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## Relevance of Symbols in Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*

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### Abstract

Brazilian author, Paulo Coelho is known for his tales that inspire readers to overcome conflicts and move toward the 'ultimate truth'. The popularity of such inspirational writings (both fictional and non-fictional) in the new age has given rise to a new literature style. Coelho's fiction, though inspirational, describes journeys that are physical and psychological at the same time. Symbols guide him in his journeys, forming a significant part of the novels. While these novels are said to appear inspirational for depressed souls with a profound philosophical and spiritual dilemma, the study of symbols found in these novels appears significant. This research aims to read closely the novel *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho and evaluate the symbols in it. The research shall attribute the commonly accepted meanings to the symbols and assess the impact of such 'accepted' meanings on the same novel through Peirce's model of semiotic analysis.

**Keywords:** Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist*, symbols, relevance, semiotics

### Introduction:

Brazilian author Paulo Coelho emerged in a literary scenario in 1995 to translate his bestseller *The Pilgrimage* from Portuguese to English. Since then, Coelho's novels have joined the bestsellers club worldwide. He has made a record-breaking sale of over 350 million copies of his books translated into 80 languages (Joshi, 2017). Coelho also entered the Guinness Book of Records, the first time being the only writer signing the most books in the Frankfurt Book Fair (2003) and the second for his novel *The Alchemist*, becoming the most translated book globally. Coelho integrates his spiritual philosophy through his books in a simple style and palatable language. His fiction and non-fiction turn out to be an awakening call for the reader to live up to their dream or 'personal legend', as Coelho calls it. The characters in Coelho's novels show how one can reach the highest stage of fulfilment, happiness and spiritual existence, overcoming psycho-cultural barriers (Joshi, 2017, p. 2). Coelho has achieved tremendous fame and exposure than any other Brazilian novelist due to film adaptations of his three novels, e-book versions, publicity policies and constant interaction with his readers through his blogs. His works thus become worthy of scholarly study.

A characteristic feature of the archetypal theme of the hero's journey is symbolism. Symbols are signs which are not intermediaries for their objects but are vehicles for the conception of objects (Langer, 1951, p. 61). In discussing things, we have conceptions of them, not simply the things; it is the conceptions, not the things, that symbols directly mean (Langer, 1951, p. 61). Symbols help Coelho describe the protagonist's journey – both physical and psychological – towards self-

awakening or self-discovery. When the protagonist overcomes internal and external obstacles during the journey, symbols act to destroy personal negativities and help the protagonist retain hope (Joshi, 2017, p. 7). Coelho's use of symbols varies from animal to religious symbols, as he uses dogs, fountains and even a cross as symbols. Symbols manifest the collective unconscious, the implicate order of human existence (Jung, 1969, p. 286).

"Symbols, particularly those that endure, can be seen as the visual manifestation of archetypes. The greater the appeal and attraction of such symbols, and the longer that attraction endures, the more likely it is to connect to the deepest levels of the collective unconscious" (Jung, 1969, p. 287).

### ***The Alchemist***

*The Alchemist*, published by Harper Collins Publications in 1998, is the story of a boy who dreams of a treasure and undertakes a long journey to find it, only to realise that the treasure lies at his own home. As cited by Arash Hejazi, the story is based on a fable that appears in book VI of *The Mathanawi* written by the thirteenth-century Iranian poet Rumi and is also found in the Arabian *One Thousand and One Nights* (Hejazi, 2009). The story even appears in the English folktale *The Pedlar of Swaffham* (1870), and Australian author Leo Perutz has based his novel *Night under the Stone Bridge* (1952) on the same plot. Later, Jorge Luis Borges adopted the story in his short story '*Historia de los dos que Sonaron*' (1974), becoming Coelho's inspiration. An alchemist is a person or a chemist practising alchemy principles like transforming base metals into gold. He can also be considered a wizard who attempts to make special elixirs curing illness and impart immortality. Hence, the Alchemist is an expert seeking an elixir of life, a panacea for all diseases and the 'philosopher's stone'.

