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The Will to Meaning: A Logotherapeutic Reading of Paulo Coelho's *Veronika Decides to Die*

Dr. Jeena Ann Joseph

The paper attempts to examine Paulo Coelho's *Veronika Decides to Die* through the lens of Viktor Frankl's logotherapy, exploring how the protagonist's journey exemplifies Frankl's concept of finding meaning amid suffering. In the post COVID-19 era, Frankl's approach to existential problems becomes relevant due to the increasing number of people battling an "existential vacuum." The paper foregrounds that the protagonist's condition exemplifies what Frankl terms "Noogenic Neurosis", an existential crisis rather than "psychogenic neuroses" that require logotherapy in place of traditional psychotherapy. Emphasis is given to delineate how Coelho challenges societal notions of madness and normalcy and reinforces Frankl's logotherapeutic principle that finding meaning is the primary motivational force in human existence. An attempt is made to discuss how Veronika's journey illustrates the creative, experiential, and attitudinal pathways identified by Viktor Frankl. The paper thus elucidates that the novel *Veronika Decides to Die* serves as a reminder of life's value, informing the readers to embrace Coelho's philosophy of "dying alive"—taking risks and embracing "attitudinal heroism" amid suffering in life. A friend, philosopher and guide to millions of people, the literary alchemist, Paulo Coelho is a great sensation and as proposed in his most famous work *The Alchemist*, he continues to propagate the idea that the universe always conspires to help the dreamer.

Keywords: Logotherapy, Noogenic Neurosis, Meaning of Life, Paradoxical Intention, Attitudinal Heroism.

Introduction

Living in the twenty first century, post COVID-19, individuals are exposed to multiple challenges that many find strenuous and exhausting. Unable to face the challenges adequately and feeling drained of meaning and joy in life, many fall into depression. Social isolation, loss of faith, and feelings of meaninglessness create havoc in the human mind. The Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist Viktor Frankl opines that finding meaning in life is critical for mental health. “Noogenic Neurosis”, a logotherapeutic term coined by Frankl (1992), refers to existential problems in life than psychological issues. Noogenic cases therefore require logotherapy and not psychotherapy, says Viktor Frankl. Logotherapy “focuses on the meaning of human existence as well as on man’s search for such a meaning. According to logotherapy, this striving to find a meaning in one’s life is the primary motivational force in man” (Frankl, 1992, p.104). Frankl (1992) categorises man’s despair about life’s worthwhileness as “existential distress”, which he explains as the existential crisis of growth and development and differentiates it from matters of mental disorder (p.108).

Logotherapy regards its assignment as that of assisting the patient to find meaning in his life. Inasmuch as logotherapy makes him aware of the hidden *logos* of his existence, it is an analytical process. To this extent, logotherapy resembles psychoanalysis. However, in logotherapy’s attempt to make something conscious again it does not restrict its activity to *instinctual* facts within the individual’s unconscious but also cares for *existential* realities, such as the potential meaning of his existence to be fulfilled as well as his *will* to meaning. (Frankl, 1992, p. 108)

According to Frankl (1992), mental wellbeing is dependent “on the gap between what one is and what should become”, which evokes his “will to meaning from its state of latency”(pp. 110 -111). Hence, Frankl tends to normalise tensions in day to day life as the life force that leads us to life’s goal.

Veronika Decides to Die is autobiographical as it is based on Coelho's three stints in a psychiatric hospital, the people he met there, and his experience of electroconvulsive therapy. Paulo Coelho always desired to be a writer, but his parents had very different plans for their son's future. They wanted him to become an engineer and tried to stifle his desire to devote himself to literature. But as Coelho began to flout the family rules his father took this as a sign of mental illness and had him committed to a psychiatric hospital. There Coelho underwent several sessions of electroconvulsive therapy. Later when Coelho became involved with a theatre group and began working as a journalist, his frightened parents had him readmitted to the hospital for the third time. When he came out, Coelho was even more lost and more enclosed in his private world. In despair, the family called in a psychiatrist who told them that Paulo wasn't mad, and he shouldn't be in a psychiatric hospital. He simply must learn how to face up to life. He realized that "it doesn't matter if I'm a little crazy, because we all need to confront our own madness, what I have to do now is live to the fullest, do everything I enjoy, deny myself nothing" (Arias, 2001, p. 41). Coelho's *Veronika Decides to Die* written almost thirty years after these experiences, is all about 'life' and living that life. The Brazilian author Paulo Coelho, well known for his alchemy with words is noted for the profound motivational insights he blends into his works. These insights prove instrumental in assisting the readers to understand the potential meaning of existence thereby proving to be therapeutic.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs Viktor Frankl's logotherapy as a theoretical lens to analyze Paulo Coelho's novel *Veronika Decides to Die*. Logotherapy, developed by Frankl (1992) following his experiences in Nazi concentration camps, centers on the concept of the "will to meaning", a principle that directly challenges both Freudian "will to pleasure" and Adlerian "will to power" paradigms. He posits that the primary motivational force in humans is the "will to meaning", which when frustrated leads to an "existential vacuum" that manifests as what Frankl terms "noogenic neurosis"—an existential crisis rather

than a psychological disorder. The study also draws upon Michel Foucault's insights on madness and institutionalization and R.D. Laing's existential psychiatry to establish a comprehensive critical framework.

