, this design enables the researcher to explore the depth and complexity of emotional expression in song lyrics, providing rich, interpretive insights into how grief is linguistically and symbolically constructed.

This study draws on two data sources. The primary data consist of the official lyrics of "Paint It Black" by The Rolling Stones, sourced from the internet. These lyrics serve as the main textual corpus for identifying and interpreting Saussurean signifiers and signifieds. The secondary data, which means data that are already available and have been previously published by organizations, institutions, or other credible sources (Erlangga et al., 2024), include academic books, journal articles, and other scholarly references related to semiotics, Saussurean theory, grief, and song lyric analysis. These sources were collected through library research and online academic databases to provide theoretical support and contextualize the findings of the study.

The data collection process involved several systematic steps. First, the researcher identified the official lyrics of "Paint It Black" from reliable online sources and transcribed them for analysis. Second, the lyrics were divided into individual stanzas based on the song's structural divisions, with repeated stanzas excluded to avoid redundancy. Third, each stanza was treated as a separate unit of analysis, allowing for a detailed examination of how grief-related signs function within the lyrical structure. The unit of analysis was defined as each line or phrase containing linguistic signs (words, images, or symbols) that could potentially carry grief-related meanings. For each unit, the researcher identified signifiers (the linguistic forms) and determined their signifieds (the concepts or emotions they evoke) based on the context of the lyrics and the broader cultural and emotional framework of the song.

The data analysis procedure consisted of four systematic stages. First, the researcher identified words, phrases, and sentences in the song lyrics that function as signifiers, with particular attention given to linguistic signs related to grief, loss, and emotional suffering. Next, the signified associated with each signifier was determined by examining the concepts, emotions, or mental images conveyed within the linguistic and contextual framework of the song. The relationship between the signifier and the

signified was then interpreted through the process of signification, taking into account both denotative and connotative meanings. Finally, the interpreted meanings were categorized according to Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's Five Stages of Grief, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. This systematic procedure ensured that the analysis remained consistent, coherent, and transparent throughout the study.

To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, this study employed triangulation of theory, using multiple theoretical perspectives (Saussurean semiotics and Kübler-Ross's grief model) to cross-validate the interpretations. Additionally, repeated readings of the lyrics were conducted to ensure consistency and depth of analysis. The researcher engaged in iterative close reading, revisiting the lyrics multiple times to refine interpretations and confirm that the assigned signifieds and grief stage categorizations were grounded in the textual evidence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The object of this study is the song Paint It Black by The Rolling Stones, a song associated with themes of grief, loss, and emotional despair. Through its recurring imagery of darkness and its portrayal of a narrator struggling to cope with the absence of a loved one, the song expresses the psychological impact of grief and the sense of loss. With Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic theory, this study focuses on the relationship between the signifier and the signified within the lyrics. Song lyrics are well-suited as a data source for this study for practical as well as analytical reasons. Transcriptions of widely known songs are publicly available online, making them straightforward to collect and verify. More importantly, lyrics are a fixed, written form of language, stable enough to support close semiotic reading in a way that improvised or spoken discourse is not. (Logan et al., 2004). Lyrics also offer a degree of textual stability, for any given song, there is a single authoritative transcription against which the analysis can be anchored. To avoid redundancy, repeated stanzas are excluded from the dataset. Each remaining stanza is then read semiotically. The linguistic expressions function as signifiers, while the grief-related concepts and emotions they point to are treated as signifieds, revealing how the song constructs and communicates loss through language.

Table 1. Data 1

Signifier	Signified
I see a red door And I want it painted black No colors anymore I want them to turn black	The red door symbolizes protection, love, and emotional warmth, all of which have become painful reminders of what the narrator has lost. His desire to paint the door black reflects a wish to make the outside world mirror his inner grief, while the absence of color suggests that he can no longer find joy, beauty, or meaning in life.

