

The Paradox of Veronika's Choice: When death is sweeter than life.

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Abstract

Our lives become more meaningful by our actions - how we live, love, and carry ourselves speak impacts our lives in profound but understated ways. One should be able to learn through each experience of life and understand that the ultimate goal in life is not to be self-oriented but to find meaning and purpose through self awakening. Moderating one's thoughts, responding versus reacting, and adapting to different challenges we encounter in our day-to-day lives demonstrate who we are as a person. Each of us is imperfect, and we need to strive through these imperfections to conquer human frailty. *Veronika Decides to Die* by Paulo Coelho introduces us to the chaos and dilemmas of life. Why do we lose faith in ourselves? Is life so hopeless at times? Why do we fail to lift ourselves? These are the questions we often ask when we hear about suicide.

Many of us can empathize with Veronica's feelings in this book. Hopelessness and helplessness often lead to depression and suicidal tendencies. Human beings are increasingly experiencing unimaginable losses and traumas in these unprecedented times. This paper explores the unanswered questions revealed through different life scenarios that ultimately unfold and lead us to our destiny. The eventual transformation of Veronika from wanting to kill herself to striving to live and create sweet memories is remarkable. Are we supposed to stand still and face the storms that come our way boldly or give way to depression and give up? Resilience is the key to overcoming such situations.

Keywords- Depression, transformation, resilience, suicide, experiences, trauma, destiny

Introduction

The core of existential philosophy is to be free and embrace freedom of speech and expression. One always has the freedom to choose; however, not choosing is also our choice. Struggles are a part of one's life. In Veronika's life, her helplessness to be a professional pianist and her lack of ability to love and be loved and to accept that she is unique and different led her to depression. *Veronika Decides to Die*, a book by Paulo Coelho, is about Veronika, a twenty-four-year-old beautiful girl who lacked contentment, although she had everything she could wish for. She attempts to commit suicide by overdosing on sleeping pills. The book addresses how even when people are surrounded by all things required for material comfort, an individual can still feel depressed. At the same time, the book charts the protagonist's journey from someone who fails to make sense of normalcy to a character with the passion to follow her dreams. She realizes that there is a whole other side to her that she has yet to discover, and she later pursues her path to self-discovery.

We often live according to social norms and expectations, trying to please people around us. This attitude determines our actions. Our actions are driven mainly by the fear of being judged and condemned. People go through anxiety, depression, boredom, and many negative emotions at times like this. Veronika, the protagonist of Paulo Coelho's novel '*Veronika Decides to Die*' published in 1998, explores the vulnerable state of humanity that emerged out of boredom and negativity, which makes one go to the extent of killing oneself. We are living in

uncertain and unprecedented times, especially during the pandemic. People go through enormous trials and hardships, and one can build some resilience only by realizing life's fragility.

As Michael L. Raposa notes: *"Boredom seems always to involve. . . a lack of meaning or value, a cognitive and emotional emptiness, a lack of interest ... This could be because [a] situation itself is not very meaningful or interesting (like waiting in a long line for a very long time), or because a person is incapable of discovering any value or meaning in the situation (like a musically unsophisticated person enduring an evening at the opera, or like listening to a conversation conducted in a foreign language that one does not understand.)"* (76-77)

Veronika kept waiting for her dreams to come true, and as Raposa interprets it, this wait made her life meaningless and led to boredom. Though she didn't have big dreams, she desired to be a pianist which is a different vocation, and according to her, it was something she should not take up as a profession as it was deemed to be low in status. Additionally, being a pianist did not guarantee regular pay as per societal norms. With this discouragement, nothing interested her, and loneliness and boredom became her companion.

Veronika, the protagonist, was torn between bitter reality and an empty life and decided to die. Two reasons propelled her decision. Firstly, she was bored of her human existence and thought that once her youth faded, she would grow old and lonely and gain nothing by continuing to live. She was convinced that this loneliness would create more discomfort, and her suffering would only increase as the days passed. Secondly, she was an idealist.

