

***The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho**

Summer reading assignment 2020

I. Preliminary Notes About the Novel: This is just background to help you understand the context of the novel.

The Alchemist is written in a **fable** format. What is a fable, & why would Coelho use it to tell his story? Generally speaking, fables use recognizable, simple characters & settings in order to illustrate a simple truth about life or human nature. What is it that Coelho attempts to teach?

Even though you may not initially understand some of the unusual terminology in the story (*Soul of the World*, for example), its themes are ones which are probably familiar to you. Can you think of some old, familiar proverbs or songs that capture some of these ideas? For example, think about what ends up being more important for Santiago—the journey....or the destination? Where is it that Santiago eventually finds happiness? People have been writing & singing about the answers to these questions for years!

The novel integrates ideas & philosophies of many faiths & historical periods. Many of these ideas concern the pursuit of truth, one's intended destiny, & the attainment of personal happiness. Coelho refers to these combined elements as one's "**Personal Legend.**" He tells the story of Santiago in order to teach us how we may find & live out our own Personal Legends. These ideas, though, have been explored since ancient times in one form or another by countless faiths & peoples. Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Taoism, Christianity, Judaism, countless tribal cultures, in addition to ancient & modern philosophers, all attempt to define the idea of one's Personal Legend (though they may call it by different names), & all subscribe paths to achieving personal fulfillment. Thus, although the legend is about no faith or philosophy in particular, it is about **all** faiths & philosophies.

Alchemy is the medieval "**science**" of transforming rocks into gold. Alchemy plays an important part in the plot (literal level) of the story, but it also becomes a symbolic, or **allegorical** device, in the legend (figurative level). Coelho is really using characters, events, & symbols as tools to show us how to achieve **spiritual alchemy**. In other words, how do we find or recognize the "**gold**" -- our Personal Legend-- in the "**rocks**" of the everyday, ordinary, simple details of our lives? As Santiago discovers, sometimes the "**gold**" is not faraway, not glittery, not exotic, & not complicated, but it may require a journey of courage, faith, & perseverance to discover what it is & where it is hidden.

In an interview, Paulo Coelho talks about “Four Pillars of Alchemy— **four (4)** important **“tips”** for finding one’s Personal Legend:

1. One must believe in **“The Soul of the World.”** The ancient Latin term for this concept is **“anima mundi.”** In short, this idea suggests that everything in the world is interconnected; that is, what one does affects everything else, from the smallest grain of sand to the largest whale, & vice versa. Writers & thinkers such as Plato, Walt Whitman, & Khalil Gibran have attempted to illustrate this interconnectedness in their works.
2. One must listen to the voice of the heart. Coelho suggests that sometimes we must follow our feelings & intuitions, even if we do not fully understand them. Through feeling, one gains wisdom.
3. One must be faithful to one’s dreams, for they both test & reward us. In other words, the path to achieving one’s Personal Legend may not be an easy one, but we must endure the tests in order to gain the rewards.
4. One must **“surrender oneself to the universe.”** Coelho suggests that we must allow ourselves to be open to recognizing & learning from omens & signs which come our way.

II. Understanding the locations / terms can help you fully understand the novel.

Geographical Locations in the Novel:

| | | |
|----------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------|
| Andalusia | Tarifa | Salem (Jeru'salem') |
| Moors (p. 27) | Sahara Desert (p. 36) | Nile |
| Tangier (p. 44) | Ceuta (p. 44) | Mecca (p. 54) |
| Al-Fayoum (oasis in Egypt) | El Cairum (p.76) | Coptic Monastery |

Regional, Cultural or Spiritual Allusions and Terms:

| | |
|---|---|
| Narcissus (Prologue) | Esperanto (p. 66) |
| King Melchizedek (Genesis 14, “King Most High”) | Helvetius, Elias, Fulcanelli, Geber (p. 82) |
| Koran (p. 54) | Scarab (p. 161) |
| Muslim | Simum (p. 148) |
| Mecca | Coptic (p. 153, 154) |
| Allah (p. 71, 97) | Tiberius (p. 158) |
| Levanter (p. 27) | hookah (p. 114) |
| “Maktub” (p. 59) | |

