Veronika Decides to Die Study Guide

Veronika Decides to Die by Paulo Coelho

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

"Veronika Decides to Die" tells the story of a young woman's transformation from despairing would-be suicide to affirmed and then affirming survivor. This book offers an archetypal story of hope, portraying a situation in which joy, freedom, integrity and truth all remain possible under the most challenging and limiting of circumstances. In doing so, the narrative thematically explores the nature of insanity, the importance of living a genuine life, and the threats to individual identity imposed by closed communities and the rules under which they function.

The narrative begins with Veronika's taking four packets of sleeping pills and with a description of her reasons for wanting to end her life and for choosing this particular method of doing so. As she waits for the pills to take effect, Veronika reads an article from a magazine that triggers such a strong reaction in her that she decides to write a letter of protest to the magazine's editor, realizing as she does so that the letter will probably be taken as her suicide note. At first she finds the thought amusing, but then as the sleeping pills begin to take effect, she becomes less amused and more uneasy, finally reacting with fear to the idea that she is about to die.

Veronika does not die, but comes to consciousness in the notorious lunatic asylum, Villete, where she is told by Dr. Igor that her attempt to kill herself, initially unsuccessful, will inevitably succeed. She has damaged her heart to the point where it will be unable to sustain her life for much longer than five days. Locked in a ward with other "insane" people, Veronika struggles to come to terms with both her failure and her impending success.

Over the days that follow, Veronika's questions about whether she is truly insane are met with varying responses by several of the institution's nurses, by Zedka, a fellow patient whose soul travels outside her body in a process narration refers to as "astral projection," and by Mari, a member of a highly functional group of inmates known as The Fraternity. Veronika also experiences a gradual awakening of interest in experiences both new and old, finding herself attracted to a schizophrenic patient, Eduard, and drawn to a piano in the asylum's common room. There, under the night of the new moon, she returns to her first love, music, and as Eduard watches, finds herself playing in ways she never had before. She also, in response to both her attraction to Eduard and the advice of Mari to try what had once been forbidden, masturbates to the point of having several climaxes. All this, in spite of having a series of painful and frightening heart attacks, arouses in Veronika the desire to try even more experiences, and eventually the desire to live as fully as she can in the time remaining to her.

Meanwhile, narration also explores the experiences, both past and present, of Veronika's fellow inmates. Zedka's fascination with what the narrative describes as the ideal, "Impossible Love," Mari's rejection of her life as a lawyer in favor of a life of service, and Eduard's search for and exploration of "Visions of Paradise" are all described within the context of Veronika's gradual experience of awakening to the possibility of a more free and full life. This sort of life, the narrative suggests, is held to

be "insane" by those in the "real" world but which, the narrative contends, is the only sort of life that is truly "lived."

Eventually, Zedka, Mari and Eduard all, in various ways and for various reasons, leave the confines of Villete. Eduard is accompanied by Veronika who is determined to live what she believes to be what little life she has left to the fullest. At this point, narration reveals that for purposes of his own, Dr. Igor has manipulated Veronika into believing she is about to die, when she is in fact going to live.

The narrative concludes with Veronika and Eduard celebrating their freedom and with Dr. Igor celebrating the success of his experiment.

Chapters 1 and 2

Chapters 1 and 2 Summary

As it tells the story of a young woman's transformation from despairing would-be suicide to affirmed, and affirming, survivor, "Veronika Decides to Die" tells an archetypal story of hope, portraying a situation in which joy, freedom, integrity and truth all remain possible under the most challenging and limiting of circumstances. In doing so, the narrative thematically explores the nature of insanity, the importance of living a genuine life, and the threats to individual identity imposed by closed communities and the rules under which they function.

In Chapter 1, in an effort to enact her long-contemplated suicide, mid-twenties Slovenian Veronika takes what she believes to be a fatal dose of sleeping pills. As she waits for them to take effect, she contemplates her choice of method as defined by her reluctance to cause suffering and inconvenience for those she leaves behind. She also contemplates her reasons for killing herself, which narration reveals are her dread of continuing to live the same boring life for years in which suffering was likely to increase and her unhappy powerlessness in the face of all the wrongness in the world. To fill the time until her death, she reads an article on a computer game that begins with what she believes to be a very patronizing question of "Where is Slovenia?" In resentment of the article writer's attitude, she writes a letter of complaint to the editor of the magazine in which the article was published, smiling to herself as she realizes that the letter will be taken as a suicide note, an explanation of why she killed herself. Finally, she affirms to herself her belief that there is no God, and even if there was, he wouldn't be bothered by her suicide. But then, when her body begins reacting to the pills, she becomes fearful and doubtful of what is to come.

In Chapter 2, Veronika regains consciousness in Villete and struggles to understand a story told by a woman of how a female relative said she never felt more alive than when she was rebelling against circumstances she believed had been imposed upon her but eventually ended up killing herself. "She said," the woman tells Veronika, "she was neither happy nor unhappy, and that was why she couldn't go on." Veronika attempts to offer her perspective on wanting to commit suicide but is unable to make herself understood. The woman, revealed to be a nurse, apologetically tells Veronika that according to the rules under which she is expected to work, she has to give agitated patients a sedative. She then injects Veronika who, as she loses consciousness, considers the nurse's apparent resignation to doing as she is told without question.

Chapters 1 and 2 Analysis

As it begins its narrative journey following Veronika's transformation from would-be suicide to what might be described as an angel, or prophet, of the fully lived life, the book introduces one of its key themes. This is the idea, embedded in the story told by

the nurse in Chapter 2 and reiterated in both action and narration throughout the book, that a full and happy life is one lived without undue consideration of rules, boundaries, and guidelines. Characters throughout the novel, eventually including Veronika herself, come to not only a place of believing in this philosophy but of acting upon it. Happiness, the story here and the novel as a whole proclaim, is to be found in a life free of imposed circumstances and conditions imposed. The irony, of course, is that the character introducing this theme is described at the end of the chapter as doing exactly what she is told and in other words, taking action entirely defined by the dictates of other authorities, as opposed to doing what she wants and believes in.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

In Chapter 3, writing about himself in the third person, the author describes how he heard about Veronika and her "suicide note" from the daughter of Villete's chief physician, also named Veronika. He comments on the second Veronika's musing on the term "asylum" as a place of refuge and on how she was angered not only that the first Veronika was treated in the way she was in a place that was supposed to be safe, but also treated badly by her father. The author then reveals why it was important for him to tell Veronika's story. He too had been imprisoned in an insane asylum and had promised himself two things that he would write about it someday and that he would not do so until his parents who blamed themselves for the suffering he experienced were no longer alive. Writing about Veronika, he comments, would be his way of telling his story without harming his parents.

Chapter 3 Analysis

This brief chapter is the only one into which the author places himself, explaining to the reader his reasons why the story attracted him and why he decided to actually act on that attraction. It is important to note that nowhere in the chapter does the author refer to what, specifically, about Veronika's actual experience was included in the narrative, what about HIS experience was included, and what was an invention. Ultimately, though, it does not matter, as this chapter defines the book as a manifestation of what most, if not all, creative artists do such as take actual experiences and transform them into narratives that illuminate the confusing, often frightening and potentially joyful or transformative experience of being alive.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 Summary

In Chapter 4, as Veronika drifts in and out of consciousness, she hears a female voice ask if Veronika wants to be masturbated. Later, when she is at full consciousness, Veronika cannot recall whether the question was real or whether it was dreamed. Meanwhile, she contemplates the repetitiveness and emptiness of her old life to which she would return after leaving Villete, assuming that she would eventually give in to the demands of both her mother and society to marry and have children. She imagines the trajectory of that marriage from passion to parenthood to resignation to emptiness, realizes that after years of wife-and-mother hood she would probably have neither the desire nor the strength to make another attempt at killing herself, and resolves to end her life before she leaves Villete.

In Chapter 5, Veronika discovers she has been moved out of intensive care and into another part of the hospital. She is confronted by two doctors, one older and one younger. The doctors test her memory, and after being pushed to do so by the older doctor, the younger doctor tells Veronika that as the result of her suicide attempt, she has damaged her heart, and is not likely to live much longer than five more days. Veronika notices that he is taking pleasure in her misfortune, and narration comments that she had always resented people with that kind of attitude. She comments with a smile that her attempt to kill herself was going to succeed, and narration comments that the younger doctor's pleasure immediately disappears.

