

The Alchemist Study Guide

The Alchemist by Paulo Coelho

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Plot Summary

The Alchemist is subtitled "A Fable About Following Your Dreams." Fables are cautionary tales that have a point to make. The universal point this story makes is that everyone has a special destiny, and yet not everyone resolves to attain it because it takes hard work. Reaching one's destiny requires leaving behind familiar surroundings. It also demands persistence, the ability to change when appropriate and the willingness to respond to omens that point the way.

Like the title character, most of the characters in this story are not given names. In a traditional fable, characters are often animals that represent a specific trait. The characters here are humans, but they are only identified by what they do or whom they represent. The main character, a young Spanish shepherd, does have a name, Santiago, which is a derivative of "saint." Santiago is disturbed by a recurrent dream that seems to have a message for him. He seeks a gypsy to explain its meaning. She affirms what the dream is trying to tell him, that he will find his treasure at the Egyptian pyramids. He meets an old man who is actually an unassuming king, who tells him that he needs to learn to respond to omens. The king explains "the principle of favorability, beginner's luck. Because life wants you to achieve your destiny."

Santiago leaves his sheep to embark on a long journey across foreign territory in search of a hidden treasure, his destiny. The journey is a universal analogy to the journey of life itself. Though Santiago travels far, learns much and faces mortal danger to get to his treasure, in the end he finds that treasure, his destiny, back at home in the very place where he started. From the start, as in life, the journey is filled with difficulties and unanticipated challenges. Through the challenges of loss and hard work, Santiago learns to recognize and respond to omens. He meets and interacts with several characters along the way from whom he learns something important about himself. Whether they intend to or not, the characters along the way help guide him to his treasure.



Part 1 (through page 26)

Part 1 (through page 26) Summary

Santiago guides his flock throughout the fields of Andalusia. He finds an old abandoned church and churchyard where he and his flock can spend the night. He sleeps on the stone floor using his book as a pillow. He anticipates his approach the Andalusian village where, one year prior, he met a merchant's daughter. Santiago and his flock approach the town. He has been herding this flock for two years. He often reflects about what he has learned from his sheep and what they have learned from him. He observes that the sheep depend fully on him to lead them to food and water. Not having to forage food for themselves, they have forgotten their instincts.

Santiago thinks about the beautiful merchant's daughter. He imagines explaining to her why he knows much more than a common, simple shepherd boy. He thinks of her surprise at her discovery that he can read. He plans to tell her that his father and mother sent him to study at the seminary and prepared him to become a priest so that he would not have to work as hard as they have. He studied Latin, Spanish and theology until the age of sixteen.

Although Santiago is well prepared to become a priest, this is not what Santiago wants to do with his life. He tells his father he wants to travel the world and see how other people live. His father tells him that among the people he knows who have traveled the world, they always come back thinking that they had it better where they were. His father says that people who travel have money to do so, and that the only ones among their people who have traveled are the shepherds. The boy tells him would like to become a shepherd.

The boy's father then gives him three ancient Spanish gold coins he has found in the field and was saving for him. He tells him to buy a flock of sheep and go into the world. He is sure his son will return one day, having decided that his home is better than anything else he has seen in his travels. In his father's eyes, the boy observes the buried hint of an old desire to see the world. As the boy prepares for his meeting with the merchant's daughter, he reflects that it's the possibility of having a dream come true that keeps life interesting.

As Santiago prepares to see the merchant's daughter, he goes to see an old gypsy woman who interprets dreams. He tells her about a dream he has had twice where a child comes to play with his sheep and then transports him to the Egyptian pyramids. Just as the child is about to show him where he will find a hidden treasure, he wakes up. The old woman interprets his dream as saying that Santiago should go to the Egyptian pyramids because there he will find a great treasure. He is disappointed in the interpretation, but she has already said she will not charge him for it. Instead, she demands that he promise to give her one-tenth of his treasure when he finds it. The boy



leaves the gypsy, relieved that he has not had to pay her. He tells himself that he will never again believe in dreams.

After Santiago leaves the old gypsy woman, he runs his errands and then finds a seat on a bench in the plaza. He meets an old man who turns out to be a king. When Santiago wonders why a king would bother talking to a shepherd, the king explains that he is appearing because the boy is on the verge of giving up just as he has discovered his destiny. The old man tells him that a person's only real obligation in life is to realize his destiny. He demands that the boy give him one-tenth of his flock if Santiago is serious about learning more about his hidden treasure.

Part 1 (through page 26) Analysis

The subtitle of *The Alchemist* is "A Fable about Following Your Dreams." The theme of dreams figures prominently, as does the theme of destiny. Santiago literally follows his dreams to find his destiny and love. He has learned important languages in the seminary, but he does not yet understand the "universal language" of dreams. The beautiful girl whom he imagines he will impress with his knowledge and skill foreshadows the woman he meets and falls in love with further into the story. The strong attraction he feels for the merchant's daughter introduces the theme of love. Love is a motivating force that is central to his journey.

As the story begins, Santiago is guiding his sheep into a churchyard to stay overnight. The sheep are symbolic. They represent the masses of people who become dependent on a leader and do not think for themselves. As a shepherd, Santiago is a natural leader. As he sets off on his journey, his main challenge is to think for himself and learn to read the omens so that he can find his treasure. He reflects that they seem to know his patterns and can understand him. This introduces the theme of a language without words, which is also central to the story. It foreshadows the universal language understood by the alchemist. Santiago's recurrent dream is the first of many dreams that occur further ahead in the story. The dreams offer clues to pay attention to.

Santiago's visit to the gypsy is revealing. She affirms what the child in his dream has told him, that he will find his treasure near the Egyptian pyramids. The three ancient gold coins that his father has given him foreshadow the ending of this story. His father has correctly predicted that Santiago will come home. He will literally find his buried treasure at the roots of the sycamore tree in the ruins of the church, where his journey began.

The name Santiago is derived from "saint," which provides a clue about how to view the main character. Saints face severe tests, and then they are rewarded. Santiago undergoes a series of difficult tests of his spirit before he is rewarded at the end of the story. On the surface of the story, this name also works because it is a common first name for boys in Spain. There is an emphasis on Santiago's name because he is one of the only characters in the book who is named.



The sycamore tree growing up through the center of the ruined old church and the sacristy symbolizes new life growing out of the ruins of the past. The forces of nature figure prominently in this novel. Later in the story, the desert, the wind and the sun all become characters that converse with Santiago as he reaches toward his destiny. As a symbol of nature, the sycamore suggests that nature continues while manmade structures crumble in time. The gold coins buried at the roots of this tree are the treasure Santiago seeks throughout his travels. Tree roots symbolize the power of nature to grow a tall tree from a tiny root. The tree also suggests the process of alchemy, which is the overall theme of this book.

Later in the novel, the alchemist defines alchemy as an understanding of the forces of nature and the world. Below ground and hidden from sight, the gold coins symbolize the buried treasure of understanding at Santiago's roots, like knowledge that lies latent in the unconscious before it is brought into consciousness. As Santiago evolves and learns the languages that his heart teaches him, he becomes familiar with the forces of nature. His father gives him three coins that he found on the ground, presumably from this treasure chest or a similar one. He tells Santiago that the coins are his inheritance, and he predicts correctly that Santiago will return home, just as many world travelers do. On a symbolic level, his father is telling him that he will find the buried treasure at the roots of his own conscious. He need not travel the world to find it.



