

THE MUSLIM INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITY ON DEATH IN VERONIKA DECIDES TO DIE BY PAULO COELHO

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Abstract

The paucity of research on the interpretation of death by Muslim readers in “Veronika Decides to Die” (2018) by Paulo Coelho, a novel imbued with existential symbolism, constitutes the primary issue addressed in this study. While this interpretive community holds a profound religious understanding of life, death, and the afterlife, there has been scant scholarly attention on how Muslim readers engage with the theme. Accordingly, the aim of this study is to explore how Muslim readers interpret the theme of death in the novel, with a particular focus on the relationship between the novel’s depiction of death and Islamic conceptualizations of mortality. The study employs Stanley Fish’s interpretive community theory (variorum), which facilitates a nuanced analysis of how Islamic values shape readers’ interpretations of the text. The findings reveal that the portrayal of death in the novel is at odds with Islamic doctrine. In Islam, death is conceived as a natural transition within a larger cycle of life, rather than as a nihilistic endpoint. Moreover, suffering is regarded as a test that draws the individual closer to God, whereas Veronika, the novel’s protagonist, perceives death as a form of liberation and a means of escaping the futility of life, thereby disregarding the spiritual principles central to Islamic life.

Keywords: Death, Interpretive Community, Meaning, Muslim Interpretation

INTRODUCTION

Death is a timeless mystery. This theme is presented comprehensively in *Veronika Decides to Die* by Paulo Coelho (Ayar and Demir, 2022). In the novel, death is not seen solely as an end. It also becomes a chance to rediscover the meaning of life (Abthaheer and Arunachalam, 2022). The narrative invites readers to reflect on hope and choice in the midst of despair.

For Muslim readers, this theme opens a unique space for reflection. Islamic values on life and the afterlife offer a distinct interpretation of the protagonist’s inner journey. This study focuses on how Muslim readers interpret the theme of death in the novel. In this context, the interpretive community of Muslim readers is seen to have a specific framework. This framework is shaped by Islamic beliefs regarding life, death, and the hereafter. The novel provides space for spiritual reflection on death. However, readers’ understandings may differ. These variations are influenced by cultural background, personal experience, and levels of religious knowledge. Such knowledge may come from the Qur’an and other sources like Hadith. Therefore, the concept of interpretive communities enables deeper analysis. This approach can explore Islamic values that shape Muslim readers’ views on the theme of death in the novel.

Veronika Decides to Die has been studied from various angles. In a different but complementary direction, Iqbal et al. (2023) focused on the existential choices faced by

the novel's characters. They examined the implications of free will and autonomy in shaping one's sense of purpose and meaning in life. Their analysis drew upon theories of liberal humanism, the philosophical concept of free choice, and Maslow's self-actualization model. The study demonstrated how the narrative structure reinforces the importance of personal agency in confronting existential crises.

Further contributions have come from scholars employing semiotic and sociocognitive methodologies. AL-Dihaymawee (2023) explored the symbolic dimensions of the text through Charles Sanders Peirce's triadic model of semiotics, uncovering layers of meaning embedded in the novel's recurring motifs and signs. Meanwhile, Prakoso and Daulay (2020) examined the environmental and social factors that influence the protagonist's motivational shifts. Applying Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory, they highlighted how behavioral patterns in the novel are shaped by reciprocal interactions between personal factors and social environments.

This gap is important. The novel has the potential to provoke deep reflection across cultural and religious boundaries, especially among Muslims. The theme of death, filled with existential symbolism, has not yet been examined through the lens of Muslim readers. This group holds unique values about life, death, and the hereafter. Thus, this study addresses that gap. It introduces a new interpretive approach that highlights the interaction between literary texts and readers' religious understanding.

The purpose of this research is to explore how Muslim readers interpret the theme of death in Paulo Coelho's novel. It applies the theory of interpretive communities (*variorum*) developed by Stanley Fish. The study analyzes how Islamic values influence the reading of the novel. The focus is on the relationship between the novel's depiction of death and Islamic concepts of mortality. This analysis seeks to reveal interpretation patterns among Muslim readers. These patterns reflect their worldview and religious beliefs. The study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how literature and religious values intersect.

