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## **PAULO COELHO'S VERONIKA DECIDES TO DIE: SEMIOTICS STUDY**

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### **Abstract**

*Veronika Decides to Die is one of Paulo Coelho's best-selling novels, through which he describes in details what is happening inside the wall of mental hospitals. The novel was first published in 1998. The researcher selects this novel as there is no study has been done so far in analyzing Veronika Decides to Die from a semiotics viewpoint. There are two main Semiotics theories, one is represented by the Swiss linguistics Ferdinand de Saussure and another is represented by the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce. Peirce's triadic theory of icon, index and symbol. The latter has been selected as a tool in answering the research question of: What are the main signs in Coelho's Veronika Decides to Die?*

### **Keyword**

Charles Sanders Peirce, Paulo Coelho, Saussure, Semiotics, Semiology

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### **1. Semiotics**

The term semiotic is first introduced by Greek physician Hippocrates (460-377 B.C.) (Solithatun, 2018). It was Hippocrates was the creator of Western medical science. He established semeiotics as a branch of medicine for the study of symptoms. Semiotics derives

from semieon means sign or mark (Sebeok, 2001). Accordingly, semiotic is the study of symbols, signs, and signification. Semiotics contains of verbal and visual signs (Nöth,1990; Solithatun, 2018). Hence, semiotics, has a long history tacked back from the ancient Greek philosophers John Locke, who in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, links semiotics with ethics and physics as one of the three central fields of human knowledge (Stamper, N.D.). Prior (2014) defined sign as "aliquid stat pro aliquot" (something that stands for something). Benny Hoed (2011) declares that semiotics is the study of signs (Pauzan, 2018). Barthes (1967) declares: semiology therefore aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits, images, gestures, music sounds, objects and the complex association of these which form the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment: these constitute, if not languages, at least of signification.

These signs always have a common meaning that people have agreed upon. Saussure (1993) states, "regards linguistics as a part of semiotics and take signs as the combination of signifier and signified". A sign can be well known as a signifier, or a symbol that implies something else. In some cases, signs can be a representation of the things being signified, while in other cases because a symbol is associated with it. For years, it has been established that every sign in society, cognition, and nature belongs to the field of semiotics. Semiotic studies are progressively attractive to anyone concerned in the understanding signs (Solithatun, 2018). Semiotics is a broad multiple field that includes the study of various kinds of signs conveyed by different media and channels, of socially-organized sign systems. (Prior, 2014)

Moreover, Peirce (1894) states that "nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign". This interpretation process happens by connecting a sign to usual systems of conventions and, hence, the sign becomes part of an organized collective of interactions (Cobley & Jansz, 2000). In short, a human being functions as a meaning-maker who uses signs to receive, understand, and express information. Understanding and interpretation of signs includes a physical component of objective existence, such as 'American stop sign', which according to stand to common understanding stand to 'stop the vehicle'. This mutual understanding is commonly resulting from socially accepted rules and norms (Tsotra et. al., 2004).



**Figure 1:** *The American Stop Sign*

*(Source: Tsotra, et. al., 2004)*

'Semiotics' and 'semiology' interfere but they have various flavours. 'Semiotics' stands more to the logical aspects of signs, while 'semiology' stands more to the role that signs play in language and society. Semiotics is connected with the work of American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce who gained fame during the 19th and 20th centuries. Peirce invented the basis of relational databases technology, relational calculus, and methods of cognitive mapping that have only just been reinvented by knowledge engineers. Semiology is associated with Swiss philosopher, linguist, and semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure who died in 1913 but is famous for his *Cours de Linguistique General* that was published from his students' notes in 1949. According to Anglo-Saxon or Northern European tradition, semiotics is related to logical, formal, scientific touch, while semiology is located in Southern Europe and has a touch of political analysis and literary criticism (Stamper, N.D.).

## **2. Paulo Coelho's Veronika Decides to Die**

Paulo Coelho is a Brazilian novelist. He was born on 24 August 1947 in Rio de Janeiro. Unfortunately, Coelho's talent to be a writer was not approved by his parents. They want him to be a legal expert or architect. Today, Coelho is one of the most broadly read writers in the world. His novels have been published more than 86 million-copy and translated into 67 languages, to be sold in 150 countries. Paulo Coelho's novel *Veronika Decides to Die* reflects his close knowledge of mental hospitals, their atmosphere, and the anxiety and comfort of living in such a place. As he was forced to live in a mental hospital by his parents due to his rebellious nature. Thus, the readers discover parts of the life of madness that they have never met or imagined they can explore. *Veronika Decides to Die* is not only about madness but also speaks about many psychological issues (Prakoso, 2020).