Part 2 (through page 50)

Part 2 (through page 50) Summary

Santiago thinks about his discussion with the old man. He is annoyed that the old man was right about his being on the verge of giving up just as he finds his destiny. Wandering around the city, he approaches a ticket seller, but he does not buy a ticket to Africa, where he knows the Egyptian pyramids are. He knows that he could buy a ticket with the money he could make from selling only one of his sheep. As he stands at the ticket window, he decides to go back to shepherding his flock. He muses that neither the old gypsy woman nor the old man understand what it means to have a flock of sheep depend on them.

As Santiago imagines staying on with his flock, the wind intensifies. He becomes envious of the wind's freedom to travel. Aware that nothing but himself is holding him back, he changes his mind. He decides that his flock, the beautiful girl and the fields in which he had been herding his sheep are all only steps along the way to his destiny. He gives one-tenth of his sheep to the old man. A friend buys the remainder of his flock.

The old man confirms what the gypsy has said, that his treasure is at the Egyptian pyramids, although Santiago already knows that. He tells Santiago about the principle of favorability that creates beginner's luck, and he says that when people really want something, the universe conspires to see that they get it. Life wants people to achieve their destiny. The old man gives him two oracle stones called Urim and Thummim. He advises Santiago to follow the omens and think for himself. Whenever he cannot understand the omens, the old man assures him that the stones will help. He reminds him to follow his destiny through to its conclusion.

Before Santiago departs on the ship to Africa, the old man tells him a story about a boy who is sent to learn the secret of happiness from the wisest man in the world. Santiago concludes from the story that although a shepherd may travel the world, "he should never forget about his sheep." In the port town of Tangier, Santiago meets a boy about his own age who offers to help guide him to the pyramids. His new friend tells him that he must buy two camels for the journey across the Sahara desert.

Santiago has handed over all his money to his friend, and while they make their way through the fascinating and crowded marketplace, his new companion disappears with his money. The sun is setting. The marketplace has emptied, and Santiago breaks down in tears because he has been robbed and is in a strange place. He has nothing left except his jacket, his book and the two precious stones. The stones give him the feeling that the old man is still with him, and he is comforted. As he looks around the empty marketplace, he reflects that this is what he wanted, to see new places. He chooses to perceive himself not as a victim of circumstances, but as an adventurer on a quest for his treasure.



Santiago wakes the next morning at the marketplace, where he fell asleep the night before. He helps a merchant assemble his stall. Later he thinks about the fact that although the two of them speak different languages, they understood each other. He thinks there must be a language that goes beyond words, such as the one he speaks with his sheep.

A crystal merchant in Tangier whose business is not doing well agrees to allow Santiago to clean his windows in exchange for lunch. He offers Santiago a job in his shop, and Santiago agrees to clean every piece of crystal all night in order to earn the money he needs to go to Egypt the following day. The crystal merchant laughs at him, saying that it would be impossible for him to earn that amount of money even if he worked for a year. He says he will give him the money he needs to go back to Spain. Santiago agrees to work for the merchant so that he can buy another flock of sheep.

Part 2 (through page 50) Analysis

The ticket seller ironically dismisses Santiago as just "another dreamer," when Santiago does not buy a ticket. This offhand remark is meant as a cut, but it reinforces his role in the story as a dreamer determined to follow his destiny to find a hidden treasure. It also supports the themes of dream and destiny. Omens are introduced. The boy's friend buys the remainder of his sheep because his dream is to be a shepherd, and he sees Santiago's predicament as a good omen for himself. Then, the old man tells him that in order to reach his treasure he will have to learn to follow the omens.

As Santiago proceeds into Tangier and is deceived by the young man he has trusted, he realizes that he is already adept at following omens. The time he has spent with his sheep has taught him how to read the signs all around, and he learns many things that he can use while traveling. Even so, he reflects that he is just like everyone else. He sees what he wants to see instead of what is actually happening. Before taking his money, the thief himself warned him that Tangier is a town full of thieves.

The crystal merchant's shop door bears a sign declaring that several languages are spoken inside. Languages are an ongoing theme in this story, as are omens and signs. Here is a literal sign bearing a message about languages. As Santiago cleans the window glass, two customers enter the shop, and the merchant reads this as a good omen. He tells Santiago that cleaning the glass was good. They both needed to clear their minds of negativity. Santiago reflects that while people speak about omens, they do not really know what they are. He thinks again about the wordless language he uses to speak to his sheep, that for many years he did not acknowledge.

The crystal merchant introduces the word *maktub*, which translates to "it is written." This word and its thematic relation to language and destiny is repeated by several other characters further into the story, including the Englishman and the alchemist. The alchemist tells Santiago that all of the knowledge of alchemy is written on the face of an emerald. Words themselves are symbols. Written language has a special kind of power



for those who understand it. Those who cannot read it cannot access its power, be moved by it or use it to help themselves evolve.



Part 3 (through page 83)

Part 3 (through page 83) Summary

Santiago begins working for the crystal merchant and receives a good commission for selling each piece. He wants to make more money in order to buy some sheep and realizes that it will take him a year at the rate he is going. He offers to build a display case to place outside and attract more customers. The crystal merchant does not like things to change, and he resists Santiago's attempt to change things. After some reflection and discussion, he gives Santiago his approval to build the display case.

Within two months, the display case is a big success, bringing many customers into the shop. In another six months, Santiago will be able to afford to return home and buy twice the amount of sheep. Working in the shop, he has learned the Arabic language, and he will be able to do business with Arabs too. He is proud of his accomplishments. He thinks about the day when he will be sailing back to Spain.

The crystal merchant tells Santiago that as a Muslim he is obligated to visit the holy city of Mecca. He dreams that he will one day go, as he has seen many other pilgrims do. His dream of visiting Mecca one day helps him get through each day of hard work. He admits that he would rather hold on to the dream than lose it by actually going there. Santiago suggests that the merchant sell tea in crystal glasses to his customers. The merchant again resists the change. He is afraid that if the tea is a big success, he'll have to expand his shop. After talking it over with Santiago, the merchant decides to sell the tea. The tea is an enormous success, and the shop becomes a popular destination for people seeking new things.

After several months, Santiago is ready to return home. He has earned a bundle of money that will buy him a flock double the size of his original flock. He leaves with the crystal merchant's blessing. As he is getting ready to return home, he changes his mind and decides to continue on his journey to the Egyptian pyramids. His decision makes him happy. He joins a caravan that is traveling across the Sahara and meets an Englishman who believes in omens and is looking for a man who is an alchemist. The Englishman is very excited to meet the alchemist, who is supposedly two hundred years old but never ages because he has the Elixir of Life. The Englishman wants the alchemist to teach him how to turn lead into gold.

At the start of the journey, the caravan leader warns them that "in the desert, disobedience means death." The large caravan of hundreds of people and animals proceeds on its long journey across the Sahara. Mysterious Bedouins ride in to join them periodically and warn them of dangers ahead, including thieves and robbers. There is increasing talk of war between the desert tribes. Santiago learns to listen to the desert and learns its language like he has that of the sheep and the crystal. The Englishman keeps reading his books, and Santiago gives his up in favor of becoming familiar with the desert.



