



Title: Suicide triggers in ancient and recent times.

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ABSTRACT

Background: Western medicine has insisted that suicide is always triggered by mental disorder. We have argued that is not the case. Plato (360 BCE) stated that suicide could occur as a response to various predicaments.

Aims: To determine whether 1) non-medical suicide triggers could be identified in the stories of ancient times, 2) these suicide triggers remained operative in recent times, and 3) methods of transmission of these models over time (in representations in literature and visual arts) could be identified.

Method: We examined history from ancient to the present time, using books, journals and the web, and arranged our findings consistent with our aims.

Results: We identified nine (9) ancients who had died in response to non-medical suicide triggers. We were also able to identify at least one recent case, in which the suicide trigger was comparable to that of an ancient individual. Literary and visual art representations of the ancient suicide completer could be identified in every case.

Conclusions: Non-medical suicide triggers could be identified in ancient and recent cases. These were various forms of loss, shame/guilt and unavoidable physical pain, reminiscent of the triggers of suicide which Plato found acceptable. It is possible that, consistent with a universal characteristic of life (the avoidance of distress/pain) suicide is an innate response to painful situations, and that the transmission of information about the responses of earlier members has a role in determining the different suicide rates of different cultures.



Introduction

For the last two centuries, Western medicine has insisted that suicide is always triggered by mental disorder.¹ Our group has an opposing view, believing that suicide is a response to stressful circumstances, and while untreated or unresponsive painful mental disorder is a potent suicide trigger, non-mental disorder suicide triggers should not be ignored.

We are grateful to the Working Paper of Public Health for the opportunity to express our views.^{2,3} In our first paper² we drew attention to the fact that in the nineteenth century English novels by Anthony Trollop, the character experienced suicidal thoughts, in the absence of any mental disorder. In our second paper³ we argued that a range of professions had knowledge to contribute to the understanding and the management of suicide.

Recently, the World Health Organization⁴ and other experts⁵ have concluded that suicide can, and in fact, often does, occur in the absence of mental disorder. However, this view yet to be universally adopted.

The importance of social integration in preventing suicide has been described by Durkheim.⁶ We have described the impact of culture on suicide rates.⁷ Different cultures have sustained differences in suicide rate. Culture is the set of beliefs, attitudes and responses one must possess/demonstrate to be a member of a particular culture/group. Among the responses of a particular cultural group are customs, that is, particular ways of behaving when faced with particular circumstances. Customs are also models of accepted/appropriate responses (and include suicide) to circumstances. In an earlier paper² we indicated that literature is a means of transmitting models of behaviour from one individual and from one time to another. We argue, the same capacity applies to the visual arts.

Plato wrote *Laws* in 360 BCE. He was opposed to suicide, however, he described four exceptions/circumstances which made suicide acceptable (to him). Two of these were, when the self-killing is compelled by extreme and unavoidable personal misfortune, and when the self-killing results from shame at having participated in grossly unjust actions (*Laws* IX 873c-d). We read these to mean various forms of loss, and shame, and unavoidable physical pain.

We were interested to determine whether these suicide triggers could be identified in ancient and recent times. We were also interested to discover whether a train of model transmission



(via literature and visual representations) exists from ancient to recent times. Should it transpire that these suicide triggers were, and continue to be, operational, either these responses are innate, or they have been effectively transmitted from one era to another.

Aims

To determine whether 1) non-medical suicide triggers could be identified in the stories of ancient times, 2) these suicide triggers remained operative in recent times, and 3) methods of transmission of these models over time (in representations in literature and visual arts) could be identified.

Method

We examined history from ancient to the present time, using books, journals and the web, and arranged our findings consistent with our aims.

Results - details

1. Loss of a lover

1.1 Ancient case: Pyramus and Thisbe

These young people died around 2000 BCE, which makes the story around 4000 years old, presumably the oldest love story in the world. The events are believed to have taken place in Babylonia, Persia. Ovid provides an account.^{8, p 89-92}

Pyramus and Thisbe were in love and lived in adjoining houses. Their parents were strongly opposed to any association, so they communicated through a crack in the wall between their homes. Ultimately, they arranged to meet one night in a public space under a mulberry tree.

