

## FIVE STAGES OF GRIEF IN THE SONG BURN FROM HAMILTON'S MUSICAL: A PSYCHOLINGUISTICS APPROACH

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### Abstract

The concept of five stages of grief has long been acknowledged as a base to understand the emotional experience of loss. The song from Hamilton's musical, "Burn", portrays this concept in a sorrowful nature as it tells a story about Eliza Hamilton who is in grief due to her husband's affair. Through the application of psycholinguistics and pragmatics, this qualitative study aims to examine the portrayal of five stages of grief (Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance) in the song "Burn" by Hamilton Musical. The analysis results show the lyrics in the song unveiled Eliza going through all five stages of grief, though not depicted linearly. The song's focus is primarily on anger, as it has the most lyrics devoted to this stage. This analysis is hoped to offer new insights into the ways in which music and lyrics can portray a story emotionally and create meaningful connections between art and life.

**Keywords:** song lyrics; five stages of grief; emotional expressions; psycholinguistics

### Abstrak

*Konsep lima tahap kesedihan telah lama dianggap sebagai basis untuk memahami pengalaman emosional tentang kehilangan. Lagu drama musikal dari Hamilton, "Burn", menggambarkan konsep ini dengan penuh kesedihan karena menceritakan Eliza Hamilton yang sedang berduka karena perselingkuhan suaminya. Melalui pendekatan psikolinguistik dan pragmatik, penelitian kualitatif ini bertujuan mengkaji lima tahapan kesedihan (Penyangkalan, Kemarahan, Tawar-menawar, Depresi, dan Penerimaan) dalam lagu "Burn" karya Hamilton. Hasil analisis menunjukkan lirik pada lagu yang diungkapkan Eliza mengalami kelima tahapan kesedihan tersebut, meski tidak digambarkan secara linier. Fokus utama lagu ini adalah kemarahan, karena liriknya paling banyak merujuk pada tahap ini. Analisis ini diharapkan memberi wawasan baru tentang bagaimana musik dan lirik dapat menggambarkan cerita secara emosional dan menciptakan hubungan yang bermakna antara seni dan kehidupan.*

**Kata Kunci:** lirik lagu; lima tahap kesedihan; ekspresi emosional; psikolinguistik

## INTRODUCTION

Psycholinguistics as a branch of psychology examines the relationship between language and cognition. One area of interest within psycholinguistics is how emotional expression is processed and represented in language. Emotional expression is a fundamental aspect of human communication, and it plays a crucial role in conveying our thoughts, feelings, and intentions to others. The ability to understand and use emotional language is essential for successful social interactions, as it enables individuals to establish rapport, empathize with others, and convey complex emotional states. Furthermore, linguistic theories of emotion suggest that emotional expression is characterized by specific linguistic features, such as metaphorical language, intensifiers, and evaluative words (Frijda, 1986; Scherer, 2005). These linguistic features serve to highlight and amplify emotional content, making it more salient and memorable for the listener or reader.

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The theory of psycholinguistics examines the relationship between language and cognition, including how language is processed, produced, and understood. Originally proposed by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in 1969, the five stages of grief describe a series of emotional and psychological stages that individuals may experience when facing a significant loss, such as the death of a loved one. Some researchers have suggested that the ability to use language to express and understand emotions can be an essential factor in coping with grief (Lamers, Jonkers, & Jong, 2010). Additionally, the way that individuals use language to talk about their grief experiences may influence how they process and cope with their emotions (Stroebe, Schut, & Stroebe, 2007). While the theory of psycholinguistics does not directly address the five stages of grief model, this study tries to examine the role of language, more specifically song lyrics, in the experience of grief and how individuals use language to describe and cope with their emotions during the grieving process.