While other psychoanalytical approaches like Lacanian theory might focus on unconscious linguistic structures or Jungian analysis might emphasize archetypes and the collective unconscious, logotherapy's distinctive emphasis on meaning-making and existential responsibility offers an appropriate framework for Coelho's novel. Unlike traditional psychoanalysis which primarily addresses intrapsychic conflicts or behavioural approaches that focus on conditioning, logotherapy specifically addresses the existential questions that form the core of Veronika's crisis—questions about life's purpose, the value of existence, and the possibility of meaning in suffering. As Frankl (1992) emphasizes, logotherapy “focuses on the meaning of human existence as well as on man's search for such a meaning” (p.104), making it particularly apt to analyse the protagonist's journey from suicidal despair born of meaninglessness to a renewed embrace of life's possibilities.

Frankl (1992), distinguishes between “psychogenic neuroses” (psychological disorders) and “noogenic neuroses” (existential crises stemming from meaninglessness) and identifies three pathways to discovering meaning: creative (achieving through work or deeds), experiential (encountering others through love), and attitudinal (transforming suffering into triumph).

According to logotherapy, we can discover this meaning in life in three different ways: (1) by creating a work or doing a deed; (2) by experiencing something or encountering someone; and (3) by the attitude we take toward unavoidable suffering. The first, the way of achievement or accomplishment, is quite obvious. . . . The second way of finding a meaning in life is by experiencing something—such as goodness, truth, and beauty—by experiencing nature and culture or, last but not least, by experiencing another human being in his very uniqueness;—by loving him. . . . The third way of finding a meaning in life is by suffering. We must never forget that we may also find meaning

in life even when confronted with a hopeless situation, when facing a fate that cannot be changed. or what then matters is to bear witness to the uniquely human potential at its best, which is to transform a personal tragedy into a triumph, to turn one's predicament into a human achievement. (Frankl, 1992, pp.115 - 117)

This theoretical perspective is particularly relevant in the post-COVID-19 era, where increased social isolation, loss of faith, and existential vacuum have contributed to rising mental health challenges. Through this logotherapeutic framework, the protagonist Veronika's journey from suicidal despair to embracing life can be understood as exemplifying what Frankl terms "attitudinal heroism"—the human capacity to find meaning even in unavoidable suffering.

Complementing this logotherapeutic approach, Foucault's analysis in *Madness and Civilization* (2001) provides critical insights into the social construction of madness and the power dynamics inherent in psychiatric institutions like Vilete, the asylum in Coelho's novel. Foucault's examination of how society has historically separated, confined, and labelled the "mad" offers a valuable framework for understanding Coelho's provocative questioning of societal definitions of madness and normalcy. As Foucault argues, "madness" is not merely a medical condition but a social construct that serves to reinforce existing power structures and enforce societal norms. This perspective enriches our understanding of why the characters in Vilete find paradoxical freedom away from society's oppressive expectations.

Further, R.D. Laing's work on existential psychiatry, particularly his concepts from *The Divided Self* (1965) and *The Politics of Experience* (1990), provides additional critical tools for analysing Coelho's portrayal of madness as potentially authentic self-expression. Laing challenged the conventional psychiatric view that madness was merely pathological, suggesting instead that it could be understood as "a sane response to an insane world"; a perspective that aligns with Coelho's depiction of the Vilete inhabitants as often more authentic and insightful than those in the "normal" world. Particularly relevant is Laing's concept of "ontological insecurity,"

the profound anxiety about one's existence and identity that can lead to defensive splitting of the self (Laing, 1965, p. 30). Laing's emphasis on the journey through madness as potentially transformative provides a valuable framework for understanding how Veronika's confrontation with death and madness ultimately leads to greater authenticity and connection.

Textual Analysis

Paulo Coelho's novel *Veronika Decides to Die* is a variation on Coelho's recurrent theme – the individual's quest for self, which traces the consequences of a young woman's suicide attempt, who eventually appreciates life as a God-given gift. The protagonist Veronika exhibits an "existential vacuum" which can be diagnosed as what Frankl points out as "Noogenic Neurosis" rather than psychological conflicts (Frankl, 1992, p. 111). She exhibits suicidal tendencies as her will to meaning is frustrated and later her stay at the Vilete (Asylum) rekindles her desire to experience life. According to Frankl (1992), "If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death human life cannot be complete" (p.77). Veronika's journey from the brink of death to embracing life exemplifies the creative, experiential, and attitudinal pathways identified by Viktor Frankl.

