

## Spiritual Journey of Santiago in Coelho's 'The Alchemist'

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### Abstract

*Paulo Coelho's 'The Alchemist' entails Santiago's journey from a young shepherd in Andalusia, Spain, to a seeker of hidden treasure. The plot is deeply intertwined with a spiritual quest for self-discovery and enlightenment. Through a rich tapestry of symbols such as alchemy, omens, and dreams, Coelho illustrates Santiago's physical and spiritual growth. Santiago's recurring dream about finding treasure at the Egyptian pyramids and different encounters, along with the omens and signs he observes, guide him through numerous challenges through his spiritual journey. Santiago's journey is a metaphor for an inner alchemical process, symbolizing the transformation of his consciousness from a lower to a higher state. The novel suggests that true success is not a mere destination but a transformative journey filled with learning and personal growth. Coelho emphasizes the importance of faith, perseverance, and resilience in the face of adversity. By following his dreams and remaining attuned to the guidance provided by omens, Santiago undergoes a profound spiritual transformation, discovering the deeper interconnectedness and inherent order of human existence. The narrative underscores the significance of embracing the signs and omens encountered along the way, highlighting the interconnectedness of all things. Coelho conveys that the pursuit of one's goals should be accompanied by a broader acquisition of knowledge and personal growth. Santiago's perseverance and resilience, even amidst challenges and monotony, are crucial to reaching his ultimate destination and experiencing the joy of achievement. His story is a testament to the profound spiritual transformation that occurs when one pursues their dreams with faith and determination. It underscores the inherent order and interconnectedness of life, ultimately portraying Santiago's journey as a spiritual odyssey that reveals the deeper meaning of life and the spiritual enlightenment that comes from embracing one's personal legend.*

**Keywords:** Spirituality, Spiritual Journey, Signs, Recurring Dream

### 'THE ALCHEMIST': AN INTRODUCTION

Paulo Coelho's novel, 'The Alchemist', originally published in Portuguese as 'O Alquimista' in 1988, was translated into English by Alan R. Clarke and released by Harper Collins Publishers in 1993. This novel has captivated a global audience, earning international bestseller status. By 2016, it was translated into nearly 70 languages and was available in over 150 countries. The novel's popularity led to numerous adaptations in film, theatre, and music, and it earned Coelho various prestigious awards, such as the Nielsen Gold E-book Award in 2004 in the UK, The Corinne International Award in 2002 in Germany, and several awards in Italy and France. Bhatnagar (2022) observes that "Paulo Coelho is one of the most widely read writers whose candid writings resonate with spiritual experiences of the reader, making his oeuvre an extremely significant contribution on contemporary spirituality" (p. 16).

In the novel, the main character, Santiago, is a thoughtful young shepherd from Andalusia, Spain. He is content and diligent, valuing self-respect and humility, and prefers to work for his livelihood rather than relying on charity. Despite his father's desire for him to become a priest, Santiago's passion for travel leads him to shepherding. The story begins with Santiago waking from a recurring, enigmatic dream near an old, abandoned church. Driven by this dream, he sets out on a journey, meeting various people and overcoming many challenges. Along the way, he gains deep insights into love and life while pursuing his treasure. Santiago's recurring dream involves a child telling him to seek treasure at the Egyptian pyramids. He consults a gypsy woman who interprets the dream, but he initially disregards her advice. Later, he meets Melchizedek, the King of Salem, who reveals personal insights and prophecies about Santiago's future. Santiago agrees to give Melchizedek one-tenth of his flock in exchange for guidance. Melchizedek advises him to pay attention to the omens along his journey and gives him two stones, Urim and Thummim, to help with decision-making. Santiago travels to Africa, where he is robbed and ends up working for a crystal merchant to earn money. His innovative

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ideas significantly improve the merchant's business, and with his earnings, Santiago joins a caravan heading to Egypt. On this journey, he meets an Englishman who is studying alchemy and learns about the concept of the Master Work. At the oasis of Al-Fayoum, Santiago meets Fatima, who teaches him about love. She supports his quest, understanding her role as a woman of the desert, and encourages him to continue his journey to find his treasure. Santiago also encounters the Alchemist, who teaches him to listen to his heart and pursue his Personal Legend:

Tell your heart that the fear of suffering is worse than the suffering itself. And that no heart has ever suffered when it goes in search of its dreams, because every second of the search is a second's encounter with God and with eternity (Coelho, 1998, p 85).