“Burn” is one of the songs from Act II of the musical “Hamilton” composed by Lin-Manuel Miranda. The song was supposedly sung by the character Elizabeth Hamilton, who was Alexander Hamilton’s wife and was initially performed by the actress Phillipa Soo. The song portrayed Eliza’s despair after discovering her husband’s affair with a lady named Maria Reynolds while Eliza was away with her family in the summer of 1791. The affair was later made clear by the creation of the “Reynolds Pamphlet” in 1797 written by Alexander Hamilton himself in order to clarify the accusations of government funds embezzlement. Alexander stated in the pamphlet:

“The charge against me is a connection with one James Reynolds for purposes of improper pecuniary speculation. My real crime is an amorous connection with his wife, for a considerable time with his privity and connivance, if not originally brought on by a combination between the husband and wife with the design to extort money from me.” (Hamilton, 1797)

According to John Barker Church (Elizabeth’s brother-in-law), Eliza did not believe the accusation of the affair addressed to her husband. Instead, John Church explained that Eliza thought that Alexander’s political opponents were at fault in this situation (Church, 1797). She believed deeply in her husband’s loyalty and her faith in him remained unshaken. However, Eliza’s mind quickly changed after her husband’s own disclosure regarding his one-year affair with Mrs. Reynolds. Eliza was pregnant with their sixth son at the time of this event, and she decided to leave her husband alone in New York while she took their kids back to her parent’s house in Albany, where her son was born. Her clear reaction was believed to be “lost in history”. Cherrow (2004) stated, “Eliza never commented publicly on the Reynolds scandal, but we can deduce her general reaction from several snippets of information” (p.542). The only significant reaction of Eliza that could be recorded was the letter from John Church that was explained before.

Though it was never recorded how Eliza reacted to the affair, Lin-Manuel Miranda had tried to convey how it possibly turned out in the song “Burn”. Its lyrics are intended to portray the psychological effects Eliza experienced during that time which can be analyzed with the psycholinguistic approach. The psycholinguistic approach according to Kantor (1936) is the study of how language could relate to psychological factors. With this approach, the authors intended to analyze the psychological processes in the song lyrics that would relate to the five stages of grief concept. Elizabeth Hamilton experienced betrayal from her husband, whom she had trusted with all her heart. Scheinkman (2005) concluded “The impact of the disclosure of an affair is typically heartbreaking. Therefore, the pain and feelings of the partner who just found out about it inevitably become the major therapeutic focus, at least for a while” (p.16). Referring to the statement, it was not impossible that Eliza might have suffered after knowing her husband’s affair. Thus relating to Kübler-Ross’ (1969) idea on “Five Stages of Grief”, which consists of “Denial”, “Anger”, “Bargaining”, “Depression” and “Acceptance”, this study aims to relate the lyrics in the song with these aspects.

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## Denial

The first stage would happen when one person first heard about his/her spouse's affair with another person. In this state, he/she might experience shock and disbelief. Campbell, Baumeister, Dhavale & Tice (2003) remarked "The self's equivalent to the shutting down of physical processes would constitute a felt inability to act, and so we inquired whether people would respond to major self-threats with a feeling of psychological paralysis" (p.85). In regards to the statement, the denial state of grief and sadness could leave the sufferer feeling numb inside due to the shock. They could act as if they were unfazed by the new, unpleasant information they just discovered. When in denial, people would give themselves a pep talk, reassuring themselves that everything was untrue despite knowing otherwise. They refused to accept the information and thus, the "denial" state. Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2006) pointed out "There is a grace in denial. It is nature's way of letting in only as much as we can handle. As you accept the reality of the loss and start to ask yourself questions, you are unknowingly beginning the healing process" (p.7). However, the pent-up emotions from this state would soon burst out, which would lead to the next stage: Anger.

## Anger

The next stage after denial would be anger, which is a more aggressive and violent reaction to the news they had heard. Within this state, one's brain couldn't think normally and irrational aggression was imminent, but Tavis (1989) concluded that anger could be understood by dividing it into two: cause and result (p.19). The cause of one's anger in this case would be their spouse's affair with another person. It was an understatement that no one could ever accept the devastating news, mainly if they had put too much trust in his/her spouse's loyalty. This certainty would eventually lead to the result, which would be aggression and deep devastation. One would think what was happening to him/her was unfair, and they might try to put the blame on anything other than themselves. DiGiuseppe and Tafrate (2007) indicated that anger associated with past traumas is linked to one's view of life and its fairness (for them) instead of his/her dignity, value, and self-respect (p.159), thus leading to the next stage: Bargaining.