This novel focuses on the aftermath of a young woman's suicide attempt, who later realizes how precious life is. Twenty-four-year-old Veronika lives in Slovenia and works as a librarian by day. Veronika seems to have everything she could wish for. She is young and pretty, has plenty of attractive boyfriends, goes dancing, has a steady job, and even a loving family. Although Veronika is a young girl with everything to live for, she is not happy and feels that the only remedy for her malaise is suicide. She found herself powerless in setting things right in this world where everything was going wrong. As the novel begins, we are given a very realistic portrayal of Veronika waiting for death because of her attempted suicide. She is portrayed reading an article asking: "Where is Slovenia?" She finds this opening

line of an article on computers rather disturbing. For her, the identity of her country seemed problematic just like her own identity. Coelho says: "I decided to write a book about a person with an identity crisis living in a country with an identity crisis, the former Yugoslavia," and the point of the novel "is to say to such people that you are not alone, and you are not crazy" (Rother, 1999). Here, Viktor Frankl's 'logotherapy', discussed in his work *Man's Search for Meaning* (1992), offers a particularly unique framework for analysis. In logotherapy, "existential frustration" arises when an individual's will to find meaning is thwarted and this frustration is the key aspect that logotherapy addresses. Contrary to psychological neuroses, Noogenic neuroses in logotherapy originate from the "noological" dimension of human existence, which refers to the mind or the specifically human realm. "Noogenic" pertains to the unique human dimension, emphasizing the importance of addressing issues at the level of human consciousness and existence. When dealing with such patients, the challenge is a deeper existential one. Frankl offers a solution through logotherapy to help patients overcome this condition. He proposes to supplement psychotherapeutic treatments with logotherapy, which focuses on finding meaning.

Noogenic neuroses have their origin not in the psychological but rather in the "noological" (from the Greek *noos* meaning mind) dimension of human existence.... logotherapeutic term which denotes anything pertaining to the specifically human dimension. Noogenic neuroses do not emerge from conflicts between drives and instincts but rather from existential problems.... Logotherapy deviates from psychoanalysis insofar as it considers man a being whose main concern consists in fulfilling a meaning, rather than in the mere gratification and satisfaction of drives and instincts, or in merely reconciling the conflicting claims of id, ego and superego, or in the mere adaptation and adjustment to society and environment. (Frankl, 1992, pp.106-109)

On 11 November 1997, she decides to die. She takes an overdose of sleeping pills, but she survives her suicide attempt and wakes up in the lunatic asylum, Villeite. She imagines the rest of her

life filled with disillusionment and monotony. However, she learns that she is destined to die within a week, of heart damage caused by her suicide attempt. During her internment in Villette, she realizes that she has nothing to lose and can therefore do what she wants, say what she wants, and be who she wants without having to worry about what others think of her. No one is going to criticize her; she is mad after all. This knowledge gradually changes her perception of life and death. She realizes that after all life is worth living. After knowing about her imminent death, Veronika feels awkward waiting for her death. It was one thing committing suicide and it was quite another to wait five days or a week for death to come. Normally people die when they least expect it, but Veronika is again confronted with a new dilemma. Waiting for death did not seem easy, she began to feel afraid, but she consoled herself that after all she wanted to embrace death. During her stay in Villette waiting for death, she meets other inhabitants there. She met several people who were pretending to be insane even though they were already cured. People were free to think, speak, and do what they wanted without being criticized, as they were in the mental hospital. This was exactly how Coelho felt when he was amid the insane without being insane himself. He says: “what I discovered during the time I spent in the asylum is that I could choose madness and spend my whole life without working, doing nothing, pretending to be mad. It was a very strong temptation” (Arias, 2002, p. 36).

The fact is that although most of his books are literary narratives, they are not completely fiction. They are actual things he has experienced and the same holds true with *Veronika Decides to Die*. It is nothing more than the fictionalized experience of his life when committed to an asylum. In this book, he explores themes like conformity, madness, and death. He reflects on his inner questions and doubts when facing the present moment and his readers identify it with their own similar experiences. For him, philosophy is something alive, something that changes according to our inner needs. He says that if he were to synthesize his work he would say: “live your Personal Legend, pay the price of your dreams, read the omens, awaken your feminine side, and dare to be different” (Bhattacharya, 2000). What is

intriguing is that the author appears in person in this work, making it self-reflexive. Of all people, it is to Paulo Coelho that the clinic director's daughter tells the story of Veronika, which Paulo in turn, passes on to his readers. To make things even more complex, the clinic director's (Dr. Igor) daughter is also called Veronika. Though his publishers urged him to cut the autobiographical chapter or to transfer it to the beginning, as a foreword; he kept the chapter unaltered. The reason is what Coelho calls 'the personal legend', everyone's distinctive experience and destiny, is crucial to the book's impact to an extent that bypasses any literary considerations. Coelho says that the book deals with the right to be different. He talks to his readers about how important it is to combat the various problems in life, and that they should see these battles as adventures rather than as sacrifices.

