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### Magical Realism In *Veronika Decides To Die*

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#### Abstract

*Veronika Decides to Die* tells the story of a young woman transformation from despairing would be suicide to affirm and then affirming survivor. This novel offers an archetypal story of hope, portraying a situation in which joy, freedom and integrity limiting circumstances. In doing so, the narrative thematically explores Nature of Insanity, Self- Realization, Self-Actualization and Quest for Meaning in Life. The importance of living a genuine life and threats to individual identity imposing by closed communities and the rules which they function. The narrative begins on 11<sup>th</sup> December 1997, with Veronika's taking four packets of sleeping pills and with a description of her reason for wanting to end her life and choosing for this particular method for doing so. As she waits for the moment to die, she happens to read a French magazine that poses such a strong question that Where Slovenia is. She decides to write a letter to the protest to the magazine's editor. She thought no one ever knows where Slovenia is. Though she becomes less amused and more uneasy finally reacting with fear to the idea that she is about to die.

**Keywords:** *Magical Realism, dream, travel, black magic.*

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#### 1. Magical Realism in *Veronika Decides to Die*

In this novel, Coelho portrays the lopsided, one dimensional being, who exhausts herself in catering to her body than to her soul. She puts her corporeal concerns above anything else and always looks for an easy option that is hassle-free and nearest to hand. It is this concern that makes her settle with an ordinary job of the public library. A stranger to struggle, she never grows and spends all her energy in ensuring that her life continues exactly as it always has. She prefers staying in a convent and adhering to its fixed schedule. She has spent “so many years of going straight from work to a bar, from that bar, to the bed of some lover, from his bed to her room, from her room to her mother's house”(35). It is the sameness of her days that gets her into believing that each day is the same as another. Veronika has a natural passivity that makes her perceive life as, “always a matter of waiting for the right moment to act” (3). Even though if she sees through to some matters; they are all trivial ones like, “prolonging a quarrel that could easily have been resolved with an apology, or not phoning a man she was in love with, simply because she thought the relationship would lead nowhere”(60).

In fact, Veronika is highly pretentious. She tries to appear strong and indifferent whereas she is just a fragile woman, who has never been an outstanding student, never excelled at school sports and never managed to keep peace at home. Moreover she endeavours to appear independent but is desperately in need of company. In struggling to create an impression that she is a woman to be envied, she is forced to behave in accordance with self-created plastic image which does not allow her to be herself. She leads an artificial life that registers no growth or change but always remains the same and turns meaningless. She lives on the plane material existence utterly devoid spirituality which involves a search for direction, purpose and meaning pertained to the deepest dimension of human existence. According to Dr. Elena Lugo, a member of the philosophy department at the University of Puerto Rico,

Spirituality is the pursuit of meaning of an intimation of purpose and sense of vital connection to one's ultimate environment- the dimension of depth in all of life's endeavours and institutions. In short, spirituality functions as a principle of enlightenment, integration and finality without which out self-reflection, self-realization and self-surrender would become superficial, chaotic and aimless.( 65)

From this perspective, Veronika's life appears largely superficial for it lacks the depth of the spirit. It is aimless for it moves within the sameness of routine like a machine and leads nowhere. So with superficiality and aimlessness defining her existence, it is all set for a chaos. Besides, the meaninglessness of her life deprives her of psychological health that comes with spirituality. *Veronika* is bored, feels powerless and has no regard for her existence. The researches associated with quest for meaning in life strongly support the importance of human life. An eminent psychiatrist Irvin Yalom significantly holds that the quest for a meaning in life is not only a matter of personal wellness but is also a matter of life and death. Thus oscillating between the life and death, Veronika gets confined to an atmosphere of non conformity of a mental asylum called Villette. Always following the manual of good behavior, she is now left to follow some seven days of her life with an irreversibly damaged heart. What initially exasperates and later enchants her is the atmosphere of absolute freedom that stands in sharp contrast to bondage of her day to day life.

Veronika strangely observes that in leading a life without emotions and following the rigid timetables without rest. She has actually been leading a life without emotions and following the rigid timetables without rest. She has actually been leading an abnormal life, incongruously, what she finds normal is the life of Villette, where people do not follow the rigorous routine or stop doing something they were enjoying, just to be nice to others. As the world of the mad begins unfolding its privileges to Veronika, she gradually regrets not being mad or having done anything mad. But the immensely provocative surroundings of the mental asylum do not let her retain her natural passivity for long and she gets down to reacting or rather playing mad.