In Chapter 6, during a struggling attempt to get to the bathroom, conversation with the nurse leads Veronika to wonder what it means to be insane. Another inmate in the asylum, Zedka, calls her over and tells her a story of a mythical kingdom whose inhabitants all drank from an enchanted well, the water from which made them all mad. In the face of his people's rebellion, Zedka says, the king was urged by the queen to drink the enchanted water as well - that way he would be perceived as being one of the people. The king and queen both drank the water and become as mad as the rest of the kingdom, with the result that the kingdom continued to exist in peace, although its citizens and ways were all very different from those of neighboring kingdoms. Zedka and Veronika agree that they have the right to live their own lives and define their own deaths, and that those living outside the asylum are like those who all drank from the contaminated well and all behave identically. Veronika then asks Zedka to help her get more pills. When the nurse attendant comes to Veronika with a sedative, Zedka says that if Veronika wants her help, she had better do as the nurse says. Veronika accepts the injection.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 Analysis

Here the narrative develops its thematic consideration of the nature of insanity through Zedka's story of the kingdom of crazy people. The point of the story is that there is no real way of defining who is insane and who is "normal." To all the people who drank from the enchanted well, their life is completely normal, but to those in other kingdoms that behavior is perceived as insane. By implication, therefore, the reverse is also true - that to the people who drank from the well, the ways of the outsiders are insane. In other words, insanity and happiness are, at least in the perspective of the novel, relative concepts.

Meanwhile, the narrative also explores, albeit indirectly, its central premise that a full and true life, even though it may be perceived by others as being insane, is one that is lived outside imposed boundaries. Specifically, the visit of the two doctors imposes a set of boundaries on Veronika, which are part of the combination of circumstances that eventually trigger desperate desire to live life to the fullest. It is important to note, meanwhile, that while the narrative never explicitly makes it clear, in hindsight the visit can be seen as part of Dr. Igor's plan to use Veronika as the subject of an experiment. In other words, when the doctors tell Veronika about her heart, it is part of Igor's plan to see what she will do when she believes she is about to die and specifically, whether the desire to live will overcome what he believes to be an excess of Vitriol.

Finally, this section contains a pair of important foreshadowings. The first is the reference to masturbation, which foreshadows not only Mari's raising of a similar question but also Veronika's intense, freeing experience of masturbation. The second is the reference, made by both Zedka and Veronika, that decisions about how to live life and face death are theirs and theirs alone. This foreshadows decisions made later in the book by several of the characters such as Zedka, Veronika, Mari, and Eduard to take their lives and deaths into their own hands. Here again is a facet of the book's central thematic consideration of living a genuine life.

Chapters 7, 8, 9 and 10

Chapters 7, 8, 9 and 10 Summary

In Chapter 7, the next day, Veronika re-encounters Zedka, who tells her of a group of inmates called The Fraternity who prefer the safe life inside the asylum to life outside, who manipulate both the doctors and the asylum's owners in order to stay, and who are more likely able to help Veronika get her pills. Veronika's attempts to connect with The Fraternity, however, result in her being continually rebuffed and teased. She takes refuge in the garden where, while walking in the snow, she realizes that at least part of the reason her life became unlivable was that she made it so, repeatedly choosing security over freedom, feeling and adventure. This realization makes her determined to take action against The Fraternity, and she confronts its apparent leader, slapping his face but getting no reaction. Following the incident, Veronika fights down a sense of pride in her actions and the resultant surges of wanting to live and/or make changes in her life, telling herself she has no choice and no freedom, "no perhaps". Meanwhile, she's spending more time with Zedka who, a day before Veronika's life is apparently scheduled to end, invites her to watch her treatment.

Chapter 8, when she discovers the nature of Zedka's treatment of being injected with a high dose of insulin in order to trigger a coma, Veronika reacts angrily, calling the treatment inhumane. The supervising nurse reminds her that she still has to obey the rules.

IN Chapter 9, the narrative in this chapter focuses on Zedka who, as the result of her treatment experiences what narration describes (and Zedka's research has defined) as "astral travel," the spirit traveling independently of the body. Narration describes Zedka's awareness that this was to be her last experience of such travel (since she was about to be released) and her plans for survival in the outside world after she is free. The author then describes what Zedka has come to believe are the reasons for her illness such as her experience of what is called "The Impossible Love" or the sort of love that takes over the mind, the body, and the life. For Zedka, that love was focused on a married man who in her younger life, she moved to America to be with but who ultimately treated her dismissively. Zedka eventually returned to Slovenia, where she married and had children but eventually experienced an increasing debilitating sense of regret and loss about her lost "Impossible Love", and her increasing mental and physical incapacities resulting in her being committed to Villete.

In Chapter 10, as she returns to her body, Zedka contemplates telling Veronika of her experiences, but chooses not to. Later, after returning to full consciousness, Zedka offers Veronika a definition of insanity such as the inability to communicate. When Veronika comments that everyone has felt that at some point, Zedka responds by saying that everyone is "one way or another" insane.

Chapters 7, 8, 9 and 10 Analysis

There are several things to note about this section. The first is the introduction of The Fraternity, an intriguing manifestation of the novel's considerations of the nature of insanity. Specifically, while the members of The Fraternity clearly see themselves as sane, the narrative contends that in shutting themselves off from fully lived lives, they are in fact more insane than those who live freely and honestly. In this sense, The Fraternity is one of the prime manifestations of the book's secondary thematic consideration relating to the essential invalidity of closed societies.

Meanwhile, Veronika's confrontation with The Fraternity and her reaction to that confrontation are important stepping stones on her journey of transformation. She is beginning to awaken to the power of her feelings and desires, but is not yet at the point where she is willing to fully commit to the actions resulting from them. She is still afraid of herself, but over the course of the next few chapters will overcome that fear.

Another important point in this section is the narrative's shift in focus to Zedka. This is noteworthy for three main reasons. The first is structural, in that it is the first of several occasions that narrative focus moves away from Veronika and onto those influenced by her presence (for further consideration of this aspect of the book. The second key point about this section is metaphorical. Zedka's astral travel can be seen as a symbolic manifestation of the book's key contention that true happiness, insight and wisdom are only possible outside boundaries. In this case, the boundaries imposed by the physical body. The third reason Zedka's story here is important has to do with its aftermath and specifically, the comment that because everyone has felt an inability to communicate, everyone is at least to some degree insane.

Chapters 11, 12 and 13

Chapters 11, 12 and 13 Summary

In Chapter 11, as she longs to play the piano in the communal living room, Veronika is shocked to discover that the door to her ward is not locked. As a nurse comments wryly that there's no way she (the nurse) wants to be trapped with the lunatics, Veronika is suddenly overwhelmed with grief and collapses into her lap. The nurse tells her that watching over Veronika makes her think about her own daughter, about things in her daughter's life that might make her want to kill herself, and about what drives people to try to kill themselves "against the natural order of things, which is to fight for survival whatever happens?" Through her tears, Veronika confesses her reasons for wanting to end her life and then is allowed to go play the piano. As she goes, she contemplates the mask of strength and determination she had presented to the world to conceal her despair and loneliness, a contemplation that leads to a surge of hatred of the world, of her parents' unconditional love and sacrifice, of things and circumstances. She sits at the piano and pounds the keys repeatedly and loudly, channeling her hatred through the noise and eventually releasing it. Narration describes how, as the hatred vanishes, it is replaced by love and compassion. In response, Veronika plays a sonata in tribute to the moon, to the garden, to the mountains, and the beauty in all of them. Her playing attracts the attention of Eduard, a schizophrenic inmate beyond curing with whom, much to her surprise, she exchanges smiles.

In Chapter 12, the narrative shifts focus to Dr. Igor. Narration describes his musings on how and why released patients return to Villete in the hospital have been conditioned to living a life without rules, and in general cannot cope in the outside world where there is nothing but rules. He also contemplates the economic context of the hospital's existence as the brainchild of a group of wealthy Serbians interested in exploiting insanity as a means of making money, and his being allowed to keep The Fraternity in existence as a means of ensuring Villete continues to generate income. He also reflects on studies that reveal a relationship between society and insanity and specifically, that "people only allow themselves the luxury of being insane when they are in a position to do so," when they are not distracted by "war, hyperinflation, or plague" or any number of societal concerns. His thoughts are interrupted by the arrival of Veronika's mother, anxious to see her daughter. Conversation reveals that the doctor advocates a life of strict steadiness and routine, and that Veronika's mother, while confused, avoids arguing or questioning so she can see her daughter. Eventually, Dr. Igor calls Veronika to his office.