Using Dr. Igor, the psychiatrist, as his spokesman Coelho brings out 'an awareness of life' using the medication: 'an awareness of death'. This aligns with Viktor Frankl's concept of "paradoxical intention", a therapeutic technique used in logotherapy, which involves encouraging patients to intentionally engage in the very behavior they fear or wish to avoid (Frankl, 1992, p.126). This approach aims to reduce anxiety and counteract anticipatory anxiety by shifting the focus away from the fear itself. The technique is based on the understanding that fear can lead to the very outcomes individuals are trying to avoid. Frankl explains that "excessive intention" ("hyper-intention") and "excessive self-focus" ("hyper-reflection") can hinder a person's ability to achieve their goals (Frankl, 1992, pp.126-127). Paradoxical intention helps to counteract these issues by redirecting focus away from the self and the fear. In practice, paradoxical intention can help patients to focus on more meaningful aspects of their lives, such as relationships or personal goals. Frankl's discussion of paradoxical intention highlights its role as a valuable technique in logotherapy, aimed at helping individuals confront and overcome their fears by intentionally engaging with them. The central paradox is that Veronika only begins to truly live after attempting suicide and learning she has only days to live. By intending death, she paradoxically finds life. Veronika attempts

suicide specifically because she finds life meaningless and monotonous but upon learning she has only days to live due to heart damage, she experiences a profound shift, and the very limitation of time creates freedom and urgency that allows her authentic self to emerge. Dr. Igor, the psychiatrist at Vilete, essentially applies “paradoxical intention” as a therapeutic technique. He deliberately tells Veronika she’s dying (when she’s not), thus creating a situation where her fear of wasting life is confronted head-on. By believing that she is facing imminent death, Veronika stops fearing the consequences of living authentically.

Dr. Igor’s prognosis triggers Veronika’s new appreciation of the world around her. Only when her paroxysmal tachycardia seems to prove that everything is too late, does the heroine start to relish every moment of her life, short as it may be. Veronika doesn’t know that she is the first guinea pig for a therapeutic trial conducted by the director of the clinic. The tachycardia is artificially induced through medication. Dr. Igor deems himself to hold the only effective medicine for tedium: to be put in the face of death. Dr. Igor’s paradoxical conclusion which proves him right in the long run is that, in the face of death we live life more intensely. From within Vilete’s controlled environment, she finally allows herself to express the emotions she has never allowed herself to feel- hatred and love, anger and joy, disgust and pleasure. Veronika also finds herself being drawn into the lives of other patients who lead constrained but oddly satisfying lives. Eduard, Zedka, and Mari have been sent to Vilete because there doesn’t seem to be any other place for them. Their families do not understand them. Each of these patients reflects on Veronika’s situation and, the imminent death of the young girl instills in them a new desire and fresh vision for life that lies outside the asylum’s walls. Thus Dr. Igor is completely successful in his provocative experiment. Here again, Dr. Igor, the psychiatrist is making his patients reanalyze their inner self just like Coelho, who aims at the same through his works. Analysis of one’s psyche is a recurring theme in Coelho’s works. Likewise, Frankl opines that human beings harbor innate potentialities that can be realized through conscious decisions. The emphasis on individual choices over external circumstances highlights the intrinsic

power individuals have in shaping their lives. This perspective reflects a realistic understanding of human nature, acknowledging the complexities and capabilities inherent in individuals. Frankl hence underscores the profound impact of personal choices in defining human existence and resilience, offering a refreshing perspective that rehumanizes psychiatry by highlighting the significance of individual agency and inner strength. In this context, Frankl talks about Edith Weisskopf-Joelson, a pioneer in logotherapy in the United States, and uses the term “tragic optimism” to emphasize that true happiness comes not from pursuing happiness directly but from finding a reason to be happy through realizing the latent meaning in challenging situations. Edith Weisskopf-Joelson was a significant but somewhat overlooked figure in existential psychology who offered important critiques of the mental-hygiene philosophy that dominated mid-20th century psychology and psychiatry. Her view on mental-hygiene philosophy was multifaceted and critical as she believed that the prevailing mental-hygiene movement, with its emphasis on adjustment, happiness, and the absence of suffering as the ultimate goals of mental health, was fundamentally flawed. Weisskopf-Joelson argued that this approach created unrealistic expectations about constant happiness. She too believed that finding meaning in suffering was often more important than eliminating it. In her view, the mental-hygiene approach’s focus on eliminating all negative feelings could create additional distress when people inevitably experience natural suffering. Similarly, for Frankl, happiness is a byproduct of discovering a meaningful reason to be happy, particularly by actualizing inherent meaning in difficult circumstances.