METHOD

This study is designed as a qualitative inquiry using a reader-response approach to analyze the translated novel *Veronika Decides to Die* by Paulo Coelho. This approach is situated within the post-structuralist paradigm, as it challenges the structuralist notion that the meaning of a literary text is fixed and inherent (Klarer, 2023). Therefore, the reader-response framework is employed to explore how meaning is constructed through interpretive communities, as theorized by Stanley Fish.

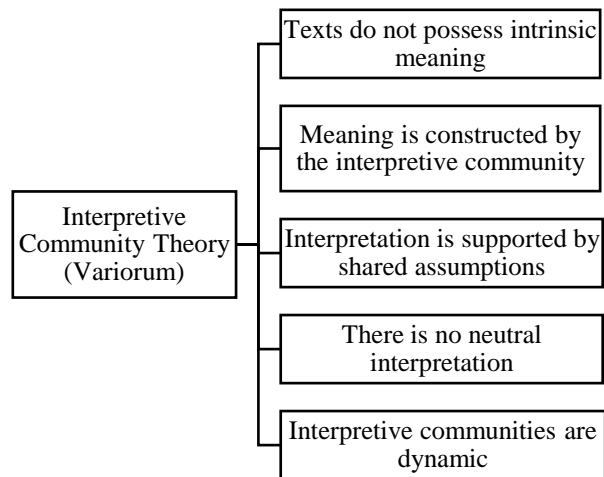


Figure 1 Key Elements of Interpretive Communities Theory

(Source: Fish, 1980)

According to this theory, meaning is not intrinsic to the text but is instead formed through interpretive processes situated within the context of an interpretive community. Fish refers to this process of interpretation as *variorum* (Fish, 1980; Barry, 2017). In this study, the community consists of the two researchers themselves, who possess interpretive authority. The perspectives of community members define the legitimate parameters of interpretation, shaped by shared values, norms, and objectives (Klarer, 2023).

This research utilizes two types of data: primary and secondary. The primary data consist of direct quotations from the novel, selected based on their relevance to the key concepts of interpretive community theory, especially regarding perceptions of the theme of death. The secondary data include supporting references such as theoretical books, academic journal articles, and other literature relevant to Fish's theory and to studies of death as a literary theme.

Data collection was carried out through intensive reading of the novel. The researchers documented significant textual elements pertinent to the research focus: the interpretive community's perspective on the theme of death. A thorough literature review was also conducted to reinforce the theoretical framework employed (Creswell and Creswell, 2022).

Data analysis involved close and critical reading of the novel to identify relevant excerpts. These excerpts were then linked to interpretive community theory and cross-referenced with secondary sources to validate the findings. The analytical method incorporated an intertextual dimension, focusing on the integration of theoretical elements within the literary text (Schilling, 2024). The study establishes a connection between *Veronika Decides to Die* and the theory of interpretive communities through intertextual parallels.

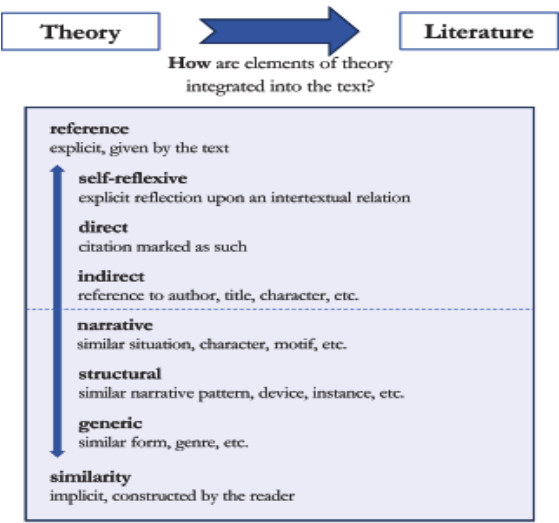


Figure 2 Intertextual Dimension Model
(Source: Schilling, 2024)

Figure 2 above shows that the intertextual similarity lies in the implicit relationship between the text and the theory. This relationship is built by the reader. It does not rely on direct references. Instead, it depends entirely on the reader’s interpretation (Schilling, 2024).

