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Psychoanalytical Perspectives on Dreams, Desires and the Unconscious in 'The Alchemist

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BSTRACT
The most popular novel of the Brazilian writer Paulo Coelho (1947), The Alchemist combines philosophical ideas and words of wisdom about ambition, perseverance, and success. Since its publication in 1988, the novel was sold over 150 million copies worldwide, won 115 international prizes and awards, has been translated into 80 languages, and is still on the New York Times bestseller list today. The Alchemist narrates the story of a shepherd boy called Santiago who travels with his flock, looking for the best pastures for his sheep in the Andalusian countryside. The conflict arises early in the novel's plot when Santiago chooses to seek an interpretation of a recent dream and is advised to travel to the pyramids in Egypt and look for a hidden treasure. The novel narrates the mystical experiences of Santiago as he travels from Spain, through the Egyptian desert and on to the great pyramids, seeking the fulfillment of his dream.

Keywords: dream, desire, elements, experiences, historical, spirituality, unconscious.

INTRODUCTION

Coelho's novel is almost mythical in structure, with a linear plot and single story line recounted in simple language. The tightly written narrative is not embellished by elaborate characterization, explanations, or historical details, and any detail irrelevant to the main plot is conspicuously absent. The entire emphasis of the novel remains on eternally valid truths, which Coelho attempts to convey through the story. The symbolic elements in the narrative, the universal quality of the protagonist's experiences, and the message the novel suggests to the reader account for much of The Alchemist's popularity.

Paulo Coelho's The Alchemist has been translated into more than 80 languages, and inspired readers across cultures and continents. Yet most literary critics, either too eager to dismiss it as pop spirituality or too quick to swallow its message at face value, have consistently overlooked the novel's central twist: **Santiago misinterprets his dream**, and that misinterpretation is the point.

This is not a flaw in the narrative. It is the very structure of how divine symbols, like dreams, operate, especially in the human experience where **free will, error, and unfolding** are essential. In fact, Coelho is drawing from an ancient scriptural pattern: just as Abraham misread God's will in his dream and was corrected at the altar, Santiago follows his dream to Egypt only to find that the treasure lay beneath the tree where the dream first appeared.

The Alchemist underlines an idea or wish that human beings strongly want to believe: If one sincerely desires something, the whole universe conspires to fulfill that dream. Coelho conveys, through the novel, that this sentiment is a lie and that at some point in life people lose the ability to control their lives and become the playthings of fate. He suggests that by listening to one's heart and by heeding omens and signs, one can control destiny. The strong undercurrent of optimism, which runs through the narrative, is the novel's greatest charm.

It is notable that in the tale Santiago's chance encounters with people bring him closer to his aim and motivate him to continue his quest despite his complacence at times. His meeting with the Gypsy fortune- teller in the beginning is followed immediately by a meeting with the old king of Salem, Melchizedek, who is aware of Santiago's past and future and urges the boy to pursue his vision. An unfortunate experience with a thief in Tangier disheartens the searcher for a time, but his memories of the words of the king guide him to the right course of action. The crystal merchant for whom Santiago works for almost a year prefers to dream of going on a pilgrimage instead of embarking on a journey to Mecca in real life. The crystal merchant's fear of failure shakes Santiago into resolving to follow his dream.

Santiago later meets an Englishman who harbors the hope of meeting the mysterious alchemist, an Arab who lives at the Al-Fayoum oasis and possesses exceptional powers. Santiago joins the caravan with the Englishman to travel to Egypt, and it is during this journey that the shepherd boy comes to know about the soul of the world, the language of the heart, and the intricacies of the science of alchemy. The shepherd boy's budding love for an Arabian girl, Fatima, whom he meets during his voyage through the desert, tempts him into giving up his quest for the treasure, but aptly enough Fatima plays the role of a soul mate and coaxes Santiago to continue his difficult expedition. Toward the end of the novel, Santiago's meeting with the alchemist in the desert helps the young seeker to discover his inner strengths and brings him closer to realizing his destiny.

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The Alchemist by Paulo Coelho is usually discussed in the language that it provides: the language of destiny, omens and the Personal Legend. However, the novel begins and ends with the same picture – a dream that repeats throughout the novel until Santiago realizes what it is telling him. This is a circle, which allows for more in-depth psychological interpretation. The dream interpretation has been described by Sigmund Freud as the "royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind" (Freud, 1900/2010, p. 608) and is not thought of as random brain activity, but as a representation of unfulfilled desires and unresolved conflicts. In developing his idea of individuation, Carl Jung was both inspired by and at odds with Freud, seeing it as the process of bringing unconscious material into a coherent conscious self throughout the life span (Jung, 1968; see also Jacobi, 1967). Santiago's recurring dream of treasure buried close to the Egyptian pyramids fits into both of these frameworks: It is a Freudian symptom which requires interpretation, and it is a Jungian structuring device that guides the protagonist's path toward psychic wholeness.