Santiago tells the Englishman the story of his life one night, and the Englishman is particularly interested in the part about the boy's achievements in the crystal shop. He says that whenever people are engaged in an activity with their whole heart, they are closest to the "Soul of the World." He tells Santiago that everything is always being transformed. He says that the desert and the caravan speak the same language, which is why the desert allows the caravan to cross the Sahara. Personal courage alone will not suffice. People must also know about this language. Santiago understands. He tells the Englishman that he has observed the guides reading the omens and signs of the desert.

Part 3 (through page 83) Analysis

The language theme is reinforced. Santiago discovers that his own enthusiasm, perseverance and fresh ideas have revitalized the crystal merchant's business. He acknowledges this energy as a language. The crystal itself symbolizes the themes of alchemy and destiny, as crystal is formed through immense heat and pressure in the earth over a long period of time. Cleaning the crystal is symbolic also. When Santiago cleans them on his first day of work, the merchant acknowledges that cleaning has cleared both their minds of negative energy. When an idea takes on a definite form and clear shape, it is said to have crystallized. Santiago's ideas and the actions he takes to improve the shop have crystallized the merchant's success. The theme of evolution is emphasized, as Santiago patiently introduces his ideas and works to change the crystal merchant's business for the better.

Meanwhile, Santiago's own ideas about his destiny are also becoming clearer. The crystal merchant has ignored his destiny and resists change at every step along the way, even though each change has positive results. His story foreshadows the alchemist's prediction of what will happen to Santiago if he resists following his destiny through to the end. He will become like the merchant who gave up his dream and obligation to visit the holy city of Mecca. He will always know that he missed the opportunity to follow his destiny, and it will be too late.

The Englishman tells Santiago that he would like to write an encyclopedia just about the words "luck" and "coincidence," because they are the words that make up the universal language. Later in the story, the Englishman says there is no such thing as coincidence and that in reality everything is related to everything else. The Englishman introduces the theme of book learning. He learns about alchemy through reading about it in books. The alchemist later tells Santiago that the only way to learn is through action.

The concepts of obedience and disobedience are thematic. Sheep are completely obedient because they give up their instincts. Santiago knows that as he seeks his treasure and follows his destiny his challenge is to think for himself, as the old king advised. The Bedouins' ominous warnings foreshadow the attack at the oasis and the mortal danger Santiago will encounter as he digs for his treasure near the pyramids.



Part 4 (through page 109)

Part 4 (through page 109) Summary

The caravan rolls on toward the oasis. As the Englishman attempts to observe the desert and learn its language, Santiago reads the Englishman's books and learns about alchemy. The Englishman tells him that the goal of alchemists is to purify metal by heating it for many years until all its individual properties are burned away. The substance left over is called the Soul of the World. This is the language in which all things are said to communicate. The discovery itself, he says, is called the Master Work. When Santiago hears this, he asks why they do not simply observe men and omens and learn about the universal language that way. This comment irritates the Englishman, who declares that Santiago oversimplifies everything.

Santiago learns that the liquid half of the Master Work is called the Elixir of Life. The solid part is called the Philosopher's Stone. Santiago becomes more interested in the Philosopher's Stone when he learns that a small piece of it will transform large amounts of any metal into gold. Learning more about the Master Work confuses Santiago. He thinks that the alchemists overcomplicate everything. The Englishman wants him to appreciate the responsibility that comes with learning how to transform lead into gold. Santiago reads all his books and disappoints the Englishman by concluding that although they contain great teachings, everything in them "could be written on the surface of an emerald." Santiago realizes that although they have different ways of learning, they are both seeking their destinies.

The camel driver whom Santiago has befriended seems to be the only one who is not afraid of the increasing tensions and talk of war. He tells Santiago that living in the present moment is the way he stays happy. The caravan finally reaches the oasis, which is filled with date palms, water and shade. Santiago knows he still has a long way to travel to reach the pyramids. The alchemist is waiting at the oasis, already aware that it has brought him another apprentice with whom he must share some of his secrets.

The oasis is a safe refuge from the desert wars. All oases are considered neutral ground because they are home to women and children. To Santiago's surprise, the Englishman hands over a revolver when the caravan driver asks for all weapons. He tells Santiago that it helps him to trust in people. The Englishman, who is anxious to finally meet the alchemist, asks Santiago to help him locate the alchemist. They have some difficulty finding him. Santiago then meets a beautiful girl at the well. Their eyes meet, and she smiles. He falls in love with her at first sight. He recognizes love as the Language of the World. He asks if she knows where the alchemist lives. She points him in the right direction.

Later, the Englishman tells Santiago about his meeting with the alchemist. When he said that he wanted to learn how to turn lead into gold, the alchemist simply told him to try doing it. Santiago feels sorry for the Englishman but encourages him to try. The



caravan driver tells them that there is no way of knowing how long this war will last. It is a battle for the balance of power, not a war between good and evil. He says Allah is on both sides.

When the Englishman builds a furnace outside his tent and begins taking the first steps toward turning lead into gold, Santiago notices that he has gained enthusiasm and energy that reading his books never gave him. While Santiago contemplates love without ownership, he spontaneously finds himself able to read the Soul of the World in a flight of hawks. The vision shows him an attacking army. He senses that he has seen an omen about something that will definitely occur. He tells the camel driver about his vision, and the camel driver relates a story about having gone to a seer, or wise man, in order to learn the future. The seer told him that the future is rarely revealed, and then only because God wants it to be altered. Disturbed by the omen, Santiago decides to go tell the chiefs of the desert tribes about it.

Part 4 (through page 109) Analysis

The oasis represents the importance of having a refuge from danger and a place to stop moving, so that important elements of change can happen. In this resting place some key changes take place. The themes of love and alchemy are heightened. Santiago falls in love with Fatima, and later he encounters the alchemist. The camel driver has told him that to be happy he must stay in the present, which foreshadows his experience with Fatima when they first meet. The past and future fade away, and only the present moment exists. Santiago declares the central theme of following one's dreams when he thinks, "without such love, one's dreams would have no meaning."

Like Santiago, Fatima's name is also emphasized, because she is one of the few characters who is named. The king also has a name, but he only says it once. When Fatima points in the direction of the alchemist's tent, it is as if love is guiding Santiago to alchemy. Finding love reinforces the theme of alchemy because it changes and transforms people, just as alchemy transforms lead into gold. The alchemist teaches him that love is the ultimate alchemy. Fatima tells Santiago that she has become part of him, because he has shared his stories of omens and told her of his dreams and destiny. Santiago's vision of the attack foreshadows the pending tribal war at the oasis.

The theme of learning through books versus learning through action is introduced. The Englishman has a habit of learning everything through the intellect and books. Instead of using his intuition to understand people, he finds it necessary to carry a handgun that, ironically, makes him trust people. Santiago is just the opposite. He learns through action, observation and reflection. In this way, he refines his intuition and is becoming more skilled at reading people's intentions. He is evolving.