## Bargaining

The anger stage would be calmed down after a while, but as stated before, one would think what was happening was unfair to them. They would try to find reasons and excuses for their sorrow. Avoidance is what they seek. According to Kübler-Ross (1969), bargaining is the least effective stage while experiencing sadness or grief (p.7). In this stage, the sufferer would dwell on the past, reminiscing about the good times in order to lessen the pain of being cheated on. Kübler-Ross (1969) quoted "We want life returned to what it was; we want our loved one restored" (p.8). In short, the cheated spouse would not miss the person their spouse is, but the person their spouse was. The happy memories are the source of comfort at this stage, which, as mentioned before, was not effective or sustainable. Sinking way too deep into the memories of the past would lead to the next stage: Depression.

## Depression

Despite finding comfort in reminiscing about the happy memories one has experienced, they will eventually come back to sense, the present time. They would feel devastated once again if not, even deeper into melancholy. Melancholy comes from Greek origin, melancholia, derived from melan- meaning black, and kholē meaning bile or irritability. While experiencing the melancholy feeling, one might feel numbness in their heart, not knowing how to neither feel nor how to react towards the situation they're in. Piccinelli and Wilkinson (2000) concluded that the lack of intimacy or understanding has the highest chance of leading to melancholy and deep sadness. This is due to the heavy, yet empty feeling in one's chest that would cause he/she to try and find substitutes to feel full once again (p.488). Self-destructive behavior is not uncommon for substitutes, such as isolating oneself from everyone. At these times, one tends to reflect on their life; how did it go wrong?

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Unlike bargaining, they wouldn't try and salvage their relationship with the cheating spouse, but they would eventually think about moving on and leaving it all behind, so they could go onto the next stage: Acceptance.

### Acceptance

After experiencing the hard stage of depression, it was finally time to make peace with the situation, moving on and forgetting the past. During this stage, one would be able to finally accept that he/she won't be able to go back to the previous life he/she had experienced with his/her spouse. As Gardner and Moore (2007) concluded, psychological flexibility can be acquired by accepting experiences instead of sulking repeatedly. Therefore, in order to make peace of mind, one must be willing to let go and move on with their life. It could be quite challenging, and they would need support from people closest to them, for example, friends and families. As stated by de Vries et al. (2014), people with intense emotional reactions really need as many interactions as they could get with their loved ones in order to fulfill their need to share their grief (p. 81). The more support they get, the faster they will recover from their sadness. The acceptance state is the ending of the five stages of grief. The person suffering from their previous sadness will later live their life normally once again.

The research on the five stages of grief had been previously conducted by several researchers whose articles or papers have been used as references in the previous paragraphs. Elisabeth Kubler Ross was the one who came up with the idea of grieving stages in her book titled "On Death and Dying" in 1969. She believed that while going through deep sadness, people would experience at least two of the stages mentioned. The concept was later developed with the help of David Kessler in their book titled "On Grief and Grieving" in 2004. In their book, they mentioned that the concept can be applied to all sorts of sadness and not only exclusive to the sadness from a loved one's death. Therefore, this concept could also apply to the sadness of discovering a cheating spouse. Having said that, the authors aim to research this subject specifically, with the use of a song that tells the exact story. There was no research done on this particular subject yet that focuses on the song "Burn", so the authors chose this in order to fill in the research gap for this topic. Subsequently, the research question for this research paper is as follows: How did the song "Burn" portray Five Stages of Grief from the perspective of a cheated spouse?

## METHODOLOGY

This paper utilizes qualitative research with the use of Kantor's (1936) Psycholinguistics approach. The authors also use the study of pragmatics in order to convey and interpret the words from the song lyrics.