Santiago and the Alchemist are captured by Arab soldiers, but Santiago's spiritual abilities help them escape. The Alchemist demonstrates his alchemical skills and gifts Santiago gold. When Santiago reaches the pyramids, he is beaten by thieves but learns from their leader about another dream involving treasure beneath a sycamore tree in Spain:

You're not going to die. You'll live, and you'll learn that a man shouldn't be so stupid. Two years ago, right here on this spot, I had a recurrent dream, too. I dreamed that I should travel to the fields of Spain and look for a ruined church where shepherds and their sheep slept. In my dream, there was a sycamore growing out of the ruins of the sacristy, and I was told that, if I dug at the roots of the sycamore, I would find a hidden treasure. But I'm not so stupid as to cross an entire desert just because of a recurrent dream...the boy stood up shakily, and looked once more at the Pyramids. They seemed to laugh at him, and he laughed back his heart busting with joy (p 164).

Santiago realizes his true treasure is back at the abandoned church in Spain where his journey began. He returns, finds a chest of jewels and gold, and plans to reunite with Fatima in Al-Fayoum.

### **Spiritual Quest in the Novel**

The main theme in 'The Alchemist' centres on the journey of self-discovery and the pursuit of one's purpose. Coelho highlights this idea, stating:

All I know is that, like Santiago the shepherd boy, we all need to be aware of our personal calling. What is personal calling? It is God's blessing; it is the path that God chose for you here on Earth. Whenever we do something that fills us with enthusiasm, we are following our legend (pp 7-8).

Santiago's dream ignites a sense of incompleteness in his life, prompting a longing for spiritual growth and genuine happiness. In search of answers, Santiago consults a local gypsy to interpret his dream. This sets him on a path of discovery, aware that remaining with his flock would leave many truths and experiences undiscovered. Psychologists often see dreams as reflections of unconscious desires within the human mind. Santiago's dream is the catalyst for his journey toward self-awareness. Despite his initial confusion about the dream's meaning, he understands the necessity of embarking on a transformative quest to connect with his higher self. Coelho underscores the importance of auspicious omens throughout Santiago's journey. Heeding "the sign," Santiago embarks on a personal odyssey similar to that of Ulysses, in search of hidden treasure near the Pyramids in Egypt. This journey becomes a profound exploration of his inner self and his quest for deeper meaning and fulfillment.

Every second of the search is an encounter with God,' the boy told his heart. 'When I have been truly searching for my treasure, every day has been luminous, because I've known that every hour was a part of the dream that I would find it (p 137).

The journey's mystery unfolds when Santiago unexpectedly finds his treasure in his homeland, Andalusia, Spain. Surprisingly, Santiago realizes his treasure not at the pyramids but at the abandoned church in Spain. It emphasizes the importance of exploring our origins. It highlights the significance of venturing outward to find our way back home and trusting our dreams, even when they seem distant. Omens play a significant role in illustrating Santiago's spiritual development, guiding him towards self-discovery and a deeper understanding of his surroundings. Initially, the omens are minor occurrences, but as Santiago progresses, they gain greater

importance and become powerful visions that impact many lives. For example, his vision of hawks and approaching armies serves as a warning of a deadly attack on the oasis. The increasing significance of these omens reflects Santiago's growing understanding of the world's profound language, revealing his heightened perception and connection to his true self. Santiago's quest involves four significant elements, one of which is the world's greatest lie. This concept becomes apparent during a conversation between Santiago and the old man, Melchizedek. When asked about the world's greatest lie, Melchizedek responds with profound insights:

It's this: that at a certain point in our lives, we lose control of what's happening to us, and our lives become controlled by fate. That is the world's greatest lie (p. 17).

