

***The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho**
Study Guide
Language and Literature
Mrs. Koplik

Pre-Study Discussion, Reflection and Writing Activities:

1. Coelho states that “simple things are the most valuable and only wise people appreciate them.” Produce a written or artistic response (or bring something to class) which depicts something that is “simple” yet valuable to you. Be prepared to explain specifically why/ how the item is valuable.

2. The alchemist (in the form of Melchizedek) says to Santiago, “When you really want something to happen, the whole universe conspires so that your wish comes true.” Write or create a response which captures a time in your own life when you had a wish, and you felt that the whole universe conspired for OR against you. What happened to make you feel that way? Did your wish come true?

3. Santiago is guided by his dreams and by omens which appear to him throughout his journey. Write about a noteworthy dream you have had, or about an omen which guided you somehow during the course of your life. How did you interpret the dream or omen, and how did it influence your life?

4. The old man states that the “world’s greatest lie...is that at a certain point in our lives, we lose control of what’s happening to us, and our lives become controlled by fate.” Do you, like the old man, believe this is a lie, and that we are always in control of our destinies? Why/ why not? Why do you think people believe the “World’s greatest lie”? Or.....Write about/explore artistically a time in your life when you felt as though you had “lost control,” and your fate was being determined by other forces. Why did you feel that way? Did you regain control?

5. Santiago is told that “people are afraid to pursue their most important dreams because they feel they don’t deserve them, or that they’ll be unable to achieve them.” Create a written or artistic response to the following: Do you have a goal or dream which intimidates you? Why do you feel unworthy or fearful of it? What practical steps might you take to make the goal more accessible or easier to accomplish? On the other hand, are there some dreams which we are correct to fear? Do you believe some dreams should simply *remain* as dreams? Why/why not?

Geographical Locations in the Novel:

Andalusia

Tarifa

Salem (Jeru”salem”)

Tangier (p. 44)

Ceuta (p. 44)

Mecca (p. 54)

Al-Fayoum (oasis in Egypt)

El Cairum (p.76)

Nile

Coptic Monastery

Moors (p.27)

Sahara Desert (36)

Regional, Cultural or Spiritual Allusions and Terms:

Narcissus (Prologue)	Esperanto (p.66)
King Melchizedek (Genesis14, “King Most High”)	Helvetius, Elias, Fulcanelli, Geber (p.82)
Koran (p. 54)	Scarab (p.161)
Muslim	Simum (p.148)
Mecca	Coptic (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)
The Unspoken Language	Elixir of Life (p. 66)
The Language of the World	Master Work (p.81)
Personal Legend	Emerald Tablet (p. 126)
Principle of Favorability (p. 29)	
Urim and Thummin (p. 30)	

Vocabulary:

scabbard (37)	treasonous (129)
conspire	elixir (133)
scimitar (112)	contemplate (134)
brandish (112)	fixedly (136)
dialect (106)	flourish (145)
prognostication (111)	sirocco (146)
monotony (124)	tether (151)
tracts (126)	recount (153)
agitated (128)	disciple (153)
centurion (158)	avidly (159)
scarab (161)	sacristy (163)
alchemy	infidel (34)

Preliminary Notes About the Novel:

The Alchemist is written in a fable format. What is a fable, and why would Coelho use it to tell his story? Generally speaking, fables use recognizable, simple characters and 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 and singing about the answers to these questions for years!

The novel integrates ideas and philosophies of many faiths and historical periods. Many of these ideas concern the pursuit of truth, one’s intended destiny and 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 and live out our own Personal Legends. These ideas, though, have been explored since ancient times in one form or another by countless faiths and peoples. Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Taoism, Christianity, Judaism, countless tribal cultures, in addition to ancient and modern philosophers, all attempt to define the idea of one's Personal Legend (though they may call it by different names), and all subscribe paths to achieving personal fulfillment. Thus, although the legend is about no faith or philosophy in particular, it is about *all* faiths and 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 symbol, or *allegorical* device, in the legend (figurative level). Coelho is really using characters, events and 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, and not complicated, but it may require a journey of courage, faith and perseverance to discover what it is and where it is hidden.

In an interview, Paulo Coelho talks about "Four Pillars of Alchemy-- four 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, and vice versa. Writers and thinkers such as Plato, Walt Whitman and 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 and 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 and 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 and learning from omens and signs which come our way.

Questions for Novel Study:

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 and 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 and 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, and 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 and 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 and perceptions about himself and the world begin to change on pp. 42-44? Describe three 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 and the merchant? What effect does the merchant say Santiago has had on him?
11. The Englishman and 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 and the desert?
12. The oasis is described in great detail. How does its lushness, laughter and 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 dead hawks and 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 two sons (the poet and 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, and 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?

Topics for Research:

What is alchemy? What processes were involved? Who performed it and why? Who were the famous alchemists of the medieval period?

Who is Melchizedek? What role does he play in the Old Testament?

What are the Five Pillars of Islam (p. 54). What is the Koran?

Explore the concept of Soul of the World as different religions and philosophies define it.

Research the tribal ways of the Bedouins of the Sahara (77).

Research one of the geographical settings from the novel.

What are the basic theories of Freud's or Jung's dream analysis theories? Catalog all of the dreams that occur in the book, and attempt to interpret one according to a theorist.

Research levanters, siroccos and other regional weather features described in the book.

Post-Reading Activities:

Map out Santiago's journey. Include obstacles he encounters and lessons he learns in their geographically correct locations. Provide a key which suggests ideas, progress, symbolism, etc. (I will explain)

Read Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass" and keep a reaction journal which connects his verse to Coelho's Soul of the World idea.

Keep a dream journal for one week. Try to interpret what you think they mean on your own, then research what they might mean according to Freud or Jung, or according to an ancient culture (medieval, Egyptian, Greek, African, etc.)

Create a dance, pantomime, musical or other performance in which you use "Unspoken Language" to convey the story of Santiago.

Create a painting, collage, photo-essay, shapescap (I will explain) or sculpture which captures an idea, relationship or moment from the story. Provide a written explanation of your work.

Produce a creative writing piece which captures some of the central ideas of the book. Some ideas:

Journal: A Day in the Life of a Shepherd

Two or three songs (with lyrics) from "The Alchemist: The Musical"

Rewrite a portion of the story from a different perspective: Fatima, the Alchemist, the Fortune Teller, the crystal merchant, the sheep!

Write Santiago's "How-To Find Your Treasure" Handbook, or "Personal Legends for Dummies"

Scrapbook (with explanatory notes) of Santiago's travels—feature pictures and items which Santiago accumulates as he learns about life

Letters between Fatima and Santiago

Unspoken Language Journal-Tune in to the various forms of unspoken language we experience around us every day. What gestures, facial expressions, intuitions and signals do we give and receive to guide us in our responses, actions, reactions and relationships? Observe interactions at school, at home, in nature, and in public places, and record incidents which illustrate that unspoken communication is sometimes as (if not more) powerful than the spoken word.