In the context of *The Alchemist*, Alchemy is a symbol of the spiritual enlightenment of Santiago, the protagonist of the novel, and is about converting lower metals into higher ones. Symbolically, spiritual enlightenment transforms human consciousness from a lower to a higher level. In his early twenties, Santiago, a young shepherd from an Andalusian Mountain village in Spain, learns alchemy and achieves his highest destiny at different stages of his journey. He has attended a seminary, knows Spanish, Latin and theology, and likes to read books. His dream was to travel to parts of the world, while his farmer parents wanted him to be a priest. However, for Santiago, travelling was 'much more important than knowing God and learning about man's sins' (Coelho, 1998). Since only the rich or the shepherds can travel, Santiago becomes a shepherd, as his father agrees. His father, too, once dreamed of travelling, but the dream got buried under the responsibilities of life. It made him understand Santiago's dream and allowed his son to discover the world. The novel thus narrates Santiago's journey towards his treasure, overcome by various obstacles that transformed him for the greater good.

### **Review of Literature:**

While *The Alchemist* is a symbolic representation of man's insatiable quest to search for his place in the world and also the ultimate search for the meaning of life and the universe (Raina, 2017, p.6), it also uses one or more animals as symbols around which the story revolves (Lakshmi &

Mani, 2018, p. 313). Coelho's use of animal symbolism makes animals act like vehicles to the reader through which the stories revolve and are the manifestations of the characters concerned (Lakshmi & Mani, 2018, p. 313). Moreover, *The Alchemist* uses the techniques of magical realism but endows them with a visionary quality, promoting the notion that each of us is destined for a treasure (Hart, 2010, p. 312). This notion makes the entire novel symbolic, giving the protagonist's journey a symbolic meaning. It makes its readers feel that each of them has a magical dream buried deep down within them and that it is up to them to search the reality around them until they finally discover where the magic is (Hart, 2010, p. 312). A specific category of symbolism, such as animal symbolism, thus becomes a part of the already symbolic novel. While Coelho expresses himself through the protagonist Santiago (Geetha & Thambi, 2018, p. 98), the transformational journey of the self is also evident in the character Englishman (Mirafuentes et al., 2015, p. 175).

Coelho's narratives are generally recognisable and highly symbolic of the migrant experience (road, trains, airports, language schools, religious differences, translations, cultural shock, home, longing, memory and identity crisis) (Murta, 2018, p. 17). Therefore, they strike emotional chords (pathos) with a transnational audience, and thematically, the transnational or the migrant experience leads to self-improvement (Murta, 2018, p. 17). Symbolism in *The Alchemist* could also be seen when we consider how the idea of "Ithaca" is expressed in the novel. For Coelho, the concept called "Ithaca" by the philosopher Constantine Cavafy is the ethical philosophy of life. All his novels appear to be based on the theme of the poem *Ithaca* (More, 2015, p. 19). Ithaca is a metaphor for birth and death, a great journey we all have to make, whether we want to or not (More, 2015, p. 19). Such a statement, in turn, substantiates the argument that *The Alchemist* is a symbolic novel, and the life of the protagonist Santiago reveals the philosophy of existentialism, as Coelho used symbolism effectively to make the whole story of *The Alchemist* a symbol of one's whole life (Makwana, 2018, p. 199). Paulo Coelho powerfully constructs his plots in the form of an odyssey and positions his characters in imbalanced situations where they feel discontented and puts them through a struggle to obtain meaning out of meaninglessness (Jondhale, 2021, p. 47). He guides them through transcendence leading to spiritual awakening, ultimately portraying them as evolved selves (Jondhale, 2021, p. 47).