The novel is telling the story of a girl named Veronika. She is twenty-four and seems to have everything; beauty, youth, a loving family, boyfriends and a job. Nonetheless, something was missing in her life and she decides to die. She takes an overdose of sleeping pills imagining she is not going to wake up. But she does – at a mental hospital where they tell her that she has only days to live (Calosa, 2004).

## **3. Applying Peirce's Semiotics Theory on Paulo Coelho's Veronika Decides to Die**

### **3.1. Reading**

"Veronika started reading about computer science" (Coelho, 1998)

On 11 November 1997, Veronika decided to kill herself. After she took an overdose of sleeping pills while she was waiting for her death. Veronika decided to read a magazine that she already had brought from the library where she worked. She placed it on the bed "that month's issue of a French magazine, *Homme*" (Coelho, 1998). Even though she has not been interested in computer science yet she decided to read that article which is an indexical sign that she always does things even if she does not like them.

During the few days that Veronika lived in the hospital, she noticed that nurses spend a lot of their time reading "a nurse was sitting reading a book" (Coelho, 1998), "These nurses must be cultivated, they spend their who lives reading"(Coelho, 1998). Here, reading comes as a symbolic sign of peaceful activity that nurses tend to do in order not to distrust their patients.

Imagining how her life will be if she does not commit suicide, Veronika will get married, and have kids, and then her husband starts cheating on her. After he cheats for the first time, she will forgive him, then after two or three years he will cheat again but this time she will pretend she does not know. She will continue working in the library and "reading books I never quite manage to finish"(Coelho, 1998), which is an indexical sign that she continues doing things she does not like. It seems that Veronika reads books only to look smarter, an act of pretending; not because she like reading that why when she saw the nurse reading in mental hospital (Villette) "warder tending to read a book, just to make others think she's an intelligent woman" (Coelho, 1998). Here, reading is an indexical sign to Veronika herself because she sometimes read without any interest to finish the book. She read as an act of pretending.

Reading for Zedka is a method to understand herself more during her treatment. Due to her treatment which goes back to the 1930s, Zedka experiences an astral journey. To understand what is happening to her, Zedka reads books "It was through books too that she had lost her fear of the creature inhabiting space" (Coelho, 1998). Thus, books here are a symbolic sign for seeking understand and knowledge.

Eduard was broken in a hospital when a nurse gave him a 'fat book'. Feeling bored and having nothing to do "he began to read the 'fat book' "(Coelho, 1998). The book was about ordinary men and women who change the world. They were ordinary people just like him, his girlfriend, and his father, full of anxiety and doubts. Therefore, reading here is an indexical sign for change, because this book changes Eduard's mentality, life, and dreams forever that why he gave the nurse his gold watch and asked her to buy him more books in the same genre "he tried to read the biographies of some of those visionaries" (Coelho, 1998).

### **3.2. Love**

Usually, people tend to commit suicide because of a lack of love, harsh breakup, or family problems. However, Veronika tends to clarify that she does not commit suicide because of the lack of love "she wasn't killing herself because of a lack of love"(Coelho, 1998), yet there is something more important than the love which is understanding "She had given up many of her desires so that her parents would continue to love her"(Coelho, 1998). It seems that her parents never understood her. Her mother forced her to leave playing the piano and became a lawyer because it is a more practical choice. Therefore, their love is symbolic of selfish love because they never considered what makes Veronika happy.

Another type of love is represented by one of the best-known Slovenian monuments is the Prešeren Statue in Ljubljana, the capital of Slovenia. France Prešeren is the Slovene national poet "the statue of Prešeren, the great Slovenian poet, who had made such a profound impact on the soul of his people"(Coelho, 1998). Prešeren was in love with Julija Primic, whom he could not marry. However, his love has been immortalized through his statue who was looking at his beloved's face who had been carved on a building on the other side of the square, "the statue of the poet stares fixedly at something", " Prešeren gazes for all eternity on his Impossible Love" (Coelho, 1998). The statue is a symbolic sign of legendary love.