When she reflects and realizes that she can't change the broken world around her, she feels powerless, and then decides to die to seek freedom - freedom from the boredom of this cruel world. She would then, she thought, experience eternal oblivion. However, Veronika reaches Villette, a mental asylum, after a failed suicide attempt. Here she meets Zedka, Mari and Eduard. Her stay in Villette aids Veronika in reflecting on her decision to die. Ironically Villette, an asylum, becomes the source of rebirth for Veronika. Although she was persistent in her attempt to kill herself in the asylum, too, Eduard manages to implant a ray of hope for a brighter tomorrow through his gestures and love. He carved a special place in Veronika's life.

The novel could be divided into three parts, as mentioned below:

Death is sweeter than life

"Death was sweet, it smelled of wine and it stroked her hair".

These lines from the book indicate that Veronika longed for death. Her life was perfect, but she feared perfection, and the result of this ideal life was loneliness and emptiness. She kept asking herself what the outcome of this perfectly happy life was. Her doubts about her existence led to despair, which led to the decision to end her life. 'Her existence had no meaning because every day was the same. And she had decided to die.[Page 40]

In his book 'Yes to Life despite Everything', Victor Frankel states four significant reasons that push an individual to make extreme decisions of suicide. Firstly, suicide can be a consequence not of a primarily mental but of a physical, bodily state. Secondly, in suicides that are revenge-driven, one likes to punish the other for the rest of their life by making them feel guilty or making them carry the burden that they led the person to take their life. Thirdly, some people desire to commit suicide because they feel tired, tired of life. The fourth group of people has lost faith in the goodness of humanity and the meaning of life. This kind of suicide is called a 'balance sheet of suicide.' The thought of killing herself was not sudden. She planned this for months, thinking of all the probabilities of killing herself and what would happen.

"Nothing in this world happens by chance." [Page 2] It was her choice to end her perfect life because she was bored and not excited about living life to the fullest. She was waiting for the right moment to end her life, meticulously planning how she would end her life. 'If I had a choice, if I had understood earlier that the reason my days were, all the same, was because I wanted them like that, perhaps, But the reply was always the same: there is no perhaps because there is no choice.' [Page 42] Suicide is never a sudden occurrence and is always a well-thought-out and planned process. When individuals go through melancholic depression and fail to figure out the reason for survival, they develop suicidal tendencies.

Any case of suicide we read in newspapers or hear from someone has a long story behind it, and the victim generally has a solid reason to end life and gain freedom from this world. The choice was not made instantly but planned for days together, reflecting on the pros and cons; of the aftermath of suicide.

In a world where everyone struggles to survive, whatever the cost is, how could one judge those people who decide to die? [Page 13] According to Veronika, people who thrive on living will never understand the fruit of death. Her soul had given up on the desire to live, and when your soul has nothing to offer you, one simply loses the joy and purpose of life. During her life, Veronika noticed that many people she knew would talk about the horrors in other

people's lives as if they took pleasure in the suffering of others because that made them believe that they were relatively happier and that life had been generous to them. She hated that kind of people, and she wouldn't allow anyone to take advantage of her state. [Page 25] Veronika also notices that people around her are not happy. Each one wore a mask of happiness and used others to vent their frustrations. Veronika was tired of this make-believe world. She hated the fact that people deceived themselves and others. People have created an artificial world of love, care, tolerance, and kindness. The negative energy around her blurred her vision of a hopeful, joyous tomorrow. Arthur Schopenhauer provides one of the best philosophical arguments for pessimism: *"Human life must be some kind of mistake. The truth of this will be sufficiently obvious if we only remember that man is a compound of needs and necessities hard to satisfy; and that even when they are satisfied, all he obtains is a state of painlessness, where nothing remains to him but abandonment to boredom. This is direct proof that existence has no real value in itself; for what is boredom but the feeling of the emptiness of life? If life—the craving for which is the very essence of our being—were possessed of any positive intrinsic value, there would be no such thing as boredom at all: mere existence would satisfy us in itself, and we should want for nothing. But as it is, we take no delight in existence except when we are struggling for something; and then distance and difficulties to be overcome make our goal look as though it would satisfy us—an illusion which vanishes when we reach it"*. (Schopenhauer 103)