Veronika's stay at Villette registers a remarkable evolution of her "self- culminating in quest for meaning in life, which is quite in adherence to the essence of spirituality that involves a search for one's true self. This can comprehensively be sketched through the hierarchy of needs in human development by a neo-Freudian and a leading American exponent of humanistic psychology, Abraham Maslow. According to Maslow, people have an intrinsic tendency towards "Self-realization. He says self-realization is the intrinsic growth of what is already in the organism, or more accurately, of what the organism is"(Maslow, Theory of Hierarchy Needs). It is the tendency to develop one's capabilities in ways that enhances the self. This tendency creates a sense of congruence or integration with in the person. It is reached after meeting the other four needs of that cascade upwards within the pyramid from physiological safety to belongingness and to self-esteem. Maslow's theory of Basic Needs is generally portrayed as a fairly rigid hierarchy. , though he found that the fulfillment of these needs does not always follow the same sequence. However, when the lower needs are met, one is free to focus on the higher ones and attain self-realization. It is a process of growth or a movement towards "full humanness" which Maslow also names as meta motivation.

It is noteworthy that Veronika's admitted to Villette is backed by awareness of her imminent death. Her days in the hospital begin with the fulfillment of her physiological needs related to rest and sleep. Stimulated by an overdose of sleeping pills, sleep has a miraculous effect of someone like her "who was used to a life without great emotions but with rigid timetables for rest" (26). Though Veronika constantly reminds herself that "I'm not here to preserve my life, but to lose it" (33). During her stay at Villette, Veronika's life changes to a great extent. "he knew that failed suicides tend to repeat the attempt sooner or later. Why not use her as a guinea pig, to see if he could eliminate the vitriol, or bitterness, from her organism?" (189). He considers Veronika "a heaven-sent opportunity in the shape of a would-be suicide; he was not going to lose this opportunity for all the money in the world" (67). Therefore he fakes upon her the news of her near death.

When he tells her that she is about to die in a week. To add the colour of reality to his prophecy he uses some drug with which he manages to stimulate the effects of heart attacks and impress upon Veronika, the shrinking days of her remaining life. Actually there had been absolutely no damage to her heart and no problem with her health, but Dr. Igor makes up this story to make her realize the meaning and lost importance of life. He wants to prove that the cure to bitterness, the cure to apathy, the indifference people feel towards life lies in an awareness of life itself because he knows "the great problem with poisoning by Bitterness was that the passions, hatred, love, despair, enthusiasm, curiosity also ceased to manifest themselves. After a while, the embittered person felt no desire at all. They lacked the will either to live or to die" (Coelho 81). And so he observes how Veronika behaves, how she lives from that point onwards. Dr. Igor's trick towards and gradually Veronika starts seeing the world around her with new eyes. In the constant awareness of life, she begins to re-evaluate her life.

She realizes that she has nothing more to lose and can therefore do what she wants and be who she wants without having to worry about what others think of her, because nobody criticizes a madwoman.

"She was now experiencing something she had never dreamed of :  
a mental hospital, madness, an insane asylum,  
where people were not ashamed to say they were mad,  
where no one stopped doing something  
they were enjoying just to be nice to others" (Coelho 35-36)

So in her last few days she indulges in all that she had deprived herself of, like playing the piano, her desires, openly displaying hurt, anger, love and frustration that she kept contained inside for her twenty-four years. In this state of being alive, with each second passing, she discovers what was wrong with her past life. During her stay in Villette Veronika's life changes to a great extent. She begins to question her existence and ideas about life. Her presence there, especially the fact that she just has a week to live, affects all of the mental hospital patients. She meets several other inmates who unknowingly make a big impact on her life, and as her spirit awakens she in turn, though unconsciously, begins to make a visible difference to their lives. Every person Veronika meets at Villette changes her view of life; since her life is changing and she is gaining a new vision of life, her wish to die gradually disappears. Now Veronika wishes to have a chance to live in an altogether different manner compared to the way she lived in her past, because meeting, Villette's patients taught her something important that she did not know living around normal people, people who have become so habitual of behaving in a typical customary way that they have forgotten their uniqueness. She finds new sense of freedom, independence, free from any compulsions or duties, commitments which did not exist in the sane world.