Thisbe arrived first, but ran away, scared by a lion with a bloody mouth (presumably it had eaten an animal). The lion then chewed on a veil which she dropped. Pyramus then arrived, found the bloody veil, and concluded his beloved had been taken by a wild animal. He

blamed himself for not arriving first, "...my spirit is guilty. I killed you..." He stabbed himself to death.

Thisbe then returned and when she understood what had happened, she blamed herself, "...your death's cause and companion...", and longed for reunion, "...nor can you be torn away by death..." She stabbed herself and died.

Both Pyramus and Thisbe expressed the pain of separation and completed suicide to escape this pain.

1.2 Representations in literature – in the 1615 novel Don Quixote, by Cervantes, a poet recites a poem he has written on the Pyramus and Thisbe story.

1.3 Representation in visual arts – numerous, including that below:



*Thisbe. John Willian Waterhouse, 1909
This work is in the Public Domain*

1.4 Recent Case: Becky Tait

In 2014, this 20-year-old woman stepped in front of a train Stone Railway Station, Staffordshire, only meters away from the spot where her boyfriend completed suicide two months earlier.⁹

2. Loss of a child

2.1 Ancient case: Aegeus

This suicide probably occurred before 1200 BCE; Aegeus is believed to have lived one generation before Heracles/Hercules.

Aegeus was the king of Athens. He had two childless marriages. In the city of Troezen, he had relations with an unmarried woman (Aethra). He told her that if she had a male child, he should come to Athens and make himself known.

A son (Theseus) was born and he eventually joined his father in Athens. He was clever and a fine combatant. Aegeus sent Theseus to Crete to suppress civil unrest and to slay the Minotaur. There was some risk. Theseus agreed that if everything went favourably, on the trip back to Athens, he would fly white sails. Theseus quelled unrest and killed the Minotaur, as planned. However, the passage back was complicated, and the young soldier was distracted and flew black sails.

Aegeus assumed his son was dead and completed suicide by drowning himself in the sea.

2.2 *Representations in literature. Aegeus features in literature as the father of Theseus, for example, Oedipus at Colonus by Sophocles, 406 BCE.*

2.3 *Representation in visual arts and other monuments. The Aegean Sea, in which Aegeus died, is named after him. Drawings and paintings of his fall have been made. The most important may be a painting on an urn by Sisyphus (circa 410-400 BCE) of a young man being greeted on arrival in Athens. This is believed to be Theseus and the seated individual may be Aegeus. See below:*



Photographer: Marie-Lan Nguyen (User: Jastrow), 2007
This file is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution
2.5 Generic license.

2.4 Recent Case: Vanghel and Nicholas Arava

In 2015 in Romania Vanghel and Nicholas Arava (both 46 years) hanged themselves when their 9-year-old son, Cristian, died of a brain tumour.¹⁰

3. Loss of choice (of spouse)

3.1 Ancient case: Dido

Dido died circa 800 BCE. Her story has been made somewhat difficult to follow, as Virgil altered certain facts when he wrote his epic poem *Aeneid*.

Nevertheless, she is known to have been a princess from Tyre (in Phoenicia, now in Lebanon). When her husband was murdered, Dido and a small group of supporters fled Phoenicia. They settled in North Africa, where she obtained a small parcel of land from the Berber king, Iarbar. This land became the site of the city of Carthage.

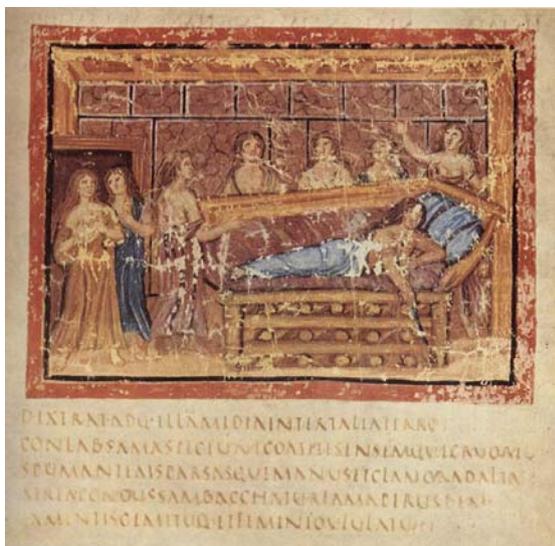
In due course, however, Iarbar declared that Dido must marry him. To avoid this marriage, Dido fatally stabbed herself with a sword.

