

THE DECISION TO DIE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL-EXISTENTIAL REFLECTION OF THE NOVEL "VERONIKA DECIDES TO DIE"



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ABSTRACT

Published in 1998 by Brazilian writer Paulo Coelho, "Veronika Decides to Die" tells the story of Veronika, a 24-year-old young woman who, despite having an apparently ordinary and stable life, decides to end her own life due to a feeling of deep emptiness and dissatisfaction. After a failed suicide attempt, Veronika wakes up in a mental health facility called Villette, where she is told by Dr. Igor that she has only one week to live due to irreversible damage to her heart. This study seeks to analyze how the narrative of the book portrays the meaning of life, using a phenomenological-existential approach to understand the subjective experiences of the protagonist. The approach focuses on individual perceptions of experiences, exploring fundamental questions about the freedom to decide about one's own life and the search for meaning in the face of imminent death. During her stay in Villette, Veronika experiences new pleasures and realizes that every second of existence is a choice between living and giving up, discovering that there is always another meaning to life, even when time is short. This article proposes a reflection on how life and death decisions are influenced by subjective and existential factors, offering a new perspective on finitude and individual freedom.

Keywords: Veronika Decides to Die. Meaning of Life. Suicide. Existential Psychology. Existential-Phenomenology.

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INTRODUCTION

Published in 1998 by Brazilian writer Paulo Coelho, "Veronika Decides to Die" is a psychological novel that tells the story of Veronika, a 24-year-old woman who lives in Slovenia's capital, Ljubljana. From the title and the first paragraph, the reader is informed of Veronika's decision: she decides to die. "On November 11, 1997, Veronika decided that there was - after all! - the time has come to kill oneself" (Coelho, 1998, p. 07). For Veronika, her life had become monotonous and without prospects of novelty, thus justifying her desire to put an end to her own existence.

Veronika is a young woman considered ordinary, with dreams and desires similar to those of anyone else her age. She has a reasonable job, lives in a small room that provides her with the much-desired privacy, frequents busy bars and interacts with attractive young men. However, despite all these activities, she feels that something essential is missing in her life, a void that she cannot fill.

After her suicide attempt, Veronika wakes up and says she knows that she was not in heaven, in fact, the place where she was gave her the perception of definitely looking nothing like heaven, she would then be hospitalized in a mental health institution, the so-called Villette, and had not been able to die.

The phenomenological-existential approach focuses on direct experience and individual perceptions of experiences, seeking to understand how individuals give meaning to their lives from their own perspectives (Sapienza, 2022). In this context, Veronika confronts us with fundamental questions: is there an ideal time for death to happen? Would death be our decision in the face of the freedom of our lives? What makes us decide about death at this moment? Is there an ideal time for finitude to be imposed? What factors influence our decision to pursue finitude? Sapienza, 2022, p. 17, states: "Those who work with phenomenology live with this: the need to go straight to the phenomenon as it presents itself".

In the course of her stay in Villette, Veronika begins to realize that every second of existence is a choice between living and giving up. Even in the face of imminent death, she experiences new pleasures and discovers that there is always another meaning to life. However, time is short. Dr. Igor, a psychiatrist at the mental institution where Veronika awakens, informs that, although she did not die at that moment, her life will not extend beyond a week, as her heart can stop at any moment (Coelho, 1998, p. 36). With this new perspective, Veronika is faced with a new question: what life would she like to live knowing

that the death, which she so desired, is imminent? And more, how would we live our lives if we knew the date of our death? What if we wanted to?

For Jean-Paul Sartre (2015), human beings are radically free and have the responsibility to create their own essence through the choices they make. Sartre states that "existence precedes essence", which means that the human being is born without a predetermined purpose, and it is up to him to give meaning to his life. In this sense, deliberating about one's own life involves the recognition of the inescapable freedom that the individual has, in addition to the responsibility for all his decisions.

