***The Alchemist* : Theme, Motif, and Symbols**

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**Themes**

**The Centrality of Personal Legends**

According to *The Alchemist,* Personal Legends serve as the only means by which an individual can live a satisfying life. In fact, the universe can only achieve perfection if all natural things continuously undergo a cycle of achieving their Personal Legend, evolving into a higher being with a new Personal Legend, and then pursuing that new goal. This concept, that the individualistic pursuit of a Personal Legend exists as life’s dominant—perhaps only—spiritual demand, lies at the center of the unique theology of *The Alchemist.* As we see when Santiago must give up his flock and leave Fatima, material success and even love pose obstacles to Santiago achieving his Personal Legend and must be delayed or ignored altogether. Those who put off their Personal Legends, such as the crystal merchant, suffer regret and fail to experience the wealth and other favors that the universe bestows upon those who follow their Personal Legends. In the novel, even alchemy, the central symbol of the book, entails coaxing metal to achieve its own Personal Legend to turn into gold. As a result, the idea that all individuals should live in the singular pursuit of their individual dreams emerges as the primary theme of *The Alchemist.*

**The Unity of Nature**

In *The Alchemist,* the spiritual unity represented by the Soul of the World binds together all of nature, from human beings to desert sand. This idea underlies the parallel we see in the novel between the alchemist purifying metal into gold and Santiago purifying himself into someone capable of achieving his Personal Legend. According to the novel, the Soul of the World has created an ultimate desire, or Personal Legend, for everything, whether Santiago or a piece of iron. To accomplish its Personal Legend, each thing must learn to tap into the Soul of the World, which purifies it. That continual purification ultimately leads to perfection. This notion of humans, metals, and all other things sharing the same goal demonstrates that all elements in nature are essentially different forms of a single spirit.

Furthermore, over and over again we see that Santiago must communicate with nature in what the novel calls the common language of the world. Santiago’s horse, for instance, communicates with him by showing him evidence of life in an apparently barren expanse of desert, and Santiago must employ the help of the desert, the wind, and the sun in order to turn into the wind. As the alchemist says when he leaves Santiago, everything from a grain of sand to God himself shares the same spiritual essence. This pantheistic view dominates *The Alchemist,* and along with the individual, evolutionary theology expressed in the theme of alchemy, it forms the book’s core spiritual message.

**The Danger of Fear**

Fear persistently comes up throughout Santiago’s journey as the primary obstacle to Santiago’s successfully achieving his Personal Legend. Santiago experiences several forms of fear: a childhood fear of having the gypsy woman interpret his dream; a material fear of losing his wealth by departing to Tangier or by joining the desert caravan; the physical fear of dying in the battle at Al-Fayoum; and the spiritual fear that he will fail to turn himself into the wind when the alchemist forces him to try.

Santiago’s mentors, from Melchizedek to the alchemist, condemn fear by comparing it to materialism, and they describe it as a product of misunderstanding how the universe treats those pursuing their Personal Legends. Fear, they suggest, should become irrelevant, even in the face of death, if you faithfully pursue your dreams.

Just as those who disregard fear appear as enlightened figures, fear dominates *The Alchemist’s* weakest characters. The crystal merchant in particular represents someone who has allowed fear to rule his life. Although he wants to make the pilgrimage to Mecca required of every Muslim, he fears that once he’s made the trip he will have nothing else to live for. As a result, he remains deeply unhappy, reinforcing the notion that fear acts as an obstacle to a happy and fulfilled life.

**Motifs**

**Dreams**

In *The Alchemist,* dreams represent not only an outlet into one’s inner desires, but also a form of communication with the Soul of the World. Santiago’s dream of a treasure in Egypt, for instance, reveals to him his Personal Legend and sets the entire plot of the Alchemist into motion. Whether or not an individual believes in dreams creates a dividing line between the “enlightened” and “unenlightened” characters in the novel. The tribal chieftain takes Santiago’s dream of the hawks very seriously, and he understands the dream as a message from the desert of an impending assault. He also relates a story about Joseph’s ability to read dreams, concluding that those who truly believe in dreams also have the ability to read them. The chief’s insight, we see, allows him to successfully defend the oasis against attack. Later in the novel, the man who beats Santiago does not believe his own dream, but when he describes his dream to Santiago, Santiago recognizes it as an omen telling him where to find the treasure. The importance of actual, sleeping dreams parallels the importance of personal, symbolic dreams as embodied by Personal Legends.

