

Advanced Placement in
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Alchemist

by Paulo Coelho

written by Gerald Mood

Copyright © 2010 by Prestwick House Inc., P.O. Box 658, Clayton, DE 19938. 1-800-932-4593.
www.prestwickhouse.com Permission to copy this unit for classroom use is extended to purchaser for his or her
personal use. This material, in whole or part, may not be copied for resale.

ISBN 978-1-935467-74-8

Reorder No. 308234

The Alchemist

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. Explore the use of allusion.
2. Identify the genre of the story.
3. Interpret the role of the supernatural in the story arc and in significant character arcs.
4. Examine the use of figurative and rhetorical devices like personification.
5. Analyze the development and motivation of the main character.

Introductory Lecture

I. RELIGION AND THE NATURAL WORLD

The Alchemist may seem to intertwine religion with the idea of Personal Legend, or one's purpose in life, but it actually acts to separate the two. In the story, the *individual* is stressed throughout Santiago's journey, not religion. Even though Coelho tries to draw authority and credibility from three major religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—there is no depth in his writing on any of them. Coelho suggests all three are valid because each one is used for Santiago to find his Personal Legend, and characters from each are successful in finding their own Personal Legends. However, Coelho chooses the natural world, not any religion, as the primary mechanism for drawing closer to God. Elements like Personal Legend, the Soul of the World, and the Universal Language are used in a spiritual, not religious, context.

The character of Melchizedek and the stones Urim and Thummim are drawn from Judaism. Originally from the Hebrew Bible, Melchizedek is the first to teach Santiago about Personal Legends and the Soul of the World. Coelho gives Melchizedek a great amount of credibility in the stories he shares, the advice he gives, the gift he brings, but especially in the dialog he has during his last appearance in the book. There, the reader hears Melchizedek directly speaking to God. This is significant because it is for the reader's sake, not Santiago's. Santiago never sees this exchange, but it reveals to the reader that Melchizedek has a very personal relationship with God. This creates a tremendous amount of credibility around everything we learn from Melchizedek. The stones Urim and Thummim are used later in the book, when Santiago has all but forgotten about his treasure. Coelho uses the stones to remind Santiago of his Personal Legend and renew his pursuit of his treasure.

Christianity makes its appearance almost immediately in *The Alchemist* when Santiago is introduced seeking shelter overnight in an abandoned church. The author also reveals very early that Santiago had attended seminary, but eventually dropped out because he was more interested in knowing the world than knowing God. These two examples could be interpreted as a rejection of Christianity. However, it is because of the picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus that allows Santiago to drop his guard enough for him to consult the gypsy woman about his dreams. It is through her that Santiago is first confronted about the validity of his dreams and is told that he must follow them. Eventually, the reader learns that Santiago is indeed still Christian, when he swears to Jesus Christ before the caravan heads out into the African desert.

Islam also plays an important role in *The Alchemist*. Coelho uses a number of characters who are devout Muslims to influence, guide, and teach Santiago during his journey. As was the case with Coelho's references to Christianity, the intent of Coelho's first mention of Islam is unclear. Santiago has just reached the shores of Africa where he is struck by the actions of Islam's priests and practitioners. "A practice of infidels," he calls it, and says, "The infidels had an evil look about them." But it is a Muslim who comes to Santiago's aid when he has nothing. This meeting then leads to a powerful friendship that continues to teach Santiago and strengthens him for his journey across the desert towards the Pyramids. It is during this journey that he meets more Muslims who guide him, including the camel driver who travels alongside him, and eventually the alchemist. The alchemist is Santiago's greatest teacher, who mentors him during arguably the most difficult part of Santiago's journey.

The Alchemist

PART ONE

Beginning, “The boy’s name was Santiago,” and ending, “The boy could see in his father’s gaze a desire to be able, himself, to travel the world—a desire that was still alive, despite his father’s having had to bury it, over dozens of years, under the burden of struggling for water to drink, food to eat, and the same place to sleep every night of his life.”

