

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

Paulo Coelho was born August 24, 1947 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil to Pedro Queima Coelho de Souza and his wife, Lygia. Coelho's parents did not share in their son's dream of becoming a writer, and even went so far as to have him twice institutionalized in a mental hospital for attempting to pursue his dream. The treatment in the hospital did nothing to make Coelho conform to his parents' wishes; in fact, he became rebellious. He got involved with the hippie movement in the 1960s as it spread through Brazil, embracing progressive politics and joining the peace and love generation. His creative explorations led him to the theatre, to journalism where he published an alternative magazine called *2001*, and to the Brazilian rock scene where he wrote lyrics for famous Brazilian singers such as Raul Seixas, Elis Regina, and Rita Lee.

His involvement in the hippie movement led Coelho to explore various types of mysticism and spirituality. He was highly influenced by the works of Aleister Crowley, and even joined an organization known as the Alternative society, which defended the individual's right to free expression. After being detained, questioned and tortured by a group of paramilitaries, Coelho decided to tame his radical behaviors. A chance meeting with a stranger in Amsterdam led Coelho to turn his life toward Catholicism and to walk the medieval pilgrim's route, the road to the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. This route across northern Spain is known as St. James's Way. This experience was recreated in his book *The Pilgrimage: Diary of Magus* (1987).

In 1988, Coelho wrote *The Alchemist*, based on *Tale of Two Dreamers* by Jorge Luis Borges, which was originally based on a tale from *The Thousand and One Arabian Nights*. Coelho's novel did not receive much critical acclaim, however, and the first edition only sold about nine hundred copies. When the publishing company decided not to reprint, Coelho refused to give up on the work, and signed with another publishing company. *The Alchemist* has since sold more copies than any other novel in Brazilian literary history.

Paulo Coelho and his wife, Christina, live in Rio do Janeiro where he serves as a member of the Board of the Shimon Peres Institute for Peace, a special counselor for the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) for "Intercultural Dialogues

**Novel:** *The Alchemist* tells the story of Santiago, the young Andalusian shepherd who dreams of buried treasure in Egypt and embarks upon a challenging and enlightening journey to find it. With all the simplicity and symbolic richness of a fable, Paulo Coelho's novel is both a hunt for buried treasure and a spiritual quest, with a hero who overcomes trials along the way with the help of disguised teachers who guide him.

**RELIGIOUS ALLUSIONS AND SYMBOLISM IN THE NOVEL:**

Perhaps the most useful background knowledge for students would be in world religions. The Alchemist includes religious symbolism and even refers to some Biblical stories like the Roman centurion, or commandments from the Koran as described by the crystal store owner. The book is profoundly religious in its own way. The following discussion about the basic beliefs, differences, and commonalities of the two religions most often referenced in *The Alchemist* is intended to enrich your understanding of the novel.

History & Stats	Christianity	Islam
date founded	c. 30 AD	622 AD
place founded	Palestine	Arabian Peninsula
founders & early leaders	Jesus, Peter, Paul	Muhammad
major location today	Europe, North and South America	Middle East, Southeast Asia
adherents worldwide today	2 billion	1.3 billion
major branches	Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant	Sunni, Shiite

Religious Authority	Christianity	Islam
sacred text	Bible = Old Testament (Jewish Bible) + New Testament	Qur'an (Koran)
inspiration of sacred text	views vary: literal Word of God, inspired human accounts, or of human origin only	literal Word of God
status of biblical prophets	true prophets	true prophets
religious law	canon law (Catholics)	Sharia
Beliefs & Doctrine	Christianity	Islam
ultimate reality	one creator God	one creator God
other spiritual beings	angels and demons	angels, demons, jinn
revered humans	saints, church fathers	prophets, imams (especially in Shia Islam)
identity of Jesus	Son of God, God incarnate, savior of the world	true prophet of God, whose message has been corrupted
birth of Jesus	virgin birth	virgin birth
death of Jesus	death by crucifixion	did not die, but ascended bodily into heaven (a disciple died in his place)
resurrection of Jesus	affirmed	denied, since he did not die
second coming of Jesus	affirmed	affirmed
mode of divine revelation	through Prophets and Jesus (as God Himself), recorded in Bible	through Muhammad, recorded in Qur'an
human nature	"original sin" inherited from Adam - tendency towards evil	equal ability to do good or evil
means of salvation	correct belief, faith, good deeds, sacraments (some Protestants emphasize faith alone)	correct belief, good deeds, Five Pillars
God's role in salvation	predestination, various forms of grace	predestination
good afterlife	eternal heaven	eternal paradise
bad afterlife	eternal hell, temporary purgatory (Catholicism)	eternal hell
view of the other religion	Islam is respected as a fellow monotheistic religion, but Muhammad is not seen as a true prophet	Christians and Jews are respected as "People of the Book," but they have mistaken beliefs and only partial revelation
Rituals & Practices	Christianity	Islam
house of worship	church, chapel, cathedral, basilica, meeting hall	mosque
day of worship	Sunday	Friday
religious leaders	priest, bishop, archbishop, patriarch, pope, pastor, minister, preacher, deacon	imams
major sacred rituals	baptism, communion	Five Pillars: prayer, pilgrimage, charity, fasting, confession of faith
head covered during prayer?	generally no	yes
central religious holy days	Lent, Holy Week, Easter	Eid-al-Fitr, Eid-al-Adha, month of Ramadan
other holidays	Christmas, saints days	Mawlid, Ashura
major symbols	cross, crucifix, dove, anchor, fish, alpha and omega, chi rho, halo	crescent, name of Allah in Arabic