Ultimately, the alchemist will tell Santiago that the only way to learn is through taking action. When the alchemist suggests that the Englishman go try turning lead into gold for himself, the Englishman is pushed out of his comfort zone of learning through books. The hands-on experience of building his furnace and taking action invigorates him. This



is significant because it reinforces the notion that although Santiago could have listened to his father, stayed home and found his treasure beneath the sycamore tree, the real value is in experiencing this risky journey for himself. Through taking action, he is energized for the journey to discover his destiny.



Part 5 (through page 134)

Part 5 (through page 134) Summary

The tribal chieftain tells Santiago a story about the tribe's tradition, which says that the oases are neutral ground and therefore safe from attack. However, he assures Santiago that they always listen to the omens of the desert, and so he tells him that the next day they will break the commitment of carrying no arms at the oasis and be on the alert for enemies. He promises to reward Santiago with gold pieces if he has read the omens correctly.

Santiago leaves the chieftain and encounters a powerful, intimidating stranger on horseback, who terrifies him at swordpoint. The stranger turns out to be the alchemist, who demands to know who is reading the omens in the hawk's flight. He is testing the boy's courage, which he says is the essential ingredient in comprehending the Language of the World. He warns the boy to be cautious in his predictions, because whatever is written cannot be changed. Santiago tells him that he has not predicted the outcome, merely the danger.

The next day the oasis is attacked, as Santiago predicted. His warning has prepared the tribe, and they destroy the invaders. Santiago is rewarded and invited to become the oasis counselor. The alchemist informs Santiago that he is going to point him in the direction of his treasure. Santiago resists the idea of continuing his journey all the way to the pyramids. He explains to the alchemist that he thinks he already has his treasure. He is referring to Fatima and the gold pieces that are his reward. The alchemist tells him to prepare for the following day the way a warrior would. He tells him to trade his camel in for a horse. The next day, they ride into the desert, and the alchemist tests Santiago. He tells him how his life will unfold if he decides to stay at the oasis with Fatima and does not summon the courage to go find his treasure at the pyramids.

The alchemist's story describing Santiago's future suggests that he will eventually be abandoned by the omens if he does not pursue his destiny. He will be a highly successful merchant, but in his heart, he will have to accept that he never found the courage to follow his dreams. He says that true love never asks a man to abandon the pursuit of his destiny. Santiago thinks about the merchant who abandoned his dream of traveling to Mecca. He considers the Englishman's pursuit of the alchemist's secrets and thinks about his true love, Fatima, who trusts her fate to the desert. He chooses to leave with the alchemist in the morning.

Before Santiago leaves, he declares his love for Fatima. She assures him that she will wait for his return as he pursues his treasure courageously. The alchemist and Santiago ride into the desert, taking precautions to avoid the battles that are still being fought. Seven days pass, and the boy asks if the alchemist is going to teach him anything. The alchemist declares that the only way to learn is through action and that Santiago only has one other thing to learn. He advises Santiago to listen to his heart in order to



immerse himself in the desert. There he will learn, through action, what he needs to know.

Part 5 (through page 134) Analysis

This part of the story illustrates how well Santiago is learning to refine his new skills. After trusting in his own interpretation of the hawks' flight, he exhibits courage by deciding to warn the tribal chieftain of the danger. After warning the chief, he finally meets the alchemist face to face. Not surprisingly, the alchemist is a mysterious and threatening figure who tests Santiago's courage. Santiago again exhibits calm and shows no fear, even when the alchemist draws a drop of blood from his forehead. Drawing blood foreshadows the frightening event awaiting Santiago at the pyramids as he attempts to dig for his treasure in the sand. Later, when the alchemist does change lead into gold, the elements are referred to as having the color of blood. The moment the alchemist draws blood from Santiago represents the alchemy that changes his life and extracts its payment.

The alchemist tells Santiago that everything is learned through action. This is similar to when he told the Englishman to go see for himself if he could turn lead into gold. The Englishman's experience of trying for himself, or taking action, fills him with energy. Santiago will be forced to take action when he digs for his treasure and is attacked by thieves.

Santiago tells Fatima that he knows their love is genuine because the universe has conspired to bring them together. He is echoing the wise old king's words, when he met Santiago in the marketplace in Spain before he left on his journey. When the alchemist tells Santiago he should listen to his heart and that it will one day return to the Soul of the World, his comment foreshadows the end of the book. Santiago does indeed return full circle, following heart all the way home to unearth his treasure beneath the ruins of the church. Listening to his heart is another way of describing the importance of language of many different kinds in the story.



Part 6 (through page 151)

Part 6 (through page 151) Summary

At the start of this part of the journey, Santiago expresses his fear and doubt to the alchemist. He tells the alchemist that his heart must be a traitor because it fears the journey ahead. It tells Santiago that he has already found his treasure, referring to Fatima's love, and it wants him to go back. The alchemist says he thinks that is a natural reaction for a heart to have, now that Santiago is following his dream. He tells him that his heart is afraid of suffering and of losing what it has won. They discuss the importance of listening to the heart.

Crossing the desert, Santiago learns to accept his heart as it is. He lets go of his fear of following his destiny and stops wanting to return to the oasis. He understands that his heart is afraid of suffering and expresses this to alchemist. The alchemist says that the suffering itself is not as bad as the fear of it. The boy tells his heart that "every second of the search is an encounter with God" and that it will not suffer because he is in search of his dreams, which are his heart's dreams, too.

Santiago's heart explains that since most people do not follow their dreams or search for their unique treasures, hearts simply stop talking about these things. Few people have the courage to follow their heart. They see the world as a dangerous place, and so for them, the world becomes a dangerous place. Santiago promises his heart that he will always listen to it. The alchemist tells Santiago that he still needs to learn one thing. That is, he will be put through severe tests by the Soul of the World, which speaks through the heart that is in tune with its destiny. In order to realize each person's destiny, each person must be tested on all that person has learned. People need to master their new knowledge. He says that quests always begin with beginner's luck and end with a major test.

Three armed tribesmen approach Santiago and the alchemist. The tribesmen demand to know why Santiago is carrying money, and he says he needs it to get all the way to the pyramids. They search the alchemist's bag and find his magical Elixir of Life and the Philosopher's Stone. They laugh when he tells them what these tools supposedly do, and they let Santiago and the alchemist go free. Santiago is surprised that they would not take the alchemist seriously. They continue on their journey, and they pass an encampment. Santiago's heart tells them there is no danger, but the alchemist is more wary.

Santiago and the alchemist are two days away from the pyramids. Santiago wants the alchemist to teach him about alchemy. The alchemist says that he already knows about it. Alchemy is about searching and finding the treasure that is uniquely his. He tells Santiago that everything in the universe has evolved, and somehow gold came to represent the highest point of evolution. However, it symbolizes conflict instead of evolution. Santiago wants to know about turning lead into gold. The alchemist tells him



that although it is possible, the alchemists who are ready to do that are very rare. He concludes by saying that anyone interfering with the destinies of others will not ever reach his own.

The next day, Santiago and the alchemist are captured as spies. Fearsome tribesmen take them prisoner. The alchemist explains to the chief that they are not spies. He tells him that he is a guide for Santiago. He then proceeds to tell the chief that Santiago is a powerful alchemist who possesses the ability to turn himself into the wind. He assures the chief and his men that Santiago could destroy their entire oasis if he chose to. Then he gives them all of Santiago's money, saying that it was meant for them, as a gift. The tribesmen want to see the boy turn into the wind. The alchemist and Santiago are given three days to prove that Santiago can turn himself into the wind.