In Chapter 13, when she is told that her mother wants to see her, Veronika refuses, saying that she has cut all ties with the outside world. She then experiences a painful, frightening heart attack, and struggles to accept the death that she has longed for. When it does not come however as she regains consciousness, she cries out in frustration at not having died. While other patients laugh, a doctor injects her with what he says is a sedative.

Chapters 11, 12 and 13 Analysis

In this section, Veronika's process of awakening to herself and to her feelings continues. No longer prepared to suppress her feelings and desires in the way she did after her confrontation with The Fraternity, in her pounding of the piano she surrenders to the first of several successive tidal waves of awakening feeling. Other such waves are the surge of long-suppressed sexuality in Chapter 19, her running away with Eduard in Chapter 24, and her celebration of their freedom in Chapter 26. Meanwhile, the calm and sense of fulfillment she feels after her release of feeling can clearly be seen as being symbolically represented by the new moon.

Other important points in this section include the mysterious appearance of Eduard who is not as insane as Veronika and that of Veronika's mother. As a character, she comes across as somewhat underdeveloped and unrealized but nevertheless plays an important symbolic role.

Finally, there is the detour into the story and experiences of Dr. Igor, a narrative choice that primarily functions as an exploration of the sort of societal and moral boundaries that holds individuals back from true, lived happiness and simultaneously triggers experiences of insanity. There are several aspects to this exploration - the commentary on the financial interests of the consortium backing the hospital, his comments to Veronika's mother about the necessity for routine or the sort of boundaries the novel contends stifle life and the implication that insanity is, for many, a society-related choice. All this information adds layers of complexity and shading to the character of Igor who, in spite of the apparent cruelty of both his experiment on Veronika and the circumstances under which he operates such as his desire for fame and his desperation to keep Villete making money can be seen as doing the right thing for the wrong reasons. In other words, although he is profoundly self interested and more than a little mercenary, his actions in attempting to rouse Veronika into some form of more active life do result in her awakening into a new sense of self. Indeed, in the relationship between Igor's actions and his results, there is on some level the sense that the novel is suggesting that true happiness and fulfillment are both possible even under circumstances of lies and manipulation.

Chapters 14 and 15

Chapters 14 and 15 Summary

In Chapter 14, as Veronika returns to consciousness in Dr. Igor's consulting room, she overhears him comment to her that she could live to be a hundred. When she questions what he means, he dismisses her, telling her to lie down. After a deliberate silence, Dr. Igor leads her into a conversation about the schizophrenic patient Eduard who, Igor says, lives in and defines his own reality. This leads into a conversation about reality in general, which is, Igor says, "whatever the majority deems it to be...[and] supports the desires of society as a whole". In the middle of the conversation, Igor drifts into a contemplation of his theory of insanity, a theory that he believes and hopes will lead to recognition and acclaim. This is the idea that insanity is triggered by a substance called Vitriol, which Igor contends is essentially deeply held bitterness which leads the sufferer to build high protective walls around his identity. Veronika interrupts his contemplations, joking that he has becoming like his patients. He sends her back to her ward.

In Chapter 15, as she leaves Igor's office, Veronika realizes that in her previous life, she should have allowed herself to be a little crazier and specifically, she should have followed her dream and her talent and become a professional pianist. At that moment, Eduard appears and leads her back to the piano in the living room. She tells him that because she is about to die, neither she nor he should get used to her playing. "My world and yours," she says, "are about to come to an end." As she leaves, she accidentally encounters The Fraternity, listening to a speaker talking about Sufism, which is an Eastern spiritual tradition and an offshoot of Islam. In conversation with Mari, a member of The Fraternity, Veronika learns that her slapping of the leader was actually applauded by the group, which has as its purpose "to investigate all prohibited experiences." Their discussion also includes Mari asking whether Veronika masturbates a lot, leading Veronika to recall the question she was asked earlier about being masturbated, and to ask Mari whether it was she who asked it. Mari says it was not but then comments that it would do Veronika good to see how far she can go in terms of experiencing pleasure, and suggests that she accept everything Eduard is offering her. Mari then invites Veronika to join the group for the rest of the lecture, and she does. The speaker then urges the members of The Fraternity to hold onto their insanity, their differentness of perspective, their honesty, and above all their own individual identity which, he says, is "what you are, not what others make of you." He then leads the group in meditation, and after some initial hesitation, Veronika joins in.

Chapters 14 and 15 Analysis

The first point to note about this section relates to Igor's comment about Veronika's potentially long life. In the context of what is eventually revealed about Veronika's health, which is that her heart attacks are being artificially induced as part of Igor's experiment, it is possible to see this comment as an accidental one and a slip of the

tongue in which the truth is inadvertently revealed. The second point to note is the introduction of the concept of Vitriol is a key component of what is eventually revealed to be the doctor's plot to use Veronika as the subject of an experiment. Here again, there is the sense that although Igor's methods appear reprehensible, he is doing the right thing and espousing the right theory for the wrong reasons. In the context of the book as a whole of its narrative and thematic intent, his theory is absolutely correct. It is bitterness and fear as well as the determination to self-protect, that leads people to lives empty of freedom, joy, of self-expression, and of intensity of feeling. All these, the narrative also contends, are generally held by society at large to be manifestations, albeit to varying degrees, of insanity. In short, although Igor is wrong in how he acts upon those ideas, the ideas themselves are, in the book's perspective, absolutely right.

Meanwhile, Veronika's journey of transformation continues to move forward in this section. Her encounters with Eduard, the Sufi lecturer, Mari, and other members of The Fraternity all awaken possibilities for feeling and experience, particularly of "prohibited experience" that she never realized she had. This concept of "prohibited experience" is a central component of the book's exploration of the nature of insanity, in that the book seems very clear that such experiences, or rather the choosing of such experiences, are essential to personal happiness and fulfillment. This, in turn, raises an interesting question that the novel either avoids or simply fails to consider. If, as the narrative and the experiences of its characters appear to contend, choosing to have a prohibited experience makes one happy and leads to fulfillment, should there be any prohibited experiences at all?

Chapters 16, 17 and 18

Chapters 16, 17 and 18 Summary

In Chapter 16, after the meditation session ends, the narrative follows Mari out into the garden, where she lights a cigarette and contemplates Veronika's increasingly frequent piano playing which, to Mari, suggests that she is contemplating a return to life in the outside world, something that Mari believes is ultimately impossible. This contemplation leads Mari to consider what that life actually is, and to think about her own life which, narration reveals, was that of a lawyer. Narration then, and at length, looks at the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden from an unusual perspective, a process of idea triggering idea that leads Mari to decide that when she leaves Villete, she is going to live a much simpler, more honest life. This realization moves her thoughts back to Veronika, specifically to how Igor suggested that she be left alone to die, and to how Eduard should be warned away from her. The chapter closes with commentary in narration on how most of the inmates of Villete had long ago given up trying to function in the outside world, and how others including Mari were being forced by their circumstances to rethink their lives.

In Chapter 17, a brief chapter, Veronika turns from the piano and looks out into the garden at Mari standing out in the cold without a jacket, wondering if Mari wants to die. This triggers a self-reminder that Veronika was the one who wanted to die, which in turn triggers a return to playing.

In Chapter 18, this chapter narrates, at length, the sequence of events that brought Mari to Villete. A successful and respected lawyer in the outside world, she had come to believe that it was time for her to do something to help the disadvantaged in the world, particularly the poor of El Salvador. However, while attending a documentary film on El Salvador, Mari experienced a crippling panic. The next day, she experienced a second, and then began experiencing more and more, eventually becoming unable to leave the house. Conversation with her supportive husband results in the situation remaining essentially the same for several months, until a visit from a colleague convinces Mari to seek help. She goes to Villete, where Dr. Igor tries to convince her to go on medication and return to her life. Mari refuses, and Igor because of the financial demands of running the asylum agrees to let her move in. Over time, narration reveals, Mari's symptoms disappeared, but along with them went her job because her colleagues believe that none of their clients will want to work with someone who had been in an insane asylum and her marriage when her husband sues for divorce. Mari accepts these changes in her life, but then tells Igor that her symptoms had returned so she can stay with the rest of The Fraternity in the asylum where it is safe. Igor knew she was lying but allowed her to remain.

Chapters 16, 17 and 18 Analysis

With the exception of the brief interlude provided by Chapter 17, this section focuses entirely on Mari, an older woman who nevertheless decides to live it much more fully. This and other similar narrative diversions into the lives and histories of other characters serve to make the thematically relevant contention that joy and the desire for fulfillment are contagious.