Mari, a fellow patient in Villette, has a different reason for committing suicide. Her reasoning was just opposite to the reason that Veronika gives. Mari feared an active life, and her suicide was not physical, but she secluded herself from the rest of society. She locked herself in Villette, not wanting to return to the community. According to Leslie Paul Thiele, "To be bored is to be paralyzed: emotionally, spiritually, and perhaps even physically ... [Boredom is] an emotional and spiritual paralysis that arises from the repression of anxiety or fear" (492).

Mari, too like Veronika, had a successful career. She was a lawyer by profession, but her mundane life led her to boredom, and she wanted some change in her life. Mari could not experiment much because of her successful career, which was an obstacle for her, and the people around her, who did not change. Panic attacks began to rise for Mari. These attacks were a collective response to her bottled-up feelings over the years regarding her job and routine life. Fear of change and social acceptance made her escape from reality. "I want to do something completely different with my life. I want to have an adventure, help other people, do something I've never done before." The conversation ended there ... That moment marked the beginning of her withdrawal" (120). However, people around her failed to notice that she was overwhelmed with years of routine work and needed a change and break from her monotonous life. People around her were unable to give her space and were also scared to go against the rules set by society. Change for them is destructive and meaningless as it would contradict the rules and regulations of society. They also had forgotten the fact and law of nature that change is inevitable and universal.

'But God had proceeded quite differently. He had devised a rule and then found a way of persuading someone to break it, merely to invent Punishment. He knew that Adam and Eve would become bored with perfection and would, sooner or later, test His patience.[Page96]

Even her husband failed to see beyond a physical outburst of panic attacks, and although he wanted to help arrange the best medical facility for her, he failed to address the real issue. 'We're allowed to make a lot of mistakes in our lives, said her colleague, 'except the mistake that destroys us.' [Page 116]. In the end, Mari was told that she could not go back to her job, her husband divorced her, and she decided to stay back at Villette because, in Villette, every behavior and every change was accepted and acknowledged. Her old ways were gone, and she had a new set of friends and a new identity.

When we analyze the other characters who are Veronika's fellow patients in the mental asylum, Zadka, Mari, and Eduard have their reason and story behind why they landed in a mental asylum. Though they could leave,, they chose to stay because they voluntarily wanted to be secluded from the real world.

Viktor E. Frankl, in his book, says that happiness in itself does not qualify as a purpose; pleasures do not give our life meaning. According to Frankl, suffering or even having an incurable illness and the inner dignity of dying one's death can prove meaningful. For instance, in the face of death, there can still be an inner success, whether in maintaining a particular attitude or given the fulfillment of that person's ultimate purpose. In this case, Veronika fails to stand against the melancholic force of nature. Overwhelmed by boredom, she takes the extreme step of killing herself. She wants to escape from reality, which blocks her vision of optimism, thus, leading to depression and suppression.

In contrast, he points out that even the dark and joyless episodes of our lives can be times when we mature and find meaning. He even points out that the more difficult things are, the more significant troubles and challenges. How we deal with the challenging parts of our lives reveals who we are. People often go against nature as they lack the courage to face reality and accept themselves. The process of acceptance and non-acceptance creates bitterness in life.