Moreover, Zedka is introduced as "thirty-five and seemed absolutely normal" (Coelho, 1998) when Veronika first meets her in Vilette. Zedka suffered from depression due to a "man hidden in her past". She "had fallen hopelessly in love in her youth" (Coelho, 1998). She sold everything and travelled to America to be with him. He was married. She was willing to do everything for her love. One day, she discovered that she was no longer welcomed, and accordingly she returned to Slovenia. She suffered for months before she married and had children. One day she started thinking about her first lover and whether she had fought for her love. Zedka started looking for her old lover, spending a fortune on international calls but it seemed no one knew where he was. She sold all her marriage's jewellery to buy a ticket to America, till someone convinced her that the US is a huge country to search it all since she had no address. She suffered for "love as she had never suffered before"(Coelho,1998). Here, Zedka's love is an indexical sign of impossible love that leads to destroying one's self, life, and family.

Another love story is represented by the heroin Veronika and Eduard. Veronika used to play the piano to Eduard who is schizophrenic. Even though she had been told that she has few days to live, Veronika felt that Eduard has become part of her world. He started speaking to her about his previous life and how he ended up in a mental hospital. Eduard admits "I think... I think you're important to me" (Coelho, 1998) "I've only known you a week ago, so it

would be far too early for me to tell you that I love you, but since I probably won't live through the night, it would also be too late" (Coelho, 1998). Their love is an indexical sign for their healing, Veronika feels that she wants to live her life to the fullest and Eduard starts feeling normal again.

Another example of parenting love is represented by Eduard's parents who even though they loved him yet they stood against his dream to become a painter and finally left him in a mental hospital. Here, Coelho is speaking about his own experience as his parents were against his passion to become a writer till, they put him in a mental hospital. Eduard's father wanted him to be an ambassador "if you really love us, do as I ask. If you don't love us, then carry on as you are now" (Coelho, 1998), "their love almost destroyed your dream" (Coelho, 1998). Their love is an indexical for selfish love because it destroys their only son, Eduard ended up alone in a mental hospital suffering from schizophrenia. After he was left in Villette, Mari started taking care of him and "made him feel loved again" (Coelho, 1998), even though she was not one of his relatives or friends yet she treats him with all kindness and love as if he were her son. Love here is a symbolic sign that sometimes strangers are capable to love, understanding, and treat with kindness better than one's family.

### **3.3. Pictures**

When Veronika discovered that she has a few hours left to live. She decided to spend them outside the hospital to go see "a church and look at those images that never meant anything to me" (Coelho, 1998), which is an indication that Veronika who committed suicide in the first pages and did not believe in God, now changes. She started considering spending her last hours admiring the painting in a church. Those church's images are an iconic sign of Christians' beliefs.

After his father talked with him about his disappointment in him, Eduard starts to rethink his options between disappointing his parents and becoming the source of his mother's grief and between giving up his dreams of painting the version of paradise "He looked around him, he saw his paintings"(Coelho, 1998) that he spent a lot of time on them, feeling loved, joy, and passion more than another thing in the world. Therefore, his paintings are an indexical sign of destroying his dreams for his parents' sake, however, destroying these paintings was a turning point in his life.

### **3.4. Music**

When Veronika took the sleeping pills, she was waiting for her death. Meanwhile, she was listening to a piece of music playing in Prešeren square. Hence, music is an iconic sign of Veronika's last company while she was waiting for her death. She was wandering whether

she has time enough to hear the end of the music "Would she live to hear the end of that music drifting up from the square?" (Coelho, 1998). The Irony is that she will live enough to play the music herself. After she woke up in Villette and knew that she has only a few days to live, she started playing the piano again "she turned to the moon and played a sonata in homage to it, knowing that the moon was listening and would feel proud" "because the moon had told her while she was playing the piano" (Coelho, 1998). The Piano is an indexical sign of a losing dream; remains her that she did not live her life the way she wanted. She wanted to play the piano not to become a librarian "she intended giving up everything and dedicating herself to the piano" (Coelho, 1998), since life has offered her a second chance to live.

