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Between Inner Utopia and Existential Despair: A Positive-Psychological and Existential Analysis of Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* and *Veronika Decides to Die*

Mr. Abhinav Singal
Ph.D. Research Scholar,
Department of English,
Baba Mastnath University,
Rohtak-124021, Haryana, India.
bssingal.sai@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0008-8126-2833

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Abstract:
This paper examines how Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* and *Veronika Decides to Die* represent the search for meaning through contrasting experiences of hope, despair, and personal change. It uses a qualitative, comparative reading informed by literary criticism, positive psychology, and existential thought. The analysis focuses on purpose, agency, freedom, mortality, suffering, and transformation. "Inner utopia" is understood not as perfect happiness but as an imagined possibility of living with greater purpose and authenticity. "Existential despair," by contrast, refers to a crisis in which familiar assumptions about life lose their force; it is used as a literary concept rather than a clinical diagnosis. Santiago's journey presents purpose as something pursued through action, uncertainty, and encounters with the world. Veronika's crisis challenges her assumptions about ordinary life and prompts her to reconsider her possibilities. Although the protagonists begin from different positions, both narratives explore how experience can unsettle established beliefs and alter a person's relationship with the future. The comparison suggests that Coelho presents meaningful living not as constant happiness or certainty, but as an ongoing engagement with choice, vulnerability, and possibility.

Keywords: *The Alchemist*, *Veronika Decides to Die*, positive psychology, existential thought, meaning in life, hope, despair, agency, self-transformation.

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1. Introduction

Literature about the search for a better life often explores the distance between the life people imagine and the life they actually lead. An imagined future can provide direction, but pursuing it may also involve risk, sacrifice, and disappointment. In fiction, a crisis that seems to close off the future can expose assumptions that have limited a character's choices. This tension appears in Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* and *Veronika Decides to Die*. In *The Alchemist*, Santiago, a young shepherd, leaves familiar surroundings to pursue a recurring dream. In *Veronika Decides to Die*, Veronika's belief that her life has lost its value brings her into confrontation with mortality and with the question of what makes life worth living.

In this paper, "inner utopia" refers to an imagined but flexible possibility of living with greater purpose and authenticity. It does not mean a perfect world or permanent happiness. Rather, it describes a life that feels more meaningful and remains worth pursuing despite uncertainty.

"Existential despair" refers to a crisis in which familiar explanations and routines no longer seem convincing. The term is used as an interpretive concept, not as a clinical diagnosis. Veronika's fictional experience should therefore not be reduced to a psychological case, and Santiago's journey should not be treated as a universal formula for success.

The study compares how the novels connect aspiration with encounters with uncertainty, suffering, and mortality. It also considers how symbolism, narrative structure, and setting shape the protagonists' different paths toward self-understanding. Positive psychology provides concepts for discussing purpose and well-being, while existential thought helps frame questions of freedom, responsibility, and finitude. These perspectives are used to interpret the novels, not to treat fictional characters as research participants.

The paper proceeds in stages. The literature review outlines scholarship on Coelho and research on meaning, suffering, and well-being. The theoretical framework defines the concepts used in the close reading, followed by a description of the comparative method. The analysis then

examines Santiago's pursuit of his Personal Legend and Veronika's confrontation with mortality before comparing the novels' treatment of hope, despair, agency, and meaning.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Coelho Scholarship: Symbol, Spirituality, and the Journey

Scholarship on *The Alchemist* has often examined its symbolism and spiritual dimensions. Studies of spiritual change and alternative spiritualities consider how Coelho brings individual desire into contact with religious, philosophical, and cultural traditions (Bhatnagar; Lätzel). Work on cultural hybridity and magical language offers a way to examine how the novel brings different traditions into a shared narrative space (Hart). Studies of Middle Eastern storytelling in Latin America, mystical analogy, and perennial philosophy further contextualise its intercultural references (Zaryab; Resheq; Safaei, "*The Zahir*"; Safaei, "*Aleph*"). Readings that connect the novel with Sufi thought and other spiritual traditions add useful perspectives, provided they remain attentive to the novel's particular characters, scenes, and narrative structure.