Santiago is terrified and full of disbelief that the alchemist has put in this dangerous position. The alchemist matter-of-factly tells Santiago that now he will have to learn to turn himself into the wind to save his own life. Santiago spends the next two days wandering, reflecting on his predicament and wondering how he is going to transform himself.

Part 6 (through page 151) Analysis

At the beginning of Santiago's journey across the Sahara, the caravan leader announces that everyone should be prepared to obey. He warns that "disobedience" means death in the desert. Santiago struggles with his decision to go on with the alchemist, to search for his destiny after finding love with Fatima. He describes his heart as a traitor because it wants to turn back to the oasis instead of risking the loss of everything it has finally found. The alchemist suggests that he should learn to distinguish between his heart's fear of suffering and its deeper messages. Obeying his heart's fear of suffering would lead to a death of his dreams. Disobeying the fear, and instead listening to the heart's deeper message, will lead him closer to his destiny.

The tribesmen who confront Santiago and the alchemist foreshadow the army who are waiting to take them as prisoners and confiscate their horses. The alchemist talks about gold symbolizing conflict instead of evolution, which foreshadows the brutal conflict Santiago will encounter as he digs for his treasure at the pyramids. The tribesmen laugh at the alchemist when he tells them of the power of his elixir and the stone, illustrating the ignorance of most people when confronted with the simple truth. The ignorant tribesmen also foreshadow the two tribesmen who will be removed from their posts by the chieftain when they display their fear of Santiago's ability to talk to the wind.

The alchemist telling Santiago that he already knows everything he needs to know about alchemy foreshadows Santiago finding his treasure buried in the very place where this story began, at the old church. It also echoes the advice his father gave him about travelers returning home to find that everything they were searching for was already there.



Part 7 (through page 177)

Part 7 (through page 177) Summary

On the third day, the chief and the tribesmen gather to watch Santiago turn himself into the wind. He begins to talk to the desert in earnest, explaining his problem and asking for its help. The desert and he discuss the nature of love. The desert recommends that the boy ask the wind for help. The wind asks him where he learned how to speak to the desert and the wind. Santiago says he speaks many languages that his heart taught him.

Santiago arouses the wind's curiosity by suggesting that if the wind helps him, they will be able to talk about all their limitless possibilities. The wind likes this idea. It wants to help and is frustrated that it cannot. It recommends that Santiago ask heaven for help and creates a windstorm that blots out the brightness of the sun so that Santiago can converse with the heavens. The sun and Santiago talk about love and about the Soul of the World. Santiago tells the sun that everything evolves. He explains the power of love, which makes everyone become better than he or she is, and in turn encourage everyone around to evolve and become better. The sun tells Santiago to talk to the "hand that wrote all," in order to receive help turning into the wind.

During Santiago's silent meditation, he has an awakening experience. He decides not to talk at all. He concludes with his knowledge that his soul is one with the Soul of God and that he can perform miracles. While he is meditating on these things, the wind begins to blow furiously. He is lifted up and carried far across the encampment. When the wind settles, the tribesmen are impressed and frightened by the distance he has moved. It must be sorcery. To them, it proves that the boy has turned himself into the wind. The men are terrified at his power. The alchemist and the chief are happy. The chief allows the alchemist and Santiago to go free.

Santiago and the alchemist ride away from the encampment, and the alchemist tells Santiago that he will be leaving him alone to continue on his quest for treasure at the pyramids. They stop at a monastery. With his Elixir of Life and the Philosopher's Stone, the alchemist turns lead into a round disk of gold. Cutting it into quarters, he gives one piece to the monk, who allows them to use the kitchen. He keeps one piece for himself and gives another to Santiago. He leaves the fourth quarter to the monk just in case Santiago should need it in the future. Before they part ways, the alchemist tells Santiago an ancient Roman story about dreams. The story illustrates the point that everyone plays a very important part in history, and usually they never know it.

At last, as the story reaches toward its climax, Santiago finds himself gazing at the pyramids. The moonlight on the desert sand is beautiful, and the pyramids are majestic. He is brought to tears. He thinks about his many gifts and the knowledge he has learned along the way. He reminds himself that even though he feels like he has everything he wants, he needs to complete his search. He still wants to find his



treasure. He begins digging where he sees an omen on the sand. Suddenly, people appear standing very near to him. They tell him they are refugees from the desert wars who need money. They approach and threaten him, demanding that he keep digging for the gold. They demand to see what he is hiding, and they take the gold that the alchemist gave him. He digs all night long, but the wind keeps burying his hole up with sand.

When the refugees see that he is not uncovering any more gold from the hole he is digging, they turn violent and beat him up. Santiago is exhausted, hurt and miserable. He tells them that he is digging for treasure and that he dreamed twice about finding his treasure there. As the refugees are leaving, their leader tells Santiago about a recurrent dream he also had. He says his dream told him to go to a ruined church in Andalusia, a place where sheep and shepherds slept, and he would find a buried treasure underneath a tree in the old sacristy. He tells Santiago that he would never have been so stupid as to cross a desert to find out. The refugee tells him this dream with the intent to make Santiago feel stupid. Instead, Santiago is filled with energy and hope.

In the epilogue, Santiago returns to the old ruined church and digs for his treasure. Uncovering a chest of Spanish gold coins, precious stones and other treasures, he realizes that they are the spoils of a long-forgotten war. He thinks about everything he has learned from the journey he has been on and from the people he has met. He is charmed by the touch of Fatima's kiss, a feeling that is brought to him on the wind. He anticipates returning to her.

Part 7 (through page 177) Analysis

The themes that have operated during Santiago's journey come together at the climax of this story. Some important central themes are love, dreams, destiny, language and evolution. In the build up to the story's climax, the theme of language is heightened. Santiago has learned to listen to his heart and now converses with it quite clearly. His heart teaches him how to talk with the desert, the wind and the sun. All of these elements, his heart, the desert, the wind and the sun, have their own dialogues with Santiago. Each reveals its own distinct characteristics, special abilities and limitations. This reinforces the theme and importance of languages. Santiago can speak in the language of the Soul of the World because he has listened to his heart.

Some of the characters, such as the old king, the merchant and the Englishman disappear from the story, but the things that Santiago has learned from them live on in his frequent reflections. The theme of evolution is reinforced by this notion, that wise words that are true continue, even if the person who spoke them is no longer around. The alchemist has told Santiago that when something evolves, everything around it evolves as well. The severe test that the alchemist referred to is the reversal of Santiago's fortune. The appearance of the refugees who take Santiago's gold and brutalize him make him think he has lost everything. Then, at the moment when he has almost lost even his conscious awareness, he is told about a dream. The refugee's dream is the key that leads to his treasure.



The alchemist himself has foreshadowed the climax of the story, most explicitly. He tells Santiago that he must learn through action. He also says that gold is seen as a symbol of conflict. He has also said that anyone who interferes with the destiny of another person will never attain his own. The refugee leader, whose dream is similar to, yet opposite of Santiago's, appears to be interfering with Santiago's destiny. Even though he does not intend to, he fills Santiago with hope and energy when he tells him about his failure to follow his own dream. He appears, like the old man did in the beginning of this story, to encourage Santiago to not give up on his dream of finding the treasure.

