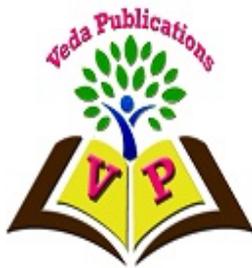




RESEARCH ARTICLE

**CHOOSE THIS, NOT THAT: EXISTENTIAL DILEMMA OF TOO MANY CHOICES**

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*(Assistant Professor, Department of English, St. Joseph's College of Commerce, Bangalore-560025.)*Email: marina@sjcc.edu.inDoi: <https://doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2026.13108>**ABSTRACT**

"Man is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does. Freedom means choosing, and in choosing, he creates himself. Yet this freedom also brings anguish, for every choice excludes another possibility."

— Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*

The existential dilemma in "The Devil and Miss Prym" reflects the broader issue of choice overload in modern society. The abundance of options in our daily lives can lead to anxiety, decision paralysis, and regret. Coelho's novel reminds us that our choices are not just about what we choose, but who we choose to become. It is an invitation to reflect on our beliefs and values and make choices that align with them, even when the decision is difficult. Existential thinkers argue that every decision shapes identity while simultaneously closing off alternative possibilities. Thus, the abundance of choice reveals the deeper human quest for meaning, certainty, and inner coherence in an uncertain world.

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INTRODUCTION

In his novel "The Devil and Miss Prym," Paulo Coelho explores the existential dilemma of too many choices. The story is set in a small village, where the arrival of a stranger ignites a moral dilemma that forces the villagers to confront their values and beliefs.

The stranger, who is the embodiment of devil, offers the villagers a bag of gold in exchange for the death of one of their own. The villagers are torn between their greed for the gold and their moral values. Miss Prym, a young woman who has recently returned to the village, becomes the center of the dilemma when the devil approaches her with the offer.

Miss Prym faces the difficult decision of whether to choose the bag of gold or uphold her moral values and refuse the offer. Coelho uses the character of Miss Prym to explore the existential dilemma of choice and the consequences accompanying a choice.

The abundance of choice creates a sense of overwhelming anxiety for Miss Prym as she struggles to make a decision that aligns with her moral values. She realizes that her decision will significantly impact the rest of her life and the lives of those around her. Coelho uses this to illustrate the weight and responsibility that comes with having too many choices.

The object of consciousness exists independently, separate from any relationships or connections. However, consciousness always relates to something, defining itself in relation to other things. Consciousness cannot be fully captured within a conscious experience since it always exists "for

itself." Within consciousness, there is a fundamental ability to experience "nothingness," a negative power. This power also manifests within the self, creating a lack of a fixed self-identity. Consequently, the unity of the self is not something given but rather a task that consciousness must undertake.

The novel explores the themes of choice and responsibility, redemption and forgiveness, and relationship with the self and others, as well as an Ethical Dimension.

CHOICE AND RESPONSIBILITY

Choices make the decision process challenging, as in the case of Miss Prym, and others in the novel, who have many choices. A wrong choice would shatter her dreams and threaten her peaceful life. Her decisions impact her life and the people around her - the entire village and its existence depend on her decision. "If you are good, bad will come to you anyway. You have to choose which side to take." (p. 12) - This quote highlights the theme of choice and the responsibility that comes with it. The characters in the book must choose whether to embrace good or evil and recognize that their choices have consequences.

It's the human tendency to pick an easier path. We often become selfish when it's a life-changing decision, and we always choose what is good in our eyes. As the story progresses, the idea is that sometimes we face difficult choices and must choose the lesser of two evils. It also emphasizes the responsibility that comes with making choices. Old Berta becomes the victim of the greediness of the villagers as the villagers want to save Visco. It all began when a stranger came to the village with



Eleven Gold bars, and the villagers were given a choice to either pick prosperity i.e., the gold bars, or to commit a crime. The village, known for its solidarity, decided to survive at the cost of Old Berta's life. However, Chantal Pym, who is the mouthpiece of the villagers, makes the right decision and saves Old Berta and her dreams. The choices that villagers and Chantal Pym make endorse the philosophy of Carl Jung "Apollonian: Analytic and Rational and Dionysian: Intuitive and Emotional"(Detrick, Philosophy). Therefore Carl Jung is one of many philosophers that holds an influence on the analysis of choices that we make on day-to-day basis therefore "Jung believed that the human psyche was composed of three components: the ego, the personal unconscious, and the collective unconscious"(Cherry, 2019). That's why Carl Jung saw many "universal symbols and patterns"(Biography). In the story, the villagers play an important role, their responses change according to the speeches made, and finally, there is strong support to back the right decision. The novel is also a great example of the message that we might be trapped in a web of knots if we are not careful about our choices. We need to be mindful of the consequences we'll have to face because of our choices. Every choice comes with a responsibility that we need to own up. One should also be accountable for one's actions and behaviour. "Every choice carries a consequence. For better or worse, each choice is the unavoidable consequence of its predecessor." (p. 117) -It emphasizes the responsibility of making choices and the importance of considering the consequences before acting.

The idea is that our choices are interconnected and that each choice we make has a domino effect on our lives and that of those around us.

