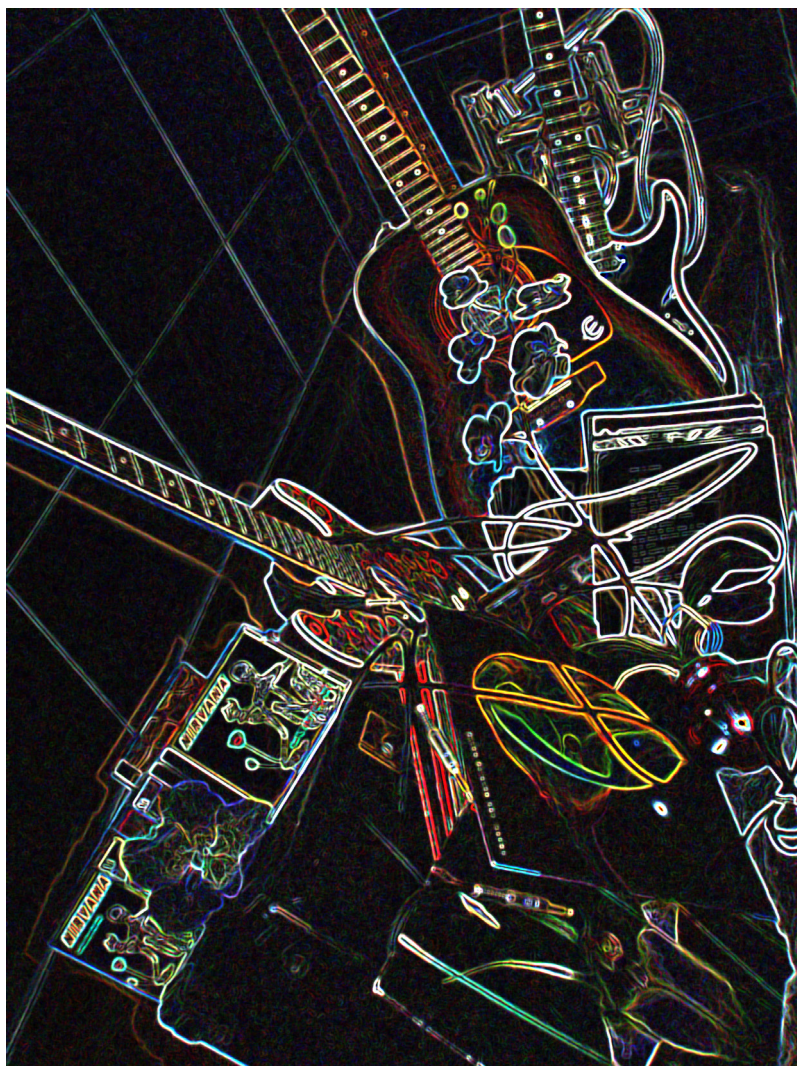


DARK SLIVERS: **SEEING NIRVANA IN THE** **SHARDS OF INCESTICIDE**



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Having pointed out the increasing isolation found within Kurt Cobain's lyrics, a further method of drawing out that aspect is to examine the wider world featured within Nirvana's music. Despite labored attempts to tag grunge as an organic by-product of the isolated forests of the American north-west, there's no causal link between heavy rock based music forms and the landscape. Man may draw inspiration from his landscape but songs do not simply arise from the soils. What is logical, however, is to tie the formative experiences of individual musicians to aspects of the communities and environments in which they grow. Yet what is striking in the music of Nirvana is the absence of a world outside the front door—it would almost be possible to call it a non-theme, it's so little a part of what Cobain wrote about. The absence of motion is remarkable given the band toured the U.S. and then the world between 1989–1993, yet the only locations mentioned are Seattle in a song title not a lyric, a fictional town—Salem's Lot—and finally Puget Sound, a series of waterways connected to the Pacific Ocean and extending inland to Olympia and Tacoma, knotting together the area in which he was born. As the only specifically named locations in the world, what's impressive was that Kurt wished vengeance upon Seattle and referred to Puget Sound as “disease covered.”

These three references from *In Utero* link back to *Bleach*, which was essentially a poison-pen letter to his small town roots. All the locations mentioned within *Bleach* are tied to sarcastic jibes, to violence or to unpleasantness. *Floyd the Barber* and *Paper Cuts* feature places of bondage, *School* was an attack on cliques, even the swap meet “is a battleground”:

Table 12. Physical and/or Geographic Locations Mentioned in Nirvana Songs

Album	Locations Mentioned
Bleach	Floyd the Barber: The barber's shop and chair where the narrator is murdered About a Girl: "standing in your line"—Paper Cuts: A basement prison Swap Meet: The Sunday swap meet—Scaff: "in your room" School: school—Mr. Moustache: An easy chair, bed Sifting: "search for a church"—Big Cheese: "go to the office"
Nevermind	Smells Like Teen Spirit: "with the lights out" Breed: A house, a tree—On a plain (plane) Something in the Way: "Underneath the bridge"
Incesticide	Sliver: Grandpa Joe's—Beeswax: The love boat, spawning downstream Mexican Seafood: Tile floor, toilet bowl, bed Aero Zeppelin: Sit upon the stairs Hairspray Queen: Disco
In Utero	Serve the Servants: Salem's Lot Scentless Apprentice: "In the soil" Heart Shaped Box, "Magnet tar pit trap" Frances Farmer: "Disease covered Puget Sound", Seattle Dumb: Clouds Very Ape: "Out of the ground, into the sky, out of the sky, into the dirt" Radio Friendly Unit Shifter: Kennel
Other	Spank Thru: In the trees Sappy: A laundry room Curmudgeon: In the garden

Interestingly, literary sources link one song from the Bleach era to the songs on In Utero. Beans was inspired by Jack Kerouac's novel The Dharma Bums. In Utero, meanwhile, drew locales from Stephen King's Salem's Lot, the story of a small town in which evil lurks in the basements and that ends with the town razed to the ground; Frances Farmer will have her Revenge on Seattle took inspiration from the (now-discredited) book Shadowland by William Arnold; while Patrick Süskind's novel Perfume—detailing the actions of an outcast sociopath—was the source material for Scentless Apprentice.