The refugee leader's dream indicates that he is a mirror image of Santiago. He is moving in the opposite direction from Santiago. Instead of representing evolution, he represents de-evolution. He is a product of the ongoing warfare in the desert, which causes poverty and drives men to commit violent crimes so they can meet their basic needs. Santiago was educated, and he did not get enlisted into a life of warfare.

The chest of ancient Spanish gold and other treasures represents both evolution and conflict. The alchemist says that men misunderstand the act of changing lead into gold. Alchemy represents evolution, and yet men have associated the gold that is a product of alchemy with conflict. The buried treasure symbolizes the forgotten value of evolution. When the gold is buried, it is useless. It cannot help anyone change or evolve because it is hidden. Santiago uncovers the buried treasure because he has had the courage to follow his dreams, and the treasure is his destiny. Moments after he opens the chest of gold, his thoughts return to his true love, Fatima. His journey has transformed him, just as lead is melted down and burned in order to become highly valued gold. He has become the alchemist.



Characters

Santiago

Santiago is the central character, and as this fable begins the reader sees the world mainly through his point of view. His long, difficult journey represents each person's journey through life. Santiago's parents have raised him with respect and sent him to school to study language and religion. Their hope is that he will become a priest and not live a life of toil, like they have. His nature is to be curious about the world though, and he craves traveling so that he can find things out for himself. He chooses to become a shepherd so that he can travel and learn things firsthand.

When Santiago has the same dream twice, of a child trying to show him where to find hidden treasure at the Egyptian pyramids, he responds to it. The dream is a sign, or an omen, that he must leave his familiar life as a shepherd if he is to find his destiny. He doesn't necessarily want to leave the sheep, but his need to leave them behind as he pursues his quest is symbolic. He must think for himself, and the sheep represent the mass of people who follow others and do not follow their own destinies.

Santiago represents the universal desire to engage with life and to see for oneself what the rest of the world is like. He has learned languages at the seminary, and he has explored his intellect. He has also learned what he can from his sheep. He is on the verge of finding his destiny or treasure. He is curious about every kind of language, including the silent language he speaks with his sheep. Naturally reflective, he realizes that he learns from observation and from taking action. He becomes the new pupil of the alchemist almost by happenstance. By reading the Englishman's books, he has learned some things about alchemy, but in his opinion, the information in them has been over-complicated.

At the start of Santiago's journey, after he has been robbed by a young man he trusted, Santiago reflects, "I'm like everyone else - I see the world in terms of what I would like to see happen, not what actually does." By the end of the story, he has learned the importance of being able to change. Change is at the heart of the story, as alchemy changes lead into gold. One of the themes of the book is evolution and the idea that when a person makes changes in his or her life, these changes affect everyone around the person. Everything is related to everything else. It could be argued that in some ways, Santiago is the alchemist in this story, because as he moves through his journey, he affects change in everyone he meets.

The Alchemist

Although the alchemist does not enter the story until it is well under way, the book gets its name from this powerful character. The alchemist himself remains nameless, which



underscores his mystique. It is not important that he has an individual identity. The emphasis remains focused on what he does, rather than who he is.

The alchemist lives in a tent apart from the others on the oasis and does not keep company with other people. His companions are his horse and his hawk. He tends to his hawk and keeps to himself. According to the Englishman, who heard it from another source, the alchemist is over two hundred years old, and he knows the secrets of alchemy. In his final scene with Santiago at the monastery, the alchemist does turn lead into gold.

The alchemist senses that he is about to receive a new pupil before Santiago arrives with the caravan at the oasis. He tells Santiago, "When a person really desires something, all the universe conspires to help that person to realize his dream." Though the alchemist obviously understands the Language of the World and has special tools and powers at his disposal, he does not actually offer to help Santiago out of a challenging and dangerous situation. On the contrary, he places Santiago in the center of an apparently dangerous situation when he tells the chief and his men that Santiago is an alchemist who can turn himself into the wind. As Santiago is growing more nervous that he must prove this fantastic feat or lose his life, the alchemist remains collected and calm. As he tells Santiago, "You are the one who is going to die. I already know how to turn myself into the wind." More than once, the alchemist makes wry remarks like this, which help to illustrate his character as a man who is wise and yet willing to take risks, even risks as dire as another man's life.

Gypsy

The gypsy woman is the first character in the story to make it clear to Santiago that he must go on a journey to the Egyptian pyramids to find his treasure and to reveal his destiny. She interprets his recurrent dream and declares that she wants a tenth of his treasure. She also tells Santiago that if his dream is spoken "in the language of the soul, it is only you who can understand." She demands a part of his treasure because she says his dream is very difficult to interpret. Ironically, Santiago's dream is literal. It should be extremely easy to interpret. He feels that he has wasted his time with her. The difficulty of his dream is that it means he is going to have to go on a long journey to realize his destiny.

Old Man (Melchizedek, the King of Salem)

The old man, or king, represents inner guidance and highly developed intuition. He represents the inner strength that people who want to discover their destiny must develop. Santiago meets the old man while sitting on a bench in the marketplace. At first, the old man annoys him. Then the old man reveals that he knows the names of everyone in Santiago's life, which catches Santiago's attention. The old man says he is a king, and his mysterious knowledge and the brilliantly decorated vest beneath his clothes support his claim. He tells Santiago that when people are young, they all know



their reasons for being, but they give up too soon. He has sensed that Santiago is on the verge of trying to realize his destiny, and he has appeared in Santiago's life at this moment in order to keep him from giving up. He tells Santiago that he often appears in people's lives just at the moment they are about to give up on their destiny. He appears in many different guises.

The king encourages Santiago to think for himself and suggests that he learn to read the omens. He gives Santiago the two stones that he says will help him make decisions if he finds that he cannot. The king's demeanor and his words remain with Santiago throughout the story. As Santiago's journey ensues, he meets other characters along the way that occasionally strongly remind him of the old man, and Santiago finds the thought of him to be both comforting and inspiring.

Crystal Merchant

The crystal merchant is important in the story for two main reasons. First, he provides Santiago with a job where Santiago can learn about persistence and how to develop good ideas over a period of time. Second, he represents the type of character that Santiago could turn into if he is not diligent, a man with an unrealized dream.

Englishman

Like Santiago, the Englishman is also on a quest, but his quest is for the alchemist, not for his own destiny. The Englishman represents the type of character who has book knowledge, but not practical knowledge. He tries to learn alchemy through the intellect. Though he seems to have a passion for learning it, he does not try it for himself until the alchemist suggests he do so. In the story, he serves the purpose of introducing the concept of alchemy to Santiago. The alchemist does not bother with the Englishman, even though the Englishman is ready to devote his life to learning from the alchemist. His character is a foil, or contrasting character, to Santiago's character, as Santiago learns through observation and action. Santiago has rejected the life of the mind for a life of interaction and a journey of purpose.

