

# The Panopticon in Action: Analyzing the Impact of Societal Expectations on the Protagonist of Paulo Coelho's "Veronika Decides to Dies

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## Abstract

*Human beings think of their actions and decisions to be an outcome of independent thinking and an expression of human agency, however, the reality is far too bitter. An individual's ideas are directly or indirectly influenced and controlled by the accepted discourse in society, which is an act of conformity. Human beings consider their daily actions and ideas, the outcome of their independent thinking and acts of human agency. Driven by this tendency to conformity, individuals do not think of their actions as being influenced and manipulated by some other factor. Micheal Focault explored this dilemma in his book "Discipline and Punishment." He explained the existence of such influencing structures that act as a gaze to direct others' actions. Utilizing this concept propounded by Focault, this research paper explores the themes of normative conformity in Paulo Coelho's "Veronika Decides to Die(1998)." It highlights how the protagonist of the novel attempts to revolt against the influencing power, however towards the end she also submits to the societal codes. The study aims to portray society as an institution while also describing the effects of normative conformity on Veronika in the novel. This paper shows that an individual follows a routine without realizing it; during this, his soul gets imprisoned, and doing the same act is considered normal. Society's capacity to accept unconventional practices and ideas is essential for cultural growth.*

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**Keywords:** *Normative conformity, Panopticon, Paulo Coelho, Micheal Foucault*

### **Introduction:**

In today's society, individuals follow a routine without realizing it. People are constantly adhering to a predetermined schedule, from waking up at a particular time to going to school or school to engaging in leisure activities. This routine can be seen as a form of control. This control over one's daily actions can also extend to control over one's thoughts, feelings, and beliefs, leading to a loss of autonomy and self-determination.

Many people believe they have control over their lives, that they make their own decisions, and that they are living lives that have meaning and purpose. However, this illusion is often shattered when individuals realize that their actions and choices are not indeed their own but rather shaped by societal norms and expectations. This can lead to disillusionment and a loss of purpose as individuals understand that the meaning they thought they had found was ultimately an illusion. "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." (Schopenhauer)

In the novel "*Veronika Decides to Die*(1998)", I explore this theme through the character of Veronika, who realizes that the life she thought she wanted was not indeed her own but rather a reflection of societal expectations. This ultimately leads her to

question the true meaning of her existence, and she realizes it has no meaning. And there are only sufferings, so Veronika commits suicide; later, Veronika finds herself in a mental hospital when she opens her eyes. Here Veronika meets Eduard, with whom Veronika thinks she is in love and decides to spend the rest of her life. This research focuses on how this choice was not her own but, again, conformism to societal rules that she should live with a husband. This research also explores why her choice was conformism because we are just like robots and have nothing in our control. If we make decisions that violate the set rules, we fear rejection and losing our societal position. This paper relates that our society is an institution with specific regulations, and we are followers of these because we consider that others are watching us; therefore, we follow them.

Thesis Statement Societal norms constrain an individual, and their actions are constantly under surveillance leading to a loss of autonomy and self-determination

### **Research Questions:**

The present study is conducted with the following questions in mind.

1. Why Veronika attempts suicide?
2. How is power spread in society?
3. Why does Veronika choose conformism choice at the end of the story?

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## Objectives

The study's primary goals are listed below.

1. To investigate the cause of Veronika's attempts to suicide despite having all the luxuries of life
2. To explain Foucault's concept of power, which is everywhere in the society
3. To explore why she chooses conformism at the end of the story

## Methods of the study

### Research design:

The author conducts this investigation through library research. The approach employed is a descriptive qualitative approach. According to Littoseli, "qualitative research is concerned with structure and pattern." It also explains what occurred in terms of a state or circumstance. It will provide a comprehensive grasp of the facts and an open interpretation. Consequently, the author believes this approach is appropriate for this investigation as this study analyzes the impact of normative conformity on an individual and focuses on society as an institution in Paulo Coelho's "*Veronika Decides to Die*(1998)."

### Data source

In this study, there are two sources of data, primary and secondary data. The leading information, presented as narration and conversation about norms and society as a whole, is derived from Paulo Coelho's book "*Veronika Decides to Die*(1998)." The secondary data came from research papers, articles, books, and other library resources that were relevant to the subject matter.