In the asylum she gets a chance to meet an important character in the novel, Eduard, a schizophrenic artist who has spent his life denying love. In the asylum she gets a chance to meet three most important characters of her life who serve as a medium for her self-reflection: Zedka, the depressed housewife, Mari, the lawyer who gave up her dreams when she came to suffer from panic attacks and Eduard who is a schizophrenic artist who has spent his life denying love. All these three people have their own stories of coming to Villette and after reading their story the reader certainly feels and shares their experience and realizes that these three are just normal, while the outside world identifies them simply as mad people.

These three persons become the reason where Veronika understands that the every second of existence is worth living, it is a choice that we make between living and dying.

During her first conscious night in the asylum, she meets Zedka. Though married with children Zedka had become obsessed with a former lover, frantically but unsuccessfully searched for him, and was even prepared to give up her family, her children, everything for him. She was convinced that he was also desperately looking for her. Veronika learns from Zedka that some patients pretend to be mad in order to exactly what they want. But Zedka's life futile search led to depression and finally she was admitted in the asylum. She experiences 'astral' journeys during the course of her treatment and explores the world around herself in a way that was strange by all standards. She becomes a friend to Veronika and on the day of her release, she leaves her with the thoughts of inexhaustible and reasonless love. She makes Veronika realize that the deep inner desires that are rooted within us form a hidden but an essential part of our personality. Such desires should be understood and analyzed without fail. The fear of things going wrong, reaction of others, of society, parents, husband, wife etc should not prevent one's soul to enjoy freedom and do whatever he likes. So during the last days of her life Veronika decided to discover herself, her dreams, her joys, her desires, her love, her sorrow, her pain, her hatred. She allows herself to live completely because she might not have another chance: "She felt like going over to the piano in the lounge, and celebrating that night with a lovely sonata she had learned at school. Looking up at the sky, she had an indescribable sense of well-being, as if the infinite nature of the universe had revealed her own eternity to her" (Coelho57).

On the other hand, Zedka decides to leave her depression in the asylum but carries with her all other sorts of madness which now will be normal for her and others. She says;

When I came here, I was deeply depressed. Now I'm proud to say I'm mad. Outside I'll behave exactly like everyone else. I'll go shopping at the supermarket, I'll exchange trivialities with my friends, I'll waste precious time watching television. But I know that my soul is free and that I can dream and talk with other worlds which before I came here, I didn't even imagine existed. (VDD 148)

Veronika also meets Mari, who stays at the expenses of the state due to the hospitals familiarity, and who behave like dangerously violent insane persons whenever there is a government inspection. Mari who is a successful lawyer, enters the asylum as a panic attack patient. Though her state is completely earlier due to her illness. Before coming to Villete Mari had "decided to give up the tedious, unending job of being a lawyer in order to dedicate the rest of her days to working for some humanitarian organization" (Coelho 103). She wanted to go against the norm of being a successful lawyer and live life to the fullest by fulfilling her cherished desires. She wanted to work for the starving children of El Salvador who "were forced to live on the streets and turn to prostitution" (Coelho 103). As she says: "When I was still a young lawyer, I read some poems by an English poet, and something he said impressed me greatly: Be like the fountain that overflows, not like the cistern that merely contains" (Coelho 180-81). But when she could not stand up against social norms she started having panic attacks and consequently bowed down before the societal pressure and prevalent beliefs. And thus she was thwarted from becoming "the fountain that overflows" (Coelho 180-81). But now learning from her own experience she teaches Veronika to push herself beyond her boundaries and urges her to experience highest pleasure.