Comparative studies of archetypal journeys and self-realisation place Coelho's fiction within wider patterns of personal transformation (Güven and Kırmızı). Such comparisons are useful for identifying recurring narrative structures, although similarities between works do not make their meanings identical.

Recent studies discuss freedom, hope, faith, and the aspirations of young readers in *The Alchemist* (Ibrahimova; Ampo). This scholarship suggests that Santiago's journey involves more than leaving home: he must interpret signs, respond to other people, and make decisions without any guarantee of success. Scholarship on *Veronika Decides to Die* appears more limited in the sources reviewed for this paper. Agis examines the novel's use of ecological metaphors in its representation of suicide and life. That discussion is relevant to the present study because

it considers how the narrative represents despair and renewed attention to life. The comparison developed here places Veronika's crisis alongside Santiago's search for meaning while preserving the distinct ethical and narrative concerns of each novel.

2.2 Positive Psychology, Meaning, and Well-Being

Positive psychology offers concepts for discussing strengths, purpose, personal resources, and well-being without assuming that a good life must be free of pain. The distinction between hedonic well-being, associated with pleasure and positive feeling, and eudaimonic well-being, associated with purpose and growth, is useful for reading these protagonists. Santiago seeks more than immediate happiness; Veronika's crisis raises the question of whether a life that appears acceptable from the outside can nevertheless feel empty. Work on meaning in positive and existential psychology explores how people understand purpose and respond when their sense of coherence is challenged (Kim et al.). Research on coping, psychological flexibility, spirituality, and self-transcendence offers further conceptual context. These studies inform the vocabulary of the analysis, but they do not establish what fictional characters experience in clinical terms.

2.3 Existential Psychology, Suffering, and Finitude

Existential philosophy examines how people confront freedom, responsibility, uncertainty, isolation, and death. Distress may arise not only from adverse circumstances but also from the collapse of an established explanation of one's life. Wong's work on existential positive psychology and meaning therapy explores how meaning-making can connect hardship with human potential (Wong, "Existential Positive Psychology"; Chang). Wong and Yu, as well as Kaftanski and Hanson, discuss the relationship among suffering, authenticity, and meaning without equating well-being with the absence of existential difficulty. Research on

meaningfulness, death, and finitude also considers why awareness of mortality can sharpen questions about what makes life significant (Peltomäki). These ideas help frame Veronika's crisis, but they do not justify treating distress as inherently beneficial. Nor should Veronika's experience be interpreted through the same optimistic assumptions that shape Santiago's journey.

2.4 Broader Contexts of Meaning and Flourishing

The literature reviewed here falls into two broad groups. Research on Coelho considers symbolism, fate, spirituality, free will, cultural hybridity, and the relationship between his fiction and spiritual traditions. Read together, these studies suggest that Santiago's journey involves both personal choice and inherited frameworks of meaning (Sebastian, "Relevance of Symbols"; Sebastian, "Rethinking Fate"; Al-Shara et al.; Hart; Zaryab). Comparisons between *The Alchemist* and the *Bhagavad Gita* explore spiritual parallels (Parvathy et al.), while studies of Coelho's other works provide context for his use of spiritual synthesis (Rajkumari et al.). These parallels should not be taken to mean that the texts or traditions are interchangeable.

A second group of studies examines meaning, existential anxiety, and well-being in social or clinical settings. Research on existential positive psychology and meaning-centred approaches considers how people negotiate purpose amid hardship and uncertainty (Wong, "Existential Positive Psychology"; Wong, "Viktor Frankl's Meaning-Seeking Model"; Wong and Yu; Kaftanski and Hanson; Nel and Govender; Doyle and Lacroix; Stauner et al.). Studies of nature connectedness and eco-existential psychology discuss relationships between natural environments, meaning, and existential anxiety (Aruta; Passmore and Howell; Passmore et al.). Such work can clarify concepts used in the present analysis, but it cannot serve as direct evidence for the symbolic meaning of the desert or the institution in Coelho's novels.

Together, these strands support a comparative close reading of how scenes, symbols, and character decisions shape ideas of purpose, freedom, death, and transformation. The analysis distinguishes Santiago's quest from Veronika's crisis and considers how each novel reopens questions about meaning without presenting either story as a universal route to well-being.