Another music was playing, it was an indexical sign of purity, calm, and focus. The Sufi master, Nasrudin played the flute when he made a lecture in Villette "The man started playing the flute" (Coelho, 1998). The music calmed the soul and made the audience felt peace. It empties Veronika's mind, makes her feel empty, thinks about nothing and leads her elsewhere. Before he was playing the flute, he asked his audience to focus on a rose "He told everyone to concentrate on the rose and to empty their minds" (Coelho, 1998). The rose here is an indexical sign of self-centre, as it helps the audience to concentrate on themselves and "allow the real "I" to reveal itself", via creating an atmosphere of soft music, dim light and flower, which reveals the audience's true religious beliefs.

In the last hours that remain in her life, Veronika decided to spend it doing things that she postponed for a long time. One of these things is talking to the "woman who sells chestnuts in winter and flowers in the spring" (Coelho, 1998). They used to cross paths but she never asked that woman how she was doing. Flowers here come as an indexical sign for simple things that Veronika wanted to do before it is too late. Indicating that her happiness and interest lay in the simple matters.

### **3.5. Windows**

The novel opens with Veronika taking the sleeping pills and waiting for her death. She tries to kill time by listening to music coming from the square, reading an article on computer science, and watching life from her "convent window"(Coelho,1998). A young man "passing by her window"(Coelho, 1998), he smiled she smiled back, and he waved but Veronika pretended that she was looking elsewhere. The window is an indexical sign of hope that life has many beautiful things to effort, soft music playing, a lovely afternoon, a young man full of life who could be a good lover, especially after he showed interest in Veronika. Despite Veronika "was happy with what her eyes could see and her ears hear", she is still convinced that committing suicide was a good idea.

### **3.6. Moon**

Eduard get used to Veronika playing the piano for him and this created his new world that "included a woman, a piano and a moon" (Coelho, 1998). Thus, the moon here is a symbolic sign of romance and perfection, especially since it is a full moon. His new world seemed perfect with a beautiful Veronika playing the piano for him under a full moon. According to Veronika "the moon will still rise" (Coelho, 1998), which is an iconic sign that life will continue after her death, no one is going to miss her even Eduard. Because someone else will play the piano for him as soon as she passes away.

### **3.7. Mental Hospital (Villette)**

Paulo Coelho was not an obedient child. His father saw his behaviour as a sign of a psychological disorder and he sent him to a mental hospital, "he too had been admitted to a mental hospital" (Coelho, 1998). The mental hospital is an indexical sign that Coelho wrote *Veronika Decides to Die* as he wanted to show the world what is going on inside these hospitals since he has lived this experience twice. Coelho experienced electroconvulsive therapy, which is a very brutal, old fashion therapy "It's an old treatment, from the sixties"(Coelho, 1998) "That's awful, inhuman. People struggle to get out of a coma not to go into one" (Coelho, 1998). Both Zedka and Eduard had to undergo electroconvulsive therapy while Veronika was watching. This therapy is very dangerous as it can destroy the human nerve system. After Coelho revealed this dangerous practice in *Veronika Decides to Die*, the Brazilian government declared banding this therapy (Prakoso, 2020).

However, Villette was a great space for some patients. Even it was not a five stars hotel, yet everyone was free to say and do what they like without being criticized because after all, they were in a mental hospital, "once in a mental hospital, a person grows used to the freedom that exists in the world of madness and becomes addicted to it" (Coelho, 1998). Thus, the mental hospital becomes an indexical sign of freedom, no more responsibilities, no struggle how to earn living, and no more pretending.

Zedka came to say her goodbyes to Veronika, she seemed more self-central than ever. Zedka was no longer suffering from depression. She stated, "Now I'm proud to say I'm mad." (Coelho, 1998). Madness by itself is not a bad thing, it is an iconic sign that the person is only different and everyone is unique by their differences.

## **4. Conclusion**



The researcher selects semiotics as everything in our daily life is an indication of a sign. The semiotics theory represented by the American philosopher Charles Peirce reveals all different types of signs in Coelho's *Veronika Decides to Die*. Accordingly, the researcher selects the main signs that have been mentioned several times in the novel with different indications and tries to examine them through Peirce's triadic theory. Love; for instance; has been mentioned several times with various indications either selfish love, impossible love, legendary love, healing love and pure love. Mental hospital as well mentioned twice either as a place of brutal treatments or as an indexical sign for freedom. Reading, Moon, Music, Window, Images are all signs have been mentioned more than once with different indications.

The researcher recommends other researchers who are interested in signs or literature to apply Peirce's triadic theory on Paulo's *The Alchemist* as it contains a lot of symbolic signs.

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