She urges her to be true to her own self instead of getting bogged down other people's opinions and fancies. She makes Veronika understand that "her parents would still have loved her, but afraid of hurting them, she had not dared to pay the price of her dream, the dream that was buried in the depths of her memory...". "Veronika had known since childhood that her true vocation was to be pianist" (Coelho 85). Through her own story, Mari helps Veronika recognize "the hundreds of other Veronikas who lived inside her and who were interesting, mad, curious, brave, and bold" (Coelho 62), Veronikas she could love. In the end, inspired by Veronika's courage to live each day as it comes, Mari decides to

leave the asylum and follow her heart and free her soul by working for the children of war-torn Sarajevo. She asks:

“Where is my soul?’ Mari asked again.  
 ‘In my past. In what I wanted my life to be.  
 I left my soul captive in that moment when  
 I still had a house, a husband, a job I wanted to  
 leave but never had the courage to..... The death of  
 that young girl made me understand my own life” ( VDD155)

Veronika’s life changes when she meets Eduard, a schizophrenic, whose madness was, according to the doctor’s report, beyond cure. Being the son of a diplomat, he had seen all comforts in life but his road accident changes his life. He gets inspired by the lives of great visionaries such as Jesus Christ, Darwin, Freud, Columbus and Marx “whose ideas had shaken the world people with their own vision on earthy Paradise” (Coelho 165) and desires to create his own visions of paradise through his paintings. But this leads him to have “endless arguments with his family” (132) and ultimately ends up in the asylum as a schizophrenic. When Veronika meets Eduard he is seen as inching towards the point of dying hunger because he has stopped eating. But when Veronika creates music on the piano, he listens to her as if he is under some magical influence. On her part, Veronika “had finally realized her dream: to play with her heart and soul, for as long as she wanted and whenever the mood took her. It did not matter to her that her only audience was a young schizophrenic; he seemed to understand the music, and that was what mattered” (102).

Each night Eduard waits for her to play and loses all his sorrows and worries in the rhythm of the notes. The playing of the piano by Veronika in a starry night with only Eduard for company is touching. Eduard falls in love with Veronika and the story gets more interesting for us to know if she would live. Eduard is the person who incites the understanding of life in Veronika. Though he does not do anything, Veronika gets sexually awakened before him and surrenders herself completely before him. Unlike others Eduard does not judge her and it is only the feelings of love and tenderness that she could see in his eyes. Veronika had concealed her hidden desires even from herself till now and now with this newfound freedom of Villete she begins to experience all the things she never allowed herself to experience. And when she has just about twenty-four hours left for death as per Doctor Igor that she realizes life. She says to the doctor:

I want to ask two favours. First, that you give me some  
 Medication, an injection or whatever, so that I can stay awake  
 And enjoy every moment that remains of my life. I’m very  
 tired, but I don’t want to sleep. I’ve got a lot to do, things that  
 I always postponed for some future date, in the days when  
 I thought life would last forever. Things I’d lost interest in, when  
 I started to believe that life wasn’t worth living. (127)

And her second favour would be:

I want to leave here so that I can die outside. I need to  
 Visit Ljubljana Castle. It’s always been there and I’ve never  
 Even had the curiosity to go and see it close to. I need to talk  
 to the woman who sells chestnuts in winter and flowers in  
 spring. We passed each other so often, and I never once asked  
 her how she was. And I want to go out without a jacket and  
 walk in the snow, I want to find out what extreme cold feels  
 like, I, who was always so wrapped up, so afraid of catching  
 a cold. (127)

In short Dr.Igor,

I want to feel the rain on my face, to smile at any man  
 I feel attracted to, to accept all the coffees man might buy for me.  
 I want to kiss my mother, tell her I love her, weep in her lap,  
 unashamed of showing my feelings, because they were always  
 there even though I hid them. I might go into a church and look at those  
 I might go into a church and look at those images that never  
 Meant anything to me and see if they say something to me now.  
 If an interesting man invites me out to a club, I'll accept, and I'll dance  
 all night until I drop. Then I'll go to bed with im, but not the way I used  
 to go bed with other men, trying to stay in control, pretending things  
 I didn't feel. I want to give myself to one man, to the city,  
 to life and finally, to death. (127)

Dr.Igor wants to convincing that her death is eminent, he has managed to shock Veronika making her want to live, respect life and above all enjoy it, something which life is actually meant for. She always wanted to do things which fascinated her and now she wants to out of Villette to taste them all and to know what life all about is. She not only falls in love with Eduard with all her heart and emotions for the first time and also enjoys it. When she sheds her sexual inhibitions and bares herself and innermost desires to Eduard she manages to free him and meets a Veronika she did not know all her life, yet it existed in her all this time. On the other hand Veronika's tragedy inspires Eduard to enjoy what life had to offer today and he starts believing that her appearance in the asylum is a signal to him to return to Belgrade. Later he sets them both free by escaping from the asylum and embracing love thereby finally "drawing Veronika back into the world" (100). And this is evident when Veronika expresses her heartfelt thanks to Eduard for giving meaning to her life as she swears that he will paint her before she dies. She says:

