

# Literary Adaptation in Film: A Boon or a Bane? A Study in Paulo Coelho's *Veronika Decides to Die*

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## Abstract

*This paper focuses on the movie adaptations of literary work. It is about the advantages and disadvantages of converting a novel into a movie. Some of the advantages are visual storytelling, entertainment value, wide audience reach, and collaborative creativity. Disadvantages are time constraints, loss of depth, changes in adaptation, and commercial pressures. In this novel, the protagonist tries to commit suicide by swallowing sleeping pills. Veronika is fed up with her monotonous life and she finds no meaning in her life. Veronika is saved and admitted to a mental institution called Villete. Dr. Igor is the director of the institution who is trying to write a thesis on vitriol poisoning. He believes that vitriol poisoning is the reason for anxiety and depression. He decides to use Veronika for his research. He lies to her that she suffers from an irreversible heart condition and she would die within a week. This awareness creates a change in Veronika's personality. She starts to do things she likes and it creates a desire in her to overcome her suicidal thoughts.*

**Keywords:** Journey, Transformation, Movie Adaptation, Advantages and Disadvantages.

Paulo Coelho is a Brazilian novelist known for employing rich symbolism in his depictions of the often spiritually motivated journeys taken by his characters. Paulo Coelho was raised in Rio de Janeiro. He rebels against the conventions of his Roman Catholic upbringing, and as a result, is temporarily committed to a psychiatric hospital by his parents. Paulo Coelho dropped out of law school in 1970, traveled through South America, Mexico, and North Africa, and began writing pop and rock music lyrics with Raul Seixas, a well-known Brazilian singer, and songwriter. In 1974 Paulo Coelho was briefly imprisoned for alleged subversive activities. Paulo Coelho published *The Alchemist*, a mystical account of an Andalusian shepherd boy's journey across North Africa in search of treasure. After being dropped by its publisher, the book was reissued to great success in Brazil. Using the internet Paulo Coelho broadened his readership by blogging, expounding upon ideas advanced in his books, and making his books available for free. He founded the Paulo Coelho Institute in 1996 to provide aid to children and the elderly. Paulo Coelho in his novel "Veronika Decides to Die" portrays twenty-one-year-old woman who tries to commit suicide and gets admitted to a mental institution. There she makes friends and her interactions with them help her realize that she should do things that make her happy without the fear of being judged.

Dr. Igor the director of the mental institution works on his thesis about vitriol poisoning. He believes that it is the cause of anxiety and depression in people. He decides to use Veronika for his research. He says to Veronika that she suffers from irreversible heart damage and that is fatal. He then states Veronika has a week to live. Veronika is upset that she has to wait for a week to die. This brings a tremendous change in her personality.

Veronika Decides to Die is adapted into a film version in the year 2009 directed by Emily Young from a screenplay by Roberta Hanley and Larry Gross, based on the 1998 novel of the same name by Paulo Coelho. It stars Sarah Michelle Geller in the title role, with Jonathan Tucker, Florencia Lozano, Melissa Leo, David Thewlis, and Erika Christensen appearing as supporting characters. The novel originally takes place in Ljubljana, Slovenia, but the film is set in New York City.

There are advantages as well as disadvantages when a novel is adapted into a film version. The advantages are enhanced character depth, aesthetic appeal, suspense, global appeal, visual storytelling, etc. Visual storytelling is a powerful narrative technique that conveys a story or message primarily through visual elements, such as images, cinematography, and design, with minimal reliance on written or spoken language. This approach engages the audience's imagination and emotions through visuals, and it is commonly used in various mediums, including film, photography, graphic novels, and even advertising. It transcends language barriers, making it accessible to diverse audiences worldwide. It relies on universally understood visual cues, like facial expressions, body language, and symbols. Visuals could evoke powerful emotions. Through composition, color, and movement, storytellers can manipulate the audience's feelings and convey mood and tone effectively. Visual storytelling captures attention and maintains interest more effectively than text alone. It is an efficient way to communicate complex information or ideas. People tend to remember visual information better than text. A well-crafted visual story could leave a lasting impression on the viewer's memory. Visuals simplify complex concepts. They enable storytellers to convey messages concisely and clearly,

eliminating the need for lengthy explanations. In visual storytelling, characters could be developed and characterized without the need for extensive dialogue. The way characters are portrayed visually could reveal their personalities and motivations.