In this stanza, the narrator expresses a desperate desire to erase all color from the world around him, beginning with the image of a red door that he wishes to paint

black. The color red on the door, which can conventionally signifies protection, passion, and love, becomes an unbearable sight for the narrator, as it represents everything that grief has stripped away from him. His desire to paint it black signifies a need to make the outside world match his internal emotional state, a world drained of warmth, color, and meaning. The phrase "no colors anymore" further extends this signification, suggesting that grief has rendered the narrator incapable of perceiving beauty or joy in any form. Black, as the stanza's dominant signified, strenghtens these meanings into a single sign of total loss, carrying the weight of darkness, mourning, and emotional devastation simultaneously.

Table 2. Data 2

Signifier	Signified
I see the girls walk by Dressed in their summer clothes I have to turn my head Until my darkness goes	The colorful summer clothing symbolizes happiness, ease, and joy. In contrast, the narrator's emotional state is represented by black, causing him to feel alienated and resentful toward the cheerful atmosphere around him. From his perspective, such bright displays of joy seem inappropriate in the context of his grief, sort of like wearing bright colors to a funeral.

In this stanza, the phrase "summer clothes" signifies a concepts of brightness, warmth, and happiness as in Western cultural contexts, summer clothing was often associated with colorful and vibrant styles that symbolized leisure, freedom, and enjoyment. Through the process of signification, these positive associations become the signified meanings attached to the image of the girls walking by in their summer clothes.

However, the narrator's reaction, expressed in the line "I have to turn my head until my darkness goes," reveals a sharp contrast between the cheerful world around him and his internal emotional state. The inability to look at these symbols of happiness suggests that grief has altered his perception of reality, making ordinary expressions of joy feel incompatible with his experience of loss. As a result, the colorful imagery of summer clothing functions symbolically as a representation of life continuing normally for others, while the narrator angers at it as he remains trapped in mourning.

Table 3. Data 3

Signifier	Signified
I see a line of cars And they're all painted black With flowers and my love Both never to come back	The references to cars, flowers, and the loved one can be interpreted as imagery of a funeral procession, either literal or symbolic. The dead flowers being thrown onto the coffin and the absent lover both emphasize the permanence of loss and the narrator's realization that what has died cannot be brought back.

This stanza presents one of the clearest representations of grief in the song through the imagery of a funeral procession. The phrase “a line of cars” functions as a signifier that evokes the image of vehicles accompanying a funeral, while “they're all painted black” reinforces traditional cultural associations of black with death, mourning, and bereavement. Through the process of signification, these images construct a scene that may be interpreted both literally, as an actual funeral, and metaphorically, as the symbolic funeral of the narrator's relationship and emotional life following the loss of a loved one. The line “With flowers and my love / Both never to come back” further develops this representation of irreversible loss. In funeral traditions, flowers are commonly placed on or around a coffin as a final tribute to the deceased. However, once removed from their natural environment, the flowers themselves gradually wither and die. As signifiers, both the funeral flowers and “my love” become linked through the shared signified concept of death and permanence.

By placing these two elements together, the narrator equates the fate of the flowers with that of his lost loved one, emphasizing that neither can return to life. This expression reflects a central characteristic of grief identified by Kübler-Ross, namely the painful recognition of loss as permanent and irreversible. Consequently, the stanza portrays not only the physical reality of death but also the emotional struggle of accepting that what has been lost can never be recovered.

Table 4. Data 4

Signifier	Signified
I've seen people turn their heads And quickly look away Like a newborn baby It just happens everyday	The people who stare and then look away may represent society's discomfort with the narrator's grief and death. Their behavior suggests sympathy for the narrator and his unwillingness to look upon the reality of mortality, which is an inevitable part of human life despite occurring every day.

In this stanza, the phrases “people turn their heads” and “quickly look away” signifies avoidance and emotional discomfort. Through the process of signification, these actions evoke the signified concepts of pity, unease, and the reluctance of others to confront suffering directly. The narrator perceives himself as an object of observation, yet the people around him avoid sustained engagement, suggesting the social isolation that often accompanies grief. This interpretation aligns with Kübler-Ross's understanding of grief as a deeply individual experience, in which the bereaved may feel disconnected from those who are unable to fully comprehend their emotional pain.