These facts support the author's analysis of the issues in light of the statement of the problem.

### Data collection

To fully and accurately comprehend the plot, this study uses the data gathering method that involves close reading of the novel. From the primary data, the data related to the issue of normative and society as an institution and how it affects characters' life are highlighted as the evidence to answer the statement of problems.

### Data Analysis

The obtained information will be analyzed using literary theory. It is a library-based study. The steps in the study are as follows:

- Quoting and describing the reason for Veronika's attempts at suicide
- Quoting and describing the effects of power
- Quoting and explaining the last decision of Veronika was also a conformist option.
- Making a whole brief conclusion according to the analysis.

### Conceptual Framework

The concept of the Panopticon was developed by the French philosopher Michel Foucault in his book "*Discipline and Punish* (1975)" Jeremy Bentham, an English philosopher and social theorist, created a particular sort of institutional structure known as the Panopticon in the late 18th century. It is a circular building with an observation tower at its center, from which

the guards can observe the prisoners or inmates confined to the cells arranged around the perimeter of the building.

Foucault used the concept of the Panopticon as a metaphor to describe the power dynamics of modern society and how individuals internalize societal norms and expectations. He argued that the Panopticon represents a form of social control in which the inmates are constantly being watched and surveilled, even though they cannot see the guards in the observation tower. This constant surveillance creates a feeling of self-discipline in the inmates, as they must always be aware of their actions and conform to the rules and expectations of the institution.

And in this novel, Veronika, the main character, was also getting tired of these unspoken rules and norms set by society, which asked her to follow them. And when she denies following them by taking sleeping pills. She was considered mad and sent to the hospital. Here, she falls in love with Eduard and marries him. Here her choice was also to conform. She does not take a new action but performs again, an act that every person in society does. Because according to the Foucault concept of power, power is spread everywhere in the community. We are bound to it and can not spend life alone.

Foucault argued that the Panopticon symbolizes the modern prison system but is also a metaphor for how power and control operate in society more broadly. He suggested that individuals internalize the expectations and norms of their community and become self-disciplined, even when they

are not being actively monitored. In this way, the Panopticon serves as a model for how power and control operate in modern society and how individuals are socialized to conform to the expectations of their community.

**Conformity:** Conformity is adhering to the norms, values, and expectations of a group or society. It is the tendency for an individual to align their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors with those of a group or organization.

Solomon Asch first proposed conformity in the 1950s. Asch, a social psychologist, conducted experiments demonstrating the power of social influence on individuals' perceptions and beliefs. His most famous investigation, known as the "*Asch Conformity Experiments*," showed that when people are placed in a group and are given a task to perform, they often conform to the majority opinion, even if it goes against their perception. These experiments established conformity as a powerful force in shaping individual behavior and decision-making, and they are still widely cited today in the study of social psychology.

Conformity can be classified into two types: Normative conformity and Informational conformity. Psychologist Muzafer Sherif first proposed these two types of conformity in 1936 in his work "*The Psychology of Social Norms*."

**Normative conformity** is the tendency to conform to the expectations of others to be liked or accepted by the group. A desire for social acceptance and approval drives it. It is often seen in situations where people

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conform to the majority opinion even when they disagree with it.

**Informational conformity** is the tendency to conform to the opinions of others when one is uncertain or lacks information. A need for information or guidance drives it. It is often seen in situations where people conform to the majority opinion because they believe it is more likely to be correct.

### Literature Review:

Foucault's panopticon theory, first introduced in his book '*Discipline and Punish*,' argues that power is exerted through surveillance and control, particularly in institutions such as prisons and mental hospitals. The theory posits that the knowledge that one is being watched leads to self-regulation and discipline, even if it is not always the case.

Asch's theory of normative conformity, first introduced in 1956 in his article "*Opinions and Social Pressure*," argues that individuals conform to societal norms and expectations to gain acceptance and avoid rejection. Asch's study on conformity has been widely recognized as a classic study in social psychology. The theory of normative conformity has been applied to literature to examine the pressure to conform to societal norms and expectations faced by the main character, Veronika, and how this pressure shapes her actions and decisions.