Visuals could establish the setting and atmosphere of a story, transporting the audience to different world and periods with ease. The most important scene in the book is Veronika playing the piano. This scene is very important because it is a main element that contributes to the transformation of Veronika's personality. During her childhood, she expresses her passion for becoming a pianist. Her parents state that she should not be wasting time with such hobbies and she should concentrate on work that pays. Playing the piano somehow releases suppressed emotions. She realizes that she could be happy when she does what she loves. This scene is portrayed with much intensity. The movie has done justice to the novel version.

Visual storytelling uses the sequences and juxtaposition of images to guide the audience's understanding of the narrative. It controls the pace and order of information dissemination. Visual storytelling often employs metaphors and symbolism to convey deeper meanings, allowing for layers of interpretation. Moon is a symbol of transformation which is beautifully portrayed in the movie. It represents infinity and eternity. The moon shows the transformation that takes place in Veronika's character. Visual storytelling can work in conjunction with written or spoken language to enhance and complement the narrative. In film, the visuals and dialogue often work together to convey the story. Visual storytelling offers a wide range of creative techniques, including animation, special effects, and various art styles, enabling artists and filmmakers to experiment and innovate. In the business world, visual storytelling is a potent tool for marketing and advertising campaigns, as it could engage and persuade customers effectively.

Movie makers enhance character depth and it is another important element in movie adaptations. Skilled actors can bring depth and complexity to characters, making them more relatable and memorable. The actor Sarah Michelle Gellar who plays the role of Veronika has made an impact on

the audience's heart. She portrays the character in such a way that it leaves a lasting impression. Multi-dimensional characters often pose contradictions or complex traits. They could be brave and fearful, kind but occasionally cruel, or confident with hidden insecurities. These contradictions make them more realistic and relatable. Characters with depth could have unique quirks, habits, or idiosyncrasies that set them apart. These idiosyncrasies can help define their personality and create memorable, distinctive characters.

Characters often gain depth when they interact with others who contrast them. Veronika interacts with Zedka, Mari, and Edward. This helps Veronika to learn about expressing her feelings without the fear of being judged. These relationships can highlight different facets of a character's personality and provide growth opportunities. Both in literature and film, using vivid imagery to describe a character's physical appearance, surroundings, and actions could provide depth and help readers or viewers visualize them more distinctly.

Aesthetic appeal in film adaptations of novels refers to the visual and sensory elements that contribute to the overall beauty, atmosphere, and impact of the film. It is about how the filmmakers use various artistic techniques to make the movie visually captivating and evoke emotions in the audience.

The film might use visual metaphors to represent the protagonist's mental state and emotional journey. This could include surreal or dreamlike sequences that convey Veronika's inner thoughts and struggles. In the climax scene of the movie, Veronika and Edward escape from Villette. Edward takes her restaurant and then to the beach. They watch the sunset together. This is a visual metaphor that conveys the message that there is still hope.

Aesthetic choices in terms of color can be used to symbolize different aspects of the story. Warm colors used in cinema might represent life and vitality, while cool colors could symbolize a sense of detachment or confinement. When the movie starts the color that is chosen for Veronika's room in the movie is Green. The green color symbolizes detachment and confinement. She tries to commit suicide because she feels trapped inside her monotonous life. She

is detached from reality and she is unaware of the consequences of her actions. Throughout the movie the color palette switches between blue and green. The hospital where Veronika is admitted also has a Green color. This symbolizes the struggle that patients go through while being confined at the hospital. At the end of the movie the color palette changes from green to orange. Edward and Veronika escape the mental intuition and watch the sunset. The orange color represents life and vitality. These are the advantages of novels adapted into the film version. Novels might take the readers to a different world but only film could give a long-lasting visual impact of the story.