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## WHAT IS ALCHEMY?

Alchemy is the medieval “science” of transforming rocks into gold. Alchemy plays an important part in the plot (literal level) of the story, but it also becomes a symbol, or *allegorical* device, in the legend (figurative level). Coelho is really using characters, events, and symbols as tools to show us how to achieve spiritual alchemy.

## THE FOUR PILLARS OF ALCHEMY

In an interview, Paulo Coelho talks about Four Pillars of Alchemy— four important “tips” for finding one’s Personal Legend:

1. One must believe in “The Soul of the World.” The ancient Latin term for this concept is “anima mundi.” In short, this idea suggests that everything in the world is interconnected; that is, what one does affects everything else, from the smallest grain of sand to the largest whale, and vice versa. Writers and thinkers such as Plato, Walt Whitman and Khalil Gibran have attempted to illustrate this interconnectedness in their works.
2. One must listen to the voice of the heart. Coelho suggests that sometimes we must follow our feelings and intuitions, even if we do not fully understand them. Through feeling one gains wisdom.
3. One must be faithful to one’s dreams, for they both test and reward us. In other words, the path to achieving one’s Personal Legend may not be an easy one, but we must endure the tests in order to gain the rewards.
4. One must “surrender oneself to the universe.” Coelho suggests that we must allow ourselves to be open to recognizing and learning from omens and signs which come our way.

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## THE MYTH OF NARCISSUS AND ECHO: *Echo and Narcissus in Greek Mythology*

Echo was a beautiful nymph, fond of the woods and hills, where she devoted herself to woodland sports. She was a favorite of Artemis, and attended her in the chase. But Echo had one failing; she was fond of talking, and whether in chat or argument, would have the last word. One day Hera was seeking her husband, who, she had reason to fear, was amusing himself among the nymphs. Echo by her talk contrived to detain the goddess till the nymphs made their escape. When Hera discovered it, she passed sentence upon Echo in these words: "You shall forfeit the use of that tongue with which you have cheated me, except for that one purpose you are so fond of - reply. You shall still have the last word, but no power to speak first."

This nymph saw Narcissus, a beautiful youth, as he pursued the chase upon the mountains. She loved him and followed his footsteps. O how she longed to address him in the softest accents and win him to converse! But it was not in her power. She waited with impatience for him to speak first, and had her answer ready. One day the youth, being separated from his companions, shouted aloud, "Who's here?" Echo replied, "Here." Narcissus looked around, but seeing no one called out, "Come". Echo answered, "Come." As no one came, Narcissus called again, "Why do you shun me?" Echo asked the same question. "Let us join one another," said the youth. The maid answered with all her heart in the same words, and hastened to the spot, ready to throw her arms about his neck. He started back, exclaiming, "Hands off! I would rather die than you should have me!" "Have me," said she; but it was all in vain. He left her, and she went to hide her blushes in the recesses of the woods. From that time forth she lived in caves till at last all her flesh shrank away. Her bones were changed into rocks and there was nothing left of her but her voice. With that she is still ready to reply to anyone who calls her, and keeps up her old habit of having the last word.

Narcissus's cruelty in this case was not the only instance. He shunned all the rest of the nymphs, as he had done poor Echo. One day a maiden who had in vain endeavored to attract him uttered a prayer that he might some time or other feel what it was to love and meet no return of affection. The avenging goddess heard and granted the prayer.