Furthermore, the comparison “Like a newborn baby / It just happens everyday” expresses a symbolic contrast between birth and death. The image of a newborn baby functions as a signifier of life, and beginnings, while the surrounding context of the song remains dominated by themes of loss and mourning. By pairing birth with death, the lyrics suggest that both events are fundamental and recurring aspects of human existence. It means that, although birth and death occur every day

and are natural parts of the human condition, the narrator's grief prevents him from viewing loss as an ordinary event.

Table 5. Data 5

Signifier	Signified
I look inside myself And see my heart is black I see my red door I must have it painted black	The image of blackness symbolizes the narrator's emotional state after experiencing loss. His heart is portrayed as cold and lifeless, suggesting an inability to feel love or affection, leaving him consumed by sorrow and despair.

In this stanza, the narrator turns inward and directly confronts the emotional consequences of grief. The phrase “my heart is black” functions as a metaphorical signifier representing emotional emptiness, despair, and the loss of the ability to experience love or happiness. Through the process of signification, the color black becomes associated not only with mourning and death, but also with the narrator's internal mental condition, suggesting that grief has consumed his emotional identity. The line “I see my red door / I must have it painted black” further develops this symbolism through the contrast between the colors red and black. Traditionally, red is associated with life, passion, affection, and vitality, while black symbolizes death, sorrow, and emotional darkness.

The narrator's desire to paint the red door black symbolically reflects his wish to erase all remaining traces of warmth, love, and emotional attachment from his life. This transformation suggests that grief has altered the narrator's perception of both himself and the world around him, causing him to reject anything associated with joy or emotional vitality. In relation to Kübler-Ross's theory of grief, this stanza strongly reflects the stage of depression, in which feelings of hopelessness, emotional withdrawal, and profound sadness dominate the mourner's internal experience.

Table 6. Data 6

Signifier	Signified
Maybe then, I'll fade away And not have to face the facts It's not easy facing up When your whole world is black	These lines can be interpreted as expressing the narrator's desire to escape from the pain of grief. Whether through isolation, disappearing from his surroundings, or even thoughts of death, the imagery reflects his inability to face reality and continue functioning as he once did.

This stanza reveals the narrator's desire to escape from the overwhelming reality of grief. The phrase “Maybe then, I'll fade away” functions as a signifier of withdrawal and disappearance, although its precise meaning remains ambiguous. Through the process of signification, it may be interpreted in two ways: first, as a wish for death or self-destruction in order to escape the pain of bereavement, and second, as a desire to isolate oneself from society and abandon the places, memories, and experiences associated with the lost loved one. Both interpretations converge on the same signified concept of avoidance, namely the inability or unwillingness to confront

the reality of loss. This idea is reinforced by the line “And not have to face the facts,” which suggests a struggle to accept the permanence of the loved one's absence.

The following lines, “It's not easy facing up / When your whole world is black,” further emphasize the psychological burden of grief. Here, the signifier “whole world is black” extends the recurring symbolism of black beyond the narrator's heart and immediate surroundings to surround his entire perception of reality. The color black no longer merely signifies mourning; it comes to represent a worldview dominated by sorrow, and hopelessness. This stanza reflects the depressive dimension of mourning, in which the bereaved experiences profound despair and finds it difficult to engage with daily life or envision a future beyond the loss.

Table 7. Data 7

Signifier	Signified
No more will my green sea Go turn a deeper blue I could not foresee this thing Happening to you	The transformation of the sea from blue to green symbolizes the narrator's emotional decline, as blue may represent purity and stability while green suggests corruption and deterioration. Additionally, the imagery may imply suicidal thoughts, with the narrator standing at a cliff's edge and contemplating escape from his suffering while gazing at the sea below.