Here, the writer finds some previous studies as follows

Machmud Yunus, a student of the English Department, Faculty of Letters, Jember University, with his thesis *A Study of Life*

and *Death Instinct In Paulo Coelho's Veronika Decides To Die*

The subject of this thesis is the psychological examination of Eros and Thanatos, as shown in the main character of *Veronika Decides to Die*. The study aims to determine how the two instincts' balance and the motivation and meaning of life are related.

The conclusion of this thesis suggests a link between Eros and Thanatos's equilibrium and life's purpose and inspiration. By any means, the finding indicates that experiencing happiness and grief is necessary for enjoyment to be meaningful. Eventually, Veronika's instincts—the id energy—have proven crucial for preparing her to deal with the other two parts of existence, the ego and superego.

"*Veronika Decides to Die(1998)*" has been analyzed through the lens of Existentialism by Dr. R. Vijay, Asst. Prof., Mahendra Institute of Techonolgy, Mallasamudram, Namakkal. According to him, Veronika finds meaning in life by marrying Eduard, but if we think about it again, she chooses an option that conforms to societal norms. Throughout the novel, Veronika faces pressure to conform to societal standards and expectations. She feels trapped in a life she believes has no meaning and constantly searches for something more. She is also under the surveillance and control of society and her parents, which adds feelings of being constrained and limited.

In choosing to marry Eduard, Veronika makes a decision that aligns with societal expectations of what a woman should do-

find a husband and start a family. It's a safe and conventional decision, rather than taking a chance on something unknown. Veronika is giving up her autonomy and freedom to make her own choices by conforming to societal expectations.ss

Moreover, the choice of marriage could also be seen as a form of self-regulation and discipline, as the panopticon theory suggests. Knowing that society expects her to marry and have a family, she conforms to these expectations to avoid rejection and gain acceptance.

### **The portrayal of normative conformity and society as an institution in Paulo Coelho's *Veronika Decides to Die***

In our daily life, some unspoken rules rule us. These rules are not in any constitution, but society respects them and follows them without realizing them. These are called norms. Some norms we follow for acceptance in society, and some to protect ourselves from the wrong track. The norms followed for approval are known as normative conformity, and what we observe to be on the safe side is called informational conformity. We follow these two everywhere. Every norm has its value. If anyone violates it, we face some consequences.

This book also depicts these rules, where the community has standards its members should uphold. However, at the novel's beginning, Veronika does not conform to these norms and commits suicide which is highlighted below.

### **Reason for Veronika's attempts at suicide:**

"At twenty-four, having experienced everything she could experience—and that was no small achievement—Veronika was almost certain that everything ended with death. That is why she had chosen suicide: freedom at last. Eternal oblivion" (Coelho 2001, 12)

Veronika attempted suicide because she felt that she had experienced everything she could and that death was the only way to escape the monotony and boredom she was experiencing. She considers that her life is a repetition of certain activities. There is nothing new in it. The bourgeoisie class sets rules and norms, and everyone follows them. They consider it normal because many people do it. They do not question why and they do so. In society, there is always a set of rules governing behavior that rational people would accept on the condition that others also take them. So Veronika committed suicide to get freedom from this society. This is normative conformity, where Veronika's decision to end her life is influenced by her perception of social norms and expectations rather than her values and desires. She believes that there is no other way to escape the mundane existence that she perceives as the norm and therefore conforms to the idea that suicide is the only solution.

"Everything in her life was the same and, once her youth was gone, it would be downhill all the way, with old age beginning to leave irreversible marks, the onset of illness, the departure of friends. She would gain nothing by continuing to live; indeed,

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the likelihood of suffering would only increase. The second reason was more philosophical: Veronika read the newspapers, watched T.V., and she was aware of what was going on in the world. Everything was wrong, and she had no way of putting things right—that gave her a sense of complete powerlessness. In a short while, though, she would have the final life experience, which promised to be very different: death." (Coelho 11)

Veronika feels trapped and unfulfilled in her life and sees no hope for the future. She believes that continuing to live would only result in further suffering, as she is subject to the irreversible marks of aging, illness, and the departure of friends. This belief is a manifestation of normative conformity, where Veronika conforms to the dominant social norms and expectations regarding the meaning and value of life. She sees no other way to escape the monotony and suffering she perceives as the norm and believes that death is the only way to achieve freedom and escape the constraints of her society.