To look at this and the other diversions in a different way, the stories of Mari and the other similarly studied characters such as Zedka and Eduard are essentially the same as Veronika's. All four characters experience a form of death in their lives, all are awakened while in Villete to the possibilities of fuller, truer lives, and all leave Villete determined to live those lives. The same point could even be made of Dr. Igor, although his journey is less explicitly affirming than those of the other characters.

Meanwhile, Mari's story is one of the clearest metaphorical manifestations of the narrative's thematic examination of closed communities. In Mari and her story, more clearly than anywhere else in the novel, the narrative makes the suggestion that the personal, moral and emotional safety apparently promised by such communities is, in fact, a trap, a spiritual prison preventing the living of a true and authentic life. For Mari, in fact, the trap of Villete has a second and interior set of walls or The Fraternity. In other words, she is doubly imprisoned, and must therefore struggle with fear even more intense than that of Veronika, Zedka or Eduard in order to realize her true self. It is this profound fear that leads her, at the end of this section, to resist the lure of freedom by asking Igor for permission to remain.

Finally, there is an important but subtle piece of foreshadowing in this section. This is the comment, made in narration almost in passing, about Mari needing to talk to Eduard. The astute reader could very well pick up on this and perceive it as out of place, a hint that something is not all it seems, since Mari is obviously clever enough to know that saying anything to anyone as schizophrenic as Eduard seems to be is pointless. That reader would be correct, in that the comment is foreshadowing of the narrative's later revelation that he is not schizophrenic at all, but merely playing a role.

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 Summary

In Chapter 19, the narrative returns its focus to Veronika, who finally stops playing for Eduard, physically exhausted but emotionally exhilarated and suddenly remembers Mari's comment about the value and importance of exploring prohibited experiences. This leads Veronika first to attempt to seduce Eduard, which does not work, since he does not seem to understand what she wants him to do and then to take off her clothes and masturbate in front of him. Narration describes, in some detail, the intense physical and emotional pleasure she gives herself, her repeated orgasms, her imaginings, and her realization that again, she had released long-suppressed feelings. Later, and as she dresses herself, Veronika notices that Eduard has not moved, but is looking at her with what seems to be increased compassion and tenderness. She then realizes Mari's in the room and tells her that she has done what was suggested or explored the forbidden. This leads Mari to tell her that only enforced sex and sex with children are truly, morally forbidden. In terms of everything else, she says, Veronika is free. After Mari leaves, Veronika sits back at the piano and resumes playing, needing to "reward" Eduard for the pleasure, love, and compassion he had given her, "witnessing her insanity without horror or repulsion."

Chapter 19 Analysis

The main point to note about this section is its place in Veronika's journey of transformation. In her playing at both the beginning and the end of the chapter, but particularly in her experience of sexual freedom in the extended middle section, there is the very clear sense that she is breaking down the barriers that have kept her from being fully herself, from being fully alive. In terms of the book's thematic question on insanity, Veronika has in fact gone a little mad with pleasure but ultimately, the book suggests, this is a good thing. She has, in other words, taken a profound and important step on her journey towards full freedom. The specter of death has indeed awakened her to the possibilities of life.

Meanwhile, the chapter contains a second hint that with Eduard, all is not what it seems. The first, as previously discussed, is the passing comment in Chapter 18 that Mari wants to talk with him, clearly with the certainty that he would understand. The second hint is contained in narration's reference to his looking at Veronika with compassion and understanding. For him to do that, he would have to have more awareness of what is going on around him than clinical schizophrenics usually do. The reference therefore suggests that he is not nearly as schizophrenic as he presents himself to be, and is therefore another clear foreshadowing of events in the following chapter that suggest he plays a role in order to remain in what he believes to be a safe place and a safe life.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 Summary

In Chapter 20, in the first part of this lengthy chapter, Veronika visits Dr. Igor and begs for medication to keep her awake. She has realized, she tells him, that she wants to fill what little time she has left with as many experiences, as many feelings, as many new sensations as possible. Igor initially refuses, saying that too many stimulants would make Veronika too excited to truly enjoy her experiences but later relents. Before she leaves, Veronika tells him about her experience masturbating, and asks whether she's a pervert. Igor comments on how everyone has different sexual desires but not everyone acts upon them, since for someone to act on what makes him or her different makes cowards out of everyone else. After she goes, he reflects on his understandings about sexuality, realizing the truth of what he said and coming to the insight that he's not going to change the medical world, but can still say what he likes in his thesis.

In the second part of this chapter, narrative focus shifts to Eduard who, narration reveals, is only pretending to be schizophrenic so he can stay in Villete, save his parents the shame of being associated with someone perceived to be a madman, and remain connected to his otherworldly paradise. This means that he was fully aware of what Veronika was doing when she masturbated in front of him. Narration also reveals that he is friends with Mari, who knows who he and what truly is, and that he is desperate to talk with her because he has decided it's time to leave Villete and join the world ... but only if Veronika joins him. As he goes searching for Mari, narration reveals that he knows ways out of Villete and has made several expeditions beyond its walls. He finds Mari with other members of the Fraternity discussing the previous day's lecture and in spite of her initial resistance, manages to lure her away for a conversation. As they talk, they reveal to each other that they have been similarly transformed by their encounters with Veronika, and have realized they want to return to life in the outside world. Mari is uneasy about leaving and goes away without revealing her intentions.

After reading poetry in the library, Eduard asks to see Dr. Igor. Nurse attendants, surprised because he does not usually talk, assume he is having a fit of some kind and restrain him. As he struggles, Veronika comes in drawn by the noise and as he is pulled away for a "treatment," he shouts out his love for her. She is allowed to follow him to his "treatment" and witnesses him being put through electro-shock therapy. Later, as Veronika sits by his bedside waiting for him to regain consciousness, she is visited by Zedka, who is about to leave Villete. She suggests to Veronika that what Veronika is doing is an act of love, leading Veronika to confess that yesterday, inspired by Eduard's presence, she played the piano like she never had and came to believe she was more herself than she had ever been. Zedka tells her that Veronika has to take risks and live fully, which is what Zedka is going to do, adding that when people look at her strangely she has an excuse and/or an explanation for her behavior. She was in Villete. "I need to run the risk of being alive," she says, and goes happily out, humming a tune "Veronika had never heard before."

Chapter 20 Analysis

Here, as foreshadowed in the preceding chapters, Eduard is revealed to be playing a role. Like Mari, he is pretending to be insane so he can remain in Villete where he believes not only that he can and will be safe, but that he can freely engage in his connection with his Visions of Paradise. Here again, the parallels with Mari, not to mention with Veronika and Zedka are clear and all are being confronted with opportunities to live full and genuine lives and all make choices in response to those choices. In this context, Zedka's departure at the end of this chapter can clearly be seen as foreshadowing of eventual, similar departures made by Veronika, Mari, and Eduard. She has accepted the challenge of living life, even in the dangerous outside world on her terms, her departure eventually inspiring the others to do the same. The final lines of the chapter, referring to the tune Zedka hums as she goes, can be seen as a metaphoric representation of this set of circumstances. The tune is new, and so is the idea of freedom.

Also in relation to this chapter, it is interesting to consider the actions and attitudes of Dr. Igor, which can possibly be seen as contradictory. In particular, his refusal to enable Veronika to stay awake can be seen as contrary to what is later revealed to be his intention for her to have her experience as much of life as she wants in order to transcend the effects of Vitriol. It is important to note, however, that in the following chapters, he becomes angry when he is told that Eduard was not allowed by the attendants to follow through on his intention to explore freedom. These two factors combine with other aspects of Igor's situation, particularly the financial constraints under which he has to operate and his accommodation of Mari's lies to make him easily the most complex and unpredictable character in the book.

Chapters 21, 22, 23 and 24

Chapters 21, 22, 23 and 24 Summary

In Chapter 21, Mari visits Dr. Igor and asks whether she is cured. Igor reminds her that she has not had any of her panic attacks for several years, and then explains to her what he believes her condition really is. He goes on to explain how society has evolved to the point where everyone accepts standards of behavior, feeling and action simply because they've been told to. People who are truly themselves, he suggests, are those who live according to who they are, and not according to what society needs them to be or defines them as. Mari tells him that her thinking has changed after hearing Veronika play, suggesting that the way that dying girl lives has inspired her to live her life fully, even though her death is less immediate. Igor signs Mari's release form, and narration suggests that he believes Mari will be missed.