What's revealed is a set of generic locales in which elements of songs took place, many simply a condition rather than a full location. The majority of Cobain's images are of nowhere that couldn't be found around the house.

Even early on when there was still room for other people to enter a song, the surrounding environment barely merited a mention.

Nirvana songs don't describe striking skies or bright oceans; they don't dwell on streets made warm by mingling crowds; there are no tour diaries or travelogues. The solipsism is extreme. Not only are external locations absent but so is nature itself. Theoretically there are two ways to show nature; firstly as something which interacts with humanity and secondly as something that exists separate to humanity. Creative writing offers a third option which is the morphing of nature and humanity into a single item—it's this third option, which Kurt preferred:

Table 13. Nature Features Mentioned in Nirvana Songs

Album	Nature Mentioned
Bleach	Swap Meet: "The kind with seashells, driftwood and burlap" Mr. Moustache: "I eat cow" Sifting: "Sun felt numb"
Nevermind	In Bloom: "Sell the kids for food, weather changes moods," "spring is here again, reproductive glands", "nature is a whore", bruises on the fruit, tender age in bloom"
Incesticide	Beeswax: "If the wind blows just right", "the sky is cotton candy", "spawning downstream" Mexican Seafood: "Flies, bugs and fleas"
In Utero	Scentless Apprentice: "I lie in the soil and fertilize mushrooms" Heart Shaped Box: "Magnet tar pit trap", "meat eating orchids" Dumb: The sun, clouds Very Ape: The ground, the sky, the dirt
Other	Spank Thru: "Trees...Flowers...Birds..."

Nevermind potentially stands as a veritable cornucopia of nature within Nirvana's catalog...But the initial impression is deceptive. The intelligence at work is clear in the way each nature image is fused with a human one. Something in the Way de-anthropomorphizes fish on the basis that "they don't have any feelings" while turning independent animals into human-owned pets,

with grass existing solely as a human dietary element rather than as scenery or natural feature. Drain You has the Disney image of assassination present in “a poison apple.” On a Plain has its dual purpose title image in plain (sorry!) sight while, cleverly, “the black sheep” image plays the same trick of referring to the human and natural simultaneously. Breed takes it to the extreme of claiming “we can plant a house, we can build a tree”, then In Bloom has an overt nature theme throughout its verses while giving each reference a human counterpart. The duality was most brilliantly written in a couplet from Smells Like Teen Spirit. At first glance it seems just a throw-away combination of words, but examine how neatly they fit together—“a mulatto, an albino” followed by “a mosquito, my libido.” This simple sequence begins with the mixed humans, then converts his nagging sexual desire into a buzzing insect.

Insecticide contains, in the phrase “spawning downstream”, the only example within Kurt’s lyrics of nature acting independently of man as well as playing into the reproductive currents of his work, something reinforced by the strange unity between Beeswax and In Bloom—the only two titles in the Nirvana catalog to have nature-derived titles end up referencing the birds and the bees when combined. The song does indeed have a mass of nature references but, again, it twists them—the narrator is spayed (something done to a female dog), the sky meanwhile is cotton candy, a further image of the unnatural. I admit to having always heard a line that the Internet insists is “fiberglass insulated” as “fiberglass is raining” which I still prefer given it plays to the corruption of nature and man-made material.

Nothing in this volume is an argument that an element must be present in lyrics or that anything needs to be a certain way. The point is more that rather than taking what appears as accident or pre-destined, I hope I’m reinforcing that the lyrics are the product of an active mind working in very specific forms and images—this we will dwell on in the next chapter.

FAMILY MAN

12.0 FAMILY MAN

Political scientist James Q. Wilson, while devoting his life to the use of data to study human society, declared *“I would argue you cannot measure anything that is really important about human beings.”*¹ While this chapter sets about breaking Nirvana’s music down to base unities, it hopefully will indicate the greater magic of the body of work rather than robbing it of its spark.

My argument throughout this work, approached from a variety of angles, has been that Incesticide provides a remarkable view of the adolescent creations of Nirvana and the band’s rapid growth spurts. It has also been about showing that Incesticide does not stand apart from Nirvana’s catalog, but is very much an integral component unified via themes and music with its better known brethren. In this chapter we will not reduce discussion of Cobain’s lyrics down to the merits or meaning of one song versus another but will, instead, seek out the overall themes. By doing so we’ll observe the transcendent ideas and images around which Cobain fashioned his life’s work. Having discussed already the ‘how’ of Nirvana’s expression—the models used and the encroaching solitude therein—and the ‘why’—how biographical events and timing shaped the creations—here we will tackle the ‘what’, the overarching themes that he couldn’t help but dwell on and express.

While, for most of us, our interests (intellectual, physical, spiritual, political) don’t have the opportunity to bleed indelibly into the work we dedicate ourselves to day-by-day, Cobain worked in a medium in which the expression of his inner world was a de rigueur requirement. Previous discussions of Nirvana’s music have oscillated between constantly locating meaning within songs, then simultaneously giving credit to and applying, in a broad-brush manner across the entire catalog, Kurt’s comments dismissing meaning in his lyrics. Other quotations dwell on the rapid writing, the tweaks and changes that

1 The Economist obituary, March 10, 2012. Quotation taken from an interview with PBS. The full interview can be found at <http://www.pbs.org/fmc/interviews/jwilson.htm>

often took place to lyrics moments before being committed to record.

I'd like to propose two premises. Firstly, the core of Cobain's writing was almost totally unmediated expressions of self—a spew of words about himself, his circumstances, his feelings and brief opinion. The story song and the portrait song died so what we're looking at are stream-of-consciousness expressions of ego rather than artistically composed dissertations rigidly focused on a theme. Therefore, whether a song was mused over for months or a channeling of the words on his mind at a moment's notice, we're still faced with recurring themes, topics and images that formed the substance of his mind.