In this stanza, the narrator continues to represent grief through the symbolism of color and nature imagery. The phrase “my green sea” functions as a signifier of the narrator's emotional condition. In real-world contexts, a green sea is often associated with murky, polluted, or contaminated water, whereas a deep blue sea is commonly perceived as clean, clear, and visually beautiful. Through the process of signification, the contrast between green and deep blue may symbolize the deterioration of the narrator's emotional state. The line “No more will my green sea / Go turn a deeper blue” suggests that the narrator believes his condition can no longer return to a healthier or happier state. He perceives himself as having transformed from something that was once clear, vibrant, and emotionally whole into something damaged and corrupted by grief.

The following lines, “I could not foresee this thing / Happening to you,” reveal the source of this transformation. These lines function as signifiers of shock, disbelief, and regret, emphasizing that the loss occurred unexpectedly and without warning. However, the imagery of the sea may also support an alternative interpretation in which the narrator is standing at the edge of a cliff overlooking the ocean while contemplating escape from his suffering. In this reading, the sea becomes both a reflection of his emotional state and a symbolic boundary between life and death. Regardless of the interpretation, the stanza ultimately conveys the lasting impact of grief, illustrating how the unexpected loss of a loved one has permanently altered the narrator's perception of himself and the world around him.

Table 8. Data 8

Signifier	Signified
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If I look hard enough
 Into the setting sun
 My love will laugh with me
 Before the morning comes

The setting sun symbolizes endings and the passage from life into darkness, reflecting the narrator's loss of a loved one. By imagining that his lover may laugh with him before morning arrives, the narrator reveals a desire to maintain a connection through memory and imagination, demonstrating his difficulty in fully accepting the loss.

This stanza introduces a temporary shift from the song's dominant imagery of darkness and grief toward a moment of longing and remembrance. The phrase "setting sun" functions as a signifier that traditionally symbolizes endings, transition, and the passage from life into darkness. Through the process of signification, the setting sun may represent the final moments of the day, paralleling the end of the narrator's relationship with his loved one through death. The line "If I look hard enough / Into the setting sun" suggests an intense desire to find traces of the lost loved one despite their physical absence. This desire is further expressed in the line "My love will laugh with me / Before the morning comes." Here, the narrator imagines a brief reunion with his deceased lover, whether through memory, imagination, dreams, or spiritual longing. The phrase "before the morning comes" is particularly significant because morning conventionally symbolizes reality, awakening, and the continuation of life.

This stanza may be the strongest example of bargaining in the entire song. The narrator cannot bring his lover back physically, but he attempts to maintain a connection through memory and imagination. It's almost as if he is telling himself: "If I look hard enough, maybe I can still see her again." This does not mean he literally believes she will return; rather, it reveals his emotional difficulty in fully letting go of the relationship.

Table 9. Data 9

Signifier	Signified
I wanna see it painted Painted black Black as night Black as coal I wanna see the sun Blotted out from the sky I wanna see it painted, painted, painted Painted black, yeah	The repeated references to black symbolize overwhelming grief, despair, and the absence of hope. The narrator's wish to paint everything black, including blotting out the sun, suggests that he rejects anything associated with life, happiness, or renewal and instead desires a world that reflects his own emotional suffering.

In the final stanza, the narrator's grief reaches its most extreme expression through the repeated invocation of the color black. The phrases "Painted black," "Black as night," and "Black as coal" function as signifiers that evoke darkness, death, mourning, and the absence of hope. Through the process of signification, black no longer represents a single object or emotion but becomes a totalizing condition that the narrator wishes to impose upon the entire world. The repetition of the phrase "I

wanna see it painted black” reinforces the intensity of this desire, suggesting that the narrator can no longer tolerate the presence of anything associated with life, happiness, or normality. This idea is further emphasized in the line “I wanna see the sun / Blotted out from the sky.” Traditionally, the sun functions as a signifier of life, warmth, hope, and renewal.