OBJECTIVES

GENERAL OBJECTIVE

Reflect on how the narrative of "Veronika Decides to Die", by Paulo Coelho, portrays the meaning of life and the decision to die, using a phenomenological-existential approach to understand the subjective experiences of the protagonist.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

To reflect on how monotony and the perception of meaninglessness in life influenced Veronika's decision to die, from the phenomenological-existential perspective; to understand, from the phenomenological-existential approach, how Veronika's new reality affected her perspective on life and death; to reflect on the philosophical and existential implications of knowing one's own life span; to reflect on the philosophical questions of freedom and choice related to the decision to die.

METHODOLOGY

To achieve the results proposed in this study, an exploratory research was carried out, as defined by Gil (2002). The method adopted was that of bibliographic research, which allows a detailed investigation of previously published texts relevant to the topic addressed. The main work used as a basis for the analysis includes "Veronika Decides to Die", by Paulo Coelho (1998), along with bibliographic reviews pertinent to the theme of death and the meaning of life.

In the development of the "results and discussion" section, the exploratory reading technique was used, also according to Gil (2002). This approach seeks to identify the relevance of the works consulted for the theme of study, highlighting the most significant

points that contribute to the analysis of existential despair and the search for the meaning of life in "Veronika Decides to Die".

Finally, in the "final considerations" section, the data obtained were interpreted through a qualitative analysis, which aims to deepen the understanding of the phenomena studied, offering reflections on the existential and psychological implications portrayed in the novel.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The novel *Veronika Decides to Die*, by Paulo Coelho, is a work that invites reflection on deep themes such as suicide, existential emptiness and the search for the meaning of life. From the trajectory of Veronika, the protagonist, the author leads us to explore the motivations that lead a person to consider the end of their own life, as well as the transformations that can occur when they are directly confronted with death.

The second page already allows us to reflect and get to know Veronika. Veronika, while waiting for her death, already with pills in her system, begins to read a magazine about computers, something that did not interest her, however, Veronika was used to looking for the next and easy, as well as that magazine that was next to her, no matter its theme, but the place where she was, close and easy (Coelho, 1998, p. 08).

Veronika also had a job as a librarian that, despite promoting stability, was not something that she perceived as meaningful in her work, it was something automatic and completely without emotional involvement (Coelho, 1998, p. 28).

Despite his desire for death, he worried about how to die. Worrying about those who would stay, about the possible way that those who would stay would feel, leading her to consider ingesting tranquilizer pills because it was a more "calm" way in which the story about her death would be told (Coelho, 1998, p.09).

The protagonist clearly tells us the reasons for her choice not to live:

The first reason: everything in his life was the same, and - once youth had passed - it was decadence, old age beginning to leave irreversible marks, diseases coming, friends leaving. In short, continuing to live did not add anything; on the contrary, the possibilities of suffering increased greatly. The second reason was more philosophical: Veronika read newspapers, watched TV, and was aware of what was going on in the world. Everything was wrong, and she had no way to fix that situation - which gave her a feeling of total uselessness (Coelho, 1998, p. 13).

In contemporary society, suicide is often associated with tangible and visible causes, such as depression, loss of a family member, or adverse living conditions. However, like

Paulo Coelho's novel (1998), suicide can also be motivated by a more subtle and profound loss: the loss of meaning in life. Veronika is not simply running away from a specific pain, but from an existential emptiness that makes life unbearable.

In the existential perspective presented by Feijoo (2019), suicide is seen as a unique and deeply personal expression, a possibility inherent to the human condition, rather than being merely a pathological or social deviation. In this view, suicide is understood as an existential response that arises from despair, lack of meaning, or the search for a way out in the face of life's inevitable limitations and suffering.

The novel does not delve into sufferings that are easy for society to understand, and it seems interesting to us that this does not appear, because anyone unable to see meaning in their life may finally make the decision to die. "The meaninglessness of life can be a significant component in making a violent decision to kill oneself." (Rocha et al., 2012).

The lack of meaning, the existential emptiness, will lead a person to try to save himself from this anguish, to fill this existential void, making him believe that this unknown, death, will rescue him from this suffering (Dutra 2000).

