

**BOREDOM, INSIGNIFICANCE, AND DEATH IN  
VOLTAIRE'S *CANDIDE*, CHARLES BAUDELAIRE'S  
*THE FLOWERS OF EVIL*, AND PAULO COELHO'S  
*VERONIKA DECIDES TO DIE***

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**T**he word “boredom” did not appear in English until 1852 in Charles Dickens’ novel, *Bleak House*, and, even then, it was already being described as a “chronic malady” (“Boredom”). However, the conceptual notion of boredom, especially when considered in combination with its effects on human consciousness, has proven to be a prevailing theme in literature that has surpassed both the barriers of time and culture. Furthermore, it can be contended that ideas concerning boredom have always been linked closely with analogous ideas concerning death. In both Voltaire’s *Candide* (1759) and in Charles Baudelaire’s *The Flowers of Evil* (1857), boredom is depicted as the worst possible mode of all human experience. When following this particular interpretation of boredom, it is not hard to perceive that the malaise boredom brings can be construed as a sensation quite similar to the emptiness that the experience of death is often thought to beget. In Paulo Coelho’s contemporary novel, *Veronika Decides to Die* (1998), Coelho explores the way in which the feelings of boredom negatively shape the lives of the characters within his novel and how these characters feel that death is the only solution to their feelings of despondency. Because of boredom, his main character, Veronika, decides to kill herself. Her fellow patient in the mental asylum, Mari, secludes herself from the real world voluntarily, attempting, in a way, another sort of suicide. Thus, it can be maintained that humans on a collective scale have always subconsciously held a united impression that the natural result of epidemic boredom is death and that the only way that a person will ever be able to enjoy life genuinely is to struggle against the melancholy that can often overwhelm one’s delicate notion of reality.

Throughout Voltaire’s *Candide*, striving and action are at the forefront of the entirety of the novel—that is up until the concluding

scenes in which all of the characters' goals seem to have been met. It is at this point Candide says the old woman asks "the grand question" (127). She inquires, "I would be glad to know which is worse ... in short, to experience all the miseries through which every one us have passed, or to remain here doing nothing?" (127). The old woman feels she would rather experience all the tortures and privations that have led her up to this supposed time of harmony rather than the actual time of harmony itself. The philosophers with Candide respond in kind. Martin, the pessimist, says that "man was born to live in either convulsions of misery, or the lethargy of boredom," while Pangloss "having once stated that everything went on as well as possible . . . still maintained it, and at the same time didn't believe it at all" (127). Although Candide says he does not agree with Martin, he can initially offer no solution. Hence, for a time in this novel, pessimism overwhelms all of the characters. It is not the difficulties or setbacks in their lives that bring about this compounded pessimism either; it is the boredom after these setbacks that allow their thoughts of negativity to become concrete. Arthur Schopenhauer provides one of the best philosophical arguments for pessimism:

Human life must be some kind of mistake. The truth of this will be sufficiently obvious if we only remember that man is a compound of needs and necessities hard to satisfy; and that even when they are satisfied, all he obtains is a state of painlessness, where nothing remains to him but abandonment to boredom. This is direct proof that existence has no real value in itself; for what is boredom but the feeling of the emptiness of life? If life—the craving for which is the very essence of our being—were possessed of any positive intrinsic value, there would be no such thing as boredom at all: mere existence would satisfy us in itself, and we should want for nothing. But as it is, we take no delight in existence except when we are struggling for something; and then distance and difficulties to be overcome make our goal look as though it would satisfy us—an illusion which vanishes when we reach it. (Schopenhauer 103)

Schopenhauer, who is writing approximately 100 years after the old woman's words are spoken in *Candide*, echoes her sentiments. He believes humans are in a constant battle to achieve their desires, obviously feeling as if they are lacking what they want in order to be happy during this process. After they achieve their goals, though, Schopenhauer believes men are no happier than when they had originally begun to attempt to accomplish them. It is at this time when boredom ensues, and thereby men must begin to combat their new senses of unrest. Hence, the philosopher argues that existence is meaningless; after all, to him, man can never attain any real sense of satisfaction. If existence is meaningless, then the question that inevitably follows is: "Why live?" Although Candide cannot offer an answer originally to the queries of the old woman, or to his friends surrounding him, (or

even conceivably to Schopenhauer's pessimism,) he does eventually discover what is, to him, a satisfactory solution.