AN ETHICAL DIMENSION

The devil uses his power and influence to manipulate the villagers into committing an immoral act. The book explores the corrupting impact of power and how it can lead people to make choices that go against their values. Miss Pym, a young woman who always longed to move to a city, becomes the target of a spell, and the novel focuses on the ethical dilemmas that arise as a result. The devil tempts the villagers with the promise of wealth, but ultimately it is up to the villagers to decide whether or not to take the bait. Each character in the novel must confront their moral compass and decide as we dive deeper into the character of Miss Pym and the important personalities of the village. We learn that every individual is trying to carry out their responsibility. We also feel that they are taking ownership of saving the village. Each character in the novel must confront their moral compass and decide whether or not they are willing to sacrifice the life of an innocent person for personal gain. Miss Pym, in particular, struggles with this decision and is forced to confront her beliefs about right and wrong. It was not easy for her to sacrifice Miss Berta. Her conscience does not allow her to agree to kill Berta, the old lady. However, her strong desire, on the other hand, pushes her to do what it takes to fulfill her dreams of moving to a new place.

"We are responsible for everything that happens on this earth. We are the eyes of the world, and if we don't pay attention to what is happening, then no



one will.” - (Page 29). Chantal Pym, a sensible woman in the story, takes the onus of saving the village from committing a crime for the sake of survival. It was her timely intervention that saved an innocent life.

Miss Pym wanted to leave Viscos for good, but she could not achieve this because she feared facing the world outside her cocoon. A cocoon she had not stepped out of even once. Chantal Pym was bored of static village life in Viscos. She was young, beautiful, and intelligent. When Carlos shared the details of the hidden gold bars and how she could get them, Chantal saw herself accomplishing her dream of a better lifestyle outside Viscos. But for that, she had to either kill someone or instigate the villagers to kill so that she could live a lavish life while dooming the village. It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity! Chantal was skeptical of inciting the villagers to murder for her liberation or even liberating the village. The CHOICES WE MAKE decide our destiny and impact the lives surrounding us. Carlos had planned the game well by leading Miss Pym to where he had buried gold bars, and then he made her a part of his quest between good and evil. ‘So you see, Good and Evil have the same face; it all depends on when they cross the path of each individual human being.’ (Page 37)

It was not easy for Pym not to heed the stranger’s plans. Carlos had planned this for his gratification. Carlos wanted to understand the nature of humans, whether they are good or change with time and circumstances. Carlos’s offer was fascinating! He offered Miss Pym a chance to lead a life of her choice. All she had to do was instigate Berta’s murder, and she would get ten gold bars! This

was her ticket out of dreary Viscos, a village where “EVERY DAY WAS LIKE EVERY OTHER DAY, EACH THE SAME AS THE LAST.” (Page 38)

In the end, the village’s collective response took the side of Miss Pym to liberate themselves from poverty and kill an innocent soul.

REDEMPTION AND FORGIVENESS:

The novel also explores the themes of redemption and forgiveness. The characters are allowed to redeem themselves for their past mistakes and seek forgiveness for their sins. Viscos is a village lost in time because every day is the same day there. Chantal Pym intervenes and tries to convince the people not to kill Berta. If they went against the just attitude they had built the town on, what fate would they have faced, finally? Miss Pym wanted to prove to the stranger, Carlos, that people are neither good nor evil but fair. The villagers ultimately agree not to kill Berta, and they leave. It is a win-win situation for Chantal Pym as she gets the gold bars and decides to leave Viscos for a better life elsewhere.

She also proves Carlos’s theory on humanity that people are evil by nature. “It was all a matter of control. And Choice. Nothing more, nothing less.” St.Savin and Ahab’s saying reverberates, and Viscos continues its traditional values though it is almost on the verge of ruins as nearly all the youngsters from the village have settled elsewhere.

Chantal, whom the villagers shun due to her past mistake, is able to regenerate goodwill in her people and says it is illogical and morally wrong to kill Berta. Chantal also conveys the message to the villagers that should they decide to murder Berta, they would live with blood on their hands. Moreover, the guilt of



killing innocent Berta would haunt them for a lifetime. This act of maturity grants Chantal forgiveness from the villagers for her past mistakes, and she is celebrated by the villagers for making the bold decision.

Though with the money they get, they could transform the village and bring changes or make it new, they'll never be able to rid themselves of the guilt of killing an innocent soul. Thus, she restores the moral fiber of Viscos when all the villagers drop their weapons and walk toward their homes.

"The story of one person is the story of all humanity." (Page 191) Every individual in the village knew what they had agreed on to liberate everyone from the day-to-day struggle was not the right choice. Viscos, built on the traditional moral code of conduct, was shattered by Carlos. However, in the end, righteousness wins it all. Carlos's quest ends and Chantal Pym wins the villagers' hearts and the readers' admiration. One thing I can tell you with absolute certainty: life can seem either very long or very short, according to how you live it. (Page 201) How you live your span of life is what matters to leave the legacy behind. Have you touched lives? Making yourself useful for the people around you or just existing for the sake of life is what one has to introspect. Everyone involved in this novel realizes that choices made, chances taken, and changes made, for better or worse, dictate their lives. The devil has always known how to lead men astray by tempting them with rich rewards for betraying their own consciousness. It is up to us to choose what makes us happy and ethically correct.

We feel redeemed only by leading a righteous life and realizing that life on this earth is temporary, and we are bound to make mistakes and become greedy and selfish. However, with the conscious effort to keep our souls grounded and ask pardon for our mistakes, can we genuinely seek redemption and make amends for the harm we have caused to people around us.

CONCLUSION

The book challenges readers to reflect on their values and beliefs systems and make choices that align with them, even when the decision is difficult. Miss Prym struggles with her identity and sense of belonging to the village. The book explores the importance of community and how our sense of belonging can influence our choices. The novel delves into the eternal struggle between good and evil within every individual. It highlights the importance of recognizing and confronting the darkness within ourselves. The author Coelho emphasizes that every choice we make has consequences. We need to face the consequences of our choices without blaming them on others. The reader is encouraged to take a firm stand on their values and make a difference, not be a passive observer but a conscious human.

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