Veronika was convinced that she had lived in the world everything she had to live and, as life would always end with death, she would like to reach this place of death, where she says that only in this way would she acquire her freedom and eternal oblivion. In her heart, although convinced, a series of questions appeared between her desire to die and everything taught about suicide, arriving at the idea that, if God really exists, he should be generous and understanding with those who chose to stop living in a world full of cruelties, injustices and suffering (Coelho, 1998, p. 15).

A suicide attempt presents a person with a significant existential problem. She has to answer herself, what value life has for her. Those who attempt against their own life certainly no longer find value in it (Rocha, Boris and Moreira, 2012).

The protagonist was happy with her decision, to die in a predicted, chosen and peaceful way. Mainly, for the feeling of ending the cycle of living the monotony of equal days there. And for something that catches our attention, the happiness of knowing that good things would not lose their originality in the tragedy of a life where everything could repeat itself (Coelho, 1998, p. 16).

To the sadness of this young woman, death does not choose her and she wakes up. He wakes up in Villette, described as "a place where no one had ever fled. That mixed the

real madmen with those who were accused of madness, or feigned insanity" (Coelho, 1998, p.20). Upon awakening in Villette, Veronika is confronted with the reality that her attempt to die has failed, which plunges her into a new kind of despair. She desperately tries to pull out the devices that keep her alive, but is restrained by a nurse who, in a protocol way, administers an injection that leaves her stunned (Coelho, 1998, p. 22).

Veronika initially imagines that her life after the suicide attempt would be marked by the repetition of the monotony and meaninglessness she has always felt (Coelho, 1998, p. 28). She finds herself unable to find any purpose in continuing to live, which reinforces the apathy and existential emptiness that led her to try to take her own life. In her reflections, she expresses the fear that, even after surviving, her life would be nothing more than a succession of equal and meaningless days, where she would be forced to face the same monotony she had previously experienced (Coelho, 1998, p. 29).

Throughout her stay in Villette, Veronika begins to interact with other patients, each with their own stories of suffering and resistance. These interactions are crucial to Veronika's transformation, who begins to question her previous convictions about life and death. Among the patients, she meets Zedka, a woman who struggles with depression; Mari, a lawyer who succumbed to the pressure of work and social expectations; and Eduard, a young schizophrenic who becomes Veronika's love interest.

As it becomes possible to get in touch again with the significant elements of the lived experience, the human being becomes capable of enhancing his condition of existing in this world, unfolding into new meanings (Rocha, Boris and Moreira, 2012).

Through these relationships, Veronika comes to see that despite the pain and suffering, life can still offer moments of beauty, connection, and meaning. Instead of finding death as a solution, she begins to experiment with a new way of living, one that accepts the uncertainty and imperfection of existence. This process is central to the novel's message: the idea that even in the most desperate circumstances, it is possible to find a new meaning to life.

Viktor Frankl, a psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, developed Logotherapy, which holds that the main human motivation is the search for meaning. In his 1991 work "In Search of Meaning," Frankl argues that even in situations of extreme suffering, such as in concentration camps, individuals can find a purpose that gives meaning to their existence, which he called the "will to meaning."

Frankl states that "life never ceases to have meaning, even in the most painful and inhumane conditions" (Frankl, 2022). According to him, the meaning of life is not fixed and can change according to circumstances; it is found in the answers we give to the challenges we face. This process of finding meaning, even in the midst of suffering, allows the individual to transcend their pain and find reasons to continue living. Frankl (2022) suggests that meaning can be discovered through three main paths: through the creation of a work or realization, through the experience of meaningful experiences (such as love and relationships), or through the attitude we take in the face of inevitable suffering.

However, time is short. Dr. Igor, a psychiatrist at the mental health institution where Veronika awakens, informs that, although he did not die at that moment, his life will not extend beyond a week, as his heart can stop at any moment. Veronika begins to experience emotions and sensations that she had suppressed for years, from the pleasure of playing the piano to the love she develops for Eduard. The narrative suggests that the experience in Villette, although initially seen as a prison, turns out to be an opportunity for rebirth for Veronika. She rediscovers the value of life, not as an endless string of equal days, but as an unpredictable journey full of challenges and possibilities.