Coelho explores the juxtaposition of faith in oneself and the concept of fate. Faith represents trust and optimism in belief systems that often lack empirical evidence, while fate suggests the inevitability of events for every individual, requiring submission to its course. Fate is often used as an excuse by those who are either lazy or ignorant in their pursuit of discovering their personal calling. Another significant aspect in the novel is the concept of the soul of the world. The quote "When you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you achieve it" (p. 21) conveys that dedication and commitment towards one's desires determine success. It emphasizes that the path to success is challenging and full of obstacles. Once someone realizes their true desires and wholeheartedly strives to achieve them, the challenges they face become insignificant in comparison. Santiago's journey also involves experiencing love. He discovers the transformative power of love:

He learned that the most important part of language that all the world spoke- the language that everyone on earth was capable of understanding in their heart. It was love. Something older than humanity, more ancient than the desert (p. 88).

Coelho portrays love as the universal language of the world. True love never hinders an individual from following their destiny. If someone gives up on their pursuit, it signifies that their love is not genuine, as true love speaks the language of the world. "One is loved because one is loved. No reason is needed for loving" (p. 116). The novel also highlights the presence of God. Given that Coelho is a practicing Catholic, his writings often include biblical references, emphasizing spiritual and religious themes throughout the narrative: "Wherever your heart is, that is where you'll find your treasure" (p. 123).

Coelho explores the significance of God's presence in one's life and the profound role God plays in the journey towards one's destiny. Santiago, the protagonist, maintains a strong belief in the divine presence throughout his journey. Even when trapped in the desert with the caravan, Santiago remains steadfast in his faith, never losing hope: "Maybe God created the desert so that man could appreciate the date trees, he thought" (p. 83). Coelho skillfully presents insights and wisdom through this novel to guide individuals towards self-actualization. He conveys that success is not merely a destination but a transformative journey. Along this journey, individuals strive to achieve specific goals while also acquiring valuable knowledge and accomplishing various milestones that contribute to their overall success. Maintaining perseverance and resilience, even in the face of challenges and monotony, is essential to reach the ultimate destination and experience the joy of achievement.

### **Spiritual Journey Unfolded through Symbolism**

Coelho's rich tapestry of symbols guides Santiago on a spiritual journey, reflecting his inner transformation and quest for self-discovery ( Joshi 2019, p.57). Alchemy, sheep, stones, and other symbols illustrate Santiago's growth, challenges, and ultimate enlightenment. These symbols emphasize the interconnectedness of all things and the importance of pursuing one's dreams with faith and perseverance. Through Santiago's journey, Coelho explores the deeper meaning of life and the spiritual awakening that comes from embracing the signs and omens along the way.

Coelho masterfully uses a rich array of symbols in the novel to illustrate the protagonist Santiago's transformative journey, both physically and psychologically, guiding him toward self-awakening and self-discovery. Alchemy, for instance, symbolizes Santiago's spiritual growth throughout the narrative. This ancient practice of turning base metals into gold metaphorically reflects the transformation of human consciousness from a lower to a higher state. Through Santiago's journey, the process of spiritual enlightenment unfolds,