3.2 Representations in literature.

Christopher Marlow wrote the play *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, which was first performed in 1593. Reference is made to her in Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, and at least a dozen operas refer to her story.

3.3 Representations in visual arts

There are numerous visual depictions of the death of Dido, one is presented below:



Aeneid, Book IV, Death of Dido, by Meister des Vergilius Vaticanus, circa 400 CE
From the Vatican Library, Cod. Vat. lat. 3225. This work is in the public domain.



3.4 Recent case: Tejaswini and Ranjitha

Sisters Tejaswini (22 years) and Ranjitha (20 years) were both studying engineering in Bangalore (India) in 2016. Their parents did not approve of the men they chose, and began arranging forced marriages. The young women hanged themselves from different ends of the same sari.¹¹

4. Loss of liberty (and revenge)

4.1 Ancient case: Samson

Samson died circa 1100 BCE. His story is told in the *Bible* (Old Testament, Judges Chapters 13 to 16).

At a time when the Philistines were strong, and ruling the Israelites, a couple in the town of Zorah (which was located at about the middle of current day Israel) were unable to have their union blessed by children.

An angel appeared and told the woman she would become pregnant with a male offspring, and from the day of his birth, he should follow the nazirite practices (the nazirites were a sect who 1, did not cut their hair, 2, did not eat grapes or grape products, and 3, had no contact with corpses or graves). The angel also asserted, "*He will begin rescuing Israel from the Philistines*".

Given he was chosen by God, Samson's behaviour was often unexpected. He was amazingly strong and once killed a lion with his bare hands. He once lost a bet with 30 men, so he went "*to Ashkelon, where he killed 30 men, stripped them, and gave their fine clothes to the men*" to whom he was indebted. When the (Philistine) woman he believed to be his wife was married off to another man he behaved destructively. He burned Philistine crops and killed various individuals.

When he returned for his wife, he was told she had been married to another man. Samson stated that he would "*not be responsible for what I do to the Philistines!*" He burned Philistine crops and killed various individuals. At one point he killed 1000 Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey.

He then lived more peacefully, and was a judge, for 20 years.

Nevertheless, the Philistines retained a deep hatred for him. Samson fell in love with Delilah, and she was bribed into discovering the source of his strength. She arranged for his hair to be cut and he was captured. He was blinded, kept in chains and forced to work on a mill-wheel.

Samson was later taken to a temple, for malicious purposes. *"The building was crowded with men and women. All five Philistine kings, and there were about 3000 men and women on the roof."*

Samson then prayed to God to give him back his strength, *"just once more, so that with this one blow I can get even with the Philistines for putting out my eyes."* He shouted, *"Let me die with the Philistines!"* He pushed against the supporting pillars and the building collapsed. *"Samson had killed more at his death than he had killed during his life."*

Samson had been blinded, taken prisoner, forced into hard labour and was humiliated by his captors. He had no prospect of escape. Suicide was an understandable response. However, it must be noted that this was not a simple suicide, but a murder-suicide, the forerunner of the terrorist suicide-bombers of the current era.

4.2 Representations in literature

As mentioned, the story of Samson is continuously available in the *Bible*. He is also mentioned in the *Talmud*. John Milton wrote the play *Samson Agonistes*, which was first performed in 1671.

4.3. Representations in visual arts

Aspects of Samson's life have been depicted by a vast number of artists, including Rembrandt. See below, a modest drawing, from Doré's *English Bible*.



The Death of Samson (Jud. 16:25-34) by Gustave Doré - Doré's English Bible. This work is in the public domain.



4.4 Recent case: Yousef Mohammed Hussein

Yousef Mohammed Hussein was a 27-year-old man who was accused of serial rape (at least 6 offences) who was being held in an Ottawa jail. He was in solitary confinement. He was charged in May 2014 and died in April 2016, and was still at least one year away from appearing in court.¹² A sense of futility and hopelessness may have been present.

Also, it is accepted that some suicide bombers have anger and vengeance as at least a feature of their motivation.¹³

5. Shame – own actions

5.1 Ancient case: Ajax

Ajax was a Greek soldier of great strength and skill who died circa 1184 BCE.

He was a prominent figure in the Trojan War (between the kingdoms of Troy and Mycenaean Greece). His fights against Hector (son of Trojan king) are described in Homer's the *Iliad*.

