



Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*

**"To realize one's destiny is a person's only obligation"**

**—from *The Alchemist***

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**Note to Teachers**

Before the publication of *The Alchemist*, Paulo Coelho (b. 1947) worked as a theater director, playwright, and songwriter for some of Brazil's most popular singers. In 1986, he walked the Road of Santiago, an ancient Spanish pilgrimage, and this experience inspired *The Pilgrimage*, his first novel, and *The Alchemist*, whose protagonist takes his name from the road. When *The Alchemist* was published in 1988, it was an instant international bestseller, and reached the #1 slot on bestseller lists in 29 countries. Paulo Coelho became one of the most widely read contemporary authors.

*The Alchemist* tells the story of Santiago, the young Andalusian shepherd who dreams of buried treasure in Egypt and embarks upon a challenging and enlightening journey to find it. With all the simplicity and symbolic richness of a fable, Paulo Coelho's novel is both a hunt for buried treasure and a spiritual quest, with a hero who overcomes trials along the way with the help of disguised teachers who guide him.

The story begins with Santiago, referred to throughout the novel simply as "the boy," deciding to sleep in an abandoned church with an enormous sycamore growing from the spot where the sacristy once stood. It is here that the boy, who had recently chosen not to become a priest, dreams of his treasure, and it is here that he will finally find it, buried among the roots of the tree, after he returns from his pilgrimage to the pyramids. These kinds of traditional religious symbols appear throughout *The Alchemist*, but in Coelho's story they have either lost their hold or have been transformed. Santiago chooses not to become a priest, his treasure lies in a ruined church, the Old Testament King Melchizedek is now an alchemist, the traditional Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca has been replaced by the journey to find one's "Personal Legend," and so on. Indeed, Coelho employs ideas that, although derived from alchemy, may be familiar to students from the many New Age concepts that have become pervasive in contemporary American culture. In order for the boy to reach his treasure, he must first learn to accept change, to value simplicity, to trust his experience of daily life over book knowledge. He must learn to live in the present moment, to read God's will in signs and omens, to listen to his heart, and to penetrate the Soul of the World and the Universal Language through which it speaks. In other words, to attain his material treasure Santiago must undergo a spiritual transformation, a process that parallels the alchemical transformation of lead into gold.

But if *The Alchemist* has clear lessons to impart, much of the novel's appeal comes from the way Coelho *dramatizes* these lessons. As Santiago journeys across the African desert, he falls in love, meets the Alchemist, encounters warring tribesmen, risks his life by promising to turn himself into the wind, and is robbed, beaten, and nearly killed just as he thinks he is about to uncover his treasure. The surprise ending, in which the boy learns that his treasure

lies not at the pyramids, as his dream had foretold, but back at the abandoned church where his journey began, has powerful implications about the importance of looking into the roots and foundation of our lives, voyaging outward to find the way back home, and trusting our dreams even when it seems they have slipped beyond our reach.

#### Questions for Class Discussion

1. What is the significance of Santiago becoming a shepherd rather than a priest, as his parents had hoped? Why has he made this choice? What does being a shepherd allow him to do?
2. The novel begins with the boy deciding to spend the night with his flock in an abandoned church. The church has no roof and an enormous sycamore tree has grown up where the sacristy once stood. Why is it important that Santiago dreams of a child who tells him of his treasure in this particular setting?
3. King Mechizedek tells the boy that when we are children, "everything is clear and everything is possible," but as time passes mysterious forces convince us to abandon our dreams (p. 23). Do you think this is true? What are the "mysterious forces" that threaten to hold us back as we grow older?
4. The King also tells the boy that when you really desire something "all the universe conspires to help you find it" (p. 24). And he explains the principle of "favorability," or beginner's luck. From whom does Santiago receive help on his journey? Have you ever benefited from beginner's luck?
5. What tests and setbacks does the boy experience on his journey? Why is it important that he faces and overcomes these challenges? How would the novel be different if his quest was easier?
6. After he has been robbed of all his money in Tangier, how does Santiago choose to regard his situation? Did this surprise you? What allows him to understand his loss in this way?
7. What chain of events leads the boy to work at the crystal shop? What does he learn there? Why is he able to change and improve the shop, which has remained the same for many years? How is he different from the shop's owner?
8. When Santiago begins his trek across the desert, he meets an Englishman who is a student of alchemy. In many ways they are alike: both are pursuing their "Personal Legends," both have encountered the ideas of alchemy. How is their approach to life and learning different? Why does the alchemist choose the boy as his pupil over the Englishman?
9. The Englishman tells Santiago that he would like to write "a huge encyclopedia just about the words luck and coincidence. It's with those words that the universal language is written" (p. 72). The Swiss psychologist Carl Jung coined the term "synchronicity" to describe such moments of meaningful coincidence. When does Santiago experience this kind of synchronicity? What do these experiences reveal?
10. The alchemist says that "people become fascinated by pictures and words, and wind up forgetting the language of the world" (p. 89). What is this language of the world, or "universal language" as it is called elsewhere in the novel? How is it different than ordinary language? Is it spoken or expressed in some other way? Why would a fascination with words and pictures make people forget it?
11. The boy is repeatedly encouraged to read the signs and omens to learn what he should do. What is an omen? How are omens related to "the universal language" and to finding one's "Personal Legend"? What are some of the omens that appear to the boy in the novel? Have you ever experienced something that seemed like an omen?
12. How does Santiago feel when he meets Fatima? How does he know this is love? What does she teach him about love?
13. Early in the novel, the King tells the boy that his book says what most other books say: "It describes people's inability to choose their own Personal Legends. And it ends up saying that everyone believes the world's greatest lie...that at a certain point, we lose control of what's happening to us, and our lives