In *Veronika Decides to Die* Coelho directs our attention to questions like “what does it mean to be mad?” and through his mad men in the Vilete Coelho answers it too: “anyone who lives in their own world is mad. Like schizophrenics, psychopaths, maniacs. I mean people who are different from others” (Coelho, 2000, p.30). In the article, “Why I Wrote this Work,” Coelho says:

Madness is the inability to communicate. Between normality and madness, which are basically the same thing, there exists an intermediary stage: it is called 'being different'. And people were becoming more and more afraid of 'being different' I decided to write a book based on my own experiences. I wrote *Veronika Decides to Die*, in the third person and using my feminine ego, because I knew that the important subject to be addressed was not what I personally had experienced in mental institutions, but, rather, the risks we run by being different and yet our horror of being the same. (Coelho, 1999)

But many prefer to be in the asylum as "it was like a maternal womb that gave you tranquility" (Arias, 2002, p.36). Zedka is one such character who was admitted to Villete to get rid of her chronic depression but now she wants to continue being mad, she wants to live her life the way she dreams and not the way other people want it to be. Mari is another patient who is still in the asylum even after being cured; she enrolled herself in a group called the Fraternity within the asylum.

Veronika Decides to Die, a psychological thriller is about the sense of life, a story about the zest for life in the face of death. Coelho's works always carry one message or the other and, here he aims at creating an "awareness of life" in mankind. "People struggle to live, not to commit suicide" says a nurse to Veronika (Coelho, 2000, p. 43). Dr. Igor states "apart from certain grave pathological cases, people go mad when they try to escape from routine" (Coelho, 2000, p. 71). Veronika is just a representative of the frustrated human race. What Coelho conveys is that one must face his fears, one must overcome his moments of doubt, and one must believe that if one looks for it, there is always a solution. But one should never be a coward, instead one must be brave, brave enough to fight for things that are meaningful to him. No one can ignore his writings as bogus since he writes from his own life experiences, from within his soul. Coelho connects imagination to authenticity and that accounts for his success.

When Veronika had achieved almost everything she wanted in life, she had concluded that her existence had no meaning, because every day was the same. And she had decided to die. She exhibits what psychiatrist R. D Laing (1960) terms “ontological insecurity” in his work *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness*. Laing introduces “ontological insecurity” as a fundamental anxiety about one’s existence and identity which he describes as a state where a person lacks the sense of consistency and coherence in their experience of being-in-the-world. The ontologically insecure person experiences their identity as precarious and fragmented rather than whole and continuous; while on the other hand, the ontologically secure person has a firm sense of their own reality and identity, allowing them to encounter life’s challenges without constant threat to their existence as a person. Vilete itself can be seen as metaphor for divided self, as the division between “sane” and “insane” worlds reflects Laing’s critique of psychiatric categorization. The other patients represent different responses to ontological insecurity and inmates like Eduard, Zedka, and Mari become catalysts for Veronika’s journey toward ontological security. In Vilete, things were changing though her days were numbered. In Vilete she was experiencing something she had never dreamed of; people were not ashamed to say they were mad, no one stopped to please somebody else, and they were living their life without any facade. She realized that the reason why her days were all the same was because she wanted them like that. She never dared to change it, never tried to follow her dreams. This awareness aroused in her a faint desire to live again. The awareness of death creates an awareness of life in Veronika. She now wants to feel hatred and love, despair and tedium, all those simple things that make up everyday life. This is not all; her presence creates in others the urge to live. Some asked themselves “What if that happened to me? I do have a chance to live. Am I Making good use of it?” (Coelho, 2000, p. 101). Eduard, the schizophrenic; Mari who was admitted to Vilete due to panic attacks; and Zedka are just a few who dare to go out of Vilete. Mari says:

I feel like starting to live again, Eduard. I feel like making the mistakes I always wanted to make, but never had the courage to I can make new friends and teach them how to be mad too in order to be wise. I'll tell them not to follow the manual of good behaviour but to discover their own lives, desires, adventures and to LIVE. I'll quote from Ecclesiastes to the Catholics, from the Koran to the Muslims, from Torah to the Jews, from Aristotle to the atheists. I never want to be a lawyer again, but I can use my experience to give lectures about men and women who knew truth about this existence of ours and whose writings can be summed up in one word: Live. If you live God will live with you. If you refuse to run his risks, He'll retreat to that distant heaven and be merely a subject for philosophical speculation. Everyone knows this, but no one takes the first step, perhaps for fear of being called mad. At least, we haven't got that fear, Eduard. We've already been inmates of Villete. (Coelho, 2000, p.188)