Secondly, I'd like to suggest that given the ample records of Kurt Cobain's antipathy toward intrusive questioning by the media—his tendency to conceal, evade, divert or simply lie—it is reasonable to refuse to trust or give primacy to his statements in some cases. Rightly the first voice to speak when considering meaning is usually the artist's, yet they often claim sole right to interpret their own work, closing down alternative readings by asserting absolute self-knowledge and ownership of the material. Sometimes this is tantamount to the patient declaring to a doctor that they know what's wrong and demanding the doctor simply record the self-diagnosis as fact.

My belief in writing this chapter has been that Cobain was simultaneously a highly revealing artist and a deeply personal one, while also being an inconsistent and unreliable witness. There are indeed deep themes that persisted, evolved or declined.

It's a commonly known fact that Cobain suffered hugely as a result of his parents' divorce and the subsequent years in which he grew increasingly estranged from each parent, resented their new partners and was shuttled between different family members. The results emerged as challenges around self-worth and an exaggerated need for affirmation and affection. His best known response to this narrative came on the *In Utero* album's opener, *Serve the Servants*. In the chorus he parodied the significance of "that legendary divorce," while in the first line he dismissed his musical works as "teenage

angst” expressed for financial gain. Then he switched in the second verse to the infliction of yet more snarky back-biting on a father he hadn’t seen in years until a brief meeting back-stage after becoming famous. Yet that chorus line didn’t refute the idea that his parents’ divorce was important; what it announced was that he was tired of hearing about it—not the same thing. Meanwhile the opening lines and the second verse directly contradicted the idea that either his parents or his youth had lost their significance. This was a 27 year old man opening his latest album with a direct address to the media tales circulating about his life and still harping on about his father and the divorce.

While this song stood as the most direct address to his own history, his lyrics genuinely support the significance of the family as a key issue within his mind. He didn’t mention family all the time, but when he did it was always marinating in a stew of negatives:

Table 14. Mentions of Family in Nirvana Lyrics

Song	Family Mentioned
Bleach	Floyd the Barber: “Aunt Bea”—Paper Cuts: “The lady whom I feel maternal love for” Negative Creep: “Daddy’s little girl”—Scoff (theme)
Nevermind	In Bloom: “Sell the kids”—On a Plain: “My brother died”
Incesticide	Sliver: (theme and lyrics)—Been a Son: (theme and lyrics) Beeswax: “Why doesn’t she need him for a father?” Downer: “Lobotomies to save little families”
In Utero	Serve the Servants: “I tried hard to have a father but instead I had a dad”
Other	Even in his Youth: (theme and lyrics)

Overshadowed by Serve the Servants’ blast at his father, it’s easy to miss the fact that In Utero is the Nirvana album least concerned with the sins of his parents and their enduring impact, though the unwanted baby present in Scentless Apprentice appears as a self-pitying echo. Kurt was now tangled in defending his own family incredibly fiercely, as he did throughout the 1992–1993 period. His early focus had been on finding ways to reassure and impress his wife while separated—lauding her from the stage during a TV appearance on

UK show The Word in 1991 then getting the Reading Festival audience in 1992 to chant “we love you Courtney.” By the end of the year, though his comments were increasingly embittered at the vicious attacks he saw Courtney Love being exposed to. In the Incesticide liner notes he declared his wife “*the supreme example of dignity, ethics and honesty*” and within In Utero, even from that very first song, he focused far more on witch trial imagery and attacks on persecutory intrusions into his family. Even at the very end of his life, in his suicide note, he still took time to tell the world “*I have a goddess of a wife who sweats ambition and empathy.*” It was important to him.

Yet, by contrast to the public ability to express affection, within his music he was challenged to express soft feelings toward a partner—empathy came hard. Spank Thru, About a Girl, Aneurysm, Drain You, Heart Shaped Box—these five songs are the candidates for the mantle of ‘Nirvana love songs’ yet in each case there’s a warping, a perversion—each of which we’ll come to as this chapter progresses. In essence, Nirvana never had a genuine, wholehearted love song in their repertoire. Consider Cobain’s mentions of love and remember this was an eighteen to twenty-seven year old Beatles fan and pop-rock song writer we’re talking about. Compare him to other pop stars you can think of:

Table 15. Mentions of Love in Nirvana Lyrics

Song	Love Mentioned
Bleach	Paper Cuts: “The lady whom I feel maternal love for cannot look me in the eyes, but I see hers and they are blue and they cock and twitch and masturbate” Swap Meet: “She loves him more than he’ll ever know, he loves her more than he will ever show.”
Nevermind	Lithium: “I love you, I’m not gonna crack” Stay Away: “Less is more, love is blind.” On a Plain: “I love myself, better than you.”
Incesticide	Beeswax: “I’m sick of paying for the love boat” Aero Zeppelin: “What’s the season of love if you can’t have everything...What’s the meaning of love?” Aneurysm: “Love you so much it makes me sick.”
In Utero	Radio Friendly Unit Shifter: “I love you for what I am not.”

Song**Love Mentioned****Other**

Spank Thru: "This song is for the lovers out there...We're together once again my love."

The richest sentiments associated with love in Cobain's lyrics are a single declaration of self-love in *On a Plain*, Aneurysm's vomitorious tribute and Radio Friendly Unit Shifter's backhanded and self-reflective compliment—he loves them by comparison. The rest consists of a combination of the stony (both mentions on *Bleach*) and the sardonic (Aero Zeppelin, Beeswax, Spank Thru.) The sense of resistance to love is palpable; in *Paper Cuts* the narrator loves while the maternal figure looks away, in *Swap Meet* the characters can't share it, *Lithium*'s couplet openly refuses it, on *Beeswax* he resents it. With two of these mentions, in *On a Plain* and *Radio Friendly Unit Shifter*, what is fascinating is that talk of love brings him straight back to thinking of himself, the phrases are circular. It's a notable point that while Nirvana now stand alongside a tiny number of era-defining, time-transcending stars, they did so while resolutely remaining detached from the romantic vibes that form the staple diet of mainstream music—it emphasizes how different a presence the band was. Yet it goes deeper than that.