Alchemy usually refers to heating metals in the laboratory to transform them into higher and better ones (Antony, 2015, p. 188). However, for Coelho, it means the personal transformation of the protagonist from a weak to a nobler character (Antony, 2015, p. 189). Thus, many pieces of research prove that *The Alchemist* is a novel in which the protagonist's journey is symbolic of self-transformation in life. Still, only the relevance of animal symbolism has explicitly been focused on. This paper thus analyses the significant symbols in *The Alchemist*, without particular focus on any specific group of symbols, to understand the combined effect of those symbols on the novel.

### **Research Method:**

The study of signs can be loosely defined as semiotics (Chandler, 2007, p. 1). Semiotics, also called semiology, was first used by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure in the early twentieth century (Bouzida, 2014, p. 1001). He states that semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign (Eco, 1976, p. 7). Semiotics involves studying what we refer to as 'signs' in everyday speech but of anything which 'stands for something else' (Chandler, 2007, p. 2). Notwithstanding,

the two essential customs in contemporary semiotics come from the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) and the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914).

The principal concept of Saussure's theory was initiated from the thought of a dichotomy or duality basis in which, according to him, a sign consists of two focal components, namely signifier- the sound pattern (marker sound image) and signified- the concept (the outcome/the interpretation/conception of the signifier) (Yakin, 2014, p. 6). A signifier refers to something in a material form (physical) that explicitly exists and can be distinguished by human senses (Eco, 1976). On the other hand, signified denotes something literally and physically that does not exist on an abstract basis (Eco, 1976). Rather than Saussure's model of the sign as an 'independent dyad', Peirce offered a triadic (three-section) model comprising of:

1. The Representamen: The form which the sign takes (not material, however usually deciphered thus) – called by certain scholars the 'sign vehicle' (Chandler, 2007, p. 29).
2. An Interpretant: Not an interpreter but rather the sense made of the sign (Chandler, 2007, p. 29).
3. An Object: Something beyond the sign it refers to (a referent) (Chandler, 2007, p. 29).

Each of the three elements is fundamental to qualify as a sign. The sign is solidarity of what is represented (the object), how it is represented (the representamen) and how it is interpreted (the interpretant) (Chandler, 2007, p. 29).

Saussure also suggested that signs have certain limitations, subject to a system of conventions (Yakin, 2014, p. 7).

"For Saussure, something becomes a sign when it is mutually or commonly agreed upon as a sign by all those involved in the particular culture. In contrast to Saussure's view, Peirce did not confine the existence of a sign as something that is purposely conveyed. For Peirce, anything can be a sign when someone has interpreted it as a sign, even though it was not purposely meant or communicated" (Yakin, 2014, p. 7).

Peirce's ideology of sign encompasses everything, whether created by humans or not, as long as it can be grasped and acknowledged by their minds (Eco, 1976). Peirce's model of semiotics thus expands the idea of 'symbols' in *The Alchemist* much more than Saussure's model. The triadic model proposed by Peirce would also help find the meanings of the symbols extensively, as they could be studied by dissecting as representamen, interpretant and object, compared to Saussure's dyadic model of semiotics. This research shall identify the significant symbols found in *The Alchemist* and assess their meanings through Peirce's model of semiotics by splitting them into representant, interpretant and object. It shall then apply those meanings to the novel's story to understand the impact of symbols in *The Alchemist*.

### **Discussion:**

The following are the eight significant symbols found in *The Alchemist*, classified into representant, interpretant and object according to Peirce's model of semiotics:

## Sheep and Wolf

As indicated by Michael Ferber in his book *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, sheep-raising was a critical practice in the Mediterranean islands' uneven areas (2017, p. 200). He says that numerous current English expressions and a few maxims, some of the scriptural or old-style starting points, vouch for the proceeding with the presence of the universe of sheep (Ferber, 2017, p. 200). The term is non-exclusive in English, while the sheep are crowded in a herd and kept in a sheepfold, sheepcote or sheep pen. Ferber adds that the Bible is loaded with sheep similitudes, giving models from the Old Testament, for example, "I saw all Israel scattered upon the hills, as sheep that have no shepherd" (1 Kgs 22.17). The New Testament makes Jesus Christ the shepherd of Israel (Ferber, 2017, p. 200). The old-style custom of peaceful verse, indicated in Homer yet commonly taken to date from Theocritus in the third century BC, depends on a romanticised and improved variant of the existence of shepherds and goatherds (Ferber, 2017, p. 201). Indeed, even two of Shakespeare's plays, for instance, are peaceful: *As You Like It* and *The Winter's Tale*.