"Look at my face .....Remember it with the eyes  
 of your soul, so that you can reproduce it one day.  
 If you like that can be your starting point,  
 but you must go back to painting. That is my last request"( 185- 186)

*Veronika* now fully grasps the meaningfulness of her life. At all points in the novel readers can identifies with Veronika. Everyone in this world is so busy playing safe and so busy playing safe and so busy keeping others happy by doing things that are required of them that they stop living for themselves, lose the essence of life: wanting to be different, according to Dr.Igor, becomes a serious illness only when Your force yourself to be the same as everyone else..... It's a distortion of nature; it goes against God's laws, for in all the world's woods and forests. He did not create a single leaf the same as another" (153). However Eduard and Dr.Igor conveyed that they had to write his medical experiment, but he could not notice that Veronika was still there. He had undergone electric shock treatment frequently. Even he was not aware, he taught her the meaning of life. Unlike her monotonous life, she finds the life of a mad quite different, interesting and relaxing so much so that a faint desire to live begins to surface within her. However she also feels challenged in adapting to the new atmosphere and gets confused, tense and exasperated in deciding whether she should enjoy the freedom of a mad person or maintain her former rigid self. She overcomes the thought of her numbered days and is tempted to create her tiny bit of space in the strange community. Thus, she slaps one of the inmates to accord herself a shelter, the status of a mad, amidst the members of Villette and thereby fulfills the second need of safety.

In moving from one need to another, Veronika progresses not only physiologically bt also psychologically. As she caters to outer self and satisfies her basic needs, she also starts exploring her inner unheeded self. This, according to Maslow, is a pre-requisite to self-realization, self-exploration and self-actualization. The deeper self-exploration, the closer one comes to self-actualization. So while, analyzing the sameness of her routine as one of the prime reasons behind her attempted suicide, she repents in these words, "if I had understood earlier that the reason my days were all the same was because I wanted them like that, perhaps..."( 42).

Another significant narrative technique in the novel is how Veronika has realized her life through self-probing is related to discovery of her varied selves. She observes, “When I took the pills, I wanted to kill someone I hated. I didn’t know that other Veronikas existed inside me. Veronika that I could love”(59). This is a remarkable observation that showed what a facade of life she has been leading. By deadening the evolution of other facets of her personality Veronika has made a machine of herself that lacks the qualities of a living and produces monotony and disgust. But since she is brought up like others only to love, to accept and to avoid conflict. She has all her inhibitions and negativities pent up inside her until she lands up in Villette. The characteristic freedom of a mental asylum proves to be acathartic experience for Veronika when she gives vent to her feeling of hatred that she had never allowed herself to feel. Having hatred herself in ways more than one by crying, slapping, refusing to be nice to others, and all for the manner in which she has conducted herself without raveling the brighter aspects of her personality, she now hates her parents. Thus confused and uncontrolled, Veronika cannot help hating her mother for her unconditional love, which she feels is quite unreal, absurd and against the laws of nature. She then hates her father for being so charming and so outgoing with everyone except her mother and so having unleashed her personal hell on her dear ones.

Veronika starts hating everything. She hates the library where she worked, the school where she studied and every single person, who having imparted her with knowledge, made a mountain of trash in her life. As she releases her age-old hatred, there is no more rancour left in her heart, and it gets purged altogether. This makes room for a sense of belongingness, the third need to take its course. Though beset with meaninglessness of existence, Veronika does have a positive frame of mind as she brought out by her fascination for the new moon that keeps growing, expanding and filling the whole of its surface with light before its decline. This attitude becomes instrumental in Veronika’s self-evolution that comes by and by, with the fulfilment of her repressed desires. Moreover, the ways of the mad provide her the necessary courage to do all that she could not even dare to do. Thus, she brings herself to pursuing and realizing her true vocation of a pianist, the desire of which she nurtures since childhood. This in turn paves way for a relationship of love between Veronika. Their affair comes out beautifully in the following lines.