2.5 Research Gap and Rationale

The relevant scholarship includes literary studies of Coelho's fiction, theoretical work on meaning and existential-positive psychology, and empirical research on well-being in different contexts. These bodies of work serve different purposes and should not be treated as interchangeable. This paper brings them into a limited dialogue: literary scholarship supports close reading, while psychological and philosophical sources clarify the concepts used to interpret the novels.

The research gap is not an absence of scholarship on hope, meaning, or existential distress. Rather, the paper offers a focused comparison of how these themes operate in *The Alchemist* and *Veronika Decides to Die*. It examines purpose, agency, freedom, suffering, and meaning while attending to the novels' different narrative structures and avoiding claims that literary representation can prove psychological outcomes.

3. Theoretical Framework

The study draws on positive psychology, existential thought, and meaning-centred approaches. These perspectives are used as interpretive lenses rather than diagnostic tools. Five categories guide the close reading: purpose and meaning; hope and despair; agency and freedom; mortality and uncertainty; and self-transformation.

3.1 Purpose and Meaning

Purpose refers to a sense of direction that helps organise choices, while meaning concerns how experience is understood as significant or coherent. The concepts overlap, but they are not identical. A character may pursue a goal without fully understanding its significance, or may lose a previously stable framework of meaning when circumstances change. The distinction between the presence of meaning and the search for meaning is useful for comparing Santiago and Veronika (Steger et al.). Santiago begins with a dream that gives direction to his actions, whereas Veronika initially sees little reason to expect meaning from the future.

3.2 Hope and Despair

In this analysis, hope concerns the possibility of a future that is not yet secured. It gives Santiago a reason to continue, although the novel's optimistic structure also raises the question of whether the universe appears to reward his persistence. A close reading should distinguish hope from a guarantee of success. Research on hope, literary value, optimism, and well-being provides conceptual context for this distinction (Nakagome; Devi and Tyagi; Wong and Yu). Veronika's hopelessness, meanwhile, should not be read as moral weakness. In the novel, it signals a breakdown in the assumptions through which she has understood her life.

3.3 Freedom, Agency, and Constraint

Agency refers to a character's capacity to act, while freedom concerns the range of choices available and the responsibility attached to them. Neither protagonist has unlimited control. Santiago faces material hardship, deception, and chance; Veronika's choices are shaped by social expectations and the institution in which she finds herself. Research on fate and free will in *The Alchemist* helps frame the tension between destiny and personal action (Sebastian, "Relevance of Symbols"; Sebastian, "Rethinking Fate"; Al-Shara et al.). Comparing the

protagonists reveals how each narrative moves between the possibility of acting and the experience of constraint.

3.4 Mortality and Suffering

Mortality changes the meaning of time by making the future finite and the present vulnerable. In *Veronika Decides to Die*, the prospect of death makes ordinary habits and assumptions newly questionable. This paper does not suggest that suicidal crisis is beneficial in real life. Instead, it examines how the novel uses the awareness of mortality as a narrative device that changes Veronika's attention to her relationships and choices. Research on existential suffering and finitude provides concepts for discussing this device without romanticising distress (Wong and Yu; Peltomäki; Kaftanski and Hanson).

3.5 Self-Transformation

Self-transformation refers to a change in how a character interprets experience and engages with life. It may involve revised priorities, new understanding, or a more deliberate response to uncertainty; it does not necessarily mean complete recovery or lasting happiness. This definition allows the paper to compare Santiago's gradual learning through travel with Veronika's rapid reassessment of life under the pressure of mortality, while recognising that the novels offer different emotional and ethical perspectives.

4. Research Method

The study uses a qualitative, interpretive, and comparative approach. Its primary sources are Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* and *Veronika Decides to Die*, treated as literary works rather than clinical case histories. The analysis considers scenes, symbols, narrative structure, character choices, and representations of time, hope, suffering, and meaning.

The method has four stages. First, each novel is read separately to identify scenes and narrative patterns relevant to the five interpretive categories. Second, those scenes are analysed in relation to the role each category plays in the novel. Third, the readings are compared to identify meaningful similarities and differences. Finally, the interpretation is discussed alongside scholarship on Coelho, meaning, well-being, and existential psychology.