For this reason, the analysis focuses on the dynamics within the interpretive community. It examines both the stability and transformation of meaning. These changes are shaped by shifts in values, goals, and socio-cultural contexts.

Thus, this study aims to offer new insights. It highlights how the Muslim interpretive community shapes the reading of a universal theme—death—even in a literary work written by a non-Muslim author.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of *Veronika Decides to Die* uses Stanley Fish’s theory of interpretive communities. It aims to explore the central theme of death from an Islamic perspective. The interpretation is framed through Islamic values. These values emphasize the balance between worldly life and the hereafter.

The selected excerpts illustrate how the narrative reflects inner conflict, life purpose, and the search for spiritual meaning. These aspects are especially relevant to the Muslim community.

Death as a Trial

Death is often understood as a struggle between hope, belief, and human experience (Sofyan & Inayati, 2023). In this novel, one of the main characters, Veronika, expresses deep ambivalence toward death. She sees death as a way to escape the emptiness of life. Her ambivalence is reflected in her views on life and death.

These views are shaped by an environment that prioritizes material success and neglects spiritual aspects. According to Stanley Fish's theory of interpretive communities, meaning is not solely derived from individual experience. Meaning is also formed by how communities interpret reality (Sibul, 2014; Seth, 2020). In Veronika's case, a society focused on materialism influences her perception. Life and death are seen as meaningless, nihilistic.

Veronika experiences a deep internal conflict concerning the existence of God and the purpose of life. This is evident in the following narrative excerpt:

"She didn't know. But she enjoyed the feeling that she would soon discover the answer to the question everyone always asked: Does God exist? Unlike others, this question had never tormented her. Under the Communist regime, public schools taught that life ended with death, and Veronika had grown used to that belief." (2018: 14).

This quote reflects her doubt about God's existence, shaped by materialist teachings in an environment where spiritual values are ignored. Education under a communist regime promoted the idea that life ends with death and nothing follows (Mincu, 2016). This perspective creates a gap between universal spiritual experiences and a personal worldview shaped by secular surroundings.

Applying Fish's theory, the analysis shows how collective views that deny spiritual dimensions shape interpretations of life and death. As a result, death is seen as an escape from suffering perceived as meaningless. Veronika's decision to attempt suicide reflects her pessimistic view of life. The following passage illustrates this point:

"Everything in her life was the same. Once youth had passed, everything would wither. Old age would leave irreversible marks, bring disease, and take her friends away." (2018: 13)

This expression shows life as worthless and filled with inevitable suffering. Life is seen as a repetitive cycle leading only to futility. However, this perspective contrasts with Islamic teachings, which regard life as a meaningful test with divine purpose (Putra, 2024). In Islam, everything in life carries meaning, and every trial has a reason. This is affirmed in the following Qur'anic verse:

"Allah does not burden a soul beyond that it can bear. It will have [the consequence of] what [good] it has gained, and it will bear [the consequence of] what [evil] it has earned." (Q.S. Al-Baqarah: 286).

Life is viewed as a test faced by individuals according to their abilities (Akbar et al., 2024). This verse emphasizes that every trial has meaning, and no test exceeds a person's capacity. From this perspective, suffering is not a reason to surrender, but an opportunity to grow and draw closer to God.

Veronika also shows signs of spiritual emptiness, which underlies her feelings of meaninglessness. She lacks a strong connection with the spiritual values once upheld by her family.

“On the other hand, her parents’ and grandparents’ generations still went to church regularly, prayed, made pilgrimages, and believed that God heard their prayers.” (2018: 14)

This quote highlights a clear contrast between Veronika and previous generations who maintained religious traditions. Her spiritual void may reflect a shift in communal values toward materialism and secularism.

From an interpretive community perspective, individual experience is shaped by how the community interprets and lives its reality (Seth, 2020). Veronika feels disconnected from the spiritual traditions once central to her family life. This deepens her sense of a meaningless existence. Her view of death is heavily influenced by the secular environment around her.