Papers, journals, or articles related to the five stages of grief concept be used to provide base understandings that support the authors' argument in this paper. The analysis of this topic will be conducted by combining the previously stated methods. Each line of the song will be analyzed thoroughly and interpreted based on the authors' view which is built from previous studies related to the field. By analyzing and interpreting each line of the song, we could later find a message of the song that could be related to the base concept. Other than interpreting, the authors find relations of each line to the concept provided before. Besides the lyrics of the song, the authors also utilize the real events recorded in history that became the inspiration for the lyrics to conduct the research with more accuracy in detail.

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## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Eliza's Denial

Lin-Manuel Miranda did not actually show Eliza's denial in the first lines of the song, but it was depicted in the third verse instead. Eliza was depicted as not wanting to believe her husband's affair with Maria Reynolds in the lines below.

*I'm searching and scanning for answers  
 In every line  
 For some kind of sign  
 And when you were mine*

From the lyrics above, Eliza was shown to be in disbelief and trying quite hard to convince herself that her husband did not actually cheat on her. She did this by compiling the letters Alexander Hamilton had sent to her during their time together in order to reassure herself that he would not drop his morals so low to cheating on his wife when she was pregnant with their sixth son. Eliza wanted to believe that Alexander would not stoop so low and destroy their marriage of 17 years at that time. Chernow (2014) described Alexander Hamilton as an extremely faithful man whose priority lies in his family (p.28). That statement must have been quite shocking for Eliza as well to find out that her husband was engaging in a one-year affair with another married woman behind her back for almost a year and thus resulting in her being in a state of denial when she initially heard the news.

Desperation was portrayed in the lyrics mentioned above. Elizabeth Hamilton put extremely deep trust in Alexander's loyalty towards her and their family. This was supported by Eliza's recorded response to the heartbreaking news. Chernow (2014) also described her as not batting an eye to the rumors and even believed that it was a merely made-up conspiracy created by Alexander's dissident in order to destroy his reputation and qualifications as the secretary of the treasury at that time, especially considering the fact that James Madison had never liked Hamilton at the first place. Not only that, his bright mind raised many envious glances from his rivals during his time of service, hence why it was only normal that Eliza resented the idea of her husband's affair being real before she heard it from Alexander himself.

It was, however, not written nor recorded for how long Eliza stayed in her denial state and gave Alexander the benefit of the doubt. However, she had read her husband's clarification in the form of a pamphlet—known as “The Reynolds Pamphlet”—and learned that it was not a lie nor a conspiracy made up by Alexander's rivals in politics. The disclosure had broken not only her heart but also tore down her trust in her husband which almost immediately led her to feel a more aggressive emotion towards this ordeal, which is Anger.

### Eliza's Anger

The song portrayed Eliza's anger in a few lines. It was depicted that Eliza was deeply enraged by the whole situation caused by her husband whom she had put her trust. She was also shown to be disenchanted by Alexander that she started creating distance from him. Her anger was mixed with her disappointment, which was portrayed by the lyrics below.

*You published the letters she wrote you  
 You told the whole world how you brought  
 This girl into our bed*

The lyrics were portrayed to show Eliza's aggression to confront Alexander about his action toward the affair, especially considering what he had written in the Reynolds Pamphlet. Because by the time Eliza discovered the affair between Alexander and Maria Reynolds, she could no longer give her husband the benefit of doubt because it was all written in the Reynolds Pamphlet her

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husband himself published in July 1797. The pamphlet not only showed Alexander's confession to cheating, but it also included letters from both Maria Reynolds and her husband, James Reynolds. This was done in order to clearly elucidate that all accusations of corruption pointed towards him by his rivals were not true. Alexander stated in the pamphlet as below:

“This history will be supported by the letters of Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds, which leave no room for doubt of the principal facts, and at the same time explain with precision the objects of the little notes from me which have been published, showing clearly that such of them as have related to money had no reference to any concern in speculation.” (Hamilton, 1797)

From the statement above, Alexander had shown that his ego was quite high as he desperately tried to salvage his reputation. This was supported by Eliza's following line:

In clearing your name, you have ruined our lives.

