

# THE ALCHEMIST

by Paulo Coelho

## A Radical Introduction

Critical reading means not being a passive reader. Sometimes critical reading involves forming negative opinions and criticizing parts of a written work. For example, *The Alchemist* is a book without a hero. In my evidence-supported opinion, the novel is about an ordinary boy who loves money and physical treasures, who wants to *have* a girl and who always makes the wrong decisions, has terrible influences on others, lacks communication skills, completely misinterprets life, sets a bad example, seems to have no conscience, and always fails to question his “good” fortune.

But the story is subtle, consequently most readers follow Santiago through his adventures and think they are reading about a good and inspiring hero. Your challenge is to see that the opposite is the truth. Here are some questions to help you think critically.

### **Topic**

Please read this short article on charity and discuss how it relates to Santiago's 'religious' life, from his education to his treasure(s). Please use quotes.

<https://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/the-faith-column/2009/04/charity-love-god-christians>

### Questions

1. Santiago, the main character, thinks very highly of his sheep. Give your own opinion and comment on his decision to leave them.
2. Santiago has a book, or books. Analyze or criticize his relationship to his books. Refer to page 3 and at least 3 other pages.
3. Try to identify the contradiction in paragraph six (p.4).
4. Explain what makes the old witch-like woman and the old man (Melchizedek) suspicious. Discuss profit and empty promises about the future.
5. On page 11 Santiago plans to get a shave and haircut in the city. What's strange and ironic about this? Refer to his work as a shepherd.
6. “It's the possibility of having a dream come true that makes life interesting” (p. 13). Is chasing your dream a moral action? What about all the immoral people who chased their immoral dreams? Comment.
7. “The secret of happiness is to see all the marvels of the world, and never to forget the drops of oil on the spoon” (p.34). Do you agree? Should everyone see the pyramids, the Taj Mahal, Niagara Falls and so on? Is life about “seeing” marvels or about being human and using the limited time, or oil, that we have?

8. Discuss the main character's decision to travel to Egypt through strange lands without knowing local languages, customs and without knowing exactly where in Egypt he should look for his treasure. Your answer can use words like imbecile and obtuse.
9. The crystal merchant thinks that it's "too late" to change because he's been a shopkeeper for thirty years. He can hardly imagine adding a tea shop to his coffee shop because he's so used to doing everything the same way. The protagonist introduces many changes into his life. Are any of them spiritual? Discuss.
10. Geography and Anthropology Research: How large is Andalusia? Comment on the narrator's claim that the shepherd boy knows all its towns and travels across it with his sheep. Traditionally, how much area do shepherds need for their flocks and where do they sleep?

(pp. 53-85)

1. Why does the boy, Santiago, enjoy his work with the crystal merchant and forget about Egypt?
2. After quitting his job, Santiago accidentally goes back to the bar where he was robbed and has tea there. Comment on this, and remember about the tea business he started.
3. On page 65 he considers asking just how far away the Pyramids are. Comment on this.
4. Comment on the Englishman's obsession with gold and the boy's obsession with his treasure. Are they similar obsessions?
5. Geography Research: How long would it take to get from Morocco to Egypt by camel? Research to see if caravan routes ever cross the Sahara that way.

(pp. 86-end)

1. Comment on his love for Fatima. Is it true love? What is true love anyway?
2. Carefully study the conversations between Santiago and Fatima. Do her words reveal love for him?
3. Comment on the money he gets from the tribal chief after the war. Why should he reject it? How was he responsible for causing the war?
4. Comment on the treasure. Research the conquistadors if necessary. Why should Santiago reject the treasure? Why should he treat it like stolen money? How should he treat it instead?
5. Comment on the Epilogue of the story. What evidence do we have that Santiago has not learned his lesson and will repeat his circular journey again?

Beyond the Text:

Explain the irony of the following: The Alchemist is a story about a young Spanish man on a journey that leads him to the wrong place, a place in Africa, before he finds what he needs in Spain. The young man is named Santiago. Research the role of the town of Santiago in Spain's traditional Catholic pilgrimage or journey.

## Research

1. Santiago's treasure consists of artifacts stole from South America, likely during the 1500s by the conquistadors. Research and explain the moral implications.

<http://www.pbs.org/gunsgermsteel/show/episode2.html>

2. The alchemist is able to make gold quite easily, while everyone else must work hard to have any kind of money. Explain the moral implications. Then research the concept of fiat money and explain whether fiat money is any different from counterfeit money and the alchemist's gold.

<http://www.drschool.com/articles/TheUnitedStatesFiat%20MoneyAndTheFederalReserve.pdf>

3. Santiago profits from a war that killed 50 people who only wanted water and food. Consider the moral implications and research how profitable war is for the U.S. military-industrial complex – specifically for arms manufacturers such as Boeing and Lockheed Martin.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/business/2013/03/10/10-companies-profiting-most-from-war/1970997/>

<http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/175077>