In contrast, the Muslim community sees death as part of a larger life cycle. This worldly life is temporary and followed by eternal life in the hereafter (Miskahuddin, 2019). This belief is reflected in the meaning of the following Qur’anic verse:

“How can you disbelieve in Allah? Seeing that you were dead and He gave you life. Then He will cause you to die, then bring you back to life, and then unto Him you will be returned.” (Q.S. Al-Baqarah: 28)

Islam teaches that death is not the end, but a transition to eternal life. The verse affirms that worldly life is part of a broader cycle. Each person will be held accountable for their actions (Imam, 2019). In this view, death is not a meaningless end, but part of a long spiritual journey. This gives meaning to every human life.

Veronika’s sense of meaninglessness also points to the essential role of spirituality in coping with suffering. In this context, the Muslim community does not see suffering as a reason to give up. Instead, it is viewed as a test that brings believers closer to God. Muslims—both men and women—are encouraged to engage in remembrance and prayer.

“Verily, in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest.” (Q.S. Ar’Rad: 28)

In Muslim communities, *dhikr* (remembrance), prayer, and worship are sources of strength in facing life’s challenges (Rahmadani et al., 2024). Though suffering is painful, it is seen as a test that can deepen one’s relationship with God. A hadith of the Prophet Muhammad supports this view by emphasizing the value of patience and gratitude in all circumstances:

“Wondrous is the affair of the believer, for there is good for him in every matter — and this is not the case with anyone except the believer. If something good happens to him, he is grateful, and that is good for him. If something harmful befalls him, he is patient, and that is good for him.” (Sahih Muslim, Hadith No. 2999)

This hadith shows that suffering can be a means of strengthening faith and patience. This contrasts with Veronika’s perspective, which views suffering as inevitable and meaningless.

The Relationship Between Death And Spiritual Freedom

Veronika perceives death as “the final freedom.” This phrase reflects a nihilistic view of life and death as equally meaningless.

“Veronika was almost completely certain that everything ended with death. That was why she had chosen suicide: the final freedom. To be forgotten forever.” (2018: 14)

This passage shows Veronika’s belief that death is the absolute end. She views it not only as a release from suffering but as a form of total freedom. In her mind, suicide is a way to erase existence and sever all worldly ties.

“It didn’t matter that her room would be covered in blood and that the nuns would panic and be shocked, because suicide requires a person to think first of themselves, then of others.” (2018: 8)

Here, Veronika admits that suicide is a self-centered act. She acknowledges its consequences, but still prioritizes personal freedom over social responsibility. This reveals a worldview shaped by individualism and personal choice, with little regard for others. Her thoughts even cross a theological boundary. Veronika accuses God of having predetermined her path, including her decision to end her life.

“That meant God had placed Veronika on Earth knowing full well that she would end her life by committing suicide. So He would not be surprised by her action.” (2018: 15)

This statement shows Veronika’s inner conflict regarding divine will and destiny. She assumes that suicide is part of God’s plan and that her act would not shock Him. This reflects a deep spiritual crisis and an existential search for meaning within suffering.

According to Fish’s theory of interpretive communities, the meaning of freedom is shaped by the norms of the interpretive group (Fish, 1980; Seth, 2020). In this context, the Muslim community may interpret Veronika’s idea of freedom as a misunderstanding. In Islam, true freedom is found in submission to God and obedience to His will.