The narrator's wish to erase the sun therefore symbolizes a rejection of these positive qualities, reflecting that grief has consumed his perception of reality. Rather than seeking recovery or acceptance, he desires a world that mirrors his internal suffering, where everything is transformed into the same darkness that dominates his emotional state. This stanza represents the culmination of the song's recurring symbolism, illustrating how grief has expanded from the loss of a loved one into a worldview defined entirely by sorrow, despair, and emotional desolation.

Table 10. Recapitulation of Findings

Stanza	Key Signifiers	Grief Stage
1	Red door, painted black, no colors	Depression
2	Summer clothes, turn my head, darkness	Anger
3	Line of cars, flowers, never to come back	Depression
4	Turn heads, look away, newborn baby	Denial
5	Heart is black, red door painted black	Depression
6	Fade away, face the facts, world is black	Depression
7	Green sea, deeper blue, happening to you	Depression
8	Setting sun, laugh with me, before morning	Bargaining
9	Painted black, sun blotted out	Depression

The recapitulation table above provides a comprehensive overview of the findings across all nine stanzas, showing the distribution of grief stages throughout the song. Depression emerges as the most frequently represented stage, appearing in six out of nine stanzas (67%), followed by anger, denial, and bargaining, which each appear once (11%). The overwhelming dominance of depression in the lyrics underscores the depth of the narrator's emotional suffering and his inability to move toward acceptance.

The semiotic analysis conducted in this study reveals that "Paint It Black" constructs grief through a complex and layered system of signs drawn from color imagery, nature, and funerary symbolism. The findings demonstrate that Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic framework, when applied systematically to song lyrics, provides a robust methodology for uncovering the multiple layers of meaning embedded within poetic and musical language. The analysis has shown how signifiers such as "black," "red door," "summer clothes," and "setting sun" function not merely as descriptive elements but as carriers of profound emotional and psychological meanings that collectively construct the experience of grief. The meanings derived from these signs are predominantly connotative rather than denotative, operating through cultural associations and emotional resonance rather than literal reference.

The absence of the acceptance stage in the lyrics is a significant finding that warrants careful consideration. Throughout the nine stanzas analyzed, the narrator remains trapped within the earlier stages of grief, denial, anger, bargaining, and most

prominently, depression, without ever reaching the acceptance stage that Kübler-Ross identifies as the final phase of the grieving process. This absence can be interpreted in several ways. First, it may suggest that the song captures a moment in the grieving process before acceptance has been achieved, representing what Kübler-Ross describes as the "liminal" phase of grief where the mourner is suspended between the pain of loss and the possibility of recovery (Faldiaz et al., 2025). Second, the absence of acceptance may reflect the narrator's refusal to reconcile with the loss, as evidenced by his repeated desire to "paint everything black" and blot out the sun. Third, from a literary and artistic perspective, the lack of acceptance serves a narrative function: it sustains the song's emotional intensity and prevents the resolution that would diminish its poignant depiction of unrelenting sorrow. This finding aligns with Kübler-Ross & Kessler's (2005) observation that the stages of grief are not linear and that individuals may oscillate between stages or become stuck in particular phases, never fully reaching acceptance.

When compared with previous studies that applied Saussurean semiotics to song lyrics, the present research reveals both similarities and significant differences. Erlangga et al. (2021) found that the construction of romantic values in "Melukis Senja" relied primarily on positive signifiers associated with love, beauty, and emotional connection, with meanings that were largely denotative and culturally straightforward. In contrast, the present study identified meanings that were predominantly connotative and emotionally complex, requiring interpretation within the framework of grief psychology. Hidayat (2014), in his analysis of "Laskar Pelangi," identified motivational meanings through signifiers of hope, perseverance, and collective effort, reflecting a positive and forward-looking emotional trajectory. Similarly, Nugraha (2016) found that nationalist values in the song "Bendera" were constructed through signifiers of patriotism, sacrifice, and national pride. The present study diverges from these previous works in two important ways: first, its focus on grief as a psychological state rather than positive values such as romance, motivation, or nationalism; and second, its integration of Kübler-Ross's grief theory, which allowed the study to map the semiotic findings onto identifiable psychological stages. This interdisciplinary approach represents the specific contribution of this research, demonstrating how semiotic analysis can be enriched by psychological frameworks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of emotional expression in song lyrics (Behera, 2024).