Villette a place of transformation

In Villette, Veronika sees a new life through her encounter with Zadka, Mari, and Eduard as she closely associates with them. Zadka gives her a vivid description of the place and makes her feel comfortable as she narrates her story of love, passion, and emptiness. She gives Veronika a sense of belongingness to Villette. However, Veronika is persistent in ending her life. Veronika hated everything, but she mainly hated how she had lived, never bothering to discover the hundreds of other Veronika's who lived inside her - interesting, mad, curious, brave, and bold. Veronika experiences a very different kind of love and affection in Eduard. He brings her alive as he nudges her to play the piano, which she does so passionately and with zeal. 'She hated the love she had been given because it had asked for nothing in return, which was absurd, unreal, and against the laws of nature. [Page 62] It was something unusual for Veronika, and she felt like she was born again and there was a new hope that had rekindled in her. 'I want and need to learn to like myself again, I have to convince myself that I'm capable of making my own decisions. I can't be pushed into decisions, not of my own making.' She understands her true potential. "She turned back to the piano. In the last days of her life, she had finally realized her grand dream: to play with her heart and soul, for as long as she wanted and whenever the mood took her". [Page 113] Art returned to her life, and she felt nothing less than Baudelaire. Her attempt to justify her suicide without realizing her true potential fades away, and she now seems to find her life more meaningful. Her encounters with other patients and listening to their stories gave her a sense of how blessed she was. She discovers that she has suppressed her true desires and longings for social acceptance. Villette brought her alive, and began redirecting herself towards a happy and joyous life. While she stayed in Villette, Veronika frequently introspected her decision to die and spent much time thinking and refocusing on how to boost herself to live, searching for that one reason to live and be content with her life.

'Tonight I played for you like a woman in love. It was wonderful. It was the best moment of my entire life.' [Page 119] The music led her somewhere else: empty your mind, stop thinking about anything, simply BE. Veronika gave herself up to experience; she stared at the rose, saw who she was, liked what she saw, and felt only regret that she had been so hasty. [Page 93] Veronika wanted to be a pianist, but her parents disapproved of her choice and she was forced by societal norms to take up a job that gave her status and acceptance in society. Everyone dreams of becoming someone, but only a few realize their dreams and turn them into reality. The rest of us just fade away over time. Her frequent encounters with Eduard teach her many lessons, and she realizes it's human to experience self-destructive tendencies, fear of the unknown, frustrations, distress, and destruction. Veronika had two choices: to control her mind or succumb to it.

Veronika was earning well and had boyfriends who fancied her. Her life was perfect. Nevertheless, Veronika always felt a vacuum in her soul, terrible emptiness, and powerlessness, that she could not do what she truly desired in life and was confined within the framework of social norms. She had concealed her hidden desires even from herself, unable to say why and what she truly wanted. It was enough that she had done what she had done: she had surrendered herself. [Page 122] Much of our distress comes from those unaccomplished hidden dreams that we fail to nurture and fulfill. We become duller and wearier when we don't realize our vision and give up on it as it is the easiest and safest way out. Here Veronika does the same. She buried her dream without realizing that burying those dreams could poison her life. It was at a later stage when she realized she felt powerless all her life because she always had to choose what society or her parents wanted her to do rather than what she wanted to do in life.

Many people go through similar situations, but each one handles the course of life differently. Some take it through valor and zest, some get through a difficult phase because of a sound support system, and a few others conquer through prayers and love that they experience from their loved ones.

Dr. Igor's trick is to keep her alive by telling a lie that she has little time on earth. It turns out to be a magical spell on her. Now she wants to live life to the fullest, reach the moon and the star, fulfill all her dreams and achieve everything she can. 'I want to make the most of that little time, but in my way'. [Page 126]

Looking forward to a better tomorrow

Nietzsche says, "He who has a Why to live for can bear almost any How." Now Veronika found another profound reason why she has to live: for the unconditional love she had for Eduard, who also found his lost love through her. They reciprocated the same feelings with each other. Life is too mundane, and sometimes people fail to understand and ultimately become helpless when asked to live such a life. We neither want to take up challenges nor would like to be empathetic.