Islam views freedom as surrendering oneself to Allah and living in accordance with His commands (Ali et al., 2024). Life is not meant to be lived without direction. It is a responsibility, filled with trials and governed by divine law. In fact, it is humankind that once accepted this responsibility. Therefore, no human can escape the laws Allah has set for life. This is emphasized in the following Qur’anic verse:

“Indeed, We offered the Trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, and they declined to bear it and feared it; but man undertook to bear it. Indeed, he was unjust and ignorant.” (Q.S. Al-Ahzab: 72)

The *Trust* in this verse refers to the heavy burden of divine responsibility—to uphold God’s commands, preserve faith, and obey His laws. Even the heavens, earth, and mountains refused it. But humanity, despite its weakness, accepted it—often acting

unjustly and without full awareness of its magnitude. This idea is reinforced by another verse:

“Say, ‘Indeed, my prayer, my rites of sacrifice, my living and my dying are for Allah, Lord of the worlds.’” (Q.S. Al-An’am:162)

This verse affirms that every aspect of a Muslim’s life—including worship, daily actions, and death itself—should be devoted to Allah. It emphasizes that full obedience to God is the path to genuine spiritual freedom.

Spiritual freedom does not mean unlimited liberty to act without restraint. Rather, it is freedom from the chains that limit the heart and soul. These chains include fear, anxiety, uncontrolled desires, and materialistic temptations (Latansa, 2020). In Islam, freedom is not absolute. Humans live within a framework set by divine guidance.

One of the most critical principles is the prohibition against suicide. Islam views suicide as a grave sin that contradicts God’s decree (Ashari, Wahyudi, & Agustriono, 2023). Suicide is not only a rejection of God’s will but also a betrayal of the trust given to humankind as stewards on Earth (Ghotbi, Bozorgmehr, & Razian, 2019).

As God’s creation, humans are entrusted with the sacred duty of preserving the life He has bestowed. This includes fulfilling their role as leaders on Earth with full awareness, responsibility, and devotion to His commands. In carrying out this trust, humans can attain true spiritual freedom—freedom that brings peace of mind, tranquility of heart, and a profound sense of purpose (Saifulloh & Monika, 2023).

This Muslim worldview clearly contrasts with Veronika’s perspective. While she sees death as liberation from suffering, Islam sees life and even hardship as part of a meaningful divine plan.

Death as Spiritual Reflection And The Acceptance of Divine Decree

The Muslim interpretive community shares a set of assumptions that shapes how death is understood—as an integral part of spiritual reflection. One of the core principles of interpretive community theory is that texts do not contain intrinsic meaning (Fish, 1980). For example, consider this excerpt from the novel:

“Your heart is damaged and cannot be repaired, and it will soon stop beating. What does that mean?” asked Veronika in fear. “If your heart stops, there’s only one possible outcome—death.” (2018: 40)

This dialogue reveals the serious condition Veronika is facing. Her heart is beyond repair, and her fear is palpable. The response she receives is cold and absolute—death is the only outcome. From the Muslim interpretive perspective, this moment aligns with the Qur’anic view of death.

“Every soul will taste death. Then to Us you will be returned.” (Q.S. Al-‘Ankabut: 57)

This verse provides a framework to understand the excerpt not only as an expression of fear but also as a reminder that life is temporary and death is a gateway to eternal existence. Thus, the Muslim interpretive community views this passage as more than just a fearful reaction—it is a spiritually reflective moment rooted in the certainty of death. The meaning shaped by interpretive communities is supported by shared assumptions. Veronika's fear of death is further illustrated in the following passage:

“Then came a fear that could not be expressed, a panic at being alone on that other planet: Death. Don’t think. I must pretend nothing is happening and everything will be fine.” (2018: 152)

This quote reveals a deep, ineffable fear of death. It is a universal experience shared by all humans. Death is depicted as an unfamiliar realm—like another planet—alien to our known reality. It emphasizes feelings of isolation and uncertainty.

From the Muslim perspective, such fear can be interpreted as a spiritual reminder of death. The Qur'an frequently stresses the importance of remembering death (Davoudi, 2022). This remembrance is meant to help individuals understand the meaning of life and prepare for the hereafter. Therefore, fear in this context is not merely emotional but a profound spiritual signal.

“And the agony of death will come in truth. That is what you were trying to avoid.” (Q.S. Qaf: 19)

In Islam, death is an unavoidable reality that people often try to ignore. Veronika's fear may be interpreted as a moment of existential awakening—a chance to reflect on her purpose and reconnect with the divine. This reflects a foundational assumption of the Muslim interpretive community.