While refusing staunchly to delve into affairs of the heart, Cobain devoted remarkable attention to sex or, more specifically, to a certain type of sex. Sex is the stated or unstated *raison d'être* behind a vast amount of music. Yet in the music of Nirvana it receives short shrift when it comes to the consensual coupling of two people; in the entire catalog it amounts to *Lithium* apologetically mentioning "I'm so horny", the title *Breed* (instead of fuck), maybe at a stretch *Drain You's* "travel through a tube and end up in your infection." By contrast, examine the regular focus on non-consensual sexual acts. On *Bleach*, Floyd the Barber's rape scene is the only sexual element on the album. On *Nevermind*, Polly channels the mind of a rapist so alluringly and ambiguously that crowds have chanted and sang along. In *Utero*, of course, has *Rape Me*. That's three rape songs and how many sex songs? 1993's *Moist Vagina*, a piece phrased in

clinical terminology with much yelling and with the curiously destructive original coda to the title on an early draft track listing for *In Utero* “...*And Then She Blew Him Like He’d Never Been Blown, Brains Stuck All Over The Wall.*”¹ There was also Gallons of Rubbing Alcohol Flow Through the Strip, with its claim that “she’s only been five months late, even though we haven’t had sex for a week...” An image drawing together acknowledgement of sex, absence of sex and pregnancy all in one. We have to delve back to the Fecal Matter demo, to the desire to “jump her bones” in Buffy’s Pregnant or wade past one more rape occurring on Laminated Effect to find a straightforward heterosexual coupling, yet it’s actually phrased as a cure for lesbianism, ugh... Masturbation at least earned a place as Spank Thru’s chorus theme, as the aforementioned description of his mother’s eyes in Paper Cuts and then a single line about “jacking themselves off in polyester” on Beeswax—suffice to say it did die out as a topic as Kurt left teenhood behind in 1988, despite this recurrent focus in 1986–late 1987.

Nothing said here is a demand that a topic should, or should not be covered in music.² Here we’re simply trying to illuminate what Cobain chose to focus on. Intriguingly, having stated sex was such a strong topic it’s necessary to reverse the statement and point out how strong the anti-sex element was within his lyrics, long before the ambiguous mention in Gallons of Rubbing Alcohol. The most obvious reference is found on Incesticide. Stain’s bluntly vulgar phrasing “he never fucks” during a character portrait about Kurt himself stands out for its directness. Alongside it there are actually more references in Cobain’s music to his absence of sexuality than to him thinking of, let alone engaging in, sex. Specifically we can look to Beeswax, with its chorus yelp about being “spayed,” Nevermind’s On a Plain does it again, referring to being “neutered and spayed”; while Breed declares “we don’t have to breed.” In addition to this should be added the self-identification as female in Been a Son and Radio Friendly Unit

1 For some reason, this image of the disintegrating head puts me in mind of the famous Mr. Moustache cartoon reproduced in Michael Azerrad’s *Come as You Are* and in Kurt Cobain’s *Journals*. In that situation the baby destroyed the man’s head, in this case the woman does the same.

2 I’d argue that an overt and constant lyrical focus on sexuality has become cartoonish, while overwhelming nuance, intelligence and charm in music, to its detriment.

Shifter. Remember spaying is what happens to female dogs not male ones. That's a lot of mentions of impotency, particularly in the world of music, with its tendency toward the hyper-sexual.

In this context it's been suggested that the repeated gun mentions in the early part of *Nevermind* were Freudian—"I swear that I don't have a gun" at least has a case for being an emasculatory image. Given *Smells Like Teen Spirit's* source graffiti read "Kurt Smells Like Teen Spirit", maybe the fact that the very first line of his big pop hit record mentioned guns has a significance, tying the band to a masculine identity as the gun-toting country boys. The same song repeatedly dwells on nagging sensuality in the beautifully phrased couplet "a mosquito, my libido"—viewing his libidinous urges as a buzzing irritating insect or as a blood-sucker.

Without slipping further into psychoanalysis, perhaps note that the teenage sexual experiences Kurt chooses to recall in the official biography of the band, Michael Azerrad's *Come as You Are*, are about a semi-unsuccessful encounter with a mentally-challenged girl and one in which his mother catches him in the act. It's understandable that both incidents would stay on the mind, but curious that they're what he chose to dwell on.

While robbing his music of sensuality and romance, Kurt replaced them with a conception of love and sex that focused on biological bonding. Within his suicide note a crucial reason he gave for his actions was a fear that his daughter would become him. This appraisal certainly tied into a repetitive focus on child birth and reproduction that utterly eclipsed sexual passion.

Examine *In Utero*. For an album linked in name to female reproduction it's remarkably asexual. And this was at a time when Cobain's sexual adoration of Courtney Love was well-attested on live TV announcements, in song form, in private Polaroid photos—the deepest sexual engagement visible in Kurt Cobain's life. *Heart Shaped Box* was a perfect hymn to his sexuality; a love song couched in the language of vaginal flowers, umbilical cords, the hymen; love made to sound more like a brutal dependency or dictatorship. This trope within Cobain's work doesn't point toward a normal mental universe.