When the Greek champion, Achilles, was killed, Ajax and Odysseus both requested his magic armour. Ownership was determined by contest. The applicants could not be separated in physical activities. Finally, a public speaking contest was conducted, which Odysseus won, making him the proud owner of the sought-after armour.

Ajax was deeply deflated. It is stated that shortly after, Ajax believed he was fighting a bunch of soldiers. It was later concluded that the goddess Athena made him temporarily insane. Ajax found himself drenched in blood, but rather than fighting soldiers it became clear that he had, in reality, killed a flock of sheep.

Ajax was greatly humiliated (and presumably still disappointed by missing out on Achilles' armour) and killed himself by throwing himself on his sword.

While Athena was supposed to have caused Ajax a psychotic episode (his attack on the sheep was more likely drunken aggression), he completed suicide not because he was psychotic, but because he was clear minded and sought to escape humiliation.

5.2 Representations in literature

Homer gives an account of Ajax and his activities in the *Iliad*, and Ovid gives an account in the *Metamorphoses*.

5.3 Representations in visual arts

The name 'Ajax' has been hugely successful brand name and logo. There is also a large number of ancient paintings clearly depicting Ajax killing himself, see below.



*The suicide of Ajax, by Unknown - Jastrow (2006), Public Domain,
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=1518659>*

5.4 Recent case: Tyler Clemente

We have elsewhere reported the case of Tyler Clemente, a young man who was secretly filmed in a homosexual act, who completed suicide as a means of escaping shame.

Shame and suicide are commonly associated in LGBTI communities, and is the focus of several recent textbooks.¹⁴

6. Shame – actions of others

6.1 Ancient case: Lucretia

Lucretia died in 510 BCE, she was a virtuous Roman woman, from a respectable family and married to a highly placed official.

The king of Rome sent his son, Sextus Tarquinius, to Collatini to conduct some business. He was treated with generosity and respect at the home of Lucius. However, that night he went to Lucretia's bedroom and raped her at knife-point.

The following day Lucretia dressed in black and summoned her husband and father, and asked them to bring witnesses. She told the group about the rape and asked, "*Pledge me your solemn word that the adulterer shall not go unpunished*". Then, she took a hidden dagger and killed herself.

These events had a huge political impact. Her body was carried into the streets and the king was denounced. Shortly, the Tarquins were banished from Rome.

Consequently, the Roman Kingdom was replaced by the Roman Republic. Whether this was Lucretia's aim is uncertain, however, her suicide had the greatest political impact of any to date.

6.2 Representations in literature

There are multiple representations of Lucretia in the literature, including mention in the long poems, *The Legend of Good Women* by Geoffrey Chaucer (written in the 1380s), *The Rape of Lucrece* by William Shakespeare (1594).

6.3 Representations in visual arts

Lucretia is one of the most commonly depicted ancients, and has been painted by Titian and Rembrandt, among others. A depiction by Lucas Cranach the Elder follows:



*Lucretia, by Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472-1553).
This image is available under Creative Commons:
Attributable to Museo Soumaya*

6.4 Recent case: Lindsay Armstrong

Lindsay Armstrong lived in Glasgow and was 17 years of age when she died (in 2002). In the previous year she had been raped, but when she had to give evidence in court she had to display the underpants she had worn. She died shortly after by overdose.¹⁵

7. Shame – loss in battle

7.1 Ancient case: Brutus

Marcus Junius Brutus died in Macedonia. He was born in Rome into a prestigious family. He made a fortune while working as the assistant to the governor of Cyprus.

After he returned to Rome, a civil war broke out between Julius Caesar and Pompey. Brutus joined Pompey. Caesar defeated Pompey. Brutus apologised and Caesar forgave him, making him governor of Gaul.

In 44 BCE Brutus played a central role in the assassination of Caesar, and then, along with his co-conspirators, fled Rome.

In 43 BCE Octavius became a chief magistrate of Rome and declared the assassins to be murderers and enemies of the state.

In 42 BCE, the armies of Brutus and Octavius fought the Battle of Philippi. Brutus was defeated. Knowing he could expect humiliation and death, he suicided by running onto his sword, which was held by his associates.

7.2 Representation in literature

Brutus is represented in Dante's *Inferno*, and is a central character in William Shakespeare's play *Julius Caesar* (1599).