Another reason for Veronika's decision to end her life is more philosophical, as she believes that everything in the world is wrong and that she has no way to make things right. This sense of complete powerlessness is also a manifestation of normative conformity, where Veronika conforms to the dominant social norms and expectations regarding the individual's ability to effect change and make a difference in the world. For Veronika, our society is just like Panopticon as presented by Michel Foucault in "*Discipline and Punish*(1975)," but here, the norms keep check and balance on an individual, and

also, these norms control an individual's soul. She sees no possibility of challenging or subverting these norms and expectations and instead conforms to them by choosing suicide as a means of escape.

Veronika's decision to end her life is seen as an example of how normative conformity shapes individual actions and choices. She conforms to dominant social norms and expectations regarding the meaning and value of life and the individual's ability to effect change and make a difference in the world. These norms and expectations shape Veronika's perception of the world and her place in it, leading her to choose suicide as the only means of achieving freedom and escape.

#### **Power is everywhere in the society**

"Yes, yes, in a moment," said Dr. Igor, slightly annoyed by the interruption. "But first, I want you to understand one thing: apart from certain grave pathological cases, people only go insane when they try to escape from routine. Do you understand?" "I do," she replied. "And if you think that I won't be capable of looking after her, you can rest assured, I've never tried to change my life." (Coelho 68)

Here we find our society as an institution, and we are following the rules. And we follow them because we are in the eye of normative conformity, so everyone performs their duties just like in Panopticon. And if we violate any societal norm, then we will be considered mad by society. The major effect of the Panopticon is to induce a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. Power is not only possessed by individuals or groups, but rather power is distributed

throughout society in the form of rules, norms, and institutions. In this passage, Dr. Igor uses his authority as a doctor to reinforce the importance of routine and the potential consequences of deviating from it. In this passage, the response of the person speaking to Dr. Igor can be seen as a form of resistance, as she asserts her capability and willingness to care for someone without changing her own life. This suggests that individuals have agency and can resist or challenge the rules and norms that govern society.

Furthermore, in his work, Foucault also emphasizes the importance of understanding how power operates in society and how it can be both productive and repressive. By becoming aware of these power dynamics, individuals can work on challenging and transforming them, ultimately working towards greater freedom and agency.

"So we have breakfast, lunch, and supper. We have to wake up at a certain hour every day and rest once a week. Christmas exists so that we can give each other presents, Easter so we can spend a few days at the lake. How would you like it if your husband were gripped by a sudden, passionate impulse and decided he wanted to make love in the living room?" The woman thought: What is the man talking about? I came here to see my daughter. "I would find it very sad," she said carefully, hoping she was giving the right answer. "Excellent," roared Dr. Igor. "The bedroom is the correct place for making love. To make love anywhere else would set a bad example and promote the spread of anarchy." (Coelho 69)

The character Dr. Igor implies that the bedroom is the only acceptable place to

make love and that deviating from this norm would promote anarchy. This highlights how power operates through social standards and expectations, which individuals must follow and conform to.

"Power is everywhere' and 'comes from everywhere, so in this sense, it is neither an agency nor a structure" (Foucault, Panopticism) . It operates through various social institutions, practices, and discourses. In this case, the norm of having sex in the bedroom is one such practice that reinforces the power of social standards and expectations. By enforcing this norm, Dr. Igor exerts control over the characters by shaping their behavior and reinforcing social norms.

### **Veronika's choice at the end was also a result of conformity**

At the novel's end, Veronika marries Eduard and starts living the life everyone is spending. At first, she wants to find something new, she is tired of the monotony of life, but in the end, we see that marrying is again conforming to societal norms. Here we see how much pressure these norms create on an individual who wants to do something different but can not. This is due to power; the power lies in the rules.

### **Conclusion**

This research highlights how an individual follows a routine without realizing it and who discovers it and wants to be different. They are considered as mad by society. Because it violates the rules set by society, and in the end, they can not do differently because these norms have so much power that an individual feels helpless in front of

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them. And then unconsciously, her choices are again conformism to these rules.

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