Notwithstanding, the most energising piece of Ferber's definition is the wolf's thought, adding that the wolf is the conventional adversary of sheep (Ferber, 2017, p. 202). "Till the wolf and the sheep be joined together" appears to have been a Greek identical to "never" (Ferber, 2017, p. 202). Ferber adds that the prophet Isaiah notably envisions when the land is re-established to the Lord's approval:

"The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them" (11.6).

In English poetry, adjectives such as "harmless", "humble", and "simple" got attached to "sheep" and "lambs" (Ferber, 2017, p. 202). The novel introduces Santiago as a shepherd. Although Santiago sells his sheep to travel to Egypt's Pyramids, he reflects on his life as a shepherd throughout the narrative. Many of the lessons he learns on his journey also reinforce things he discovered by being a shepherd. As Coelho writes,

"The boy prodded them, one by one, with his crook, calling each by name. He had always believed that the sheep were able to understand what he said" (1998, p. 4).

Santiago was close to his sheep, and talking to them apart from rearing was his hobby. However, when the king Melchizedek offered him a chance to find a treasure hidden for him in Egypt, he was ready to leave his folk for something uncertain.

"Here I am, between my flock and my treasure, the boy thought. He had to choose between something he had become accustomed to and something he wanted to have" (Coelho, 1998, p. 23).

When we try to apply the definitions of sheep given by Michael Ferber to that of the sheep we see in *The Alchemist*, it must be noted that Santiago's sheep act as a symbol that denotes peace, humbleness and simplicity. Being a shepherd himself, Santiago had a very close relationship with his sheep, thereby considering the sheep as a part of himself. The fact that Santiago is identified as a shepherd throughout the novel results from the same. As a shepherd, Santiago remained humble, calm, and straightforward throughout, even when he was robbed. Thus, the meanings attributed by Michael Ferber to the word 'sheep' complies with the symbol of sheep found in *The*

*Alchemist*. The novel even attributes the sheep's characteristics to their shepherd, identifying both as one with the same qualities.

### **Umim and Thummim**

While Umim and Thummim are fortune-telling stones that the character Melchizedek gives to Santiago in *The Alchemist*, no formal meanings or definitions can be found for the words and the stones they represent. However, considering the stones in the novel's context, Umim and Thummim also address the human craving to surrender control and decision-making ability. The best lie on the planet, as expressed by Melchizedek, is that people do not control their destinies. Although Melchizedek is the person who offers the stones to Santiago, they additionally represent the very thing that he says Santiago ought to stay away from – confiding in something besides himself to settle on a choice. The stones are black and white, with their colours representing "yes" and "no" answers. In the novel, Melchizedek asks Santiago to use the stones whenever he needs to decide, particularly on questions that need a "yes" or "no" answer. Santiago kept both the stones in a cloth bag. He picked up one stone at random whenever he struggled to decide and proceeded according to the colour of the stone he picked up. It is interesting to note how blindly Santiago trusted the two stones in the novel. However, not all his decisions were based on the stone, as Santiago used them only during two challenging situations. His ideas of working in a glassware shop and suggesting changes to the shopkeeper were based on his instincts. In such a scenario, the stones appear to be beyond human instincts. If so, the question of how can two stones go beyond human consciousness to help make decisions remain unanswered.

