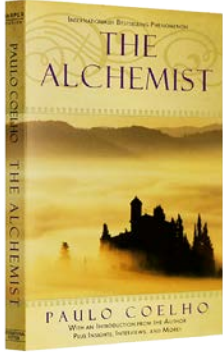


# The Alchemist

## Discussion Questions



Author: Paulo Coelho  
Original title: O Alquimista  
Original language: Portuguese  
Original Publication: 1988  
Genres: Novel, Drama, Quest, Fantasy Fiction, Adventure fiction

1. At the start of his journey, when Santiago asks a gypsy woman to interpret his dream about a treasure in the Egyptian pyramids, she asks for one tenth of the treasure in return. When Santiago asks the old man to show him the path to the treasure, the old man requests one tenth of his flock as "payment." Both payments represent a different price we have to pay to fulfill a dream; however, only one will yield a true result. Which payment represents false hope? Can you think of examples from your own life when you had to give up something to meet a goal and found the price too high?
2. Paulo Coelho once said that alchemy is all about pursuing our spiritual quest in the physical world as it was given to us. It is the art of transmuting the reality into something sacred, of mixing the sacred and the profane. With this in mind, can you define your Personal Legend? At what time in your life were you first able to act on it? What was your "beginner's luck"? Did anything prevent you from following it to conclusion? Having read *The Alchemist*, do you know what inner resources you need to continue the journey?
3. One of the first major diversions from Santiago's journey was the theft of his money in Tangiers, which forced him into taking a menial job with the crystal merchant. There, Santiago learned many lessons on everything from the art of business to the art of patience. Of all these, which lessons were the most crucial to the pursuit of his Personal Legend?
4. When he talked about the pilgrimage to Mecca, the crystal merchant argued that having a dream is more important than fulfilling it, which is what Santiago was trying to do. Which approach do you agree with?
5. 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 compares to Santiago's search for a treasure? How did the Englishman and Santiago feel about each other?
6. The alchemist tells Santiago "you don't have to understand the desert: all you have to do is 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 into gold. How does this process compare to finding a Personal Legend?
7. 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?
8. 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?

# Author Bio

- Birth: 1947; Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
- Education: Left law school in second year
- Currently: Lives in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Paulo Coelho's books have been translated into 56 languages, topped bestseller lists throughout the world, and scored him such celebrity fans as Julia Roberts, Bill Clinton, and Madonna; yet for Brazilian publishing phenom Paulo Coelho, the road to success has been strewn with a number of obstacles, many of them rooted in his troubled past.

## Personal life

As a youth, Coelho was expected to follow in the footsteps of his father, a professional engineer. When he rebelled, expressing his intentions to become a writer, his parents had him committed to a psychiatric hospital where he was subjected to electro-shock therapy. He left home to join the 1970s countercultural revolution, experimenting with drugs, dabbling in black magic, and getting involved in Brazil's bohemian art and music scene. He teamed with rock musician Raul Seixas for an extremely successful songwriting partnership that changed the face of Brazilian pop—and put a lot of money in Coelho's pockets. He also joined an anti-capitalist organization called the Alternative Society which attracted the attention of Brazil's military dictatorship. Marked as a subversive, he was imprisoned and tortured.

Amazingly, Coelho survived these horrific experiences. He left the hippie lifestyle behind, went to work in the record industry, and began to write, but without much success. Then, in the mid-1980s, during a trip to Europe, he met a man, an unnamed mentor he refers to only as "J," who inducted him into Regnum Agnus Mundi, a secret society that blends Catholicism with a sort of New Age mysticism. At J's urging, Coelho journeyed across el Camino de Santiago, the legendary Spanish road traversed by pilgrims since the Middle Ages. He chronicled this life-changing, 500-mile journey—the culmination of decades of soul-searching—in *The Pilgrimage*, published in 1987.

## Writing and awards

The following year, Coelho wrote *The Alchemist*, the inspirational fable for which he is best known. The first edition sold so poorly the publisher decided not to reprint it. Undaunted, Coelho moved to a larger publishing house that seemed more interested in his work. When his third novel, 1990's *Brida*, proved successful, the resulting media buzz carried *The Alchemist* all the way to the top of the charts. Released in the U.S. by HarperCollins in 1993, *The Alchemist* became a word-of-mouth sensation, turning Coelho into a cult hero.

Since then, he has gone on to create his own distinct literary brand—an amalgam of allegory and self-help filled with spiritual themes and symbols. In his novels, memoirs, and aphoristic nonfiction, he returns time and again to the concepts of quest and transformation and has often said that writing has helped connect him to his soul.

While his books have not always been reviewed favorably and have often become the subject of strong cultural and philosophical debate, there is no doubt that this self-described "pilgrim writer" has struck a chord in readers everywhere. In the 2009 edition of the *Guinness Book of World Records*, Coelho was named the most translated living author—with William Shakespeare the most translated of all time!

Coelho's works have won the following awards: Crystal Award (Switzerland), 1999; Rio Branco Order (Brazil), 2000; Legion d'Honneur (France), 2001; and Brazilian Academy of Letters (Brazil), 2002.

### Further Information

*From a 2003 Barnes & Noble interview:*

- Few writers are able to accomplish what Coelho can in just two to four weeks—which is how long it takes for him to write an entire novel.
- Before become a bestselling novelist, Coelho was a writer of a different sort. He co-wrote more than 60 songs with Brazilian musician Raul Seixas.
- Coelho is the founder of the *Paulo Coelho Institute*, a non-profit organization funded by his royalties that raises money for underprivileged children and the elderly in his homeland of Brazil.
- Coelho is a longtime practitioner of archery; a bow and arrow help him unwind.
- In writing, Coelho says "I apply my feminine side and respect the mystery involved in creation."
- Coelho loves almost everything about his work, except conferences. "I am too shy in front of an audience. But I love signings and having eye contact with a reader who already knows my soul."
- When asked what book most influenced his life, he answered:

*The Bible, which contains all the stories and all the guidance humankind needs.*