Candide, Pangloss, and Martin are all invited into the residence of a Turkish Muslim who gives them insight into how he leads his life, and, in doing so, he affects Candide's conceptual worldview deeply. The dervish tells them, "I have no more than twenty acres of ground, the whole of which I cultivate myself with the help of my children, and our labour keeps us from three great evils—boredom, vice, and want" (129). Candide now feels he has an answer to the old woman's problematic quandary. In order to combat boredom, Candide feels that humans must have a purpose; they must work. He recognizes that the dervish is the only man around him who appears to have found a sense of contentment in life. The dervish is not striving for what he does not have; he is enjoying and "cultivating" what he does have. Idleness, to him, is not an option because idleness takes away the ability for humans to experience fulfillment, and, in turn, it brings forth the ability to experience boredom. William F. Bottiglia notes that Voltaire's *Candide* "ends by affirming that social productivity of any kind at any level constitutes the good life, that there are limits within which man must be satisfied to lead the good life, but that within these he has a very real chance of achieving both private contentment and public progress" (118). Therefore, by finding an answer as to how to quell boredom, Candide subsequently finds a reason to live. He realizes he can have a positive life that is not only about experiencing pain or constantly feeling bored. Because of Candide's realization, all of the characters living with Candide begin to feel as if they have purposes as well: "The little society, one and all, entered into this laudable scheme, and each began to exercise his talents" (130). Through work, the characters in *Candide* find the happiness they had always hoped for during all of the times of suffering they had to go through in order to reach this end moment of reprieve. These characters discovered, though, that they did not want nothingness or even just to be together. What they really wanted but had never gotten the chance to have before was the prospect finally to live life—each on his own respective terms and each with his own chosen purpose.

Charles Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil* appears initially to offer a much less optimistic view concerning the ability of humans to cope with the effects of boredom on the human consciousness. In his first poem in the series, "To the Reader," the idea of ennui is automatically entered into his poetry's landscape:

One creature only is most foul and false!  
Though making no grand gestures, nor great cries!  
He willingly would devastate the earth

And in one yawning swallow the world;

He is Ennui!—with tear-filled eye he dreams  
Of scaffolds, as he puffs his water-pipe.  
Reader, you know this dainty monster, too;  
—Hypocrite reader,—fellowman,—my twin! (32-40)

First, it should be noted that the definition of ennui is not just of boredom; rather, it is a feeling of existential emptiness. When man experiences this emotion, he no longer has any will. He desires nothing. Even committing sin is no longer intriguing to him because, presumably, by the time he reaches the state of this horrendous boredom, a man has committed every foul act of which he could have possibly ever conceived. Again, the question that inescapably occurs at the moment one experiences ennui is the one that queries why a person would, in this instance, choose to continue life. In the stanzas cited above, ennui is observably personified as the devil. However, Antoine Fongaro makes the distinction that “L’Ennui personifies not Satan himself but the consequences of his power over man. L’Ennui is as much effect as cause. The most violent activity of l’Ennui, that is to yawn and swallow the world, remains a mere conjecture. Even the horror of execution is vicariously experienced as a dream. The single tear of pity is an accident, not an act of will, and perception of the world is further dulled by the drug tobacco” (96). Baudelaire appears in “To the Reader” to view the devil’s influence as terrifying and unavoidable. Over time, the devil erodes a person’s motivation to live, and perhaps one of the most frightening aspects of this attrition is that Baudelaire illustrates Satan as being so dispassionate in the process. Ennui is boredom in its most repulsive extreme; it is boredom that could undoubtedly lead someone to beg for the release death would bring from its grip.