R. D Laing in his *Politics of Experience and the Bird of Paradise* (1990), explores the intricate ways in which individuals can affect each other's perceptions and the philosophical implications of these interactions. He emphasizes the importance of authenticity and the potential for personal transformation through genuine connections. He details that the central theme of philosophy revolves around the concepts of being and non-being, which is crucial for understanding human experience and existence. As our experiences are often clouded by societal constructs, true understanding requires peeling back these layers to reveal our authentic selves. He suggests that our understanding of reality is often shaped by internal conflicts and societal pressures, which can distort our perceptions and experiences, hence true creativity arises from the relationship between being and non-being. This philosophical stance suggests that human beings have the capacity to create meaning and existence from a state of non-being, emphasizing the transformative power of authentic experiences and connections with others. Laing (1990) thus foregrounds the intricate relationship between self, perception, and reality, emphasizing the need to transcend societal constructs to achieve a deeper understanding of existence.

Delving into the narrative, we see that Veronika craved to be a pianist but studied law and became a librarian. Eduard wanted to paint the ‘visions of Paradise’ but his parents admitted him to Villete. Coelho himself wanted to be a writer, but he was committed to the asylum thrice. This is not the case for Veronika or Eduard alone. Thousands of people fail to realize their dreams; they end up miles away from them. Though everyone dreams, only a few realize their dreams. Coelho’s uniqueness is that we automatically identify ourselves within his plots. Coelho makes his readers re-evaluate their inner desires; and makes them question themselves ‘Am I living my Life?’ Coelho instructs us to observe the signs and to find the inner magician. To a cynic, this might seem naive, but to Coelho, life reaffirms the fact that simple rules work. His heroine, Veronika eventually fulfills the credo of her creator: while playing the piano at the clinic she retrieves her passion which her mother had recommended her to forsake for a more solid bourgeois profession. The problem with poisoning by Bitterness or the “Vitriol” as Dr. Igor names it is that the passions – hatred, love despair, enthusiasm – ceased to manifest themselves. This “disease of the soul” deprived the embittered of any feeling; they lacked the will either to live or to die. As Veronika relives her dream to be a pianist, the mad cacophonous, jangled chords that echoed around the empty room were an accurate portrait of her soul at that moment. She seemed to free her soul of hatred, of the feelings that had been repressed in her soul. Love filled up the space left behind by hatred, enabling her to play the sonata. She felt a new desire to experience all those simple foolish things that make up everyday life, everything that gave pleasure to one’s existence. She tries to snatch every single moment of her life—hours, minutes, and seconds. She reveals herself to Eduard, the schizophrenic. She plays for him like a woman in love and for her that was the best moment in her entire life. She explores ‘how far she can go’ as she masturbates before Eduard. Coelho touches on aspects like the growing cases of stress, tedium, depression, loneliness, rejection, and despair. Coelho urges his readers to overcome such feelings and live. Coelho shows how people build walls around themselves to portray their strength while being very weak inside. He encourages his readers to look within

to find the different selves they have hidden from themselves. Moreover, he recommends searching for the sad depressed ‘Veronikas’ within us and encouraging them to flourish with a better approach to life. This is a moving and uplifting song to life, one that reminds us that every moment in our lives is special and precious. As Viktor Frankl (1992) opines, “Man’s search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a “secondary rationalization” of instinctual drives. This meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by him alone; only then does it achieve a significance which will satisfy his own will to meaning”. (p. 105)

The various cases in Villete are insights into different life situations that are very common in this materialistic world. In the narrative, Eduard, the Schizophrenic, is none other than Coelho himself. During his teenage days, his parents had him committed three times to a mental institution. Similarly, Edward’s rebellious nature and his desire to paint the “visions of paradise” lead him to Villete. Coelho’s parents had different plans for him; the same is the case with Eduard. So unable to follow their true vocation both felt alienated and lost. After Veronika opened up to Eduard, he felt like sharing his secrets with her. His desire to return to the world began to unsettle him. Though he knows Veronika isn’t going to last until the end of the week, he confides to her how he ended up in Villete. Together they leave Villete: “Come on let’s go. Mad people do mad things” (Coelho, 2000, p. 177). For Coelho, there are many types of madness. The destructive one, that leads people to fight against themselves since they feel useless, unworthy, and incapable. The passive one, makes human beings go behind the routine life. Finally, there is what society views as madness, which he considers as a quality: to break the manuals of good behaviour and to follow your dreams. It has become a routine to accept what society imposes on us, nobody questions why we must do this or stop doing that. Those who accept such an imposition and do what the majority recommend are considered normal people. On the other hand, those who try to come out of it and start fighting for their dreams are generally considered fools. Here we are reminded of what Michel Foucault opines in *Madness and Civilization*, and it helps in examining the social construction of madness and institutional