It wasn't a strong early theme in his work; for example, *Buffy's Pregnant* stayed in the realm of teenage smirking. There's a definite evolution as Kurt moved ever increasingly toward a lyrical narrative that was wholly self-centered. He drew a now famous cartoon in which the character Mr. Moustache, a redneck stereotype, receives his comeuppance as his beloved offspring kicks through the mother's womb and skewers Mr. Moustache's face in a bloody explosion. It's an image in which the unborn child reacts to, and against, the father, an ominous portent. The intervening years see ambiguous attitudes toward gender identification, love and sex, but it's on *Nevermind* that we find a trio of songs, a full quarter of the album—*In Bloom*, *Breed*, *Drain You*—referencing babies, reproductive glands and parental planning. The front cover of the album featured a baby with exposed penis—thankfully a long way from Kurt's original idea of a picture of a gory water-birth—while the inlay featured a photo of his favorite toy monkey with a barely visible meat/vagina collage as background. This was the first album in which he was in full creative control and had the confidence to go for it. Kurt Cobain had already begun this fixation, pre-Courtney, pre-Frances—he already had a substantial collection of broken baby dolls.¹

This swelled into the deluge that occurred seemingly from the moment Courtney Love was pregnant. Charles Cross stated in his biography of Kurt Cobain that Kurt had to be persuaded to stop drawing pictures of malformed fetuses during Courtney Love's pregnancy. With full control over Nirvana's artwork the results in 1992–1994 were extensive. Firstly, and ambiguously, the *Come as You Are* single featured images of embryotic looking sea creatures on the CD and inner sleeve. Clearer was the close up of the flower's stamen (it's reproductive organ) on the *In Bloom* single; next *Incesticide's* broken-headed doll-baby/disinterested parent (and the title *Incesticide* returning to the inappropriate sex mantra). Next the *Heart Shaped Box* single's cover featured a heart surrounded by vaginal flowers with baby fetuses lining the inner sleeve collage. Finally the *All Apologies/Rape Me* single came with an image of

1 There's a famous photo of him with his head rested on a shelf amid severed doll heads.

seahorses chosen specifically because male seahorses carry the young through gestation—gender confusion, plus reproduction once more.

Oh, and not to forget the small matter of In Utero's artwork. This was the ultimate thematic torrent; the back cover collage features diseased vaginas, flowers and fetuses overlaid with sketches from The Women's Dictionary of Symbols and Sacred Objects. The front cover is an anatomical model of a woman with a close-up illustration by Alex Grey inside the liner notes of a skinless pregnant woman. The disc itself bares an image of Kurt and Courtney's young male nanny, Michael "Cali" DeWitt, dressed in drag with a copy of the book "Always Ask a Man: Arlene Dahl's Key to Femininity" alongside him.¹

In fact, Oh The Guilt was the only Nirvana release after the Smells Like Teen Spirit single not to wear the child/birth/woman theme, though the Pennyroyal Tea single—withdrawn after Kurt's death—only featured a tea cup and cigarette but apparently was not approved or conceived by Kurt Cobain. Perhaps the fact the song referenced a substance with mythical abortive properties was deemed sufficient fidelity to the theme.

The video treatments continued this fixation: the Sliver video in early 1993 was cheaply made and done at speed but featured Frances Bean Cobain prominently. Next was the Heart Shaped Box video with the charming image of fetuses hanging from the trees, a young girl (a veritable Cobain look-alike) eventually trying to pull some down, an old man being hooked to an IV containing a fetus and a large woman (with a figure like the old fertility symbol goddesses found at archeological sites in Europe) with her organs on the outside of her body. The treatment planned for a video to accompany the All Apologies/Rape Me double A-side was described in his Journals with a request for "*preferably lilies, orchids, ya know vaginal flowers*" and ended with a request for a man to be filmed lying in a gynecological chair with his legs up in stirrups—another version dwelt on the forced feminization and rape of men in prison.

1 Arlene Dahl is an actress primarily active in the 1950s who went on to found a company focused on cosmetic sales and lingerie. The Women's Dictionary of Symbols and Sacred Objects is by Barbara G. Walker. Alex Grey's piece was called 'Muscle System (Pregnant Woman)' and his work dwells on spiritual themes in a range of formats and art styles.

Finally, the music on *In Utero* provides plenty to dwell on. Take the album step-by-step: the very first song, *Serve the Servants*, references his father, the second song begins with an undesired baby being born, the third song was *Heart Shaped Box* and, as Courtney Love said in 2012, “*you do know the song is about my vagina right?*”¹; the fourth was *Rape Me*. The fifth song’s title referenced the ex-Hollywood actress Frances Farmer on the basis of the book *Shadowland* that claimed she had been forcibly lobotomized and reprinted rumors about her being used as a sex slave and raped in an asylum.² Then the album pauses for breath for one song, before commencing its Side B with a track referencing its narrator’s masculinity/anti-masculinity, then *Milk It*, track eight, with its viruses being looked after like pets and breast milk imagery; track nine is *Pennyroyal Tea* (abortion), track ten is *Radio Friendly Unit Shifter* (a song originally titled *Four Month Media Blackout* then shifted to *Nine Month Media Blackout* to emphasize the pregnancy point), with mentions of afterbirth and “my waters broke” before coming to rest for two tracks...Before a last spurt of sex and pregnancy on the bonus.

There’s a surprising absence of male or female rock stars devoting entire albums to rape, babies and the biological aspects of reproduction (rather than the pornographic.) Cobain did it in music, video and in artwork. The point is not that he, faced with the pressures of fatherhood, focused his lyrics on babies and reproduction. It’s that both long before Frances Bean Cobain’s conception—when preparing *Nevermind* and writing half the songs on *In Utero*—and months after her August 1992 birth he was grimly fixated on the subject. It seems that in the early years his focus was on his parents, shifting after *Nevermind* to a morbid fascination with what dark inheritance he might be passing on in his genes. As pointed out at the start of this chapter, love and sex were portrayed as impositions, something unwanted yet bestowed regardless. On the album he played out various alternatives that might arise in his new family life; consisting

1 Twitter.com, July 29, 2012 in a response to Lana Del Rey, who had recently covered the song.

2 The book—now substantially debunked—had a huge effect on Cobain. The author claiming Kurt tried to contact him fearing he was related to the judge who had Frances Farmer committed.

of the rejected father, the unwanted child, the burdensome dependency of husband to wife and child to parent; then posited abortion as a solution to “the life inside of me.” We’ll return to that quote.

