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Prestwick House
Literature
Teaching Unit
Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



The Alchemist

by Paulo Coelho

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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The Alchemist

Objectives

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

1. identify and give examples of the use of metaphor in this novel.
2. infer causes and relationships that are not explicitly given in the novel.
3. discuss the basics of religious practice among Muslims.
4. cite the crystal merchant and life in the oasis in a discussion of the laws of hospitality in Muslim culture.
5. discuss the role of fable in this novel.
6. comment on the balance between use of a narrator and of an interior monologue in showing Santiago's growth in the novel.
7. identify static and dramatic characters in the story.
8. understand the use of character development as a means of expressing cultural information.
9. analyze the characters of the crystal merchant and the Englishman, pointing out their shortcomings in achieving their Personal Legends.
10. analyze the characters of the alchemist and Santiago and discuss what traits equipped them to achieve their Personal Legends.
11. comment on the role of women in Muslim society.
12. identify a leitmotif and show how this technique is used to strengthen the structure of this novel.
13. summarize the major plot points of the novel.
14. give a critique of the novel, analyzing its strengths and weaknesses.
15. cite the use of both Muslim and Christian elements in the novel and discuss reasons for including these two religions in the story.

The Alchemist

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Cite several omens used in the story and discuss how they are used to move the story forward.
2. Debate the proposition that giving life to inanimate objects is essential to the success of this novel, not just repeated instances of the pathetic fallacy.
3. Cite examples of stereotyping religious and ethnic figures. Discuss how and why some stereotypes are left standing in the novel and others are blurred or erased by later character developments.
4. Discuss whether Fatima was an “average” Muslim woman, citing her freedom of thought and expression, her understanding of men and the desert, and her pledge to Santiago.
5. Consider the character Melchizedek and discuss his importance in preparing Santiago for the quest and sustaining him during the journey. Comment on the use of Melchizedek as a leitmotif in the novel and on whether it is necessary to know about his Biblical origins to understand his role in the novel.
6. Although Santiago is called “the boy” throughout the story, he becomes a man during the course of his quest. Use specific incidents to trace Santiago’s development and maturation as the story progresses.
7. Make a case that the Englishman is a static character in this story.
8. The “willing suspension of disbelief” is often required if a reader is to gain full enjoyment from a work of fiction. Discuss how you had to suspend disbelief to enjoy *The Alchemist*.
9. As the caravan crossed the desert and then camped at the oasis, Santiago spent quite a lot of time thinking, and the author has shared those thoughts with the reader. Discuss how the use of the interior monologue (Santiago talking to himself) moves this story away from an action-oriented story into the realm of the psychological novel, in which the emotional development of the protagonist dominates.
10. In the Introduction (Ten Years On), the author lists four obstacles to finding one’s own legend. These are: being told that what we want is impossible, loving in a way that makes us afraid we will hurt those around us, defeats and diversions along the way; and the fear of achieving the goal. Discuss and give examples of how Santiago encounters and overcomes these barriers.
11. Give an overview of the main beliefs and practices of Islam as shown in *The Alchemist*.

The Alchemist

Ten Years On: Introduction

Vocabulary

disinter – unbury, reveal
impetus – encouragement, goad

1. The author says that four obstacles stand in the way of a person who tries to live his or her dream. What are these obstacles?

2. What does the author classify as the secret of life?

3. The author is a citizen of another country. What is the country?

Prologue

1. The Prologue is a fable. What does it involve?

2. Why would the author include a fable before the story even begins?

5. The Introduction has prepared the reader to understand that something significant occurs while the boy and girl are talking. What is it, and what does it mean?

6. What is the geographical setting for this part of the story?

7. What did the boy's parents plan for him, and how did he change the plan?

8. What does Santiago plan to do in Tarifa?

9. One ethnic group is singled out in a negative light. What group is stereotyped by the presence of the old woman who interprets dreams, and how is this group described?

10. What is the price of Santiago's consultation with the old woman about the dream?

11. Santiago meets an old man in the village. The old man says that Santiago's new book is irritating and contains the world's greatest lie. How does it irritate, and what is the lie?

8. Thinking of Melchizedek, Santiago feels that it was “almost as if he had been here and left his mark...he always appeared to help those who are trying to realize their Personal Legend.” What makes Santiago think the old king has been with him during the year he spent in the crystal shop? Why does this constitute a turning point in the story?

9. What do we learn about the Englishman?

10. What motivates the Englishman’s decision to befriend Santiago?

11. The author describes the caravan as making detours, stopping and starting, and unloading and reloading. In this way, the caravan becomes a metaphor for a journey to a destination. The Englishman, however, is unaware of this. Why does he not understand this, and what does his lack of awareness imply for his larger journey?

12. What wisdom did the camel driver share with Santiago?