However, it can be argued that Baudelaire, just as Voltaire does, comes to a determination as to how to resist the effects the state of ennui can have on an individual’s mindset. In “Voyaging,” Baudelaire discusses how man encounters trial after trial on his soul and how hard it is for him not to concentrate on the banalities life presents:

How bitter, what we learn from voyaging!  
The small and tedious world gives us to see  
Now, always, the real horror of the thing,  
Ourselves—that sad oasis in ennui! (109-112)

Once again, Baudelaire asserts humans are despicable creatures who cannot help but to begin eventually wallowing in their boredom and successive degeneracy. The poet does not believe humans recognize their vileness initially; it his post to show them. In this poem, Baudelaire portrays experience after experience of men journeying

from one place to another, learning how different people live and undergoing what it feels like to be in opposing cultures. Yet, the case becomes that it is everywhere that ennui immerses itself into the human soul. There are no cultural or geographical boundaries to the depravity ennui brings to someone's psyche. Finally, though, in the last two stanzas of "Voyaging," it does become reasonable that a solution is come to—a solution in fact that is quite similar to that of *Candide's*. The concluding stanzas of "Voyaging" read:

O Death, old captain, time to make our trip!  
This country bores us, Death! Let's get away!  
Even if sky and sea are black as pitch  
You know our hearts are full of sunny rays!

Serve us your poison, sire, to treat us well!  
Minds burning, we know what we have to do,  
And plunge to depths of Heaven or Hell.  
To fathom the Unknown, and find the *new!* (137-144)

If one is to read this poem as an allegory to the voyage man makes of his own life before death takes it toll, these last stanzas offer the only solid solution available to him. Man must realize death is coming. Whether he wants initially to accept it, ennui is part of human existence. He must acknowledge it. Man is, in fact, made more powerful because he has accepted his role as a human and recognizes fully the baseness that existence provides. If he searches, though, if he brings newness to life by reinterpreting it, if he attempts to find honesty, if, perhaps, he leads the life of an artist, he can reconcile his humanity with the concept of ennui. He can emerge as the victor in the struggle for his soul because he is not denying the truth nor is he merely giving up in the face of it. On the contrary, he is attempting to make ennui part of his daily consciousness and still trying to live life and understand it even while knowing how sordid it can be. His heart remains "sunny" even after he has gone through one terrible experience after another. Lloyd James Austin observes that in these last lines of "Voyaging" "only creative energy is left, an energy unencumbered by delusory expectation" (32). Baudelaire believes, as an artist, he is best equipped to deal with the hardship ennui brings into human existence. He is prepared to confront the unfamiliar because he has no illusions of what life is and what it provides to mankind. He realizes nothing can be worse than facing the awfulness of ennui, and this fact gives him courage. Ultimately, Baudelaire comes to the conclusion that ennui can elicit artistic expression if only it is confronted in the appropriate, fearless manner he knows it can be.

Although they are both French writers, Voltaire and Baudelaire were writing nearly 100 years apart, and their ideas regarding boredom and

its relation to death are definitely not confined to their geographical location. In his novel, *Veronika Decides to Die*, Paulo Coelho corroborates many of their notions of boredom. It is significant to note, therefore, that Coelho is of Brazilian descent and that the novel in question is set in the country of Slovenia—a European nation obviously on a completely different continent than the writer's origin. When the book first appeared in 1998, “with book sales exceeding twenty-seven million in over one hundred countries, Coelho became the second best-selling author worldwide” (“Contemporary Authors,” par. 8). Even in contemporary times, then, how boredom interacts with man's feelings regarding death strikes a chord across cultural and geographical barriers. And, indeed, Coelho does not shy away from the subject. His main character, Veronika, does not attempt to commit suicide because she is depressed in a way that would seem to lend itself to such a drastic resolution. Instead, Veronika feels that she should commit suicide because “everything in her life was the same, and, once her youth was gone, it would be downhill all the way, with old age beginning to leave irreversible marks ... She would gain nothing by continuing to live; indeed, the likelihood of suffering would only increase” (7). Veronika is not unhappy; she is bored. She does not say she feels suffering; she is only worried about the possibility of it in the future. As Michael L. Raposa notes:

