

English II: Summer Assignment

***The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho**

We hope you will enjoy this inspiring novel about finding and following your dreams, told from the point of view of a young man who travels from Spain to Egypt. Hopefully, while following his search, you will find much to reflect upon and perhaps apply to your own journey.

While You Read:

Read and annotate the novel (or take your own notes), keeping track of characters and plot events, which are relatively few. What you will find most interesting are the ideas, lessons, and reflections of the protagonist. Be sure to include the “Introduction,” “Epilogue,” and “About the Author” sections in your reading and note-taking. Keep track of any questions you have.

Your Written Assignment:

Since the questions below will be potential discussion topics, keep brief notes on all of them. **Choose ONE to answer** more fully in a typed, one-page, double-spaced journal entry in size 12 font. The best grades will be given to journals which fully answer the question using sensible paragraphing, good details, and proper writing skills. Make sure to answer all parts of the question in your journal. Bring your notes and your journal with you on the first day of class. (Also be sure to have a copy of the journal in your Google Drive.) **All submissions will be run through AI and plagiarism detectors. We would much prefer your original thinking rather than “right” answers generated by a computer.** The assignment is about reflection and self-discovery, not about answering questions.

Discussion Topics/Journal Choices:

1. The “King of Salem” tells Santiago that the new book he has acquired is about the same thing almost all other books are about: “people’s inability to choose their own Personal Legends.” This story is so common, he suggests, because people have come to believe “the world’s greatest lie”—that we all lose control of our own lives and must let them be controlled by fate. When is Santiago tempted to let his life be controlled by fate? The elder chieftain of the oasis tells Santiago the story of Joseph of Egypt, who became an important counselor to the pharaoh. In what ways would this Personal Legend have suited Santiago’s own life? Why does he not choose it? What overall theme or message does this help reveal?
2. One of the first major diversions from Santiago’s journey is the theft of his money in Tangier, which forces him into taking a menial job with the crystal merchant. There, Santiago learns many lessons on everything from the art of business to the art of patience. Of all these, which lessons are the most crucial to the pursuit of his personal legend? How do most people react to “setbacks” like this one? What is another way to see these kinds of problems in our lives?
3. When he talks about the pilgrimage to Mecca, the crystal merchant argues that having a dream is more important than fulfilling it, which is what Santiago is trying to do. Do you agree with Santiago’s rationale or the crystal merchants? Explain and defend your opinion.
4. The Englishman, whom Santiago meets when he joins the caravan to the Egyptian pyramids, is searching for “a universal language, understood by everybody.” What is that language? According to the Englishman, what are the parallels between reading and alchemy? How does the Englishman’s search for the alchemist compare to Santiago’s search for a treasure?

5. The Englishman comments that he'd like to "write a huge encyclopedia just about the words *luck* and *coincidence*. It's with those words that the universal language is written." Do all of the characters in *The Alchemist* experience omens as coincidences? What kinds of omens occur in the book? If the universal language is "understood by everybody, but already forgotten," in what sense do omens remind us of what we've forgotten? How is the Englishman himself both a link to Santiago's past and an omen about his future?
6. According to *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary*, an oasis is "something that provides refuge, relief, or pleasant contrast. In the oasis in the desert, Coelho seems to be suggesting a reversal in our usual perceptions of the spiritual and material worlds—that the spiritual experience is an arduous journey and the world of people is where we go to rest and be rejuvenated. What have you experienced with this in your own life? Did your oasis seem "of this world," or was it a spiritual experience?
7. The alchemist tells Santiago "you don't even have to understand the desert: all you have to do is to contemplate a simple grain of sand, and you will see in it all the marvels of creation." With this in mind, why do you think the alchemist chose to befriend Santiago, though he knew that the Englishman was the one looking for him? What is the meaning of two dead hawks and the falcon in the oasis? At one point the alchemist explains to Santiago the secret of successfully turning metal to gold. How does this process compare to finding a Personal Legend?
8. Why did Santiago have to go through the dangers of tribal wars on the outskirts of the oasis in order to reach the Pyramids? At the very end of the journey, why did the alchemist leave Santiago alone to complete it? What theme or message does this help reveal?
9. 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 save Santiago's life? How did it lead him back to the treasure he was looking for? What theme or message does this help reveal?
10. Toward the end of their journey together, the alchemist tells Santiago a story about a Roman who was visited in a dream by an angel telling him that his son's words would be remembered for generations to come. That son, the centurion not the poet, encountered a rabbi whom he saw to be the Son of God and uttered the words immortalized in the Gospel of Luke (chapter 7): "My Lord I am not worthy that you should come under my roof..." What lesson did the alchemist wish to convey to Santiago? Does the New Testament version of the story (Luke 7) seem to be related to this lesson? If so, how?

Checklist of what to bring on the first day of class:

- a copy of *The Alchemist* (unless you borrowed it from the library or friend)
- your notes on *The Alchemist* journal/discussion topics
- your typed journal response on *The Alchemist*

If you have any questions email noelleoman@grcatholiccentral.org or laurakozminski@grcatholiccentral.org