leading to a profound shift in his understanding and perception of the world. Alchemy thus becomes a powerful metaphor for the inner alchemical process Santiago undergoes in his quest for self-discovery and fulfillment. Santiago's sheep represent peace, humility, and simplicity. As a shepherd, Santiago shares a deep connection with his flock, viewing them as an extension of himself. This bond is reflected in his identity throughout the novel. Even when faced with adversity, such as being robbed, Santiago maintains his inner calm and straightforwardness, embodying the virtues symbolized by his sheep. The stones Urim and Thummim, given to Santiago by Melchizedek, symbolize the human desire to relinquish control over one's destiny, representing the world's greatest lie—that people have no control over their lives. These stones, black and white, representing "yes" and "no" respectively, are used by Santiago in moments of decision-making, teaching him the balance between seeking external guidance and relying on his intuition. The Pyramids of Egypt stand as a significant symbol in Santiago's quest, representing his ultimate goal and personal legend. The journey to these hidden marvels symbolizes the challenges and the beauty of Santiago's journey, embodying the fulfillment and accomplishment he seeks in life. Conversely, the abandoned church in Spain, where Santiago dreams of his fortune at the novel's beginning and returns to find it at the end, symbolizes home. This church represents a sense of familiarity and belonging, emphasizing that the treasure Santiago sought was always nearby, discovered through his extensive journey. Dreams, central to the novel's action, act as catalysts for Santiago's quest, stressing the importance of following one's aspirations. Gold in the novel symbolizes success, affluence, and achievement, representing the grandeur and fulfillment Santiago seeks. Omens, introduced by Melchizedek, play a crucial role in guiding Santiago towards his Personal Legend. These signs, found in various forms throughout his journey, teach Santiago to be observant and intuitive, understanding that the signs are placed by God to guide him. Hawks, symbolizing aggression and the ability to read omens, reflect Santiago's vigilance and strength. When Santiago reads omens through the hawks' motions, he senses impending danger and takes action, highlighting his growing perception and connection to the world around him. The butterfly, as one of the first signs Santiago notices, symbolizes good fortune, helping him understand that signs are meant to lead him in the right direction. Wind, a recurring symbol throughout the novel, represents nature's uncontrolled energy and Santiago's spiritual journey. It plays a significant role, especially when Santiago speaks to the wind and the sun, symbolizing his deepening connection to the universal language of the world. Wells in the oasis symbolize life and unconditional love, as it is around these wells that an entire settlement thrives. It is here that Santiago meets Fatima, illustrating the well's role as a symbol of love and sustenance. Camels, representing resilience and endurance, are essential for Santiago's journey across the desert. They symbolize the strength and perseverance needed to pursue one's Personal Legend. Water, another crucial symbol, represents purification, renewal, and transformation, emphasizing its importance in sustaining life and reflecting Santiago's spiritual journey. Thieves in the novel represent the obstacles and challenges one faces when pursuing their dreams. Santiago is robbed multiple times, symbolizing the trials and tribulations that test his resolve and determination. These encounters underscore the importance of perseverance and the idea that shortcuts to achieving one's Personal Legend are futile. The cobra, appearing unexpectedly in the desert, symbolizes danger and hidden life, adding depth to Santiago's experiences and representing the unexpected challenges one might face. The sycamore tree, present at both the beginning and end of the novel, represents Santiago's growth and his connection to Egypt, symbolizing the full circle of his journey. Finally, crystal glassware in the merchant's shop, where Santiago works after being robbed, symbolizes fragility and clarity. This setting marks a significant point in Santiago's journey, where he starts anew and learns valuable life lessons, reflecting the delicate nature of his transformative journey.

## **CONCLUSION**

Through these symbols, Coelho not only illustrates Santiago's growth and challenges but also emphasizes the interconnectedness of all things and the spiritual awakening that comes from embracing the signs and omens along the way. The narrative suggests that success is not merely a destination but a transformative journey. Coelho conveys that individuals should strive to achieve their specific goals while also acquiring valuable knowledge and experiencing various milestones that contribute to overall success. By maintaining perseverance and resilience, even in the face of challenges and monotony, one can reach the ultimate destination and experience the joy of achievement. Through Santiago's journey, Coelho explores the deeper meaning of life and

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the spiritual transformation that occurs when one pursues their dreams with faith and perseverance, ultimately highlighting the profound interconnectedness and inherent order of human existence.

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