### **Alchemy**

In the novel, Alchemy is considered a process initially just known bit-by-bit to the Englishman and Santiago. In both cases, the specifics of alchemy symbolise more significant life lessons. Alchemy is usually defined as a process in which a metal is purified to the extent that it becomes gold. As written by Coelho,

"They were men who had dedicated their entire lives to the purification of metals in their laboratories; they believed that, if a metal were heated for many years, it would free itself of all its individual properties, and what was left would be the soul of the world. This Soul of the World allowed them to understand anything on the face of the earth because it was the language with which all things communicated. They called that discovery the Master Work -it was part liquid and part solid" (1998, p. 61).

The Englishman clarifies that the quest for the 'Master Work', another term for Alchemy, in which chemists go through years cautiously contemplating and filtering metals, really filters the actual alchemists. Self-advancement goes inseparably from the improvement of the 'Master Work'. From this, Santiago understands that one may seek after "a speculative chemistry of life," wherein self-improvement results from the world's investigation and different standards of the same chemistry to regular life practices.

### **Al-Fayoum or The Oasis**

The Oasis or Al-Fayoum is considered a neutral territory in the desert tribal wars. In the novel, we can see that Santiago defies the elder chief at the Oasis with his vision of a future in which adversary fighters attack Al-Fayoum. There can be two explanations behind the Oasis symbol: first, the two sides of the tribal war have oases to secure. Thus, both have an essential shortcoming (or weak point). Second, the Oasis contains regular citizens, many of whom are women and children. Al-Fayoum, or Oasis, in this way, represents a lack of bias, yet life and flourishing.

### **The Emerald Tablet**

The Emerald Tablet is seen as one of the speculative and noteworthy proprietaries of the Alchemists. It is a solitary emerald engraved with guidelines for finishing the Master Work: the making of the Philosopher's Stone and the Elixir of Life. These unique guidelines were, in this way, basic enough that they could be composed on the outside of a solitary stone. The Alchemist in the novel discloses to Santiago that Alchemists later started to doubt simplicity; thus, they made different messages and accumulated other data about the Master Work. According to him, many make progress toward the objective of the Master Work, however, with no accomplishments. Hence, the Emerald Tablet symbolises the significance of simplicity as a value.

### **Pyramids of Egypt**

As indicated by Michael Ferber, the Pyramids of Egypt, existent for the past 5,000 years, have entered literature as bywords for impermanence or the futile vainglory of rulers (Ferber, 2017, p. 171). He says that the inception of the word 'pyramid' is obscure, yet to the Greeks, it was recommended: "pyr" (fire). Plato felt that since the pyramid, or tetrahedron, was the most versatile, the littlest, and the keenest of the ideal (Platonic) solids, it was "the component and seed of fire". Likewise, it was thought to take after a fire (Ferber, 2017, p. 172).

Throughout the novel, the Pyramids of Egypt are Santiago's ultimate objective, as they mark the location of the treasure he was looking. Consequently, the pyramids represent his legend. The pyramids are hidden in a secret view, taking extraordinary exertion to find them across the desert. They are considered a dazzling accomplishment of design and human achievement on the grounds and symbolise Santiago's journey's trouble and the beauty of the same journey coming to an end with an accomplishment.

### **The Abandoned Church**

The Abandoned church in Spain marks the novel's beginning and end. It can be seen that Santiago longs for his fortune while dozing in the imploded church toward the start of the book, and he gets back to the same place to discover his fortune at the end. The unwanted church thus represents his own home. The home may not necessarily be a physical place but a feeling attributed to Santiago's mind – a feeling of familiarity. Since Santiago eventually did not have to venture out any physical distance to discover his fortune, which was in his own country, he could



discover the same fact only through a venture. The Abandoned church's significance is thus related to Egypt's Pyramids because the journey to the Pyramids made Santiago find his treasure at the church. The abandoned church may be damaged, broken and worn-out as it was abandoned. If the abandoned church symbolises home (as a feeling), the church is 'abandoned' and symbolises a broken heart. Thus, in the broken heart of Santiago, he could find his treasure.