Secondary sources are used according to their relevance. Literary studies inform the discussion of symbolism, spirituality, fate, and narrative structure. Psychological and philosophical research clarifies concepts such as eudaimonic well-being, meaning in life, existential anxiety, and suffering. Findings from empirical studies are not applied directly to the fictional characters; they provide context for the concepts used in the analysis.

The study is limited to two novels by one author and a selected group of secondary sources. It does not claim to represent all existential fiction or all experiences of despair. Its theoretical framework is selective, and its conclusions remain interpretive. Quotations should be added only when they can be checked against the editions cited in the references.

5. Inner Utopia in *The Alchemist*: Hope, Purpose, and Self-Realisation

A recurring dream prompts Santiago to question the familiar limits of his life as a shepherd. Although his routine offers a degree of security, the dream suggests that the future may hold possibilities he has not yet explored. By choosing to pursue it, Santiago takes an early step toward agency: he acts without knowing whether the journey will fulfil his expectations.

The idea of a Personal Legend gives the novel a language for purpose. It can be read as a destiny waiting to be discovered, but it can also be understood as a direction whose meaning develops through action, attention, and persistence. Scholarship on fate, symbolism, and free will identifies a similar tension in the novel (Sebastian, “Relevance of Symbols”; Sebastian,

"Rethinking Fate"; Al-Shara et al.). Santiago must interpret signs and make decisions despite uncertainty; the narrative does not remove the need for judgement.

Hope therefore appears as a practice rather than simply a feeling. Santiago leaves home, encounters strangers, experiences loss, and learns to respond to circumstances he cannot control. His time in Tangier, where he is robbed, forces him to choose between abandoning his aim and adapting to a new situation. Working in the crystal shop gives him a way to recover and to reconsider what he wants. Later, the desert journey and his encounters with the alchemist require him to remain attentive while acting without certainty.

The desert intensifies this process. It is a setting of danger, isolation, and exposure, but it also demands patience and observation. Santiago cannot rely on plans alone; he must respond to the world as it unfolds. Studies of magical language, mystical analogy, and spiritual traditions provide context for the novel's symbolic and intercultural elements (Hart; Resheq; Zaryab), while the close reading must still attend to the specific events through which Santiago learns.

Faith helps Santiago continue, but the novel also raises a question about belief and critical judgement. If every obstacle is interpreted as proof that the universe will reward him, the idea of destiny risks becoming unfalsifiable. The novel's optimistic structure is important to its design, but it should not be treated as a universal account of how life works. In reality, effort does not guarantee success. In the novel, however, hope keeps the possibility of change open and allows Santiago to respond to setbacks.

Santiago's development can be considered eudaimonic because it involves purpose, learning, and a changing understanding of himself, rather than the pursuit of pleasure alone. Research distinguishing hedonic happiness from purpose-oriented well-being helps clarify this reading (Wong, "Existential Positive Psychology"; Kim et al.). His "inner utopia" does not depend on perfect comfort; it emerges through his commitment to a meaningful undertaking.

The treasure complicates the relationship between inward change and external achievement. It matters as the material goal of Santiago's journey, yet the journey also changes how he understands the goal. His growth cannot be reduced to finding treasure, although the ending connects the inner and outer dimensions of the quest. The novel's symbols invite readers to consider both what the external journey represents and how its conclusion reshapes the meaning of the experiences that came before.

Coelho's novel draws on a range of spiritual and philosophical references rather than presenting a single, unified doctrine. Studies of Taoism, Sufism, perennial philosophy, and comparative spiritual traditions offer context for this plurality (Sebastian, "Relevance of Symbols"; Sebastian, "Rethinking Fate"; Safaei, "*The Zahir*"; Safaei, "*Aleph*"; Güven and Kırmızı). These traditions should not be collapsed into one message; their relevance lies in the different ways they illuminate the novel's treatment of fate, intention, and discovery.

The novel's hopeful vision also has limits. Its confidence in destiny can understate the roles of social inequality, luck, and unequal access to opportunity. A person may pursue a meaningful goal and still fail to achieve it. Santiago's story is therefore best read as a literary portrayal of purposeful action under uncertainty, not as a promise that determination will always be rewarded.