Boredom seems to always involve . . . a lack of meaning or value, a cognitive and emotional emptiness, a lack of interest ... This could be because [a] situation itself is not very meaningful or interesting (like waiting in a long line for a very long time), or because a person is incapable of discovering any value or meaning in the situation (like a musically unsophisticated person enduring an evening at the opera, or like listening to a conversation conducted in a foreign language that one does not understand.) (76-77)

Veronika's feelings do seem to lend themselves to Raposa's interpretation of boredom. She no longer finds interest in life because it holds no meaning for her. She has no great passions and only looks toward the future with dread. The natural reaction to boredom, according to Veronika's viewpoint, is to end her life. Boredom, to her, equivocates with an individual's cessation of existence.

Veronika's journey, however, does not end with her surrender to boredom. On the contrary, it is here that Coelho's novel begins. Veronika's suicide attempt lands her in the mental asylum of Villette, and she learns that she is supposed to die in five days from heart complications due to her overdose. At first, Veronika feels she has succeeded in her initial aim, but, slowly, a desire to live begins to overtake her. The first time she feels this desire she is outside, in the sunlight, and she has just realized that she can act however she wants

because she is in a mental asylum: “Veronika stood looking at the mountains beyond the walls of Villete. A faint desire to live seemed about to surface, but Veronika determinedly pushed it away ... She reflected on her situation there; it was far from ideal. Even if they allowed her to do all the crazy things she wanted to do, she wouldn’t know where to start. She had never done anything crazy” (40). Like the speaker in Baudelaire’s poems, Veronika has seen into the depths of the depression boredom can bring out in a person. Her feelings also begin to be akin to his when she begins to fathom that there are new experiences to be had in life—new experiences that she does now wish to address. In Villete, she can act crazy. She can do whatever she wants. She can explore new facets of herself and of life in general. Just as what occurs to the speaker in the last two stanzas of “Voyaging,” Veronika begins to feel hope and to look toward a future of exploration. After being in the hospital for just a few days, Veronika comes to the conclusion that she had always tried “to ensure that her life continued exactly as it always had. She had given up many of her desires so that her parents would continue to love her as they had when she was a child” (43). At this point, Veronika begins to see beyond her fear. She is beginning a path of enlightenment that undercuts the feelings of boredom she formerly could not find the strength to resist.

It is not only the fact that Veronika begins to interpret life differently from her time in Villete that brings about her will to live and her subsequent escape from the death grasp boredom can hold over a person. Veronika also begins to bring art back into her life. Once again, like Baudelaire, Coelho’s protagonist discovers she views life in a more meaningful, rich manner because aestheticism has begun to play a significant role in her daily rituals: “She turned back to the piano. In the last days of her life, she had finally realized her grand dream: to play with her heart and soul, for as long as she wanted and whenever the mood took her” (113). Part of the reason Veronika felt bored before was because she had suppressed her innate instincts as an artist. When she remembers being able to express herself with abandon, Veronika also remembers what it was that brought meaning to her life. By smothering her own wants and needs as a person with the wants and needs she felt were demanded of her by contemporary society, Veronika found it impossible to remember what it was that previously brought forth purpose and joy in her life. Coelho believes this is one of the main fears paralyzing human activity on a universal scale today. In his article, “It’s a Mad World,” which details much of his inspiration for this novel, he observes, “People prefer to live in a huge asylum, religiously following rules written by who knows whom, rather

than fight for the right to be different” (par. 11). Veronika discovers that what she initially labeled as boredom was really a mask for the fear she felt of living life the way she wanted. She chose to label this fear as boredom because she did not want to recognize her malaise was not brought about because life was not worth living; rather, her feelings existed because she was stifling all of the intricacies that made her unique as an individual in order to better maintain the standards that society had put forth for her from birth.