In Chapter 22, when Eduard regains consciousness, he discovers Veronika at his bedside. She tells him he spoke, in his sleep, of "visions of paradise." Eduard has the urge to tell her about those visions but before he can, a nurse comes to give Veronika a sedative. At first Veronika refuses, but Eduard convinces her to obey. Later, when they're out on a walk, Eduard suggests that Veronika is ashamed of what happened between them the night before. Veronika admits that she was, at first, but now she's proud, and then asks Eduard about his visions. He then begins to have one.

In Chapter 23, the author tells the story of how Eduard came to be in Villete. The child of diplomats and privilege, he lived with his socially ambitious parents in the diplomatic compound in Brazil, where he went to school and tried to fit in with other children of other diplomats, but never felt as though he belonged. Through a relationship with a Brazilian girlfriend, he began to look at other philosophies, but was discouraged and challenged by his parents. A severe bicycle accident left him injured and in hospital where, to pass the time, he read a book on saints and visionaries, making some profound discoveries. As a result of his reading, he resolved to explore his own vision of the sorts of paradise those other visionaries discovered and upon leaving hospital started taking classes in painting. His parents watched as he became more and more involved with art and artists, eventually telling them he did not want to be a diplomat the way his parents have always planned. His father asked him, in the name of the love in their family, to do as was planned. Eduard, after a night of contemplation, came to believe that his parents were right and that he was a false visionary. He told his relieved parents that he would do as they asked but later realized he could not follow through, he would not be being true to himself. The next morning, his mother found him in his room with his paintings slashed and unresponsive to her. A few months later, he was committed to Villete.

In Chapter 24, the author reveals that the preceding chapter had been Eduard's story as told to Veronika. She tells him about a vividly remembered painting of "Our Lady" that she believes was a lesson to keep both love and evil under control, but adds that she

does not want to control her love for Eduard. She wants his to be the last face that she sees when she dies. Referring again to her imminent death, she asks to play for him again that night. He, however, proposes that he leave with her and after reminding him that they will not be together for long, she agrees. "Crazy people," she says, "do crazy things."

Chapters 21, 22, 23 and 24 Analysis

The parade of characters leaving Villete, which began with Zedka's departure in the previous section, continues with Mari's physical departure at the beginning of this section. Meanwhile, events at the end of the section such as Eduard's telling Veronika the truth about himself can be seen as a kind of emotional departure, in that he is leaving the mask, armor, safety, and prison of his schizophrenia behind and taking the first steps into a more free and true life. The next steps take place in the following section with his and Veronika's physical departure.

This movement away from perceived and socially mandated insanity into what the narrative defines as a genuine and healthy insanity such as the free experience and celebration of individuality and difference. This is a twin escalations of plot and theme, aspects of the narrative entwining more thoroughly in this section as the story builds momentum towards its climax in the following chapters. In other words, in that section as in this and indeed as in the entire book, theme such as the value of individual, independent life defines and motivates action while action such as the choice to live such a life illustrates and illuminates theme.

At the same time, the narrative of Eduard's childhood and youth can be seen as another, metaphoric exploration of one of the book's secondary themes, the consideration of the reasons for and repercussions of closed communities. There are two levels of meaning here. First, Eduard's spirit and arguably those of his parents can be seen as being enclosed, defined, and limited by the social, economic and physical walls surrounding their home. Second, Eduard's identity can be seen as being enclosed by the "community" of his parents, and their dreams and intentions for him. His relationships with women, first with the Brazilian girl, then with Mari, and finally with Veronika can be seen as breaking down all those walls once and for all, enabling and en-freeing him to live a life defined by his unique "visions of paradise."

Chapters 25 through 29

Chapters 25 through 29 Summary

In Chapter 25, the inmates of Villete noticed that Zedka, Mari, Eduard and Veronika were all missing, how they all believed Veronika was dead, and how relieved they all were that they were not.

In Chapter 26, the members of The Fraternity examine a note left for them by Mari, in which she says life with them was just the same as life out in the world. People were/are confined and defined by barriers and walls, protected from living and engaging in themselves. She thanks them all for their company and the good times they experienced together, saying that even though she is sixty five, she is going out to fully experience both life and herself. The members of The Fraternity go to bed that night believing she has gone truly insane.

In Chapter 27, after Eduard and Veronika drink several bottles of wine at the most expensive restaurant in Ljubjana, they are asked to leave by the manager. As they wander through the town square, past the convent where Veronika used to live, they purchase another two bottles of wine, continuing to argue over the meaning of the painting of "Our Lady." They realize two important things that the Virgin, Our Lady, represents female energy and love and that the people in her life who heard her story about being the virgin mother of God must have thought she was crazy. Later, they climb to the castle at the top of a small hill in the center of town, where they confess their love for each other Veronika makes Eduard promise to paint a portrait of her and to continue painting after she dies, and then thanks him for giving meaning to her life. Eduard then confesses that he loves her and in that moment, Veronika asks "the God she did not believe in to take her at that very moment." The narrative then describes death coming to her where it "smelled of wine and it stroked her hair."

In Chapter 28, the next morning, both Eduard and Veronika are awakened by a policeman into "a miracle," as Eduard puts it, "another day of life.

In Chapter 29, in his office, Dr. Igor receives word that Veronika and Eduard have gone missing. After berating his staff for their incompetence, he sits back and considers the situation and smiles. Narration reveals that he had used Veronika, as depressed and as suicidal as she was, as the subject for a test for the nature of, and potential treatment for, Vitriol that he gave her a drug to simulate heart attacks in order to trigger a desire to live which, he believed, would banish the Vitriol from her system. As he contemplates the success of his experiment, narration describes how he did not take into account ways in which Veronika's decision to live might influence the lives of others like Mari, Zedka, and Eduard, and wonders how Veronika will react when she realizes her death is not truly imminent. He then realizes however what her response would probably be. "She would consider each day a miracle," narration suggests are his thoughts, "which

indeed it is, when you consider the number of unexpected things that could happen in each second of our fragile existences."

Chapters 25 through 29 Analysis

Chapters 25 and 26 can be seen as further explorations of the novel's thematic consideration of closed societies. Both the larger group of inmates in Villete and The Fraternity, both of which are such societies, can be seen here as fearful and selfish, unwilling and/or unable to embrace the concept and fact of freedom even as manifested in death. Chapters 27 and 28, meanwhile, are further explorations of the value the novel places on everything the closed communities are not, do not recognize, and cannot ever fully embrace. This is true freedom, personal, emotional, and spiritual abandon, the celebration of individual identity and desire. It could be argued that in drinking themselves into both rowdiness and not paying their bill, Veronika and Eduard are breaking some fundamental rules and behaving with both selfishness and inconsideration. The novel seems to be saying however, that because they are celebrating themselves, their freedom, and the fact that they're alive, such selfishness is all right. This again raises the previously discussed question of whether, in the novel's apparent perspective that the forbidden is to be celebrated no matter what, of whether anything should be forbidden at all.

Chapter 27 also includes a passing, but potent, examination of the image and apparent values of the Virgin Mary, specifically commenting on the perception that she represents "female energy." It's interesting to note, in this context, that the energy of transformation that pervades the novel is anchored in female experiences - primarily those of Veronika, but also those of Zedka and Mari. Eduard is caught in the fallout, going along for the ride. There is the sense, therefore, that on some level the novel is suggesting that women are, for whatever reason, more open to the idea of connecting to their individual, "natural," and spirit-defined identities than men.

Finally, there are the revelations contained in Chapter 29, specifically the indications that Veronika has been used by Dr. Igor for what the narrative has previously suggested are his own, ego driven and defined, purposes. As discussed earlier in this analysis, there is the sense of suggestion that he has done the right thing for the wrong reasons, and that that "right thing" has resulted in rippling outwards into the lives of other people such as Zedka, Mari, and Eduard for whom he had, in fact, been doing the "wrong" thing for years. In other words, he had for several years been enabling the dysfunction of people who, in their innermost hearts, had desired the kind of freedom that society in general as represented by the businessmen controlling the hospital and Dr. Igor in particular perceived as dangerous, to the self and to the community. Now, at the end of Veronika's journey of transformation, the narrative reveals that at least to some degree, he too has been caught up in the ripples of change triggered by that transformation. He may not yet be as willing as Zedka, Mari, and Eduard were to allow himself to experience a full transformation, but the prison doors and windows of his mind have, it seems, been opened a crack. In this, the novel seems to be suggesting that there is at

least some hope for redemption and transformation in everyone. All one has to do is be willing to go a little bit mad.