power dynamics at play in Villette. In his work, Foucault examines how Western society's understanding and treatment of madness underwent changes from the Middle Ages through the 19th century. He opines that the "fruitful understanding of madness ended around the middle of the 17th century", and as opposed to medieval and Renaissance views, the "Classical Age saw madness as merely the negation of the essential human attribute of reason" (Gutting, 2005, p.72). During the classical period, "it was regarded as unreason, a plunge into an animality that had no human significance. There was, accordingly, a conceptual exclusion of the mad from the human world and "correlative to this conceptual exclusion, there was a physical exclusion of the mad effected by their confinement in institutions that isolated them from ordinary human life" (Gutting, 2005, p.72).

The conceptual and physical exclusion of the mad also reflects a moral condemnation. The moral fault, however, is not the ordinary sort, whereby a member of the human community violates one of its basic norms. Rather, madness corresponds to a radical choice that rejects humanity and the human community in toto in favour of a life of sheer (nonhuman) animality. On the Classical view, the animality of the mad is expressed in their domination by passions, a domination that leads them to a delirium in which they mistake the unreal for the real. Passionate delirium thus results in a fundamental blindness that cuts the mad off from the light of reason.

The modern therapeutic view of madness is a sharp break with the Classical view, what Foucault later calls a change in episteme or discursive formation. The mad are returned to the human community, no longer animals beyond the human pale. But, within that community, the mad are now moral offenders (violators of specific social norms), who should feel guilt at their condition and need reform of their attitudes and behaviour. Correspondingly, the characteristic modern mode of treating the mad not only isolates them but subjects them to a moralizing therapy. Still, this move from the custodia confinement of the Classical Age to the modern therapeutic asylum continues to deny madness as a humanly significant challenge. (Gutting, 2005, p.73).

Foucault's outrage is directed against "a perception of madness that admits no meaningful alternatives to our standards of normality and puts all belief and behaviour that seriously deviate from these standards outside the pale" (Gutting, 2005, p.71). According to Foucault, "madness should be seen as a creditable challenge to normality" (Gutting, 2005, p.71). At this point, Foucault "in opposition to the Enlightenment", "realized that the reason that was supposed to liberate us has itself become the primary instrument of our domination" (Gutting, 2005, p.76). This can be viewed as "a direct assault on the pretensions of reason, and his heroization of the mad aims to set up an alternative to the regime of reason. This alternative is the irrationally transgressive experience lived by the mad and evoked in the works of mad artists" (Gutting, 2005, p.76). Likewise, Coelho's *Veronika Decides to Die* is an account that reiterates that we could miss out on the finer aspects of life and keep chasing and running after the elusive goals set by others. Coelho's magical writing aims to encourage mankind to follow one's intuitions and to embark upon the journey to the self.

Veronika's journey in Paulo Coelho's novel, undoubtedly exemplifies Viktor Frankl's three pathways to discovering meaning in life. The creative pathway is evident in Veronika's rediscovery of music. Veronika had abandoned her dream of becoming a pianist, settling instead for law and her job as a librarian. During her stay at Vilete, she returns to the piano and plays with unprecedented passion, her musical expression becomes a form of creative self-actualization. Through music, she literally frees her soul from repressed hatred and allows love to fill the space left behind. Playing for Eduard becomes the best moment in her entire life, representing creative expression as a pathway to meaning. The Experiential pathway is realised as she bonds with others. Her relationship with Eduard, the schizophrenic patient, becomes transformative for both and she reveals herself authentically to him, breaking down all the barriers she had maintained in her previous life. Again, her openness and impending death catalyse similar transformations in other patients like Eduard, Mari, and Zedka. Through genuine human connection, she experiences what Frankl calls encountering "another human being in his very uniqueness" (Frankl,