There was a clear fountain, with water like silver, to which the shepherds never drove their flocks, nor the mountain goats resorted, nor any of the beasts of the forest; neither was it defaced with fallen leaves or branches; but the grass grew fresh around it, and the rocks sheltered it from the sun. Hither came one day the youth, fatigued with hunting, heated and thirsty. He stooped down to drink, and saw his own image in the

water; he thought it was some beautiful water-spirit living in the fountain. He stood gazing with admiration at those bright eyes, those locks curled like the locks of Dionysus or Apollo, the rounded cheeks, the ivory neck, the parted lips, and the glow of health and exercise over all. He fell in love with himself. He brought his lips near to take a kiss; he plunged his arms in to embrace the beloved object. It fled at the touch, but returned again after a moment and renewed the fascination. He could not tear himself away; he lost all thought of food or rest, while he hovered over the brink of the fountain gazing upon his own image. He talked with the supposed spirit: "Why, beautiful being, do you shun me? Surely my face is not one to repel you. The nymphs love me, and you yourself look not indifferent upon me. When I stretch forth my arms you do the same; and you smile upon me and answer my beckonings with the like." His tears fell into the water and disturbed the image. As he saw it depart, he exclaimed, "Stay, I entreat you! Let me at least gaze upon you, if I may not touch you."

With this, and much more of the same kind, he cherished the flame that consumed him, so that by degrees he lost his color, his vigor, and the beauty which formerly had so charmed the nymph Echo. She kept near him, however, and when he exclaimed, "Alas! alas!" she answered him with the same words. He pined away and died; and when his shade passed the Stygian river, it leaned over the boat to catch a look of itself in the waters. The nymphs mourned for him, especially the water-nymphs; and when they smote their breasts Echo smote hers also. They prepared a funeral pile and would have burned the body, but it was nowhere to be found; but in its place a flower, purple within and surrounded with white leaves, which bears the name and preserves the memory of Narcissus.

**Vocabulary:**

scabbard (37)	treasonous (129)	conspire	elixir (133)
scimitar (112)	contemplate (134)	brandish (112)	fixedly (136)
dialect (106)	flourish (145)	prognostication (111)	sirocco (146)
monotony (124)	tether (151)	tracts (126)	recount (153)
agitated (128)	disciple (153)	centurion (158)	avidly (159)
scarab (161)	sacristy (163)	alchemy	infidel (34)

**VOCABULARY ASSIGNMENT 1 *The Alchemist***

Part I: Using Prior Knowledge and Contextual Clues

Below are the sentences in which the vocabulary words appear in the text. Read the sentence. Use any clues you can find in the sentence combined with your prior knowledge, and write what you think the underlined words mean on the lines provided.

1. The alchemist knew the legend of Narcissus, a youth who knelt beside a lake to contemplate his own beauty.

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2. Dusk was falling as the boy arrived with his herd at an abandoned church. The roof had fallen in long ago, and an enormous sycamore had grown on the spot where the sacristy once had stood.

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3. The merchant was the proprietor of a dry goods shop, and he always demanded that the sheep be sheared in his presence, so that he would not be cheated.

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4. He knew that a few hours from now, with the sun at its zenith, the heat would be so great that he would not be able to lead his flock across the fields.

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5. The horizon was tinged with red, and suddenly the sun appeared.

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6. A shepherd always takes his chances with wolves and with drought, and that's what makes a shepherd's life exciting.

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7. And if the book was irritating, as the old man had said, the boy still had time to change it for another.

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8. The boy didn't know where Salem was, but he didn't want to ask, fearing that he would appear ignorant.

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9. "It prepares your spirit and your will, because there is one great truth on this planet: whoever you are, or whatever it is that you do, when you really want something, its because that desire originated in the soul of the universe."

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10. The boy felt a pang in his heart, thinking about the merchant's daughter.

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*The Alchemist* Vocabulary Worksheet Assignment 1 Continued

Part II: Determining the Meaning -- Match the vocabulary words to their dictionary definitions.

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| ___ 1. CONTEMPLATE       | A. A sudden feeling of mental or emotional distress or longing       |
| ___ 2. SACRISTY          | B. A slight degree of coloration                                     |
| ___ 3. PROPRIETOR        | C. Brought into being; created                                       |
| ___ 4. ZENITH            | D. A room in a church housing the sacred vessels and vestments       |
| ___ 5. TINGED            | E. Exciting to impatience or anger; annoying                         |
| ___ 6. DROUGHT           | F. To consider thoroughly; think fully or deeply about               |
| ___ 7. IRRITATING        | G. A point on the celestial sphere vertically above a given position |
| ___ 8. IGNORANT<br>crops | H. A period of dry weather, esp. a long one that is injurious to     |
| ___ 9. ORIGINATED        | I. The owner of a business establishment                             |
| ___ 10. PANG             | J. Lacking in knowledge or training; unlearned                       |