6. Existential Despair in *Veronika Decides to Die*: Death, Freedom, and Reclaiming Life

In *Veronika Decides to Die*, the central problem is different from Santiago's from the beginning. Veronika's life appears orderly, yet she experiences it as repetitive and empty of significance. Whereas Santiago's dream opens a future he wants to pursue, Veronika initially sees no future that seems worth pursuing. Her crisis makes the gap between social normality and personal experience central to the novel. The awareness of mortality changes how she attends to time, relationships, and decisions. Existential thought helps frame this shift because it asks how

people respond when familiar explanations no longer seem adequate (Wong and Yu; Peltomäki).

After Veronika's suicide attempt and the discovery that her heart has been damaged, the belief that she has little time left changes her relationship with everyday experience. Her interactions with Zedka, Mari, and Eduard expose different responses to social expectations and personal freedom; her renewed engagement with the piano also reconnects her with a part of herself she had neglected. These episodes portray change through attention and behaviour, not as proof that a suicidal crisis is necessary or beneficial. Agis's discussion of ecological metaphors and suicide in the novel is relevant to this reading, but the novel's cathartic structure should not be treated as clinical guidance or as a reason to romanticise suicidal distress.

The institution complicates the question of freedom. The boundary between "normal" and "abnormal" becomes less secure, prompting readers to question whether outward conformity necessarily reflects inner well-being. The other patients' experiences reveal how social labels can oversimplify lives that are more complex than they appear. The institution functions as a narrative setting in which familiar expectations are disrupted, and characters reconsider their choices. This does not mean that institutionalisation itself creates freedom; rather, the setting makes social norms more visible.

Despair matters to the novel because it interrupts automatic ways of living. When familiar explanations no longer seem convincing, Veronika must confront questions about what she values and what alternatives remain possible. This can be compared, cautiously, with the search for meaning discussed in meaning-centred psychology (Steger et al.). The novel challenges the assumption that social acceptability and outward productivity are sufficient measures of well-being. Veronika's apparently orderly life has not given her a stable sense of purpose. Research on meaning, existential anxiety, and psychological flexibility provides concepts for discussing

this tension (David and Truţa; Wąsowicz et al.; Carreño and Pérez-Escobar), but such research cannot explain Veronika as though she were a real clinical subject.

Existential-positive psychology helps avoid two unhelpful readings. One would reduce Veronika's experience to pathology and ignore the novel's philosophical questions; the other would celebrate despair as a route that necessarily produces growth. A more careful interpretation treats her suffering as serious while examining how the narrative represents a renewed awareness of possibility. Scholarship on authenticity, suffering, meaning-centred coping, and self-transcendence supports this distinction (Kaftanski and Hanson; Wong, "Existential Positive Psychology"; Wong et al.). Research conducted in clinical or social settings cannot be transferred directly to fiction, but it can help clarify why suffering and meaning should not be treated as simple opposites.

The two protagonists therefore move toward self-understanding by different routes. Santiago begins with the possibility of a meaningful future and tests it through action; Veronika begins by believing that the future has little to offer, and her crisis unsettles that belief. Her renewed awareness is not a claim that despair is desirable. Rather, the novel questions the assumption that a familiar way of living is the only possible one. Freedom appears as the reopening of choices that had seemed unavailable or unthinkable.

7. Comparative Discussion: Between Hope and Despair

7.1 Two Narrative Routes into Self-Understanding

The novels differ first in their narrative starting points. *The Alchemist* begins with Santiago's dream, while *Veronika Decides to Die* begins with a character who can no longer take everyday life for granted. One novel is structured as a journey; the other centres on a crisis. Both, however, ask whether a life can be lived meaningfully without examining its assumptions.

Santiago tests his dream through experience, while Veronika's crisis forces her to reconsider whether life still holds possibilities.

This contrast presents "inner utopia" as a changing orientation rather than a fixed condition. For Santiago, it is imagined as a future toward which he can move. For Veronika, it becomes conceivable only after her assumptions about the present are disrupted. Neither path should be treated as universal: people find or revise meaning in different ways. Research on cultural understandings of the good life and meaning reinforces the need to avoid a single formula for flourishing (Coetzee et al.; Batthyany and Russo-Netzer; Zhang; Li et al.).