***Maktub***

Many of the characters that Santiago meets during his journey use the word *maktub,* which as the crystal merchant explains, means “it is written.” The word typically appears just as Santiago is about to turn to a new chapter in his quest, usually by taking a big risk or abandoning a comfortable situation. It becomes a reassuring refrain for Santiago, because it reminds Santiago to see his actions in the context of fate. As Santiago learns, fate always cooperates with those in pursuit of their Personal Legends, so as long as he remains focused on his goal he can find comfort in the fact that his destiny has already been written in the history of the world. In addition, the repetition of *maktub* reinforces the Biblical tone of *The Alchemist.*The word gives Santiago’s story the universality and spiritual heft of a fable (much like the other capitalized terms that dominate the book, such as *the Soul of the World* and *the Hand that Wrote All*).

**Omens**

The motif of omens serves a dual purpose in *The Alchemist.* For one, omens offer Santiago guidance on his journey and reassure him that the Soul of the World has endorsed his journey. As Melchizedek explains, omens make up part of the Universal Language of the World, and if Santiago taps into this language he can always find the meaning in his environment. For example, when the stones Urim and Thummim drop from Santiago’s pocket, Santiago chooses to consider the event an omen. In doing so, he continues to feel that the universe conspires to help him, and he finds meaning in the seemingly random event. In this way, the motif of omens reinforces the book’s theme of the unity of nature.

Omens also serve to demonstrate Santiago’s spiritual growth throughout the story. The omens that Santiago experiences grow in relevance from being small, limited events to important visions that affect many lives. The vision of the hawks and approaching armies that Santiago has in Al-Fayoum, for example, tells Santiago of an assault on the oasis that could lead to the deaths of hundreds. That his omens become more and more important signifies that Santiago is getting closer to understanding the pure Language of the World.

**Symbols**

**Santiago’s Sheep**

Santiago’s sheep symbolize the sort of existence lived by those who are completely blind to their Personal Legends. Santiago loves his sheep, but he also expresses thinly veiled disrespect for them because of their animal desires for mere food and water. He thinks that his sheep do not appreciate all the wonderful lands that Santiago discovers during his travels. Also, in a disturbing image, he imagines that his sheep are so blindly trusting that he could kill them one by one without them noticing. These sheep symbolize the characters in the book like the baker and the crystal merchant who do not pursue their Personal Legends. Like the sheep, these characters content themselves with their material desires and social acceptance. Accordingly, they lose the ability to appreciate certain aspects of creation, and tend to miss out on many opportunities because of their limited perspectives.

**Alchemy**

Alchemy, in which a base metal is transformed into a more valuable metal like gold, functions as the dominant symbol in *The Alchemist*and represents Santiago’s journey to achieve his Personal Legend. The symbol also gives the novel its title. *The Alchemist* describes the process of turning base metal to gold as equivalent to the base metal realizing its Personal Legend. In the parlance of the book, the metal must rid itself of all impurities to achieve a higher evolutionary state. Similarly, Santiago must rid himself of impurities, such as his desire for his parents’ acceptance, his desire to live as a rich shepherd, and even his desire to live with Fatima, in order to realize his own Personal Legend and achieve a higher state. The way a person learns the craft of alchemy parallels the way in which a person achieves his Personal Legend. As the alchemist tells Santiago, although many tomes have been written about alchemy, these books only complicate the craft. In fact, all the secrets of alchemy exist on the small Emerald Tablet, and these secrets cannot be expressed in words. Likewise, no written instructions can guide a person to his Personal Legend. The person must follow his own instincts and the omens provided by the Soul of the World. The alchemist chooses Santiago as his pupil rather than the Englishman largely because Santiago does not depend on books and reason to understand the world. By listening to the Soul of the World, Santiago ultimately enters into communion with all of nature, including the wind and the sun, and he reaches a higher state of being.

**The Desert**

The desert, with its harsh conditions and tribal wars, symbolizes the serious difficulties that await anyone in pursuit of their Personal Legend, but it also serves as an important teacher to Santiago during his journey to the pyramids. As the alchemist puts it, tests are an inherent part of all Personal Legends, because they are necessary to create spiritual growth. More than the desert heat, the desert’s silence, emptiness, and monotony test Santiago. As Santiago learns, however, even the desert, despite appearing barren, contains life and the Soul of the World. Santiago begins to understand his environment, and to see the signs of life in what seems to be a wasteland. Eventually he learns to recognize all of creation in a single grain of sand, and in the greatest test he faces during the book, he finds he is able to enlist the desert in his effort to become the wind.