7.3 Representation in visual art

Brutus' likeness is captured in various sculptured busts, and on Roman coins. A drawing of his suicide by Geoffrey Whitney appears below:



Brutus commits suicide. From Geoffrey Whitney, Choice of Emblemes (published in 1585).

This work is in the public domain.

[This is not an accurate representation as Brutus is stated to have died by running onto a sword which was held by two assistants.]

7.4 Recent case: Mikhail Grigoryevich Yefremov

Lieutenant General M G Yefremov was a military commander of the Soviet Union. In 1942 his troops were defeated by the Germans and he fatally shot himself. This is by no means an unusual response of defeated military leaders. At the end of the Second World War various German and Japanese commanders took their own lives.

8. Guilt

8.1 Ancient case: Judas Iscariot

Judas was the disciple who betrayed Jesus to the Pharisees (leading to the crucifixion). He suicided circa 30-33 CE. He took a bribe of 30 pieces of silver, to identify Jesus, by kissing him in a public garden.

His motive for the betrayal is not beyond question. The most commonly held view is that greed (30 pieces of silver) drove his action. However, alternative arguments have been made.

The widely accepted version of subsequent events comes from the *Bible*, Matthew 27 3-5:

When Judas, the traitor, learnt that Jesus had been condemned, he repented and took back the 30 silver coins to the chief priests and the elders. "I have sinned by betraying an innocent man to death!" he said.

"What do we care about that?" they answered. "That is your business."

Judas threw the coins down in the Temple and left; then he went off and hanged himself.

The story of Judas is taken of a model of how one may behave when guilty of a treachery and self-interest.

8.2 Representations in literature

Judas is represented in the *Bible*, Dante's *Inferno*, and various other writings including Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* (written earlier, first published in 1967).

8.3 Representations in visual art

Judas has been depicted in church stained glass windows and frescos. Giotto made a famous painting of Judas kissing Christ (The Kiss of Judas; 1305). He is also depicted in sculpture as below:



*The death of Judas, possibly by Gislebertus, French, 12th century sculptor
Cathédrale Saint-Lazare, [Autun](#), Burgundy, France.
This work is in the public domain.*

8.4 Recent case: Rebecca Nalepa

Rebecca Nalepa was 32 years of age and living in California when she died (2011). She had been in charge of her lover's 6-year-old child when he fell and was severely injured. She expressed extreme guilt, and two days after he died she hanged herself.¹⁶

9. Physical pain

9.1 Ancient case: Heracles (Greek)/Hercules (Roman)

Heracles was born in Greece and died there, circa 1200 BCE. He was thought to be the son of Zeus and a female human. Thus, he is a mythical figure, in so far as he had a supernatural parent. However, evidence suggests many elements of his story were lived by a male human. He was a hero, with great physical strength, fighting skills and intelligence. He had a very large number of adventures. He killed various people, one giant, and other strange and dangerous creatures. He married four times and enjoyed a large number of affairs (with both females and males). He had about 50 children, some of whom became kings.

At about 38 years old, Heracles and his wife, Deianira, were travelling and came to a fast running river. Hercules anticipated no difficulties in swimming across himself, but there was uncertainty about how well Deianira would manage. A centaur (lower body of a horse, upper body of a man), Nessus, offered to assist her across.



The following comes from the *Metamorphoses* by Ovid,⁸ Book 9.

*"as he (Hercules) came to shore
He heard his wife call out and at a glance
Saw Nessus mounting her..."*

"Then from his (Hercules') bow an arrow pierced the Centaur

...

As he (Nessus) tore it out, the arrow dripped"

*"My death has come,
But not without revenge." His poisoned shirt
Still wet with blood he gave to Deianira,
Told her that all who wear it are possessed,
Seized by the magic of reviving love."*

Later, Deianira heard that her husband was in love with Princess Iole, and wondered,

"How to uproot that woman from my bed".

*"At last and best she thought of Nessus' shirt
Still thick with blood and virulent as ever –
The perfect gift for Hercules to wear"*

Thus, the shirt was given to Hercules and he put it on. Then.

*"...the secret fires
That burned within the shirt and spread their flames
Until they seemed to pierce the heroes' bones..."*

*"Then he tried to strip the shirt away
His flesh came with it. Horror to his sight.
It seared his bones and clung or stripped them bare"*

Hercules addressed the gods:

"Take this burden from me which is life"

He "...tore down trees ...