By this line, Eliza had depicted Alexander as a rather irresponsible figure for her, as well as their children. From her angered perspective, Alexander valued his political reputation more than his own family and this left her feeling deep resentment towards his behavior as far as saying that it had ruined their (Eliza's and their kids) lives. Chernow (2014) indicated that Eliza's reputation was also ruined by a newspaper agency named Aurora shaming her for her husband's disreputable conduct (p.542). The lyrics above were intended to show that Alexander's action had impacted not only his reputation but also his family's and thus resulting in Eliza's growing wrath toward the situation.

The following line was also strongly believed to support the previous statements:

*You and your words, obsessed with your  
 legacy  
 Your sentences border on senseless  
 And you are paranoid in every paragraph  
 How they perceive you*

Eliza's anger was portrayed to be at its peak in those lines and continued to stay like that later on in the song, as her words were becoming harsher. She pointed out how egocentric her husband was by the lines “you are paranoid”, referencing Alexander's aforestated actions that had ruined their family in order to salvage his reputation amongst his political peers.

*I'm erasing myself from the narrative  
 Let future historians wonder how Eliza  
 Reacted when you broke her heart*

This was the moment Eliza's anger led to rather violent and aggressive action. She burnt all love letters Alexander had sent to her and considering that she used to value them so much, this was extravagantly astonishing of her. Rothenberg (1971) concluded that unspoken anger led to destructive behavior. (p.457). Pursuant to this statement, as well as the writer's findings in Eliza's denial, it was an understatement that she could go as far as burning what she had valued the most in the past. This action also had become the reason why historians and researchers had a hard time determining Eliza's reaction toward the ordeal.

### **Eliza's Bargain**

Despite the depiction of the aggressive anger Eliza experienced, Lin-Manuel Miranda also portrayed how Eliza was trying to justify Alexander's action by looking back on the moments they had experienced together before. The reminiscence was actually depicted in the very first lines of the song.

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*I saved every letter you wrote me  
 From the moment I read them  
 I knew you were mine  
 You said you were mine  
 I thought you were mine*

From the lyrics, Eliza was shown to be fond of the love letters Alexander had sent to her. As stated above, she valued them so much, and thus, the reason why she was trying to recall the good memories with her husband was by reading those letters. The lyrics also strongly suggested that she found comfort in reading the letters, as they acted as “proof” that Alexander was once hers and no one else’s. Chernow (2014) described Alexander as “Charming and impetuous, romantic and witty, dashing and headstrong” (p.5), and by this statement, Alexander’s words in his love letters might have captivated Eliza to fall for him, making it to be the reason why it was a bit hard for her to move on despite her husband’s wrongdoings towards her and their family.

*You and your words flooded my senses  
 Your sentences left me defenseless  
 You built me palaces out of paragraphs  
 You built cathedrals*

Still, Eliza was reminiscing about how faithful and romantic her husband was back then. She was comforting herself in the hope that she could feel better while facing this. The line “You built cathedrals” suggested that Alexander’s words were overwhelmingly endearing for her and she cherished everything he had written especially for her in those love letters. By this, a self-comfort occurred.

However, the use of past tense in the lyrics depicting Eliza’s bargaining state indicated that she knew that the Alexander she once knew and fell in love with was in the past. She did not miss the person Alexander was at the time the affair occurred, but she missed the person Alexander was back then before this all happened when she still fully believed that her husband was a loyal and caring man who would value his family over anything else.

### **Eliza’s Depression**

In the depression stage, Lin-Manuel Miranda seemed to portray Eliza to experience some deep regrets and devastation towards the whole situation. The lyrics indicated that she was reflecting on her past once again, but this time, she did it to search for how and where it went wrong.