Moreover, the community asserts that no interpretation is neutral. This idea is illustrated in Veronika's admission:

“You may say that,” said Veronika. “I’m not afraid. I want to live, but I know that desire alone is not enough. I’m ready to accept my fate.” (2018: 180)

This passage expresses Veronika's acceptance of her reality. It shows emotional maturity and courage. She understands that the desire to live is not sufficient and that fate is something to be received with wisdom. In Islam, acceptance of fate is part of faith, as affirmed in the Qur'an:

“[He] who created death and life to test you [as to] which of you is best in deed. And He is the Exalted in Might, the Forgiving.” (Q.S. Al-Mulk: 2)

The Muslim community sees this as a reflection of Veronika's spiritual journey toward accepting divine decree. It aligns with Islamic teachings that life is a test. The interpretive community is also dynamic. As Veronika reflects on her emotional and spiritual growth, the narrative reveals:

“In fact, during her time at Villette, she had experienced things more deeply than ever before—hatred, love, fear, and a desire to live. Maybe Mari was right: did she

even know what an orgasm was? Or had she only gone as far as men had taken her?” (2018: 134)

This passage shows Veronika’s deep reflection on emotional and physical experiences—love, hate, fear, and her desire to live. It highlights her journey toward understanding identity and personal agency. The Muslim interpretive community would see this as part of her awakening—a step in contemplating the meaning of life and death.

In this light, the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) offers a clear reminder to live with awareness of death:

“Increase your remembrance of the destroyer of pleasures: death.” (Hadith Al-Tirmidhi, No. 2307)

Remembering death is not merely a source of fear in Islam—it is a spiritual practice that awakens one’s sense of purpose, actions, and relationship with God. Veronika’s transformation—from fear to understanding—underscores the importance of living with intention and spiritual awareness, as taught in this hadith.

Finally, Veronika’s fear of death, as depicted in the novel, prompts the Muslim interpretive community to connect her experience to Qur’anic and prophetic messages about death as the greatest counsel.

“When a human being dies, all his deeds come to an end except three: ongoing charity, beneficial knowledge, or a righteous child who prays for him.” (Hadith Muslim, No. 1631)

This hadith confirms that death is not the end. It is a gateway to eternal life, and one must prepare for it through good deeds. Veronika’s fear of death becomes more meaningful when interpreted through the Muslim lens—as a call for spiritual introspection.

“Indeed, the death from which you flee—indeed, it will meet you. Then you will be returned to the Knower of the unseen and the witnessed, and He will inform you about what you used to do.” (Q.S. Al-Jumu‘ah: 8)

This verse affirms that death is inevitable. It brings every soul back to the Creator, the All-Knowing. The Muslim interpretive perspective understands death not just as a physical end, but as a journey toward nearness to God. This belief reminds humans of their accountability and the importance of preparing for the eternal life (Davoudi, 2022). In this context, Veronika’s fear of death can be seen as a spiritual call—a turning point toward discovering deeper meaning in life.

CONCLUSION

In the view of the Muslim interpretive community, death is not the end. It is a transition to eternal life—filled with meaning and divine purpose. Veronika’s fear of death reflects deep ambivalence. It reveals an inner struggle about the value of life and the meaning of existence.

This struggle shows the influence of a secular, materialistic environment. Such an environment can shape a nihilistic view of life and death. In contrast, Islam teaches that death is a moment for spiritual reflection. It reminds the soul of moral responsibility and the weight of one's actions in this world.

The Qur'an and Hadith both affirm that death is part of a greater journey. These texts urge believers to live meaningfully and draw closer to God. In Islam, suffering is not a reason to give up. It is a test. A path that strengthens faith and builds character.

In this study, the meaning of death is shaped by the norms of the interpretive community. According to Stanley Fish, meaning is never neutral. Veronika's nihilism is shaped by secular logic. But the Muslim community sees death differently. For them, it is a reminder to prepare for the eternal—through faith, action, and devotion.

Future research should explore this more deeply. Cross-cultural and interfaith perspectives on death may open new insights. These perspectives can enrich our understanding of spiritual life and the human condition.

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