The disadvantage of a movie taken into film is changes in location or settings. Novels could provide intricate details about characters, settings, and inner thoughts that might not be fully conveyed in a film due to time constraints. This loss of depth could impact the audience's understanding of the story. Veronika's monologues explain her actions. The movie has skipped the part where Veronika questions the existence of God. Veronika states

"If God exists, and I truly don't believe he does, he will know that there are limits to human understanding. He was the one who created this confusion in which there is poverty, injustice, greed, and loneliness. He doubtless had the best intentions, but the results have proved disastrous; if God exists, He will be generous with those creatures who chose to leave this Earth early, and he might even apologize for having made us spend time." (VD7)

From the above quotes, it is evident that Veronika is confused. She is upset that God could not solve problems like poverty, injustice, greed, and loneliness. She knows that suicide is considered a sin but she wants God to forgive her. This shows the intensity of Veronika's mental state. It has also omitted the part where Veronika ponders upon various ideas like shooting herself, jumping off a high building, and hanging. People who might not have read the novel may not understand the intensity of the situation.

Novels often allow for in-depth- exploration of multiple character's thoughts and perspectives. In a film, the internal perspective is more challenging to

covey, potentially resulting in a shift in the audience's understanding of characters and their motivations. In the film, only Veronika's character is given importance. All the other characters such as Zedka, Edward, and Mari are given less importance. Zedka's husband was called up into the army when Slovenia decided to separate from Yugoslavia. When the war ends her husband safely returns which relieves her from loneliness. Zedka thought it is unjust to label a whole nation as a criminal because of the foolishness of a few people. She writes about it in newspapers. None of Zedka's action changes anything and the foreigner believes that the Serbs were responsible for the atrocities. One evening she walks past the statue of Preseren, the great Slovene poet, which reminds her of her past love life. She becomes obsessed with the idea of finding impossible love. She starts to write letters to a person whose whereabouts are unknown. She decides to get on a plane without knowing the destination. When she has failed in all her attempts to find her ex-lover, she locks herself inside the room. She stops eating food and even she behaves so rudely that she slaps one of her children. When the author describes Zedka's character he states "The children no longer came into her bedroom, ever since she had slapped one of them for no reason, and then knelt, kissed his feet, begging forgiveness, tearing her nightdress into shreds to show her despair and repentance." (VD53) This incident shows the mental state of Zedka and helps the audience to understand her story. Zedka's husband takes her to Villette to examine her. Dr. Igor says that she is diagnosed with depression.

A minor character Mari who has been a lawyer for forty years decides to give up her work as a lawyer and joins the humanitarian organization. The rumors about the civil war affect her mind. Mari watches a film with her husband about poverty in El Salvador. She is worried about how children are forced to live on the streets and turn into prostitution. She is tired of struggling with bureaucracy and lawsuits and understands her inability to help people resolve their problems for years. She joined Red Cross to solve the problem but the El Salvador government did not allow her. Mari's heart began to beat rapidly and she was unable to breathe. Her surroundings blur and she thinks that it is a heart attack. But her husband takes her to Dr. Igor, and he diagnoses her with a panic

attack, which results in her loss of livelihood even her husband frees her from their marital relationship. This is another ill effect of panic attacks. Her suffering of losing her job is shown through this quote. Mari asks her colleague to give her one more chance She states "You were the one who had suggested I get treatment when I was considering retirement, my idea was to leave on a high note, fulfilled, having made a free, spontaneous decision. I don't want to leave my job just like that, defeated. At least give me a chance to win back my self-esteem, and then I'll ask to retire."(VD115) This character's background story is omitted in the film. They are important because they portray how despite all adversity they try to become a better person.

Literary adaptation in Film is a boon because it gives a visual treat that the novel could not. It kindles the people to read novels who do not read novels. It is not only a boon it is also a bane because even a minor character should capture a place in the movies as they might leave imprints in the audience. Tan Cenk, a scholar of film and literature, claims that "Film is the most powerful medium of storytelling and the foremost conveyor of narratives that reaches millions of people. Film's artistic qualities, its interrelation with literature, particularly via adaptation ensures the popularity of the genre" (46) In a world where digital media often takes precedence, literary adaptations can encourage people to explore the source material, thus promoting reading and literacy.

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