The theme can be turned full circle to the Fecal Matter song known as Laminated Effect. The song ends with the mantra “made not born” recited over and over—that we are molded. The song also identifies who does the molding. In the first verse the character’s life (which ends with him a victim of AIDS), revolves around his sexual preference (homosexuality) and implies it was caused by his father raping him. Yet in the second verse, the female character, again defined by her sexuality (lesbianism), is ‘cured’ of her homosexuality by vaginal penetration—the sex act as damnation through the male line or redemption through the female. In this light it no longer seems coincidental that Kurt began spelling heroin as heroine—the female as champion, heroin as a personal salvation. It’s a fair summation of his conception of life; the centrality of sex and parents, becoming one’s fate by virtue of parental inheritance. That’s where the Pennyroyal Tea point comes in. He, as the man, was the one who bore the bad genes that needed to be aborted. His suicide note returned to this by describing how what he was as a child had been destroyed and his terror at the idea that his daughter would inherit his character.

The medical theme in Cobain’s work tied directly into this same conduit of thought. A core idea was that of something alive inside oneself, something independent; Milk It being the perfect encapsulation of that idea—being a parasite, caring for a virus. It’s used again in Drain You, where the concept of love means to live inside another, with the same idea appearing in Heart Shaped Box, in Pennyroyal Tea and to a lesser extent in Aneurysm—perhaps even Dive’s request to “dive in me.” Note that this concept was the language he chose for three of his five clearest ‘love songs’—Spank Thru, his ode to masturbation, went with the actually imaginative and remarkable image of “the flowers have gingivitis,” flowers as gaping mouths with gum disease—vaginas? I Hate Myself

and I Want to Die, usually an overlooked throw-away, actually ties in with this strand to his writing, whether as a continuation of Rape Me’s invitation to abuse, or an invitation to share disease in the affectionate style of Drain You.

Kurt’s lyrical obsession was not that of the average heavy metal gore-hound, which is what makes his fixation on medical conditions, female anatomy and physically exceptional features unusual. He was taking textbook images and using them in contexts a world away from the horror-film schlock of the metal world. While Bleach never went further than mild scatology, Incesticide displayed a broader interest in using medical terminology to complete lyrics, before Nevermind and In Utero delved into symptoms and treatments:

Table 16. Medical, Disease or Injury References in Nirvana Lyrics

Song	Medical, Disease or Injury References
Nevermind	Smells Like Teen Spirit: A mulatto, an albino, contagious In Bloom: Reproductive glands Drain You: “Travel through a tube and end up in your infection”, “the water is so yellow, I’m a healthy student,” “vacuum out the fluids” On a Plain: Neutered and spayed, “scratched till I bled” Stay Away: Poison skin—Lithium (title)—Breed originally Immodium
Incesticide	Stain: Never bleeds Beeswax: Shrinking infections, spayed—Downer: Lobotomies Mexican Seafood: infection, mucus, fungus mould Big Long Now: Color blind—Aneurysm (title and its full lyrics)
In Utero	Serve the Servants: As my bones grew they did hurt Scentless Apprentice (title): Semen Heart Shaped Box: Eat your cancer, cut myself on angel’s hair and baby’s breath, broken hymen, umbilical noose—Rape Me: Kiss your open sores Frances Farmer: disease covered Puget’s Sound Milk It (title and its full lyrics)—Pennyroyal Tea (title and its full lyrics) Radio Friendly: Afterbirth, acne’d, my water broke “Gallons of Rubbing Alcohol Flows Through the Strip” All Apologies: Sunburn with freezerburn
Bleach	Sifting: “Wet your bed”—Mr. Moustache: “Poop as hard as rock”
Other	Spank Thru—“All the flowers have gingivitis”—Moist Vagina I Hate Myself and I Want to Die—Runny nose, cold, cough, broken heart, broken bones, capsule of horse pills

Kurt seemed to bask in the diversity of medical options available for consideration, reeling off diseases, injuries, deformities and defects over and over again. To some extent it's unsurprising that his lyrics should weave together these elements given ill health formed part of his core personal experience. His frail physical condition led him to wear multiple layers to disguise how thin he was while he complained for years of debilitating stomach pains. Mexican Seafood was one of his most prolonged meditations on disease symptoms, apparently a meditation on venereal disease, and in the context of this discussion an almost normal late teen issue to tackle, despite the song's cataloguing of the inside of the toilet bowl, the bed and his discomfort.¹

Beyond cataloging medical terminologies, the intriguing feature was how often Kurt blurred physical ailment and emotional state within his lyrics the same way he merged love, sex and family around a physical, biological center. As examples, consider "broken heart and broken bones" from I Hate Myself and I Want to Die; "as my bones grew they did hurt..." juxtaposed with his alienation from his father in Serve the Servants; "love you so much it makes me sick" in Aneurysm; then the whole of Pennyroyal Tea's blending of spiritual and physical malaise. What was occurring in these songs was a fusion of the physical with the emotional, a rendering of real-world injury as emotional, mental experience.

Psychiatrists observe many cases of psychosomatic illness whereby physical perceptions or symptoms of disease and injury originate in the mind. Summarizing, the general characteristics are that the problem develops during adolescence, is usually diagnosed before age thirty and involves a preoccupation with perceived ill health, leading the sufferer to contact a range of specialists none of whom can locate any problem. Stress, anxiety and depression are very common, arising from the patient's belief that their assumed ill health is serious and then reinforced by the inability of doctors to find a cause. It's impossible at this distance to say more about Cobain's medical condition beyond the fact that he saw doctors and psychiatrists; was never specifically diagnosed with a medical issue beyond a curvature of the spine; that he claimed to suffer

1 I admit to a desire to see the condition of the mattress he was using given he also referenced a "piss stained mattress" in Mrs. Butterworth and "wet your bed" in Sifting.

extensive incapacitating pain; claimed to be narcoleptic; and stated that his drug taking was self-medication. On the other hand, this was a man who had experienced poverty during his mid-to-late teens, who had an appalling diet, who put his body through the physical rigors of touring and who was a regular user of a range of drugs from his mid-teens onward, culminating in an extensive heroin addiction. In other words it isn't altogether surprising that he would end up ill. His songs, however, indicate a remarkably repetitive bonding of disease and mental state.