Characters

Veronika

Veronika is the novel's central character and its protagonist. The narrative is anchored in and defined by her journey of transformation, her movement from despair into hope, from spiritual, emotional, and even physical imprisonment into freedom. In more specific terms, that journey is one of awakening and evolution and movement from despair through enlightenment into joy and freedom. It is a journey that carries with it substantial resonances of archetype and myth, echoing long-told stories of heroic characters encountering both obstacles and allies as they undergo physical challenges with metaphorical spiritual resonances.

An important aspect of Veronika's story is how the transformations she experiences trigger transformations in others such as Zedka, Mari, and Eduard. In this context, it's interesting to consider the symbolic implications of her name. In Christian tradition, Veronica is the name of a woman standing on the side of the road as Christ carried the Cross to his execution, and who wiped the sweat, blood and tears off his face with a handkerchief. Named as a saint early in the development of Christian theology and faith, she has, over the centuries, become a symbol of compassion and faith, of selflessness and succor. There are clear echoes of both her actions and what those actions have come to represent in the Veronika of the novel. Specifically, while the latter never actively offers the other characters the same sort of unconditional support and comfort offered by the former, there is the clear sense that the values espoused and practiced by St. Veronica are also embodied, albeit in different ways, by this Veronika. Both women come to a place of unconditional caring. The parallels become even more appropriate when the fact that St. Veronica did what she did in the face of potential condemnation from the angry, anti-Christ majority. In other words, and according to the novel's thematic perspectives, what St. Veronica did was an act of insanity, an expression of self and identity that risked condemnation. Ultimately that was an act of freedom and truth exactly the same sort of acts undertaken by Veronika here and by the characters whose lives she changes.

Zedka

Zedka is the first of three secondary characters and inmates at Villete whose lives are transformed by their encounters and relationship with Veronika. Each of the three is, in his or her own way, entrapped by despair in the same way as she is. In Zedka's case, the despair in question is that usually associated with unfulfilled love, and manifests in the form of severe depression. Each of the three is also triggered to embrace their own identity, leaving behind what they once believed was safety but which has in fact become a prison to move into the riskier world of freedom. For Zedka, this means no longer allowing her soul to go on astral journeys independent of her body but instead taking journeys into life that involve both body and soul. As a result of this

transformation she, like Eduard and Mari, becomes able and/or free and/or willing to express her individual truth. Such action, the narrative suggests, might be regarded by rule-bound society as a manifestation of insanity, but is in fact, in the narrative's perspective, a manifestation of a deeper and more profound, spiritual, and ultimately more human reality.

Mari

Mari is the second of the three secondary characters transformed by their encounter with Veronika. Her despair is associated with being trapped in an unfulfilling career, and manifests in severe panic attacks. This despair leads her, like the others, into the physical prison of Villete, perceived as a place of external, physical safety, and the mental, emotional, and spiritual prison of The Fraternity, perceived as a place of internal and intellectual safety. As the result of encountering, and being inspired by, Veronika, she is able to break out of those prisons and move towards a life of true freedom and integrity which will be lived in the service of those suffering from the after effects of the Bosnia-Serbia-Slovenia war.

Eduard

Eduard is the third of the three secondary characters whose lives and identities are transformed by encountering Veronika. His despair springs from being kept from pursuing what he believes to be his true vocation as an artist and manifests as a belief that that vocation is, in fact, a delusion. That despair leads him not only to Villete but to the self-imposed exile of assumed schizophrenia. In other words he, like the other two secondary characters, pretends to be insane in order to perceive himself as safe. After connecting with Veronika, he feels not only intense romantic desire but a surge of courage, not to mention of intention to re-discover what he realizes he has lost his Visions of Paradise which, at the end of the novel now include Veronika.

The Fraternity

The Fraternity is a group of inmates in Villete. They pose as insane but in fact suffer from no genuine mental illness, choosing to remain in what they believe to be the physical and intellectual safety afforded to them by two sets of walls such as the physical walls of the asylum, and the walls of perception built up by the diagnosis of insanity. In the narrative's perspective, their sense of safety is, in fact a delusion, since what The Fraternity believes to be a good life is, according to the narrative, narrow, shallow, and unfulfilled.

Dr. Igor

Dr. Igor is the head of Villete, its chief doctor and administrator. He is, in many ways, the most complex character in the novel, driven by a variety of motives and hamstrung by a

variety of circumstances. Revelations in the book's final chapter (that he is using Veronika as a test subject for theories about mental illness that, he believes, will gain him fame and fortune) seem intended to portray him as a kind of selfish monster. There is also the sense, however, that because Veronika and the others are ultimately transformed for the better as the result of his actions, Igor is in fact, and perhaps unbeknownst to himself, a good man doing the right thing for the wrong reasons.

The Staff at Villette

The doctors, nurses and security guards at Villete are, without exception, unnamed and undifferentiated in terms of character. They nevertheless play important and defining roles in the narrative as they variously enact Igor's orders, offer unexpected warmth and insight to Veronica, and trigger realizations and transformations in all the characters. Many of them are portrayed as functioning in a way condemned by Zedka and by extension by the book itself as robots, doing as they have been told, unquestioning because they see no reason to question. In other words, they are metaphoric representations of the society in which to live freely, openly, passionately, and independently, heedless of the perceptions and reactions of others is to be considered insane.

Eduard's Parents

Eduard's father, an ambassador, and mother, a social hostess, appear late in the narrative, their ambitions for their son portrayed as a metaphorical prison from which he longs to escape. They, like the Villete staff, seem to be intended to be perceived as representatives of a restrictive society that does not value, or that perhaps even fears, that which is different from what is held to be the status quo. Their actions in having Eduard declared insane and moved to Villete can, in that context, be seen as metaphoric manifestations of society's determination to not be transformed in any way by thoughts, perceptions, and experiences that in any way challenge their perceptions of security.

Veronika's Mother

This character appears only briefly, but in her submission to the manipulations of Dr. Igor, can be seen as an important symbol of the sort of unquestioning acquiescence to rules, boundaries and authority that the narrative thematically suggests is a powerful inhibitor of true happiness. This symbolic value to the character is reinforced by Veronika's recollections of her mother as squelching Veronika's desire to play the piano professionally and in other words as a source of a life-denying boundary.

Our Lady (The Virgin Mary)

In Christian tradition, particularly in the Roman Catholic faith, the Virgin Mary, the earthly mother of Jesus Christ, is perceived and revered as a compassionate intercessor, someone whose faith and trust in God is so pure and so ideal that if she speaks on someone's behalf, God will listen. Veronika's reminiscences of a portrait of the Virgin lead to discussion between her and Eduard on how Our Lady is perceived, and on what she truly represents (see Chapters 24 and 27). In a narrative rich in portrayals of wise and influential women, the book's comment that she represents female energy is particularly interesting, especially since the comment is in some ways an unusually broad interpretation of traditional perspectives.

The Author (Paulo Coelho)

Paulo Coelho is a noted author of books on spiritual illumination and transformation. He makes a cameo appearance in "Veronika...," in which he describes the circumstances through which he came to write the novel. There is the sense, in fact, that in the same way as several of the book's characters are transformed by their encounters with Veronika, so too has the author. In other words, the transformations he portrays in his book are, quite possibly, manifestations and projections of his own.

Objects/Places

The War in Bosnia-Serbia-Croatia

In the early-to-mid 1990's, several regions in Eastern Europe that were once a single country called Yugoslavia participated in what has been variously described as a civil war or a war of aggression. Lingering social, political, and economic uncertainty after the fall of the Soviet Union and its satellite, Communist governments were a fertile breeding ground in which centuries old ethnic tensions resurfaced and became violent, with the result that thousands of people, soldiers and civilians alike, were killed. This is the social and political context in which Veronika decides to end her life, the violence and intolerance of the world around her being primary components of the "wrongness" she feels helpless to address.

Slovenia

Slovenia was one of the countries involved in the Bosnia-Serbia-Croatia war. A region with less influence than some of the other combatants, Slovenia suffered a great deal of what is called "collateral" damage or damaged suffered by unintended victims.

Ljubljana

Ljubljana is the capital of Slovenia, the setting for the novel's first and final sections, where Veronika lives at the point at which she attempts to end her life and the town where she, with apparent miraculousness, overcomes the condition that she believes will end it.

The Magazine Article, The Letter to the Editor

As she's waiting for the sleeping pills she took to take effect, Veronika reads a magazine article that, she believes, is insulting to Slovenians like her. She writes a letter to the editor condemning this perspective, and while writing comes to the amused realization that people will probably think she killed herself because of the article. The letter is referred to in passing throughout the novel, particularly by Dr. Igor, generally in laughing consideration of Veronika's desire to die.