Fatima

Fatima represents the power of love to encourage people to evolve. Significantly, just as she and Santiago meet, he is trying to locate the alchemist in the oasis. She points the way to guide him. Symbolically, love and attraction point the way to alchemy and evolution. She tells Santiago that she will wait for him just as her mother waited for her father. Her declaration of patience and love represents the cycle of love throughout the ages, and its central role in encouraging evolution.



Santiago's Father

Santiago's father is a living reminder that life evolves from one generation to the next. Santiago has more and better opportunities to succeed in life and reach his destiny because his father and mother made personal sacrifices to send him to the seminary and study to become a priest. He does not have the education that Santiago has been privileged to receive, and yet his life experience has given him wisdom. He knows intuitively that Santiago will eventually return home and find his treasure there.

The Thief

The boy in whom Santiago places his trust upon arriving in the African port city of Tangier robs him and disappears. He plays an important role in Santiago's personal evolution and growth, even though his action first creates suffering. In order for Santiago to endure the difficult journey across the Sahara, he must learn to read the omens, including people's intentions. After he is robbed, he realizes that he only saw what he wanted to see, instead of what was actually happening. He recognizes that he ignored the signs of warning that the bar owner was trying to communicate to him. The thief is a teacher who shows Santiago that people sometimes say and do dishonorable things, but they also offer the opportunity for growth.

Camel Driver

The camel driver and Santiago share stories of their lives while on the journey across the desert. Santiago observes that the camel driver is a happy man, and the camel driver tells him a story about a very difficult time in his life that taught him that trust in Allah.



Objects/Places

Gold Coins

Santiago's father's contribution to Santiago's treasure is gold coins.

Ruined Old Church

The ruined church represents religion and faith. It still provides sanctuary and harbors hidden treasure, even though it is out of use.

Urim and Thummim

Urim and Thummim are oracle stones that represent the old man's wisdom and guidance that is there if Santiago should really need it.

Treasure Chest

The treasure chest represents Santiago's destiny. The ancient gold coins and other precious items are the refined or evolved form of lesser metals. Symbolically, the treasure represents Santiago's actual treasure, which is the evolution of his soul. Fatima's declaration of eternal love and Santiago's soul's growth and development is his real reward.

The Caravan

The caravan represents the journey of life and its inherent dangers, the many types of characters met along the way and safety in numbers.

Crystal

The crystal represents the beauty, clarity and value that the process of alchemy creates in people and in minerals. Their value is only brought forth through the tremendous heat, time and pressure of natural geological cycles, as well as by an artisan who knows how to cut crystal perfectly.

The Englishman's Books

The studious Englishman's books represent the life of the intellect verses the life of learning through interaction.



Santiago's Book

The book that Santiago is reading in the marketplace when he meets the king represents the futility of trying to learn about destiny through books, instead of action.

Oasis

The oasis is a neutral place where life is protected from brutality.

Desert

The desert is where war takes place, and the elements and forces of nature are ultimately in control of man in the desert.

Lead

Lead is a dull, cheap metal. Lead represents the state of being unevolved and untried by life.

Gold

Gold a precious metal valued more than life itself and the product of alchemy.

The Englishman's Gun

The Englishman's gun represents the ignorant assumption that a threat of violence will induce cooperation between people.



Themes

Alchemy and Evolution

As the book's title indicates, alchemy is the main theme. Alchemy is change. On a literal level, alchemy describes the transformation of base metal into precious gold. The process of alchemy is a force of nature, and it is not an easy transformation. Natural power turns base metal into gold, but in order to do so it takes a very long geologic time and exerts a tremendous amount of pressure and heat.

The alchemist is a person with rare, mysterious knowledge, who knows how to speed up that natural process and use special tools to create gold from lead. From the beginning of this story, Santiago is clearly interested in evolving and experiencing change. He learned language and religion through studying at the seminar, but he is dissatisfied with the learning that happens through books. He chooses to become a shepherd because he wants to travel.

After Santiago's mysterious dream, he decides to travel to the pyramids in order to pursue his destiny. All along the journey he is faced with challenges, danger and difficulties, but he continues to learn, change and grow. This fable tells the story of his encounters as he attempts to follow his dream and undergoes his own personal process of transformation or alchemy.

Santiago eventually discovers his destiny, but it is only as a result of taking the risks and doing the work required of him. The transformation of lead into gold is a metaphor for the inner growth and refinement that Santiago becomes engaged in. He is changed and alchemized over the length of his journey. The Sahara desert and the brutal, conflicting tribal members represent the pressure and heat that are a necessary part of his transformation.

By the end of the story, Santiago has been completely changed by his journey, and yet he remains the same person. He is refined, tried and transformed just as metal is when it becomes gold. He is rewarded because he has successfully navigated through life's trials, problems and difficulties and become a transformed being. Santiago's journey represents the road of life and the unanticipated challenges and problems that life presents. The way Santiago approaches his journey is a reflection of the way he faces all decisions in life.

Language and Words

In the beginning of the story, Santiago reflects that he has learned to communicate with his sheep and that indeed he learns from them. The recurrent dream he has about the child who is talking to his sheep represents a special type of communication between his essential self, or the child, and the sheep, or his instinctual knowledge.



Many of the book's details point to the use of language as a theme. Santiago has attended the seminary in order to study the important languages Latin and Spanish. His parents wanted him to study languages and become a priest so that he would not have to work as hard as they have. They recognize that if he develops a knowledge of languages, he will live a better, more evolved life than theirs.

The language theme is developed throughout the book. During the year Santiago works for the crystal merchant, he learns to listen to what people want in order to improve the crystal merchant's business. He also learns to speak Arabic by interacting with the Arab customers. The crystal merchant introduces Santiago to the Arabic word *maktub*. He says that it loosely translates into "as it is written." He often reflects on the "language without words," which describes the way that people communicate to each other when they do not speak each other's language. The language without words is also the language he speaks with his sheep.

The alchemist's knowledge is a special language of its own. The Englishman's books that are devoted to explaining the magic and secrets of the process of alchemy, the Englishman says, are filled with knowledge that could easily fit onto the face of an emerald. Near the end of the story, Santiago thanks the alchemist for teaching him the Language of the World. The alchemist says that he only invoked from the boy what he already knew. The word "invoke" is usually used in the context of magic. Using it to describe what Santiago already knows, the alchemist acknowledges that Santiago carries within himself the ability to evolve.

Journeying and Growth

The journey that Santiago undergoes is difficult. He is lonely at times, and he faces terrible danger, brutality and loss. However, he wants to change and grow, so he has no choice other than to literally "follow his dream" as the book's subtitle suggests. Many situations in the book illustrate the theme of journeying.

The sheep that Santiago herds for two years through the Andalusian fields are themselves journeying. The big difference between the sheep and Santiago is that the sheep have given up their instincts. They depend entirely on the shepherd to lead them to food and water, whereas Santiago is motivated to think for himself as he proceeds on his journey. The sheep will get their food and water as long as a shepherd guides them. Santiago will get his treasure and discover his destiny, as long as he continues to develop his ability to think and find out for himself.

While Santiago is working in the crystal merchant's shop, Santiago's journey appears to end for a year. He thinks that when he earns enough money he will return to Spain. At the end of that year, however, he has undergone a certain amount of personal growth. At the last minute, he decides not to go back but to continue on his way toward reaching his dream. Perhaps his conviction to reach for his destiny is strengthened by witnessing the crystal merchant's reluctance to follow his own dream.