Veronika, during her stay, notices a piano in a room. After looking at the piano from afar, she finally manages to put into practice what she knew very well: playing it. When playing that piano, the melodies that emerged made her feel pleasure in the sensations and emotions that emerged from it, as if they touched them deeply (Coelho, 1998, p. 135). By playing the piano, Veronika has contact with her authenticity and reconnects with her individuality, leaving aside, at least for that moment, the monotony and apathy that dominated her life before the suicide attempt. Heidegger (Silveira, 2024) mentions that authenticity is a central characteristic of a life lived fully, in contrast to a life lived inauthentically, in which the individual is absorbed by routine, conformism, and the impersonality of the "if".

For Sartre (2015) human life does not have a pre-defined essence; rather, "existence precedes essence." This means that human beings are born without an intrinsic purpose and need to construct their meaning through their choices and actions. In the work "Being and Nothingness", Sartre argues that the human being is constantly projecting himself into the future, creating his own path freely, even if this freedom brings with it anguish and uncertainty.

The high point of the novel occurs when Veronika discovers that her medical condition has been manipulated by Dr. Igor, the psychiatrist in charge of the clinic, who made her believe that she had a few days to live as part of an experiment on the impact of imminent death on the human mind. Ironically, it is this false proximity to death that finally awakens in her a new will to live.

In the work "Being and Time" (2015), Martin Heidegger introduces the concept of being-towards-death, arguing that the understanding of one's own mortality is essential for authentic existence. According to Heidegger, living authentically requires the individual to face the reality of his finitude and recognize death as an inevitable part of life. By accepting this finitude, the individual is able to live more fully, attributing greater meaning to their daily choices and actions.

For Sartre (2015), the confrontation with death is also a stimulus for the realization of human freedom. Sartre states that while death is inevitable and beyond the individual's control, it is the knowledge of this finitude that can free us to live a more authentic life. Death, in its inevitability, brings into focus the radical freedom of the human being to choose and act. Veronika, believing that she had only a few days to live, begins to realize that every moment has value and that her freedom to live them intensely depends only on her.

This "proximity" of death makes Veronika rediscover the power of her choices and the freedom to enjoy every moment. For Sartre, this realization is central to human existence, since living authentically with freedom involves recognizing responsibility for one's own life, even in the face of the inevitability of death.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

"Veronika Decides to Die" portrays in a deep and philosophical way the journey of a character who, by confronting death, rediscovers the value and meaning of life. Through the phenomenological-existential approach, the novel allows us to understand Veronika's existential crisis, marked by monotony and the perception of lack of meaning, which leads her to attempt suicide. However, it is precisely the proximity of death that awakens in her a new perspective, revealing that the meaning of life is not fixed, but can be continuously resignified through daily experiences and choices.

Through Veronika's experience in Villette, we are invited to reflect on the philosophical and existential implications of human freedom, especially the freedom of

choice in the face of finitude. From her coexistence with other characters who also face existential challenges, Veronika rediscovers the value of uncertainty and the unpredictability of life. This transformation shows that, even in moments of extreme despair, it is possible to find new meanings and experiences that allow us to face life in a more authentic and full way.

As observed by Sapienza (2022), existential phenomenology values lived experience and connection with the world, sometimes free of explanatory theories, highlighting that the understanding of human beings is based on their references and experiences. In Veronika's case, her transformation occurs when she reconnects with the world and with others, realizing that freedom and the responsibility to live are always present, even in adverse situations.

The novel's ending, which leaves Veronika's fate open, reinforces the idea that life is not about finding definitive answers, but about embracing uncertainty and the unknown. Instead of seeking death as an escape, Veronika learns to live with the consciousness of death, allowing that consciousness to give meaning and depth to her existence.

From the novel we are capable of reflecting on the freedom, finitude and power of transformation that arises when the human being confronts his own mortality. Veronika, by accepting the unpredictability of life, discovers that meaning can be found not only in the search for great achievements, but also in the small moments and choices that shape our existence.

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