1992, p.115). Her presence creates in others the urge to live, demonstrating how authentic relationships can be mutually meaningful. The attitudinal pathway is realised as suffering transforms into triumph. Veronika's response to imminent death explains it. Only when facing death does she truly begin to live as she transforms her suicidal despair into what Frankl calls "attitudinal heroism". Instead of passive acceptance of her fate, she chooses to live authentically in her remaining days. She decides to experience hatred and love, despair and tedium, all those simple things that make up everyday life. Her attitudinal shift from seeing life as meaningless monotony to embracing every moment as precious exemplifies transforming a personal tragedy into a triumph. Through Veronika's complete transformation, the novel demonstrates how these pathways work synergistically. Her creative expression (music) facilitates deeper connections with others; her authentic relationships inspire her to maintain a life-affirming attitude despite impending death and her transformed attitude enables both creative expression and genuine love. Veronika's journey through all three pathways creates a ripple effect as Eduard decides to leave Vilete and pursue his artistic dreams, Mari chooses to make the mistakes she always wanted to make and live authentically, and Zedka gains courage to live life as she wanted it. The psychiatrist's (Dr. Igor's) therapeutic approach embodies Frankl's "paradoxical intention" and by confronting Veronika with the reality of death, he enables her to discover meaning through all three pathways simultaneously. The artificial creation of urgency (through the false diagnosis) paradoxically frees her to pursue creative expression, authentic relationships, and a transformed attitude toward existence. Veronika's journey thus serves as a comprehensive illustration of Frankl's logotherapeutic principle that meaning can be discovered even in the most hopeless circumstances, and that this discovery of meaning is humanity's primary motivational force.

Like Frankl, Coelho also highlights the importance of finding meaning as a fundamental motivation for human life and sheds light on the intricate relationship between meaning, happiness, and human behavior. In the context of the concentration camps, individuals who

chose not to work and faced death exhibited a sense of resignation and despair. Despite warnings, they remained unmoved until their eventual demise. This behavior can be contrasted with instances where individuals turn to self-destructive behaviors such as suicide or drug use as a response to perceived meaninglessness or hopelessness. Frankl rightly enumerates the significance of finding meaning and purpose in life as a motivator for survival and resilience and foregrounds the idea that the final meaning of life often becomes apparent only when approaching death, like how understanding individual moments contributes to a larger perspective on life. As rightly pointed out, individuals facing seemingly insurmountable challenges can transcend their circumstances, grow personally, and turn tragedy into personal victory. Logotherapy, as a form of meaning-centered psychotherapy, aims to help individuals find pride and nobility in their suffering rather than viewing it as degrading. Empirical evidence, including Frankl's personal experience in the concentration camps/ the experiences of prisoners of war, supports the notion that meaningfulness can be derived from suffering. Frankl as well as Coelho emphasizes the importance of knowing how to endure suffering and dealing with challenges rather than seeking an escape through actions like suicide/ euthanasia based on societal value judgments. Considering suicide as free and unforced action engaged in to bring about one's death, it is evident that suicide is morally wrong and ought never to be considered by Christians. Life is a gift from God and to take one's own life is to show insufficient gratitude to God. To end one's own life is to usurp the prerogative that is God's alone. Suicide is ordinarily a rejection of the goodness of God, and it can never be right to reject God's goodness. Within his simple stories Coelho has always incorporated his messages for the good of mankind and here while dealing with psychoanalysis in detail, Coelho draws attention to the most essential aspect of life: "I do have a chance to live. Am I making good use of it?" (Coelho, 2000, p. 101).

Conclusion

More like a fable than a story, the main theme of *Veronika Decides to Die* is that life is worth living. As Veronika is forced to question the idea of madness, she comes to realize that every second of existence is a choice that we all make between living and dying. The book covers almost all aspects of life, and this makes it appealing to almost all its readers, an important reminder of the value of life. It is a tale of the joys of life and the fragility and the preciousness of each day that we live. It is an authoritative and disquieting reminder that we must always seize the day, compelling the reader to live by the idea of *carpe diem*. According to Coelho, people need to break out of the sameness of the everyday. If the same pattern is repeated, you are not alive anymore. He wants to die alive and “to die alive is to take risks.” He wants his epitaph to be: “Paulo Coelho died while he was alive” (Sheahen, 2006).

Veronika’s transformation during her stay at the Vilete after her suicide attempt and her discovery that she has only days to live due to heart damage paradoxically awakens her desire to experience life completely. Through Veronika’s interactions with other patients—Eduard, Zedka, and Mari—and her rediscovery of passion for piano playing, she embodies Frankl’s creative, experiential, and attitudinal pathways to discovering meaning in life. Ostensibly, the novel confronts existential crisis and the question of meaningful life. Veronika’s journey from suicidal despair to finally embracing life testifies to the idea of finding meaning amid suffering, reinforcing logotherapy’s emphasis on personal responsibility, attitude, and choice. Coelho’s novel reiterates Frankl’s belief that even in seemingly hopeless situations, life can be meaningful. Through Veronika and her decision to “die alive”, Coelho accentuates finding meaning in life as the primary motivational force. Coelho thus dons the role of a logotherapist, motivating millions to embrace attitudinal heroism amid unavoidable suffering.

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