Eduard was the only one capable of understanding that Veronika was an artist. Through the pure emotion of a sonata or a minute she had forged a bond with this man such as she had never known with anyone else. (118)

Veronika is overtaken by love that she says, “I can see love in everything, even in the eyes of a schizophrenic” (122). She accredits love for having regenerated in her the potential of a pianist. She recalls, “A long time ago, when I was just a child, and my mother was forcing me to learn the piano, I said to myself that I would only be able to play it well when I was in love. Last night for the first time in my life, I felt the notes leaving my fingers as if I had no control over what I was doing” (147). She also revels in the miraculous effect of platonic love on her magic performance, when she observes.

A force was guiding me, constructing melodies and chords that I never even knew I could play I gave myself to the piano because I had just given myself to this man, without him even touching a hair on my head( 147)

But before Veronika begins to experience love, she decides to get rid of the fears and preconceptions on which she had been feeding continuously and that eventually limited her existence. She makes up her mind to discover how far she can go in matters of sex and pleasure. Thus stimulated by the freedom accorded to her as a mad person, she begins masturbating before Eduard without even involving him directly. In a moment of ecstasy, *Veronika* goes curiously paradoxical and imagines herself to be,

both queen and slave, dominatrix and victim in her imagination, she was making love with men of all skin colours –white, black, yellow-with homosexuals and

beggars. She was anyone could do anything  
 to her she had one, two, three orgasms one after the  
 other she imagines everything she had never imagined  
 before and she gave herself to all that was most base .... (121-122)

On viewing Veronika's experience in the light of Maslow's theory hierarchy of needs, everyone clearly recognizes it as "peak experience". It is as good as a moment of self-realization", when the person typically feels better, stronger, unified and the world also appears to him more organized and honest Maslow finds that peak-experiences have most of the characteristics traditionally ascribed to religious experiences have most of the characteristics traditionally ascribed to religious experiences. He observes,

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Practically everything that happens in the peak-experiences,  
 Naturalistic though they are, could be listed  
 under the headings of religious happenings or indeed  
 have been in the past considered to be only religious  
 experiences For instance, it is quite characteristic in  
 peak-experiences that the whole universe is perceived as  
 an integrated and unified whole. ( Religions, Values, and Peak  
 Experiences, 65)

In this respect, Veronika's visualization of herself as both queen and slave, of her making love with one and all, and her eventual submission to the most base and the most pure lends ample credence to Maslow's instance of an integrate universe. Through her peak –experience she is apparently transcending the dichotomies, polarities and conflicts of life. She tends to be the world in experiencing universality and eternity. Veronika can be seen as a unique and sacred person who has virtually scaled the heavenly heights. Maslow's remark confirms this state of transcendence when he says, "I have likened the peak experience in a metaphor to a visit to a personally defined heaven from which the person returns to earth" (Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences, 72).

Though, having experienced moments of intense, joy, wonder, awe and ecstasy, Veronika feels inspired, strengthened, renewed. She is actually transformed as she has met her lower needs and freed herself of apprehensions and prejudices. Finding herself on the verge of self-realization, she observes, "I was not myself yesterday, not when I gave myself over to sex when I played the piano and yet I think I was myself" (VDD 147). Strangely enough Veronika who once said, "I am not some tame mad woman who's afraid of everything. I'm raving, hysterical, I don't even respect my own life or the lives of others" (58), now repents saying, "I should have been madder" (85).

## 2. Conclusion

The nature of insanity is inevitable narrative element in this novel. Being madness acquires a therapeutic nature for a person like Veronika, who had buried her real self beneath the facade of her



“mediocre existence” (181). However, the awareness of an impending death and the maddening freedom of a lunatic asylum, goad her into discovering within herself, hundreds of other Veronikas, who are interesting, mad, curious, brave and bold. In the process she openly voices pain, anger, frustration, love and her most intricate desires that have remained bottled inside her for past twenty-four years. Accomplishing the fourth need she now learns to respect herself, holds her existence in esteem and nurtures a desire to live. Veronika meets all her lower needs. She becomes free to allow the real “I” to reveal itself. The Young woman’s case, though, was dramatic because she was so young and because she now wanted to live again, something they all know to be impossible. Some people asked themselves ‘What if that happened to me? I do have a chance to live. Am I making good use of it?’ (101).

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