

## Naive Readers Beware; *The Alchemist* Is Ironic

The story, *The Alchemist*, is extremely ironic. It details the life of a young adventurer, Santiago, who seeks to break free from the norm in society and instead, become a shepherd that travels. Eventually, after a dream that tells him that there would be treasure in Egypt he decides to embark on his journey to Egypt in search of this treasure. What he doesn't know is the countless dangers or encounters along the way.

At the very beginning, to fund his journey, he sells his sheep to travel to Egypt. Ironically, he gets all his belongings stolen. Disheartened, he works his way up to having enough money to sustain himself.

Thanks to his difficulties, he thinks he now understands the old king's philosophical words, "When you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it" and "When you play cards the first time, you are almost sure to win. Beginner's luck." The former quote pertains to their religious belief. It suggests that God is always watching and everything you encounter helps you get what you want. This is nonsensical because although in Santiago's case, there were several factors that helped him reach his goal, there were also many obstacles. For instance, the alchemist he met allowed Santiago to become more resolute in searching for the treasure; however, he also met with tragic encounters with thieves and other unscrupulous persons. The latter quotation, like the former quote, is also nonsensical. Although luck can play a large role in a particular activity, skill and intuition are also important.

His journey to the pyramids would entail meeting the love of his life, gaining a profound understanding of the "Language of the World," and wealth. However, disregarding these gains, the end result of this treasure hunt was to simply find that his coveted treasure was located in the location in which he started his journey. Ironically, there, he acquired wealth that he no longer needed as the alchemist he had met already given him an abundance of gold. Another irony is that the real 'treasure' that he gained came not from the material treasure but from the journey itself: love, wealth, and knowledge. Ironically the treasure he found back where he started was less impactful than the journey.

In a way, the story ridicules the common theme of most novels: "Never give up on your goals." Santiago never gave up and did whatever he could to find the treasure. Ironically, that's what made him naive and obtuse. To elaborate, he sold all his sheep just so he could travel to a country that he had no knowledge of. He did not even understand the culture, the language, and the land. Consequently, or ironically, the young treasure-hunter had his belongings stolen.

While he became extremely obsessed with finding the treasure because the old king convinced him that it was his destiny, a rational person would research the place they would go and figure out what they should expect once they are there.

Another ironic aspect of *The Alchemist* is the fact that the actions and objects that are perceived as moral and heroic are despicable. This includes implications of war profiteering, robbing, and counterfeiting. In the novel, these actions are euphemized and disguised in order to lead the reader away from the truth.

Firstly, war profiteering and the global arms trade were portrayed as evidence of a benevolent universe. When Santiago was in the oasis village, he made a bet with the village heads: should an army attempt to invade the village the next day, Santiago would get a gold coin for every ten kills; however, should the 'prophecy' not come to light, Santiago would be killed instead. In the end, Santiago gained 50 gold coins for five dead bodies. To disguise the fact that Santiago profited off of the deaths of an army, the author emphasized that Santiago avoided death to make it seem like he earned this money faithfully. Santiago's affluence

seemed moral because there was a life threatening consequence for a large reward. War profiteering in the modern world is, much like Santiago's actions, scandalous. It is the selling of weapons and supplies to armies. The merchants gain a large sum of money because these supplies are in high demand. However, clearly this is extremely scandalous as selling to armies indirectly causes the deaths of others.

Secondly, robbing appears to be the initiator of Santiago's journey for treasure. In the past, Spain and Portugal conquered the Americas and pillaged their resources. Coincidentally, the treasure that Santiago found was an abundance of riches, including a mask adorned with feathers which are the symbols of the First Nations. *The Alchemist's* implication of robbing is commonly overlooked because it was 'overwritten' by the narrator emphasizing the fact that it was the treasure that Santiago worked hard for.

Lastly, counterfeiting was pursued by all the revered alchemists much like the central banks that create fiat currency. However, the author tricks the reader into thinking that counterfeiting is alchemy and that this skill was only necessary to provide an understanding of the 'Language of the World.'

In essence, *The Alchemist* is brimming with irony. It follows an extremely ironic and tragic plot in which Santiago embarks on an arduous journey into Egypt only to find out that he needs to return to his homeland. Additionally, within this journey, he encounters and commits some of the most despicable acts, such as war profiteering, robbing, and counterfeiting, that can easily be misinterpreted as heroic and ethical. In short, reading this novel requires close attention to detail to avoid a naive or mystical reading.