We are mostly building walls around us and have forgotten to mend walls in that process. Resilience is what we have failed to conquer in this fast-moving modern world. We have become mechanical in our lifestyle, and emotions are taking a back seat. Therefore, ending one's life is the easiest way to end all the problems surrounding us. Often, people fail to understand that if we can't change our fate, at least we can accept it, adapt, and possibly undergo inner

growth even amid challenging times. Kierkegaard once said that the door of happiness always opens outward. We are gifted with different talents and qualities. This is why we all are a unique part of God's creation. It is not wrong to be different, but society expects us to live in a particular way and has framed rules and regulations that dictate a person's way of living. Humans, by nature, are different from one another; however, we fail to accept that fact. We compare ourselves with others trying to fit into the social framework. It was Eduard who instilled zeal in Veronica's life, *'Real love changes and grows with time and discovers new ways of expressing itself'* [Page 39]

Some are not bothered with finding an answer or solution, and they have long ago given up on life and now formed a new world in which neither life nor death, space nor time exist. Others, however, were being forced to think hard, and Mari was one of them. -101. The power of love is contagious, and inmates in the asylum were awestruck by the changes in Eduard's behavior which impacted Veronika's life. Lifeless, subtle activities of Eduard suddenly gained momentum, and he showered all the love that he had stored for years into Veronika. Veronika, on the other hand, experienced pure love and affection that strengthened her and helped her dig deep into her buried desires and she started to explore the woman she always wanted to be. Veronika discovers that what she initially labeled boredom was a mask for her fear of living life the way she wanted. She chose to label this fear as boredom because she did not want to recognize her real desires. After all, life was not worth living; instead, her feelings just existed as she was always torn between her real desires that would make her unique and special and the expectations of the society forced upon her since birth.

Veronika now wants to live, enjoy everything around her, accomplish her dreams, and live life to the fullest. *'Before you say again that you're going to die, I want to tell you something. There are people who spend their entire lives searching for a moment like the one you had last night, but they never achieve it. That's why, if you were to die now, you would die with your heart full of love.'* [Page-147] She would never feel lonely because now she has tasted the unconditional love of Eduard. Here, the healing power of love and compassion worked wonders in Veronika's life. The eager eyes and the loving gestures of Eduard filled Veronika's melancholic life with joy and hope. There's always someone who wants exactly what you want.' [Page-123] Love heals and conquers everything.

God chooses to send people into our lives at the apt moment, and Eduard's role in Veronika's life was a testament to this statement. He feels that he was born to give life to Veronika and show that life is beautiful and that we need to be patient and persistent in our desire to live. Challenges and struggles are a part of our existence. It co-exists to bring meaning to one's life. Eduard feels that his existence will be meaningful only if he can help Veronika live and accept life the way it is. Fulfilling one's life lies in instilling the zeal to live in others. He wants to be a companion in Veronika's life to share her joys and sorrows. That is the only reason I came into the world, to make you go back to the path you strayed from. Don't make me feel my life has been in vain.' -186 Veronika starts seeing things beyond her fears and limitations, and she does not brood on her past but looks at the brighter side of life. What's not done is not relevant to her anymore, and she focuses on what must be done. She is on the path of courage, and this rejuvenates her self-confidence. She looks forward to brighter days with Eduard in the future.

CONCLUSION

Whatever our future may hold: We still want to say 'yes' to life, Because one day the time will come- Then we will be free!

Freedom to be yourself is all that Veronika needed and wanted. To curtail this freedom meant the end of life to her. We all deserve to live according to our choices, not forced by society or the people around us. Yes, we need rules and regulations to keep peace in the community, but these should not control our choices. We need to be prudent in making various decisions in our lives. Being restricted closes the path to freedom and happy life. Veronika, Zedka, Mari, and even Eduard all feared society and being judged, and the only place which gave space to their free will was Villette, an asylum. Depression, stress, and rejection are part of life. An individual should be resilient to fight these stumbling blocks to succeed. It's easy to hold others responsible for our downfall, but it's always difficult to cross these hurdles with our potential and leave a legacy behind. We should all strive to live well and leave a great legacy behind for generations to come.

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