Although this study focuses primarily on the lyrical text, it is important to acknowledge that the musical elements of "Paint It Black" likely contribute significantly to the representation of grief. The song's distinctive sitar-driven melody, composed by Brian Jones, creates an exotic and melancholic atmosphere that evokes feelings of alienation and emotional disorientation (Casalena, 2025). The driving, repetitive rhythm of the drums and bass may be interpreted as mimicking the relentless and overwhelming nature of grief, while the minor key tonalities prevalent throughout the song reinforce the feelings of sadness and despair expressed in the lyrics. The contrast between the song's upbeat tempo and its dark lyrical content creates a sense of cognitive dissonance that may represent the tension between the narrator's outward functioning and his inner emotional turmoil (Harper, 2026). While

these musical elements are beyond the scope of this semiotic analysis, future research could productively explore the interplay between musical and lyrical sign systems in constructing meaning.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the song "Paint It Black" constructs grief through a layered system of signifiers drawn from color imagery, nature, and funerary symbolism, such as black cars, funeral flowers, a blackened heart, the setting sun, and summer clothing, which signify mourning, emotional suffering, hopelessness, and the permanence of irreversible loss. Through Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotic framework, the analysis reveals that these signifiers operate on both denotative and connotative levels, with the process of signification linking each linguistic sign to grief-related concepts that collectively portray a narrator whose perception of the world has been fundamentally ruptured by bereavement. When mapped onto Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's Five Stages of Grief, the lyrics reflect four stages: denial (evident in avoidance of reality and desire to escape), anger (shown through rejection of symbols of happiness), bargaining (manifested in imagined reconnection with the lost loved one), and depression, which emerges as the most dominant stage, appearing in six out of the nine stanzas analyzed, characterized by recurring imagery of darkness, emotional paralysis, hopelessness, and withdrawal. Importantly, the acceptance stage is entirely absent from the lyrics, suggesting that the narrator remains trapped in the earlier phases of grief without achieving emotional resolution. This study also acknowledges its limitations explicitly: the analysis is confined to a single song, relies on qualitative interpretation which is inherently subjective, does not incorporate the musical elements (melody, rhythm, instrumentation) that may reinforce the representation of grief, and does not consider the songwriters' intentions or audience reception, all of which restrict the generalizability of the findings. Nonetheless, by integrating Saussurean semiotics with psychological grief theory, this research offers a novel interdisciplinary model for analyzing emotional expression in song lyrics, demonstrating how linguistic signs can serve as carriers of complex psychological states and contributing to both semiotic and literary studies.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, future research is encouraged to apply similar semiotic and psychological frameworks to other songs that explore themes of grief, loss, and mourning, whether from The Rolling Stones' discography or from other artists across different musical eras and cultural contexts. More specifically, researchers are advised to conduct comparative studies between "Paint It Black" and other grief-themed songs from the 1960s to examine how socio-historical conditions shape the linguistic representation of bereavement, or to expand the analysis to entire albums in order to trace the evolution of grief narratives over a broader musical corpus. Additionally, future studies could productively compare Saussurean semiotics with alternative semiotic approaches, such as Roland Barthes' model (which emphasizes connotation and myth) or Charles Sanders Peirce's

triadic framework (icon, index, symbol), to determine which analytical lens offers the most nuanced interpretation of emotional meaning in lyrics. Researchers are also strongly encouraged to incorporate musical analysis alongside lyrical examination, investigating how melody, rhythm, instrumentation, and tempo interact with linguistic signs to reinforce or counterpoint the representation of grief, thereby providing a more holistic understanding of how songs communicate emotional experience. Finally, given the subjective nature of qualitative semiotic interpretation, future studies could adopt multi-analyst triangulation or incorporate listener response data to enhance the credibility and validity of the findings, and where possible, examine interviews or biographies of songwriters to ground interpretations in authorial context.

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