Villete

Villete is the name of the insane asylum to which Veronika is committed following her suicide attempt. Run by Dr. Igor and also the home of several other important characters such as Zedka, Mari, and Eduard, narration repeatedly refers to it as being

run on economic rather than humanistic principles. In other words, Villete is intended by its owners and Dr. Igor to be a money-making rather than health-enhancing enterprise.

The Moon

For Veronika, and therefore for the narrative, the new moon is a symbol of new life and new beginnings, of hope and of possibility in the midst of despair. The metaphor is suggested by the fact that the narrative includes references to such a moon when Veronika is playing the piano in Villete, her playing becoming an externalization and manifestation of her desire to live.

Vitriol

In semantics, "vitriol" is generally used as a synonym for anger or for temper. Vitriol is the term used by Dr. Igor to define what he believes to be the origin of mental illness such as bitterness that can be self-protective and all-consuming. This becomes a physical presence that triggers both emotional and physical symptoms in the sufferer. Igor sees his theories about this sort of Vitriol, which is capitalized throughout the narrative as a stepping stone to fame and fortune, with his treatment of Veronika during her time in Villete eventually revealed to be an experimental treatment of the condition.

Brasilia

As revealed in Chapter 23, Brasilia is the name given to the city-like diplomatic compound in Brazil where Eduard spend his teenage years. Isolated and self-protecting, Brasilia is yet another variation on the "closed community" motif.

The Painting of

Late in the narrative, as Veronika's relationship with Eduard deepens, she recalls a painting owned by her grandmother in which the Virgin Mary or in traditional Roman Catholic theology, also referred to as "Our Lady" is portrayed as standing upon a snake. Veronika's and Eduard's debates over the metaphoric meaning of that painting constitute large sections of the book's final chapters with their differing interpretations each exploring a different facet of the book's thematic focus on living fulfilled and individually defined lives.

The Piano

The piano, in the so-called "living room" at Villete is the primary means by which Veronika connects to and releases her feelings and identity. The fact that she comes upon it unexpectedly is a metaphorical suggestion that personal truth can also emerge unexpectedly, and in unusual circumstances.

Themes

The Nature of Insanity

Several times throughout the novel, characters question and discuss what it means to be insane, their differing answers defining the book's other thematic considerations. For many of the characters, and in all likelihood most readers, the concept of insanity triggers, at least initially, ideas and images of unpredictability, violence, bad physical hygiene, individuals talking to themselves and/or hearing voices, and many other symptoms. In other words, insanity is generally defined and perceived, in both the book and in life, as a profoundly negative experience, with those declared and held to be insane perceived as inhabiting a state of being other than what is commonly held to be or regarded as, "normal." Such people, again in both the book and in life, tend to be further defined as dangerous, frightening, amusing, or irritating, and in all cases ought to be kept away from "normal" people.

By contrast, Veronika seems to be making the thematic statement that insanity is, or at least should be regarded as, simply having a unique perspective on, or experience of, reality. The book also suggests that any intense experience, (emotional, physical, artistic, spiritual, sexual) perceived as extreme and/or outside the realm of the "normal" should not automatically be perceived or regarded as negative, or an indication that an individual is unwell. Rather, such experiences ought to be perceived, again by those both experiencing and witnessing them, as something to be celebrated, an indication that a connection is being made with something other than this world and traditional, restrictive ways of functioning within it. Insanity, the book contends, is freedom.

Living a Genuine Life

As suggested above, the book's secondary thematic considerations develop within the context of its primary theme, the contemplation of insanity. One of those secondary considerations, manifesting throughout the narrative, is the question of what it means to live a genuine, passionate, individualized life. Answers to that question emerge through the behavior and discoveries of its characters, with both behavior and discovery being portrayed as invaluable, life-defining experiences of transcendence and insight. These revelatory experiences include the moments when Veronika plays the piano or masturbates, when she and Eduard talk and fall in love and get drunk, when Zedka has her out of body experiences, and when Mari returns to Bosnia to help those suffering because of the war. All these actions, the narrative suggests, are undertaken because the characters are finally living according to their true selves, their true identities, and the dictates of their living souls. There is also the sense that the characters are doing what they're doing because of the pleasure their actions bring, the sense of fulfillment, the sense of joy. In short, the book makes the thematic suggestion that to be genuine, life must be lived fully and passionately and freely, all attributes which, the book also suggests, run the risk of taking the individual outside the boundaries of what society,

and individuals within that society, have come to believe is acceptable and normal and safe. In other words, in the book's thematic perspective, a genuine life is one that in moments of freedom appears, on some level, to be insane.

Closed Communities

The flip side of living a genuine life, in the novel's thematic perspective, is living a life within a closed community. Such communities, the book contends, can come in a variety of forms and be defined by a variety of circumstances. These include society itself with its rules, laws, traditions, and beliefs, traditional religion such as the Roman Catholic church, gender roles such as those that, in Veronika's imagination, define her future, and the sane, as defined by their adherence to the rules of any community. There are also, the narrative suggests, communities within communities, each with their own subset of rules. The Fraternity is one such inner community, the wealthy and influential another, the family yet another, ethnic communities such as those active in the Serbia-Bosnia-Croatia war still another. In other words, there are circles within circles within circles of community, of closure, and of cowardice. This last is particularly noteworthy in that the narrative contends that the closed-ness of all these communities results from fear and uncertainty, unwillingness to have their self-protective boundaries challenged by anyone unprepared for whatever reason to live within the moral, physical, spiritual, sexual, and psychological confines of those boundaries. In other words, the book thematically suggests that living within a closed community, even a closed community of one, prevents true freedom, the excitement of possibility, and the joy and wonder of connection with the non-physical world. A true life, Veronika suggests, is one in which the barriers around closed communities are broken down or transcended or both, and if that leads to an appearance and perception of insanity, so be it. Life is to be lived.

Style

Point of View

For the most part, the narrative unfolds from the third-person past tense point of view, with its primary focus being on Veronika, her experiences, insights, and feelings and the events of its plot being set in motion in response to her reflections as manifest in her intentions and actions. There are occasions, however, when the point of view shifts to one or another of the characters she encounters such as Zedka, Mari, Eduard, or Dr. Igor. There appears to be two facets to the intent of these diversions into other points of view. The first is to illustrate how Veronika's waking up to the possibilities of her life triggers similar awakenings in the lives of others and the second is to define the contexts within which those awakenings occur. It's interesting to note that while such contexts are established for the secondary characters, the narrative includes much less context for Veronika, revealing fewer details about her childhood than are revealed about Eduard and fewer details about her pre-Villete life than are revealed about Mari. There is also less exploration of Veronika's psycho-spiritual life than there is of Zedka's and less examination of Veronika's motivations than there is of Dr. Igor's. This does not meant that Veronika is an undeveloped character but rather to suggest that the first facet of reason for the shifts in point of view is more important. In other words, while Veronika's experiences are the main focus of the story, the narrative also, through its shifts in point of view, explores in which positive transformation in one life can have a ripple effect on the lives of others. In other words, the moving point of view suggests that joy is catching and the insanity of freedom or the freedom of insanity is a contagious disease.

Setting

There are two main components of the narrative's setting worth considering. The first is that much of its action is set within the walls, both physical and ideological, of an insane asylum. As such, setting is in this case a manifestation of, and provides an opportunity for, exploration of all three of its primary thematic explorations. It also provides and defines the context for occasionally glimpsed, but potently portrayed, commentary on the self-interested economics of free enterprise health care.

The other important component of setting is its placement in time - specifically, the aftermath of the Serbian-Croation-Bosnian War. There are a couple of important elements to consider here. The first is more general, in that any war is a trigger for physical and psychological displacement, for confusion and uncertainty, or for wondering about one's place in the world. This is the situation in which Veronika and the other residents of Villete find themselves. In specific terms, a key component of that war, simultaneously a trigger for and manifestation of its destructive tensions, was the issue of difference, specifically of ethnic differences and how they defined status. This means that while the war and its contexts never play an overtly active or defining role in

either the story or the emotional and spiritual journeys of its characters, its issues form the background of the characters' explorations of the nature and consequences of difference and how those differences affect and define both life and death.