*Do you know what Angelica said,  
 When we saw your first letter arrive?  
 She said  
 “Be careful with that one, love  
 He will do what it takes to survive.”*

By the lines above, she was recounting the time Angelica Schuyler, her sister, warned her about Alexander. McKeever and Saunders (2022) concluded “The amount we love someone can be disproportionate to their qualities and we can conceive of them as being more beautiful/interesting/kind/funny than they actually are” (p.265). Congruent with this, Eliza might not have put too many thoughts into her sister’s words back then due to feeling deeply in love with Alexander. In other words, Eliza had high hopes for him, yet Alexander left her disappointed. The lyrics above were intended to show how regretful Eliza was not to listen to her sister’s words back then and be fascinated with Alexander’s love letters blindly. McKeever and Saunders (2022) also

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stated that the unreasonability of love can eventually lead to one's regret (p.265). As mentioned, Eliza experienced deep regret about her relationship with Alexander and how she was not careful enough.

*Do you know what Angelica said  
 When she read what you'd done?  
 She said  
 "You have married an Icarus  
 He has flown too close to the sun."*

The lyrics above continued to feed Eliza's regret. Angelica depicted Alexander as Icarus from Greek mythology. Miller (1992) remarked, "The fabled Icarus of Greek mythology is said to have flown so high, so close to the sun, that his artificial wax wings melted and he plunged to his death" (p.24). In brief, due to Icarus' immoderate ego, he created his own downfall, just like what Alexander did to himself, as well as his family who suffered the consequences of his actions despite not having any direct involvement in his deeds. By depicting Alexander as Icarus, Angelica had attempted to make Eliza aware that the man she had married had brought this upon himself, and that Eliza was not at fault. This was done in order to comfort Eliza so that she would not stay too long in her depressive stage.

By the following lines, Lin-Manuel Miranda intended to show when Eliza was at the peak of her depression.

*The world seemed to  
 Burn  
 And,  
 You have torn it all apart  
 I am watching it  
 Burn  
 Watching it burn*

The lyrics appeared to have a correlation to the aforementioned statement of Alexander ruining Eliza and their children's lives with his actions and they show how miserable Eliza's perspective of her own world had become. She referred to it as being "torn all apart", expressing her devastation towards the situation she was in and she was depicted as not being able to see her world in a positive way anymore. All she could do at that time was watch how her own world was crumpled by the hands of her husband, whom she had trusted from the very beginning.

### **Eliza's Acceptance**

After going through the previous stages, Eliza was depicted to be able to let go of Alexander. The acceptance stage was portrayed in the following lyrics:

*The world has no right to my heart  
 The world has no place in our bed  
 They don't get to know what I said  
 I'm burning the memories  
 Burning the letters that might have  
 redeemed you*

By this point, Eliza had already resented Alexander for making her life fall apart. In the lyrics, it was shown that Eliza could no longer justify nor think positively about her husband anymore. She had stopped dwelling on her sadness and just accepted the fact that she might not be able to get Alexander back.

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*You forfeit all rights to my heart  
 You forfeit the place in our bed  
 You sleep in your office instead  
 With only the memories  
 Of when you were mine  
 I hope that you burn*

Eliza aimed to make peace with her mind and by doing this, she was finally ending her grief of being cheated on with acceptance. The lyrics indicated that she had finally learned that it was better to cut off the ties she had with Alexander in order to feel better once again.

## CONCLUSION

The foremost conclusion from the authors is that Lin-Manuel Miranda might not portray the five stages of grief in the song “Burn” in a consecutive way, but the song still contained the five stages and portrayed them in a concise way, especially for one particular stage. With the use of psycholinguistics and pragmatics studies, the writer concluded that the song mainly focused on anger, for it has the most lyrics to portray the said stage. In addition, the lyrics not only portrayed the five stages of grief but also narrated Eliza’s experience in dealing with her husband’s affair in an accurate way that related to the real events in American history.

However, this study is not without its limitations, one of them being the subjectivity of the analysis as the lyrics' interpretation may be different across individuals. Furthermore, this analysis emphasizes the lyrics and linguistic features, and therefore, other aspects such as melody, rhythm, and instrumental are not considered. Nevertheless, this research provides new insights into the use of language as a tool for expressing one's grief and narrating a sorrowful story. The authors hope that this study may inspire future research on the topic of linguistic expressions in narrative songs.

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