Style

Points of View

The book begins from Santiago's point of view, as told through an omniscient narrator who describes what Santiago is feeling and thinking. This point of view reveals the subtle changes that he goes through and allows the reader to share in his insights and discoveries. The changes Santiago experiences are important to the theme of alchemy, and the fact that his perspective is dominant helps to underscore that theme. The narrative does not stay only in Santiago's perspective, but like a cinematic camera, the point of view of the story pulls away from the close-up scenes when necessary and shows a wider panorama of perspective.

Occasionally, marginal characters who are only in the story for one small scene will snap to the forefront as their point of view is referenced. For example, when the ticket seller at the port calls Santiago a "dreamer," his perspective gives a wider picture of the scene and its importance in the story.

As each important character enters the story, the point of view switches to their voice briefly and then returns to Santiago's. One example of this switch is when Santiago is strolling through the streets of Tangier, after having been robbed by the thief who gained his trust. Reiterating what the old man said, "all things are one," the scene ends.

In the next passage, the reader is privy to the thoughts of the crystal merchant. The segue is gracefully made by a blank break on the page. Although the introduction of the crystal merchant is mildly unexpected, the transition into his thoughts is made easily. After a few paragraphs, another break in the text signals that the point of view switches back to Santiago, and the two characters meet and begin their interactions. Santiago's voice is dominant throughout the book. If it were otherwise, the impact of his discoveries and changes would be less dramatic.

Setting

In the opening, the story is set in the pastoral fields of Andalusia with the pretty image of sheep running along together or lingering in a field eating grass, while the shepherd attends to their needs. Santiago's tendency to philosophize and the ruins of the old church create a feeling of peace and static. This quiet feeling is immediately contrasted with the unrest created by his recurrent dream. The tension between the pastoral setting and Santiago's growing restlessness helps spring him out of his quiet life of contemplation.

The crowded port city of Tangier is chaotic and filled with temptations. Santiago is robbed and left, as he sees himself, a stranger in a strange land. The chaos surrounding him is terrifying and disorienting at first, but once he gains some perspective on his trouble, he shifts his view from confusion about being lost to



acceptance of the strangeness as simply being different. He realizes that he is getting the adventure he craved. It just looks different than he expected it to look.

In contrast to the peaceful green fields of Spain, the Sahara desert is filled with danger. The lives of the desert people are shaped by the hardships they deal with. The safe places, the oases, are not even guaranteed to be safe although they are supposed to be. Women who say goodbye to their men know very well that they may never see them again. The desert is its own character. Its influence is dramatic. War, heat and pressure are all elements that support the main theme of alchemy. Santiago could not have stayed at home in the peaceful pastures and experienced the kind of changes he is forced to confront in the desert.

Language and Meaning

Language is an important part of the theme of this fable, and although the story is told in rather simple terms, the ideas that it expresses are philosophical and deep. Santiago is an educated young man, capable of understanding many languages because of his seminary training. Yet, he is clearly interested in learning about the world and about his reason for being in a way that goes beyond mere speaking and writing. He chooses to travel, first as a shepherd and then as an adventurer seeking his destiny, because he wants to learn how to communicate in the Language of the World. There are many references throughout the text to this language, and clearly it is a language that goes beyond words.

Yet words themselves also carry deep meaning. The Arab word *maktub*, meaning "it is written," is mentioned at important moments in the story. The word carries the connotation that in every situation or action there is a hand of fate involved. When Santiago reads a warning in the flight of hawks, he is communicating in a language beyond words. The alchemist tells him to use caution when he says that something is definitely so. The alchemist knows that words have a power of their own and create consequences.

This story also expresses the paradox of language and words. The books that hold all the information about alchemy are obviously full of meaning and have been written by curious and intelligent minds. However, their meaning can all be boiled down to fit on the face of an emerald.

Structure

The Alchemist is divided into two parts and an epilogue. In Part One, Santiago leaves Spain for Africa, but he is robbed of everything immediately upon arriving in Tangier. He gets a job at the crystal merchant's shop and stays there, working and improving the business, for a year. By the end of that time, he is ready to return home. His conviction to discover his destiny has been tempered by experience. The money he has earned makes him feel confident and capable, and he has learned to speak Arabic as well,

which is a shrewd business move for him. He will be able to set himself up well when he returns.

In Part Two, however, Santiago decides that he will continue on his journey to follow his dream and discover his destiny. He realizes that returning home at this point would mean that he was giving up on his dream. He still has a real need to travel and to find his treasure. Almost on a whim, he changes his mind and joins up with the caravan traveling across the desert that will take him to the Egyptian pyramids. Part Two stands in sharp contrast to Part One, because it throws Santiago into foreign territory where he is tested at every step of the way. He continues to be a thoughtful and reflective character, though, and it is easy to see how he is affected by the changing scenery and the other characters he meets, including the caravan driver and the Englishman as well as Fatima and the alchemist.

In the Epilogue, Santiago's journey has come full circle. He is back on the Andalusian plains, at the very church where his story began. The tree growing in the center of the sacristy represents the growth that is part of everyone's experience as they allow themselves to follow their dreams.



Quotes

"And, when you want something, all the universe conspires to help you achieve it."

"It's called the principle of favorability, beginner's luck. Because life wants you to achieve your destiny."

"There must be a language that doesn't depend on words. I've had that experience with my sheep, and now it's happening with people."

"All things are one."

"People talk a lot about omens. But they don't really know what they're saying. Just as I hadn't realized for so many years that I had been speaking a language without words to my sheep."

"Never stop dreaming. Follow the omens."

"We are afraid of losing what we have, whether it's our life or our possessions and property. But this fear evaporates when we understand that our life stories and the history of the world were written by the same hand."

"You have a mania for simplifying everything. Alchemy is a serious discipline. Every step has to be followed exactly as it was followed by the masters."

"Who dares to read the meaning of the flight of the hawks?"

"It's not what enters men's mouths that's evil. It's what comes out of their mouths that is."

"You must understand that love never keeps a man from pursuing his destiny. If he abandons that pursuit, it's because it wasn't true love...the love that speaks the Language of the World."

"When you are loved, you can do anything in creation. When you are loved, there's no need at all to understand what's happening, because everything happens within you, and even men can turn themselves into the wind. As long as the wind helps, of course."



Topics for Discussion

The image of the tree growing through the center of the old church is a contrasting image of nature and religion. Discuss the roles of nature and faith in this fable.

People who choose to follow their destinies face many difficulties. Discuss someone you know who has faced hardship in order to follow his or her dream.

The journey through an exotic land plays an important part in Santiago's growth and his discoveries. Aside from literally leaving home to search for treasure, what are some other ways that people can develop themselves and build confidence?

What is meant by the statement, "everything is related to everything else"? Give some examples using your own experiences.

How is alchemy related to love? How does falling in love create change in people and cause personal evolution?

Which character most resembles you or someone you know, the crystal merchant or Santiago?

Have you ever communicated with other people or animals in a language without words? Discuss how and why you think this can happen.

Do you know anyone who has given up a dream? Discuss why you think they did and what has been the result.