Language and Meaning

The use of language throughout the book can be seen as a manifestation of its narrative and thematic intent. While the book's language is, for the most part, as anchored as its structure in a linear recounting of events, of communicating what happened and when, there is also the sense that the writer is interested, at least to some degree, in moving away from the literal. He and the book seem as interested in communicating the spiritual and emotional quality of the events described as in communicating the specific details of the events themselves. In short, the language is in many ways poetic, as interested in how an experience feels and how it triggers spiritual growth and/or awareness as it is in what, how, when, and why something happened and to whom. Language here, as in many narratives exploring issues relating to enlightenment and transformation, is the language of intuition and insight, of emotion and spirit, its meaning defined by the search for meaning in a world where so much of what goes on seems meaningless.

It must also be noted that the book was originally written in Portuguese, and that as the result of translation there may be slight shifts in, or differing interpretations of, meaning. The author's original intent itself may be, at least to some degree, transformed. The point is not made to suggest in any way that the translator or any translator works without the intent to communicate the author's vision as thoroughly and truthfully as possible. Nevertheless, and in this specific case as well as in many other translations, a certain stiffness in the dialogue suggests that the translated version is perhaps less than fully effective in presenting and communicating what the author originally wrote and intended.

Structure

For the most part, the narrative is structured in traditional linear fashion, action and event flowing one after the other from beginning through middle to end. Also as in traditional linear structure, that flow of action and event is anchored in the experience and transformational journey of the central character who in this case is the young woman with no given last name called Veronika. That said, the book's occasional diversions into the points of view of other characters simultaneously trigger and manifest diversions from its structural line. In other words, the narrative's detours into the lives and experiences of other characters illustrate and define, structurally as well as thematically, what seems to be a secondary authorial intent, to suggest that experiences of joy and freedom in one can trigger similar experiences in others. Structure reinforces intent, while intent defines structure.

On another level, these shifts in structure and intent can also be seen as points of manifestation for the book's thematic consideration of closed communities. Formal structure has an aspect of closed nature, of manifesting and being defined by a set of rules in the same way as closed communities are. The diversions from formal structure in "Veronika" can be seen as reinforcing the book's thematic contention that breaking away from such closed nature is as valuable, affirming, and enlightening as breaking away from the closed nature of life. Here again, structure reinforces intent, while intent defines structure.

Quotes

"It was time to feel proud of herself, to recognize that she had been able to do this, that she had finally had the courage and was leaving this life: What joy! Also she was doing it as she had always dreamed she would - by taking sleeping pills, which leave no mark" (pg. 3.)

"No one can judge. Each person knows the extent of their own suffering or the total absence of meaning in their lives. Veronika wanted to explain that, but instead she choked on the tube in her mouth" (pg. 14.)

"It was best to put an end to everything now, while she was still brave and healthy enough to die" (pg. 24.)

"Veronika] had always spent her life waiting for something: for her father to come back from work, for the letter from a lover that never arrived, for her end of year exams, for the train, the bus, the phone call, the holiday, the end of the holidays. Now she was going to have to wait for death, which had made an appointment with her" (pg. 30.)

"all you had to do was to keep your insanity under control. You could cry, get worried or angry like any other normal human being, as long as you remembered that, up above, your spirit was laughing out loud at all those thorny situations" (pg. 53.)

"'It's as if you were in a foreign country, able to see and understand everything that's going on around you but incapable of explaining what you need to know or of being helped, because you don't understand the language they speak there'" (Zedka to Veronika, pg. 62.)

"Poets loved the full moon; they wrote thousands of poems about it, but it was the new moon that Veronika loved best because there was till room for it to grow, to expand, to fill the whole of its surface with light before its inevitable decline" (pg. 63.)

"'When I took the pills, I wanted to kill someone I hated. I didn't know that other Veronikas existed inside me, Veronikas that I could love'" (pg. 65.)

"The impression returned of Infinity and Eternity walking hand in hand; you only had to look for one of them...to feel the presence of the other, Time that never ends, that never passes, that remains in the Present, where all of life's secrets lie" (pg. 70.)

"Dr. Igor...wanted to leave his mark on the history of medicine, although he had no illusions about the difficulties he would face when it came to publishing his ideas, for 'normal' people were content with their lives and would never admit to the existence of such an illness, while the 'sick' fed a gigantic industry" (pg. 92.)

"'If one day I could get out of here, I would allow myself to be crazy. Everyone is indeed crazy, but the craziest are the ones who don't know they're crazy; they just keep repeating what others tell them to'" (pg. 96.)

"She knew she was going to die soon, why be afraid? It wouldn't help at all, it wouldn't prevent the fatal heart attack; the best plan would be to enjoy the days and hours that remained, doing things she had never done before" (pg. 102.)

"God...had devised a rule and then found a way of persuading someone to break it, merely in order to invent punishment" (pg. 106.)

"In the last days of her life, she had finally realized her grand dream: to play with heart and soul, for as long as she wanted and whenever the mood took her. It didn't matter to her that her only audience was a young schizophrenic; he seemed to understand the music, and that was what mattered" (pg. 113.)

"Together husband and wife pondered what was happening. He thought it might be a brain tumor, but he didn't say anything. She thought she was having premonitions of some terrible event, but she didn't say anything either. They tried to find some common ground for discussion, like logical, reasonable, mature people" (pg. 123.)

"Eduard was the ideal man, sensitive, educated; a man who had destroyed an indifferent world in order to recreate it again in his head, this time with new colours, new characters, new stories. And this new world included a woman, a piano, and a moon that was continuing to grow" (pg. 130.)

"She imagined herself both queen and slave, dominatrix and victim...she was making love with men of all skin colors...she was anyone's and anyone could do anything to her...everything she had never imagined before, and she gave herself to all that was most base and most pure...all those men and women who had entered and left her body through the doors of her mind'" (pg. 134.)

"Eduard had already been on that road several times, but he had always decided to go back because he had still not received the signal to go forward. Now things were different: the signal had finally come in the form of a young woman with green eyes, brown hair, and the startled look of someone who thinks she knows what she wants" (pg. 148.)

"If everyone there - and outside Villete too - just lived their lives and let others do the same, God would be in every moment, in every grain of mustard, in the fragment of cloud that is there one moment and gone the next. God was there, and yet people believed they s till had to go on looking, because it seemed too simple to accept that life was an act of faith" (pg. 149.)

"'We all live in our own world. But if you look up at the starry sky, you'll see that all the different worlds up there combine to form constellations, solar systems, galaxies'" (pg. 162.)

"'You're someone who is different, but who wants to be the same as everyone else. And that, in my view, is a serious illness'" (Igor to Mari, pg. 169.)

"The men and women who shook the world were ordinary men and women like him ... they were full of the same doubts and anxieties that all human beings experienced in their daily routine ... in each of those lives, there was a single magical moment that made them set off in search of their own vision of Paradise" (pg. 182.)

Topics for Discussion

Discuss possible metaphoric implications of the magazine article Veronika reads and responds to in the moments following her suicide attempt. In what ways does the article's content reflect and illuminate Veronika's state of mind? In what ways are her taking sleeping pills and her writing the letter to the editor similar in intent?

The book seems to be suggesting that to live a full, rich, committed, honest life, one must occasionally give in to the intensity of experience and run the risk of being perceived, at least to some degree, as insane. Do you agree or disagree with this perspective? Why or why not?

Discuss in detail an experience and/or situation in which you felt you were living according to your truest self but were considered by others to be insane. What effect, if any, did the negative attitudes around you have on your choices and decisions? What choices have you not made out of fear of being considered at least not normal, at most insane? What choices WOULD you make if the possibility for such attitudes did not exist?

Consider how the narrative draws a comparison between insanity and being unable to communicate (see "Quotes", p. 62). Do you agree or disagree with this statement? In this context, discuss circumstances in which you have been frustrated by your inability to communicate. How did those circumstances make you feel?

What other characters in the book experience a failure to communicate? What are the consequences of that failure?

Debate Dr. Igor's contention discussed in Chapter 14 that reality is what the majority define it as. What is reality? What is imagined? What is normal? What is insane?

Discuss the various parallels and differences between Veronika's journey of transformation and those of Mari, Zedka, Eduard, and Igor. Comment on the different forms of death they each experience, the different processes of discovery they undergo in Villete, and the life-fulfilling actions they take in response to those discoveries.

Several times throughout the novel, characters celebrate freedom and feeling in ways that might be perceived as impinging upon other characters, behaving in ways that make others uncomfortable. At the same time, the narrative seems to be saying that such celebrations are more important than the feelings, perspectives and values of others. Do you agree with this perspective? Why or why not? Are there ways in which such feelings and celebrations can be contained? Should they be? Why or why not?