7.2 Hope, Meaning, and the Limits of Optimism

Research on optimism, psychological health, and meaning-centred coping offers useful conceptual parallels, but it does not prove what the novels mean (Devi and Tyagi; Quiroga-Garza et al.; Sanchez-Ruiz et al.). Read in this light, hope is not compulsory positivity or confidence that everything will end well. It is a willingness to remain engaged with possibilities despite uncertainty.

7.3 Agency, Fate, and Social Constraint

Santiago's journey also raises questions about agency and forces beyond individual control. The idea of "maktub" can be read as suggesting that events are written in advance, but the narrative also depends on Santiago's decisions and responses. Scholarship on fate, Taoism, and free will helps clarify this tension (Sebastian, "Relevance of Symbols"; Sebastian, "Rethinking Fate"; Al-Shara et al.). Veronika's choices, meanwhile, are shaped by social expectations and her immediate circumstances.

Agency should not be confused with complete control. A choice may matter even when the available options are constrained. This is one reason not to treat Santiago's journey as a recipe

for everyone: people do not have equal resources or opportunities to pursue their goals. Research on attachment, migration, and meaningfulness highlights the relational and cultural conditions that shape well-being (Lopez; Bobowik et al.; Coetzee et al.).

7.4 Mortality, Suffering, and Transformation

Mortality serves different narrative purposes in the two novels. In *The Alchemist*, the journey is dangerous and uncertain, but its dominant movement is aspirational. In *Veronika Decides to Die*, the prospect of death creates the central crisis and changes the protagonist's sense of time and possibility. Finitude thus functions both as a background to purposeful action and as a force that unsettles familiar assumptions.

Research on existential inquiry, suffering, and meaningfulness addresses similar questions, but it does not establish that suffering inevitably produces growth (Danylova et al.; Peltomäki; Wong and Yu). The novels' representations should be understood as literary constructions, not general rules about real people's lives.

7.5 Meaning as a Journey Rather Than a Destination

The comparison suggests that meaning is not simply a possession or a final state in which all doubt disappears. Santiago's goal acquires significance through the events that change his understanding of it. Veronika's renewed awareness emerges as her view of the life available to her changes. In both novels, transformation involves a new relationship to choice, time, and possibility. Research on meaningfulness, self-transcendence, and well-being can help frame this interpretation without turning the novels into empirical case studies (Wong, "Existential Positive Psychology"; Wong et al.; Glaw et al.). Coelho's fiction thus presents meaningful living as a continuing negotiation between hope and vulnerability.

8. Theoretical Contribution and Implications

This study contributes to comparative literary analysis by reading *The Alchemist* and *Veronika Decides to Die* through a shared framework while preserving their differences. Positive psychology helps identify how purpose and growth shape Santiago's journey, while existential thought clarifies the roles of freedom, uncertainty, responsibility, and death, particularly in Veronika's story. Meaning-centred approaches provide a vocabulary for considering how suffering and flourishing may coexist without assuming that suffering automatically leads to growth.

The study also distinguishes literary interpretation from psychological diagnosis. The protagonists are fictional characters whose experiences are shaped by narrative and aesthetic choices. Research on clinical distress, care, and meaning may broaden the conceptual discussion, but it cannot predict how a real person would respond to similar events (Wong and Yu; Glaw et al.; Carreño and Pérez-Escobar). Research in areas such as education, migration, or health can offer further context only when its relevance to the literary argument is clearly explained.

9. Conclusion

The comparison shows that "inner utopia" is not a promise of perfect happiness but an orientation toward purpose, choice, and a more examined life. Santiago pursues meaning through a journey shaped by aspiration and uncertainty; Veronika's crisis challenges her assumptions about the future and the routines through which she has understood herself. Their experiences differ, but both novels explore how people respond when familiar expectations no longer provide sufficient direction.

The study is limited to two novels and a selected group of secondary sources. Further research could examine additional works by Coelho, consider how translation affects the novels,

presentation of meaning, or compare these texts with other contemporary works of existential fiction. Within its scope, this paper argues that the contrast between inner utopia and existential despair reflects a broader literary concern: how people make choices when the future is uncertain, and the meaning of life can no longer be taken for granted.

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