And with them built a mammoth funeral pyre...

And took his ease upon a bed of flames"

In short, Nessus took revenge on Heracles/Hercules, by tricking Deianira into arranging for him to put on a poisoned/magic shirt which burned his body and caused him severe, continuous physical pain. To avoid this pain, he took his own life (by self-immolation).

It does not matter if much or even most of this story is non-factual. It has remained a model of how to behave/respond in certain predicaments over centuries.

9.2 Representations in literature

As mentioned, Heracles' story is told in the *Metamorphoses*. An earlier account appears in Homer's *Odyssey* (7th century, BCE), and parts continue to appear in children's books of mythology.

9.3 Representation in visual art

Heracles is represented in a large number of Greek and Roman statues. He was often depicted on urns. More recently he was painted by Tintoretto. Representations of his suicide are less common, one by Francisco de Zurbarán follows:



*Death of Hercules (painting by Francisco de Zurbarán, 1634. Museo del Prado),
This work is in the public domain.*



9.4 Recent case: Kevin Keller

Kevin Keller was 52 years when he fatally shot himself in front of a Veterans Administration clinic in Virginia.¹⁷ He was a Navy veteran who had suffered unavoidable physical pain after a stroke 11 years ago. A suicide note stated, "Can't take it anymore".

Results - summary

We identified nine (9) ancients who had died in response to non-medical suicide triggers. We were also able to identify at least one recent case in which each suicide trigger was comparable to that of an ancient individual. Literary and visual art representations of the ancient suicide completer could be identified in every case.

The suicide triggers were classified as follows:

1. Loss – of a lover
2. Loss – of a child
3. Loss – of choice (of spouse)
4. Loss – of liberty (and revenge)
5. Shame – own actions
6. Shame – actions of others
7. Shame – loss in battle
8. Guilt
9. Unavoidable physical pain

Discussion

One concern with this study is that the quality of the information is at times poor and, at other times, questionable. Ancient information comes from various sources such as the *Bible* and records of myths/legends. It is neither standardised or verified. Recent information comes from newspaper reports of variable quality. With current resources, this is the best information available and we must accept it, with caution and reservation.

Examples of the doubtful quality of the ancient information include that certain characters are said to be demigods. However, such flaws can be ignored – what is important is the broad



stroke stories which have been believed and passed on from one generation to the next. In this way they have informed the public on what is an appropriate/acceptable response to particular individuals.

Readers may also be concerned that the nine categories we have invoked are arbitrary, and devised to accommodate the nine cases to hand. Alternative arrangements could be made; the 4 categories of 'Loss' could be collapsed into one, and the three categories of 'Shame' could be collapsed into one. Also, of interest would be the exploration of the supposed differences and similarities between 'Shame' and 'Guilt'.

It is important to recognize that the constellation of categories of 'Loss', 'Shame/Guilt', and 'Unavoidable physical pain' are those described by Plato as triggers which made suicide acceptable. Also, these three categories have a degree of face validity, based on our reading and life experience of human behaviour/responses.

In each of the nine categories we found representations in literature and visual art which could be links in chains potentially transmitting models of response from ancient to recent times.

We know from this study that similar triggers have been effective in both ancient and recent times. We do not know whether the triggering of suicide by the listed circumstances is innate to the human, or is passed down as a custom – culturally acceptable/recommended models of response. The avoidance of pain/distress is a response of living organisms, so suicide as a response to painful situations may be innate. Different nations continuously demonstrate vastly different suicide rates (compare Greece and Lithuania). It is probable there is an innate tendency to suicide in distressing circumstances, but that cultural factors play a contributing role, and may explain (to some extent) the difference in rates between groups.

Ernest Bramah, the British novelist and humourist, wrote in 1922, "*...there are few situations in life that cannot be honourably settled...either by suicide, a bag of gold, or by thrusting a despised antagonist over the edge of a precipice...*" Here is expressed (albeit light-heartedly) the widespread belief that suicide can be a solution (means of avoidance) of distress and painful circumstance.

Our findings that ancient and recent cases of suicide had been triggered by non-medical factors (such as loss, shame and unavoidable physical pain) strongly discredit the notion that suicide is always the result of mental disorder.¹



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