Family, sex, love, disease—this unhappy vision left little room for outright levity within Cobain's music. In some respects though, what's saddest is not this bitter twist of concerns but the central protagonist's apparent sense of responsibility for his own plight. There was little external world in the music of Kurt Cobain.¹ Likewise it was also rare for him to point the finger of blame anywhere other than at himself. It's hard to support the argument that it was all irony, or not to be taken literally, when what we're faced with is a torrent of self-criticism played out over quite a few years:

Table 17. Self-Criticism Expressed in Nirvana Lyrics

Song	Self-Criticism Expressed
Bleach	Blew: Shame—Floyd the Barber "I was shamed" About a Girl: "I'll take advantage while you hang me out to dry" Paper Cuts: "My whole existence is for your amusement" Negative Creep: "I'm a negative creep"—Scoff: "In your eyes, I'm not worth it"
Nevermind	Smells Like Teen Spirit: "I'm worst at what I do best...I feel stupid n' contagious" Lithium: "I'm so ugly...I'm to blame for all I've heard," Territorial Pissings: "Just because you're paranoid don't mean they're not after you"—On a Plain: "I'm neutered and spayed"
Incesticide	Stain: "I'm a stain"—Been a Son: "She should have been a son" Aero Zeppelin: "We're worse nowadays" Big Long Now: "Shameful as it seems...I am Blind"

1 As described in more depth in the Over the Edge chapter.

Song	Self-Criticism Expressed
In Utero	Serve the Servants: “Now I’m bored and old” Rape Me: “Rape me...hate me...waste me,”—Dumb: “I think I’m dumb” Very Ape: “The king of illiterature...acting like I’m not naive” Milk It: “I am my own parasite”—Pennyroyal Tea: “I’m a liar and a thief” Radio Friendly: “What is wrong with me” All Apologies (title and its full lyrics)
Other	Even in His Youth (title and its full lyrics) I Hate Myself and I Want to Die (title)

Just to emphasize, he states that he’s negative, a bad son, a stain, naïve, not well-read, unlucky, a shame, ugly, unmanly, blind, dumb, a liar, a thief, sorry for all that he is and to blame for all that has been—that’s ignoring his diseased nature, his impotence and his castrati status, which we’ve already discussed. That’s quite a litany of sins and flaws to ladle over oneself so publicly. Again, this isn’t simple self-depreciation. The criticisms go hand-in-hand with parental figures and their disapproval, with laments around his own absent masculinity, all coated in references to ill-health. The inter-weaving of these themes incorporates most of his lyrical work and paints a picture near jet-black. Kurt’s dislike of confrontation made his songs the outlet for his negative emotions; other channels might have required him to confront his own issues. Yet he wasn’t an arrogant or vindictive man so couldn’t find it in him to hate others for who he was. Instead he drew himself as the unwanted child, rejected because there was something wrong with him—the broken doll who gave a home to broken dolls.

The title of Nirvana songs were remarkable for draping Cobain’s life work in such low expectations and negativity: Scoff, Stain, Negative Creep, Big Cheese, Paper Cuts, Downer, Blandest, Rape Me, Dumb, Very Ape, All Apologies, Oh the Guilt, Curmudgeon, Stay Away, Something in the Way, Sappy—this was a man who could make School an insulting word. By contrast, in terms of titles with positive connotations, the pickings are thin; Nevermind is the only album where there’s an inviting tone: In Bloom, Come as You Are, Smells Like Teen Spirit.¹

1 That’s sixteen song titles with negative connotations from a total selection of around eighty songs; leaving aside how many songs contained lyrics linked to the described themes.

In light of Cobain's suicide and the accompanying note describing himself as a "*miserable self-destructive death rocker*," his work has been well examined for images of self-annihilation. In *Utero* runs the full gamut from the casual "waste me," to the prehistoric "magnet tar pit trap" (and the punishing "umbilical noose"), the punitive "buried up to my neck," to the nihilistic "the bright side is suicide," to the disposable and fatalistic "use just once and destroy." The album was also rich with funereal concepts: "into the dirt", "obituary birthday", "married buried", "lie in the soil and fertilize mushrooms." The nearest the album comes to images of peace are the death images in which he can "hang out on clouds" (like angels in other words) or exist in "a Leonard Cohen afterworld," of eternal sighs. Despite Cobain's protestation no-one caught the joke in the B-side/potential album title "I Hate Myself and I Want to Die." This theme stood out on the last album because, on the one hand, his previous work had been so low on violence, and on the other, because the violence was directed inward at himself.

The idea that he was burning out, captured in the Neil Young quotation used in his suicide note, was also literally visible on the album. Water has been overestimated as a component of Nirvana's work, represented mainly by *Nevermind*, the *Hormoaning* EP and the *Come as You Are* video. On *In Utero* even water was a threat in the form of witch trials and drowning. Yet far more potent were the fires spreading throughout the album. *Salem's Lot*, in the first song, was a town in Stephen King's novel set on fire by the heroes; the next song contained the invitation to "throw me in the fire I won't throw a fit"; *Rape Me* promised enemies that they would "stink and burn,"; the next track brought vengeance down as a ghost returning "...as fire, to burn all the liars and leave a blanket of ash." Other songs dwelt on injuries and escapes, ranging from *Dumb's* "soothe the burn," *Radio Friendly Unit Shifter's* "second rate third degree burns" and "a blanket acne'ed with cigarette burns," then *All Apologies'* "sunburn with freezer burn, choking on the ashes of her enemies," an image seemingly set in the aftermath of the mooted revenge. The bonus track's very title stayed true to the theme "...gallons of, umm, rubbing alcohol, flowed through the strip and was

set on fire, it didn't just singe the hair..." Even Heart Shaped Box's cancer turning black possessed a carcinogenic quality. The result was an album in which flames were destroying, or had destroyed, all within a world of funerals and afterlife visions while the central protagonist requested annihilation.