## Gold

As per Ferber's dictionary, gold is the first metal (Ferber, 2017, p. 91). "Gold, similar to fire bursting/in the evening, sparkles transcendent amid noble riches", says Greek verse artist Pindar (Race, 1997, p. 1). Its excellence and virtue gave it divine status in scriptural and old-style culture; un-tarnish-able and subsequently godlike, it has a place with the divine beings – "Gold is the offspring of Zeus" (Race, 1997, p. 86). "Golden" is applied to whatever is ideal or generally superb, like the golden guideline, the golden stanzas of Pythagoras, or the golden mean (Ferber, 2017, p. 91). The sun is golden – Pindar again has "the golden strength of the sun" (Race, 1997, p. 118), while Shakespeare has the sun's "gold appearance" in Sonnet 18 (Shakespeare and Burrow, 2002, p. 417) – whereas the moon is silver. Gold consumes in another sense, for it is a profound risk, a reason for evil (Ferber, 2017, p. 91).

The symbols found in *The Alchemist* can be classified or divided as follows according to Peirce's idea of signs:

Representant	Interpretant	Object
Sheep	Santiago is introduced as a 'shepherd'	Calmness, humbleness and simplicity
Umim and Thummim	A black stone and a white stone stand for 'yes' and 'no', respectively	Surrendering the mind to instincts or intuitions
Alchemy	A process, somewhat of which was known to the characters Englishman and Santiago	Purification of the mind copying certain chemical principles
Oasis	A lush place where Santiago stays. The Oasis also gets invaded by enemy warriors in Santiago's dreams	A lack of bias, yet life and flourishment
Emerald Tablet	An emerald engraved with instructions	Simplicity as a value
Pyramids of Egypt	Location of a treasure	Personal legend
Abandoned Church	Santiago sleeps in the church	Home, in the sense that it is a mental state

Gold	A metal, which is also an end-product of alchemy	Anything of tremendous value
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**Table1: Symbols found in Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* are classified or divided according to Peirce's sign model.**

### **Conclusion:**

Daniel Chandler argues that every text is a system of signs organised according to codes and sub-codes, which reflect particular values, attitudes, beliefs, assumptions and practices (Chandler, 2007, p. 157). While writing, we select and join signs concerning the codes we are familiar with. Codes make it simpler to impart encounters providing better communication experiences. In understanding writings, we decipher signs regarding what seems to be the appropriate codes to restrict their potential implications (Chandler, 2007, p. 157). He adds that textual codes do not decide the content's implications. However, dominant codes constrain them. Social conventions guarantee that signs cannot mean whatever an individual needs them to mean. The utilisation of codes helps direct us toward what Stuart Hall calls 'a preferred reading' and away from what Umberto Eco calls 'aberrant decoding. Be that as it may, media messages do not fluctuate in the degree to which they are not entirely clear (Hall, 1980, p. 134).

Consequently, all interpretations are systems of signs: they signify rather than represent, and they do as such with essential reference to codes instead of reality (Chandler, 2007, p. 160). As Catherine Belsey notes, 'realism is possible not because it reflects the world, but because it is constructed out of what is (discursively) familiar' (Belsey, 1980, p. 47). Realism becomes relative, dictated by the system of representation standard for a given culture or individual at a given time (Goodman, 1968, p. 37).

When we inferred and attributed meanings that were socially 'accepted' and 'familiar' in literature to random symbols found in *The Alchemist*, their meanings seemed to 'adjust' with codes rather than reality. It is not possible to assume whether Coelho deliberately used the symbols found in the novels. However, they stand as a sign vehicle, carrying their meanings determined by specific 'codes'. Even though open-ness drives symbols and their meanings to appear to be expected after some time, we need to figure out how to 'read' such symbols. Reading the symbols thus becomes mechanical and confined to specific forms or structures. Thus, the structure made *The Alchemist* a famous novel, provided the readers were already trained to think and read standing amidst that structure.

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