Like Veronika, Mari, a fellow patient in Villete, uses fear of activity as a reason to commit suicide. Mari's suicide is not physical, though. Instead, hers is a social suicide. Although she is no longer classified as crazy, Mari locks herself away in Villete voluntarily, not wanting to be a part of the outside world and of the standards it places on human behavior. Prior to her time in Villete, Mari had been a successful lawyer. When she becomes bored, though, and can no longer find meaning in her job, those around her do not support her decision to make a change. Therefore, Mari is overcome with dread and begins having panic attacks. According to Leslie Paul Thiele, “To be bored is to be paralyzed: emotionally, spiritually, and perhaps even physically ... [Boredom is] an emotional and spiritual paralysis that arises from the repression of anxiety or fear” (492). Following from that argument, it would make sense, then, that Mari would begin having panic attacks because she no longer finds meaning in her work as a lawyer. These attacks are symptomatic of the fear she tries to conceal throughout her daily life in the outside world. When she tells a colleague, “I want to do something completely different with my life. I want to have an adventure, help other people, do something I've never done before.’ The conversation ended there ... That moment marked the beginning of her withdrawal” (120). A sense of alienation overwhelms Mari because no one around her understands why she would want to transform her current mode of accepted behavior just to perform an activity that would make her feel fulfilled and happy. Even when others advise her they want to help her—they offer no real solace. Her husband believes she must have a “brain tumor ... [and] thought of taking her to Austria, where there were many eminent specialists in disorders of the brain” (123). He cannot see beyond the physical aspects of her illness, although he claims to want to help her totally. Her friend from work advises her to seek help, but, once she enters the mental asylum, he visits her and tells her, “We're allowed to make a lot of mistakes in our lives ... except the mistake that destroys us” (128). By announcing publicly that she is different, Mari has eliminated her former role in the outside world. She has destroyed her old way of life because everyone in it refuses to accept her in any



form but the way that they desire her to be. Eventually, Mari is told she cannot come back to her old job, and her husband divorces her. It is at this time that she makes the decision to stay in Villetete, even though her panic attacks have ceased.

While in Villetete, Mari becomes one of the leaders of a group called the Fraternity. The Fraternity consists of individuals, like Mari, who enjoy the freedom that the mental asylum affords them. They are not crazy or mentally unstable. They just want to be able to do whatever they choose whenever they choose, and they believe that Villetete gives them this opportunity. The narrator notes that "Once in a mental asylum, a person grows used to the freedom that exists in the world of insanity and becomes addicted to it. You no longer have to take on the responsibilities, to struggle to earn your daily bread, to be bothered by repetitive, mundane tasks" (53). However, the solution the Fraternity members come to does not hold as being satisfactory to Mari any longer when she considers the transformation that Veronika has made during her time in Villetete. Although before encountering Veronika, Mari had decided that living her life within Villetete's walls was the only solution, she too begins to remember what it was that made her enjoy life before her time in the asylum. She wonders why if Veronika can decide she wants to live even when believing she only has a few more days left on Earth that someone like herself, whose time in the world is also slipping by with each passing minute, should decide not to venture out and savor true life. She relates her transformation in thought to her friend Eduard:

Last night, I too asked myself what I was doing in this hospital. And I thought how very interesting to be down in the square, at the Three Bridges, in the marketplace opposite the theater, buying apples and talking about the weather. Obviously, I'd be struggling with a lot of other long-forgotten things, like unpaid bills, problems with neighbors, the ironic looks of people who don't understand me, solitude, my children's complaining. But all of that is just part of life, I think, and the price you pay for having to deal with those minor problems is far less than the price for not recognizing they're yours. (151)

