

Social perspectives in contemporary English Literature

Paulo Coelho, the Alchemist

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Abstract

The institutions of society are the strongest paths in paving way for the individual to achieve his/her dreams. Each part of society functions to provide stability and it puts a large emphasis on which the human develop. Human life and social interactions seek in unifying the goals or desires of the individuals. The society and its culture, influences the personal development. Society acts as the stimulus in achieving individual's desire. "The Alchemist ", a novel by Brazilian author Paulo Coelho was first published in 1988. 'The Alchemist' follows a young Andalusian shepherd in his journey to Egypt, after having a recurring dream of finding treasure there. Journey is necessary according to the Alchemist. It is about the essential wisdom of listening to a heart and above all, following our dreams. "When you want something, the entire universe conspires in helping you to achieve it". This is the core theme of the Book. The main theme, is finding one's destiny influenced by the society.

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Everything on Earth is related. This is because everything, including inanimate objects, has a soul, and a soul is connected to the soul of the world. Santiago's ability to communicate with the forces of nature is itself both an act of communication across perceived divides and an act of transformation. That which is not living cannot communicate, the Earth engages in conversation and is thus a living being, just like Santiago. The boy is the protagonist of *The Alchemist*. Born in a small town in Andalusia, he attends the seminary as a boy but longs to travel the world. He finally gets the courage to ask his father for permission to become a shepherd so that he can travel the fields of Andalusia.

The novel is a focus on developing one's wisdom through the individual journey in the society. The goal of life is, live in harmony with what is ordained for one, or one's personal legend; happiness depends upon this harmony. As we all know what our personal legends are, the main problem is that as humans and adults we strive to make things more complex than they really are. The Book claims that the original secrets of alchemy can be written in a single sentence, but the mankind had made its explanations of that event so convoluted that they cannot be understood by anyone. "When you want something, the entire universe is conspiring to help achieve it" (109).

It is focussing one's energy on determining on what it is that one really wants. Coelho describes it, the soul of the world unites us all- people, plants, rocks and elements. In the narrative of *The Alchemist*, the unity of humans and the natural world is pointed out several times.

Santiago crosses the Strait of Gibraltar and finds himself in Tangier, a city in northern Morocco, where a man he meets in a bar swindles him out of all his money. As a result of this unfortunate occurrence, Santiago realizes that he is like everyone else: "I see the world in terms of what I would like to see happen and not what actually does" (72). He decides to think positively — to consider himself an adventurer rather than a victim. The protagonist, Santiago learned mainly from books, but, after that, he begins to learn from his experiences. What he learns first is that people deceive themselves about the world and the way it works. More crucially, he learns that he can continue to be a passive receiver of the events of his life, a victim or he can embrace his experiences and move forward with purpose, thereby becoming an adventurer.

Santiago's realization that, "he should see the world as it is, rather than how he wants it to be" — would seem to contradict the king of Salem's advice, "if people follow the dreams, the universe will assist them". Santiago is not looking to understand the language of the world, he is inadvertently learning to do so. While his own quest is towards his Personal Legend and thus a buried treasure, the simple Spanish shepherd boy cannot help but start to become one with the universe.

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He does so by traveling through worlds that are new to him (Tangier, the Sahara), and by observing a new religion (Islam) and new peoples (Arabs and Africans). As Santiago tells the

Englishman, still lost in his books in the midst of the desert, "You should pay more attention to the caravan . . . We make a lot of detours, but we're always heading for the same destination"(69).

In talking to Santiago about his experiences at the crystal shop, the Englishman makes a statement that is central to *The Alchemist's* philosophy — that "the earth is alive . . . and it has a soul. We are part of that soul, so we rarely recognize that it is working for us. But in the crystal shop you probably realized that even the glasses were collaborating in your success" (87).

Although this idea is new to Santiago, the attribution of spirits to inanimate objects is a form of religion common to many primitive cultures known as animism.

Santiago's discovery that the surface of a single emerald contains the world's most important knowledge points out another of *The Alchemist's* fundamental propositions: that books should be straightforward and easy to understand. People make all things, including their books, too complicated, and eventually they cannot return to the simple truths that everyone once knew. Santiago begins to wonder if, in working for the crystal merchant, he was engaged in a kind of alchemy. The Englishman, by contrast, believes that alchemy can be learned only from a master alchemist and after reading many difficult books on the subject. This is another instance of *The Alchemist's* point of view that experience is the best teacher. The episode's final lesson, delivered to Santiago by the camel driver, is not inconsistent with this — that living in the present is the richest, most rewarding way of life.

Santiago has been steadily maturing over the course of his journey. A boy no longer, Santiago is the man to whom the alchemist will teach his secrets. This sudden change in the novel's setting is physically and emotionally dramatic. The alchemist identifies the cobra in the desert as a symbol of life. Traditionally, snakes also are emblematic of male potency. The cobra's power may give Santiago the strength to return to Fatima and declare his love for her. The alchemist's ability to face down various threats that emerge from the desert — the cobra, the three armed warriors, the pair of ominous looking men — demonstrates his strength and influence. Not only have the alchemist's studies made him wise; they also have made him powerful.

The human characters have spoken of all things having souls; here the desert, the wind, and the sun can converse with a human (Santiago) in language that the human can understand. Another way of describing this phenomenon is to say that desert, wind and sun have been personified.

Consistent with the tonal transformation from the mostly realistic to the mythic is Santiago's contact with the Soul of God. Like so many stories of seekers and their quests (think not only of the *Odyssey*, but *The Wizard of Oz*), *The Alchemist* ends where it began. Santiago's treasure was literally under his nose, but he had to travel across a continent to find it. Surely this is central to Coelho's vision, and to this novel's theme.

Dreams are central to *The Alchemist's* action as well as its meaning. Santiago's dream is the novel's *inciting incident* (the event that sets the story in motion), and the author's primary message seems to be that we should follow our dreams. Without love, according to *The*

Alchemist, our lives are incomplete. Once, Santiago discovers unconditional love in the person of Fatima, however, there is little he cannot accomplish.

The Englishman introduces another function of omens in ‘*The Alchemist*’. He tells Santiago that omens are not just for following on the way to achieve one’s personal legend. They also can help a person understand the language of the universe. As described by the Englishman, the language of the universe is a kind of lost knowledge information that everyone in the world used to know, without having to read books.

While crossing the desert, at night Santiago learns an important lesson, that there is no need to fear the unknown if you can achieve what you need to survive. In the words of the camel driver, “We are afraid of losing what we have whether its our life or our possession and property” (73). But this fear evaporates when we understand that our life and the society are inclined.

Man, certainly a contradictory figure urging self reliance, possess discouraging passivity and does not understand the principle of favouritism. The protagonist formerly learns mainly from the books. Books are not especially useful to him in his quest. The society serves as symbols, cobra as danger and strength. The desert as symbolic of all the obstacles and hardships that stand between people and their dreams, the oasis symbolises life, love and domesticity. Thus, the protagonist as the recurring dream to which the society sets him on his way to be a triumphant.

Works Cited

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