While viewing love, family and sex as intertwined elements of control, Cobain expanded on that theme of control with the coterie of individual figures who haunted his songs:

Table 18. Characters Mentioned in Nirvana Lyrics

Song	Characters Mentioned
Bleach	Floyd the Barber (title)—Negative Creep: Daddy's little girl Mr Moustache (title)—Sifting: teacher & preacher—Big Cheese (title) About a Girl: Girlfriend—Paper Cuts: Parents/captors Scoff: Dismissive parents—Swap Meet: Uncommunicative couple
Nevermind	Teen Spirit: Friends, kids, our little group/tribe, bored self-assured girl In Bloom: Ignorant fan—Breed: Decision-making partner Polly: Rapist/captor—On a Plain: Blackmailed black sheep, brother Drain You: Babies
Incesticide	Sliver: Mom/dad, grandpa/grandma—Been a Son: Mother/father Beeswax: Pepe LePew—Hairspray Queen (title): Disco goddess Downer: "Little families...Sickening pessimist hypocrite master...Conservative communist apocalyptic bastard"—Aero Zeppelin: Friends
In Utero	Serve the Servants: A father/a dad, judges, a witch, the servants Scentless Apprentice (title): Wet nurse—Rape Me: Favorite inside source Frances Farmer (title):Favorite patient—Pennyroyal Tea: Leonard Cohen Heart Shaped Box: Female highness—Dumb: Drug buddy Gallons of Rubbing Alcohol: Perry Ellis
Other	Even in His Youth: Daddy—Curmudgeon (title): Santa in Curmudgeon Sappy: Captive

Barely any of the figures are sources of comfort; the best that can be said is that some are neutral or ambiguous presences. On both Bleach and Incesticide the family figures loomed large. Next Nevermind shifted in a way that indicates Kurt's keen awareness of what made effective pop music; the generic anonymity of the characters allowed each fan to interpret the blank archetypes as whoever they wished. In Utero was the first time named public figures appeared in the form of perennial miserablist Leonard Cohen, fame victim

Frances Farmer, then fashion designer and AIDS victim Perry Ellis.¹ Previously only cartoon character Pepe LePew had lived within Kurt's world of cardboard cut-out job titles or vocational roles. The absence of empathetic characters persistently emphasized the isolation of the narrator.

The theme of control, however, stood out in the overtly hierarchical relationships present on *Bleach*, where the narrator was dominated by a sadistic barber (and friends), by an abusive family in a dark room, by a neglectful girlfriend, by preachers, teachers, school, the 'big cheese'—the album's opening lines even ask permission to breathe. Intriguingly the acquisition of his new wife and child, a return to a family environment, seemed to return this theme to the fore. On *In Utero* the new rulers were the judges, the female 'highness' of *Heart Shaped Box*, the binary relationship of wet nurse to babe, acknowledgement of his subsidiary apprentice status, his position as the acquiescent victim on *Rape Me*. On both albums there was a powerlessness to the roles taken on by the narrator and a universe of figures that emphasized it. On the surface *Milk It and Serve the Servants* were locales for declared superiority; in the former undermined by his status as a parasite upon his own being, in the latter by the inversion of service.

On *Bleach* the reaction against control was understandable. Kurt was a young man who had finally escaped family and school only to fall under the demands of employment and bosses. Yet by the time of *In Utero* this was a grown man with significant power who decided not to tour, not to record, to force new financial arrangements on the band...A reality that made no difference. The feeling of powerlessness returned to his songs, after an absence of a few independent years, making a jarring statement of the wounds reopened by the parent-child scenario to which he had returned.

Cobain's lyrics were primarily a record of the interior world; a view

1 The second time a victim of AIDS had featured in one of his compositions after the fictitious 'Johnny' on *Made Not Born*. Perry Ellis founded the eponymous Perry Ellis International fashion chain with its various highly successful sub-companies and brands. He died in 1986 at age 46.

reinforced by looking at the verbs used. Not wishing to reproduce the entire list here, take a listen and consider what actually happens on Nirvana's albums—there's very little action at all. The songs feel or think in the present tense (I'm, I am), they state intentions or theoretical possibilities (I'll, we'll, they'll) or they simply give opinions. What's lacking is a narrator who is actually doing anything physical, it's a procession of verbs that don't lead to actual events taking place. This is often willfully accomplished with songs refuting the possibilities and declaring what can't be (I can't, I don't, I did not, I am not.) There's just a smattering of songs where the narrator takes part in present tense life: Floyd the Barber, About a Girl, Paper Cuts, Swap Meet, Lithium, Drain You, On a Plain, Something in the Way, Sliver, Mexican Seafood, Scentless Apprentice, Dumb, Pennyroyal Tea. The rest consist of things taking place in someone's head.

The question raised by this chapter is the degree of conscious intention—did Kurt spend a decade deliberately eviscerating himself, selecting his darkest concerns for public consumption? No...But it was the end result of whatever drove him to create. He splurged content, writing whatever fitted the emotion, the vibe, the line. But that lack of conscious consideration contributed to the visible unity of what he dredged up from within to fill those lines. Cobain's style—low on artifice or arty touches, low on external observation or participation—meant he expressed what resided in his mind. What can be seen suggests a man with genuine mental trauma announced over and over again via his lyrics. This is specifically an analysis of his music, not an attempt to summarize all he was as a person. It is not an attempt to deny that he was often funny, warm, kind, loving, cheerful, enthusiastic—he was a three dimensional human being. But acknowledging those positive sides to his character doesn't erase the extensive evidence in his music of a very powerful challenge within his thinking. We have sight of around one hundred songs written and the majority play to the themes described.

His lyrical world was highly unified. Being born was an imposition by parents that bestowed either advantage or poisoned fate upon the resulting child. Ergo sex was an act of violence in which the participant was enslaved in

the same way as love was thrust upon an individual against their will as a further instrument of control. It all led back to biology—child birth, reproduction, disease—the same source with all human relationships enforcing authority over both partners and all children. Removing or destroying the male was a key solution.

The symptoms displayed by patients in psychiatric care that the normal world finds deranged are often the patient's attempts to self-heal, to make sense of, compensate for, or cure what's wrong. They're not the problem itself. In Kurt Cobain's case the warped imagery and intimate themes spoke to an attempt to make sense of his own past history and present condition. He sought to unravel his problem while creating an origin myth that explained the emotional circumstances in which he found himself.