1. Why is Santiago sleeping on the ground and using a book as a pillow?

2. How does Coelho set the tone of the book within the first couple of pages?

3. What do Santiago’s sheep, his father, and the merchant’s daughter all have in common?

4. Coelho has Santiago believe that the church he slept in may be haunted because it caused him to have the same dream for a second time. By doing this, Coelho effectively establishes what?

Beginning, “The horizon was tinged with red, and suddenly the sun appeared,” and ending, “He looked to the skies, feeling a bit abashed, and said, ‘I know it’s the vanity of vanities, as you said, my Lord. But an old king sometimes has to take some pride in himself.’”

1. Why is Santiago afraid of gypsies?

2. How does Coelho reassure the reader that the gypsy isn’t going to harm Santiago?

3. If Santiago enjoys meeting new people, why is he annoyed when the old man tries to spark up a conversation with him?

4. What does Coelho accomplish in describing Santiago’s errands after his consultation with the gypsy?

Beginning, “How strange Africa is, thought the boy,” and ending, “And after another long silence, he added, ‘I need money to buy some sheep.’”

1. How does Coelho choose to transport the reader to Africa?

2. Why does Coelho mention the beautiful sword in the market?

3. What is the narrative purpose for Santiago’s being robbed of all his money?

4. After Santiago gets robbed in Tangier, what does Coelho accomplish by revealing how happy the candy merchant is or by revealing how unhappy the crystal merchant is?

5. Why does Coelho end Part One with the line, “I need money to buy some sheep?”

PART TWO

Beginning: “The boy had been working for the crystal merchant for almost a month, and he could see that it wasn’t exactly the kind of job that would make him happy,” and ending, “Not everyone can see his dreams come true in the same way.”

1. How has Santiago’s role changed in the beginning of Part Two?

2. What does Santiago’s change of roles say about his development as a character?

3. What theme is advanced by Santiago’s success in this section?

4. What is the point of the conversation between Santiago and the crystal merchant?

Beginning, “The boy went to his room and packed his belongings,” and ending, “What could it cost to go over to the supplier’s warehouse and find out if the Pyramids were really that far away?”

1. What is Coelho’s purpose for keeping Santiago in Tangier for a year?

2. Why doesn’t Santiago initially want to pursue his Personal Legend to the Pyramids?

3. What purpose do Urim and Thummim serve?

4. What is Coelho’s intent for continually referencing the old king during his description of other characters?

Beginning, “The Englishman was sitting on a bench in a structure that smelled of animals, sweat, and dust: it was part warehouse, part corral,” and ending, “And I better read your books,” said the boy.

1. Coelho’s main purpose for introducing the character of the Englishman is to what?

2. How does Coelho create a sense of danger before Santiago heads out into the desert?

3. What is Santiago talking about when he describes “the mysterious chain that links one thing to another, the same chain that had caused him to become a shepherd, that had caused his recurring dream, that had brought him to a city near Africa, to find a king, and to be robbed in order to meet a crystal merchant, and...?”

4. How is journeying across the desert analogous to Santiago’s search for his Personal Legend?

5. What is Coelho suggesting when he points out that the challenges of the caravan go unnoticed by the Englishman?

6. How does Coelho continue to teach the reader about the major themes of his book, namely, The Soul of the World and the Universal Language, while Santiago is merely traveling within the larger scope of the caravan traveling across the desert?

Beginning, “The caravan began to travel day and night,” and ending, “And, if I have to, I will accept the fact that he has become a part of the clouds, and the animals, and the water of the desert.”

1. When Santiago sees the oasis on the horizon and asks the camel driver, “Well, why don’t we go there right now?” the camel driver’s response is, “Because we have to sleep.” What does this accomplish?

2. Coelho uses many literary tools in order to introduce the oasis to the reader for the first time including imagery, allusion, emotion, and exposition. However, he does not use dialogue. Explain.

3. What narrative purpose does the war serve?

4. What further purpose is served by making oases places of refuge from the tribal wars?

5. Coelho is using the Rule of Three when he has Santiago talk to the woman dressed in black, the man, and the young woman at the well, before Santiago discovers where the alchemist lives. Why do this?