The Alchemist’s Terms / Expressions:

| | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------|
| The Soul of the World | Philosopher’s Stone (p. 66) | Personal Legend |
| The Unspoken Language | Elixir of Life (p. 66) | Master Work (p. 81) |
| The Language of the World | Emerald Tablet (p. 126) | |
| Principle of Favorability (p. 29) | Urim and Thummin (p. 30) | |

III. Assignment to turn in on the first day of school.

- Responses should be **typed. No handwritten responses will be accepted.**
- Each response should be answered in complete sentences.
- **Save the document.** You will be required to upload it to Turnitin.com.
- Bring your typed assignment on the first day of class.
- This Study Guide will count as a **Quiz Grade**

Questions for Novel Study: (page numbers refer to the 2004 printed edition)

1. Why does Coelho open with the modified myth of Narcissus?
How does the new version differ from the original one?
How does it change the myth's meaning?
What might the author be suggesting about how we perceive ourselves & the world?
2. The novel opens with Santiago thinking about his sheep.
What does he observe about their existence?
How might the sheep symbolize the way some people live their lives?
How does his observation that they "have forgotten to rely on their own instincts" foreshadow later events in the story?
3. How does Santiago's father react when his son tells him that he wants to travel?
(p. 9)
4. To what degree is his father's observation about travelers ("They come in search of new things, but when they leave they are basically the same people they were when they arrived.") true about Santiago?
5. Why does the old fortune teller say that Santiago's dream is difficult to interpret?
(p. 12 - 14).
Why is Santiago suspicious of her?
6. The old man tells Santiago the story about the miner & the emerald on p. 24.
How does it connect to Santiago's situation?
What does he mean when he says that "treasure is uncovered by the force of flowing water, & it is buried by the same currents"?
What does this quote have to do with the miner/emerald story?
7. What point does the old man's story about the boy in the castle & the drops of oil (p. 30 - 32) make?
How might this story apply to us in our modern lives?
8. How does the King assist Santiago in recognizing omens?
When does Santiago use this help?

9. How do Santiago's thoughts & perceptions about himself & the world begin to change on **pp. 42 - 44**?
Describe **3** things that Santiago sees now that he had never noticed before.
10. What lessons does Santiago learn by working at the crystal shop?
Why do you think Coelho chose crystal?
How does the crystal merchant's explanation for not taking the pilgrimage to Mecca (**p. 55**) highlight the difference between Santiago & the merchant?
What effect does the merchant say Santiago has had on him?
11. The Englishman & his goals are described on **pp. 65 - 70**.
What is he looking for?
What does he demonstrate to Santiago that he already knows?
On **p. 78**, he says that the progress made at the crystal shop is an example of the principle of the Soul of the World.
What does he mean?
How does he define this?
How does he connect the idea to the relationship between the caravan & the desert?
12. The oasis is described in great detail.
How does its lushness, laughter & color reflect what Santiago finds there?
Where else in the story does Coelho provide details about the physical setting in order to lend more meaning to the events which occur there?
13. Explain how Santiago's union with Fatima represents the Language of the World, according to Santiago on **p. 93**.
Why does Fatima accept that her new husband wanders the desert, as she explains on **p. 98**?
14. What is the meaning of the two **(2)** dead hawks & the falcon in the oasis?
How does this omen change Santiago's status in society?
15. During his trek through the desert with the alchemist, Santiago is told of many basic truths.
The alchemist says, "There is only one way to learn. It's through action. Everything you need to know you have learned through your journey" (**p. 125**).
What are some of the things Santiago has learned through action?
16. Why do you think the alchemist tells Santiago the story about the man's dream about the **2** sons (the poet & the soldier) on **p. 156**?

17. Why did Santiago have to go through the dangers of the tribal wars on the outskirts of the oasis in order to reach the Pyramids?

At this point, the boy remembers the old proverb: "The darkest hour of the night came just before the dawn."

How does this apply to his situation now?

At the end of the journey, why did the alchemist leave Santiago alone to complete it?

18. Earlier in the story, the alchemist told Santiago "when you possess great treasures within you, & try to tell others of them, seldom are you believed."

At the end of the story, how did this simple lesson change Santiago's life?

How did it lead him back to the treasure he was looking for?

Summer reading assignments must be completed individually and without the use of unauthorized online sources or study aides. Students who commit an infraction of the Honor Code will receive a grade of zero on the assignment, an N in conduct for this semester in 10th Grade World Literature, and an administrative referral.