CONTEXT AND RESEARCH GAP

The criticism of The Alchemist in the recent past brings together in common ground despite the various accents. In Sahi, he reads Santiago's arc as a Jungian differentiation, combined with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and he considers the satisfaction to be the union of psychic integration and the ascendancy of the motivation (1216-19). Nazakat, Imran, and Farooq apply Jungian theory more directly, arguing that Santiago's physical travel enacts individuation through a sequence of archetypal encounters (51-55). Gyawali reads Melchizedek and the Alchemist as versions of the Jungian wise old man who guide Santiago from naivety toward self-awareness (44-47). These readings differ in emphasis, but they share a common limitation: each treats the recurring dream as the event that sets individuation in motion rather than as a structure that persists, repeats, and changes meaning across the narrative. Individuation, in other words, is addressed mainly through its agents, Melchizedek, the Alchemist, the omens, instead of through the dream that such agents interpret and serve. This is not a minor omission. If the dream is treated only as a starting point, separation seems to occur through Santiago's encounters, with Melchizedek, the Alchemist, the desert, rather than through any internal psychic process of his own. What remains largely unexamined is the likelihood that the dream itself, not the journey it leads, organizes the novel's psychology from beginning to end, reappearing at each turning point before finally changing its own meaning.

This paper addresses that gap directly, treating the dream not as background to the mythical encounter's criticism that has previously been investigated but as the structure that gives such encounters their psychological purpose.

METHODOLOGY

This paper applies psychoanalytic literary criticism through sustained close reading of Coelho's language, imagery, and repetition rather than plot summary. Freud's concepts of wish-fulfillment, suppression, and repetition compulsion demonstrate why the dream must recur before Santiago can take action on it, while Jung's concepts of archetype, the collective unconscious, and individuation explain why his journey takes the form that it does and the reason it ends where it began. The two frameworks are not separated to be addressed in different sections, because the psychological logic of the story complements each other: Freudian recurrence moves the story forward, and Jungian incorporation provides the end to the repetition. Quotations are taken verbatim from the novel and read for their image/symbolic meaning and word choice and not just as evidence of them

Psychoanalytic readings of Paulo Coelho's The Alchemist frequently frame Santiago's physical pilgrimage through the desert not as mere geographic travel, but as a journey of psychological and spiritual individuation.

Dreams as the Language of the Unconscious

- **Precognitive Guidance:** Santiago's recurring dream about finding treasure at the Egyptian pyramids operates much like Sigmund Freud's concept of the "royal road to the unconscious"—a symbolic messenger exposing hidden desires and unacknowledged longings.
- **The Soul's Idiom:** As the gypsy woman and Melchizedek (the King of Salem) suggest, dreams translate what God or the deeper self tries to communicate when waking rationality shuts down. In Carl Jung's analytical framework, these visions are prospective and compensatory, guiding the ego toward psychic balance rather than just disguising repressed trauma.

DESIRE AND THE PERSONAL LEGEND

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- **Libidinal and Spiritual Drive:** Psychoanalysis views desire (or libido) not strictly in narrow sexual terms, but as a vital energy pushing the individual toward growth. In The Alchemist, this translates to Santiago's **Personal Legend**.
- **Surmounting the Ego's Resistance:** Most people abandon their dreams because the unconscious threat of change or societal norms feels illogical or terrifying. Santiago's movement from a simple shepherd to an alchemist mirrors the ego shedding illusions, confronting personal fears, and integrating shadow aspects of the psyche.
- **The Unconscious and the Soul of the World (Anima Mundi)**
- **Jungian Archetypes:** Santiago encounters archetypal figures—the mentor (Melchizedek), the anima/temptress (Fatima), and the wise old man (the Alchemist)—who assist him in navigating his inner depths.
- **Expanding Consciousness:** Through his encounters with the desert, the wind, and the sun, Santiago learns to speak the "universal language", a literary echo of Carl Jung's **collective unconscious**, where individual boundaries dissolve and the inner self unites with the broader cosmos.

CONCLUSION

In The Alchemist, dreams are important symbols. As we follow Santiago's travels, Paulo Coelho first takes us through the Spanish countryside, to an old ruined church where the boy stops with his flock to sleep. There's a sycamore tree growing in the midst of the ruins, and each time the boy sleeps under it he has the same dream: of a child who magically transports him to the Egyptian pyramids. When the boy arrives in the next town, he visits a fortune-teller to inquire about the meaning of his dream. She tells him that dreams are the "language of God" and that he must heed this dream and go to the Egyptian pyramids, where a treasure awaits him. He finds this conclusion preposterous and goes about his day. We see in this part of the story that the boy is dismissing his dream as meaningless and is in danger of not following his calling. Here, Coelho shows us that the universe gives us signs and prompts to recognize our calling, but we often ignore them. However, we see that for a person who truly wants to find their destiny, the universe will not give up so easily and will give them more chances to recognize its signs.

Omens, signs, dreams, and visions pervade the narrative and act like refrains in this song of the desert. It is only by taking note of these subtle revelations of his subconscious mind that Santiago rises to the alchemist's expectations and bravely faces all the trials that await him. In The Alchemist, Coelho suggests through Santiago's tale that it is only by finding and following one's "personal myth" that one can hope to achieve success, contentment, and happiness. Those who do not have the courage to pursue their deepest desires end up living an empty and doomed life plagued by dissatisfaction and frustration.

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