Mari does not want shelter from the world's problems anymore. She knows now she has been living in a place that is not real. Although, since coming there, she has not been afraid to express herself within the asylum's walls, she has still been afraid to express herself outside of those walls. Real life is filled with problems and difficulties, but those experiences are part of what shape and create who a person is as a human being in his entirety. How a person faces their personal tribulations in life is part of what defines them; it is part of what makes them strong and also part of what makes them different. Mari believes it is part of what makes a person whole. By staying in the

asylum, she is shirking her responsibility as a human being both to herself and to others.

When Mari definitively decides to leave the asylum, she does not do so without displaying how her changes in feelings about life have already made a significant impact on how she expresses herself to others. While Veronika's transformation is much more akin to Baudelaire's viewpoints and his idea of the artist as being one of the elite few who can interpret and tackle the complexities of the world suitably, Mari's transformation is much more practical in nature. Hence, her ideas are similar to *Candide's* in that she believes that fulfilling work in any field of a person's choosing is what will make him happy and bring purpose to his life. To Mari, boredom is not only a disorder that can be combated by an artist; it is a disorder that can be combated by anyone who can find meaning in his life. Sean Healy argues in his book, *Boredom, Self, and Culture*, that "boredom has a history and has gradually emerged from near obscurity to center stage ... What was once a rare state of mind ... has now become the common property of the bored horde" (15). Boredom is not an emotion that only targets the artist, although Baudelaire may argue that the artist is the most capable of fighting its effects. In Coelho's novel, Mari realizes that every human being faces the same questions and fears about their lives. She leaves a note for the rest of the members of the Fraternity in Villete, advising them, "I learned something very important. Life inside is exactly the same as life outside. Both there and here, people gather together in groups, they build their walls and allow nothing strange to trouble their mediocre existences ... the danger of an adventure is worth a thousand days of ease and comfort" (199). Mari leaves Villete in order to help strangers in Bosnia; her purpose is clear. She is leaving with the intent to help and alter the lives of others. Although the members of the Fraternity are said to go back to their rooms and deem Mari as insane, one of the primary impressions this novel brings out is that one person's change in mindset can drastically affect the lives of those around him. Veronika changed Mari, and it seems inevitable that, in some way, Mari's leaving will affect the life of someone else, and the sequence will continue perpetually. New life and new ideas are brought about once boredom and the fear that it masks is overcome.

Therefore, it can be argued that although boredom is linked with death irreparably in all of these works of literature, it comes to mind that the path in overcoming that boredom that is achieved by all three of the writers mentioned is conversely related to a renewal of life. Voltaire's *Candide* asserts that humans, in order to conquer the monotony of boredom, must work in whatever field is best suited for

them to achieve happiness. In his *The Flowers of Evil*, Charles Baudelaire finds that the artist possesses a special mission to surmount ennui in that he holds the ability to recognize that world-weariness exists in man but that it can be overcome if it is accepted as natural and reinterpreted through the eyes of the artist. In *Veronika Decides to Die*, Paulo Coelho taps into both of these ideas, first displaying Veronika as defeating the results of boredom through both a reawakening in her perception of the world around her and also through her ensuing alignment of herself as an artist, and then displaying Mari, in her way, defeating boredom through the fulfillment of her purpose to leave her old career and begin a new one as an activist to aid others in need. Indeed, it is an unavoidable fact that the consequences of boredom have led people, across time and cultures, to feel that life is meaningless. Yet, it is also an undeniable fact that, in every age and locality, man has struggled to find purpose in his life; he has struggled to combat the despair boredom brings. Even in contemporary times, the fact that novels such as Coelho's work reach and affect so many people shows that the fears cited are universal themes. Yet, so, too, are the measures and lessons that people take and learn from these works of literature so as to resist boredom and thereby to find new meanings and motivations concerning why it is important for each struggling individual's life to be lived.

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