

Summary and Analysis of *Siddhartha* (1922) and *The Alchemist* (1988)

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Siddhartha

By Hermann Hesse, 1922

This fictional novella¹ is loosely inspired by and engages with themes associated with the life and teachings of Siddhartha Gautama (commonly referred to as “the Buddha,”). He lived sometime during the 6th or 5th century BCE in the region of ancient northern India and present-day Nepal. It is not a biography, but a work of philosophical fiction. British scholar Karen Armstrong argue that although there is very little information that can be considered historically sound, we can be reasonably confident that Siddhārtha Gautama did exist as a historical figure.² The reasons include archeological findings, inscriptions, and mentions in early Buddhist texts.

Here in this novella, Siddhartha is the son of a Brahmin (a Hindu priest), living in ancient India. His best friend is Govinda. He faces a struggle: no matter what he does, he always wants more. Nothing fully satisfies him. Nothing physical or mental gives him a sense of “completeness.” He feels that there is something lacking in his life, and he believes the answer may be enlightenment. He wants to find “the one and most important thing,” but is not sure what it is or how to achieve it, but he believes such thing exists.

He decides to become a Samana: a wandering ascetic who gives up all physical pleasures. They live with very little, and wander in the hope that their suffering will bring them closer to truth, enlightenment, or the highest state of being.

Siddhartha tells his father, and he is not happy about this decision. The next day, Siddhartha departs to live among the Samanas. Govinda joins him.

After spending some time with the Samanas, Siddhartha perceives that he has achieved an increase in moral strength. Nonetheless, he still feels unsatisfied. He determines that *self-denial* does not provide the attainment of enlightenment.

1 A novella is typically 20,000–50,000 words, or roughly 80–200 pages; a novel is generally over 50,000 words, or 200-plus pages.

2 Armstrong, Karen. *Buddha*. Penguin, 2004.

He hears of a person named Gotama the Buddha, who has apparently attained total spiritual enlightenment (on May 10). Buddha means “above the mind.” Siddhartha and Govinda give up the Samana way of life and go to seek him.

When they arrive, Govinda readily joins Gotama’s camp. However, Siddhartha has doubts. He interprets a contradiction in Gotama’s teachings: if one is to give up the physical world, how can they obtain a sense of unity with the world? Isn’t part of the world physical? Thus, Siddhartha does not join. He leaves once again to embark on a new journey, but this time of gluttony and enjoying material possessions and pleasures. He wants see if this contributes to his enlightenment.

He crosses a river and meets a friendly ferryman named Vasudeva, who later turns out to be important. He remarks how Vasudeva is very content.

Arriving to the other side, Siddhartha walks to a city. There, he meets an upper-class wealthy woman named Kamala and he takes up employment as a merchant. In a brief amount of time, he becomes a wealthy merchant, and begins a relationship with Kamala.

Despite having it all, he is still unsatisfied and yearning. He realizes he cannot achieve enlightenment by satisfying physical, material needs and desires. Having material wealth, pleasure, and comfort does not create a sense of complete peacefulness, bliss, and joy within himself. There is something missing. He has to figure out a new way to find this elusive state. One day, he leaves behind Kamala, the city, and his wealth.

Siddhartha goes back to see the ferryman, Vasudeva. He learns from him that the river has secrets. That it contains the mystery of life. The river is interconnected to all bodies of water, including the ocean. And when water flows away, it later returns as rain. From studying the river, he concludes that there is a sense of timelessness and unity in all things.

Siddhartha listened. He was now listening intently, completely absorbed, quite empty, taking in everything. He felt that he had now completely learned the art of listening. He'd often heard all this before, all these numerous voices in the river, but today they sounded different. He could no longer distinguish the different voices—the merry voice from the weeping voice, the childish voice from the manly voice. They all belonged to each other: the lament of those who yearn, the laughter of the wise, the cry of indignation and the groan of the dying. They're all interwoven and interlocked, entwined in a thousand ways. And all the voices, all the goals, all the yearnings, all the sorrows, all the pleasures, all the good and evil, all of them together was the world. All of them together was the stream of events, the music of life. When Siddhartha listened attentively to this river, to this song of a thousand voices; when he did not listen to the sorrow or laughter, when he did not bind his soul to any one particular voice

and absorb it in his Self, but heard them all, the whole, the unity; then the great song of a thousand voices consisted of one word: Om – perfection. (p. 119)

In this moment, the sound Om represents “everything.” Siddhartha realizes: *all is connected*. In that knowledge, feeling, trust, experience, and understanding, one thus reaches enlightenment.

At the end of the book, Govinda sees Siddhartha. Siddhartha states that one cannot teach enlightenment: one can only realize it for oneself. Enlightenment is there for you, you just have to want to tap in. One can open their eyes by closing them.

It seems that “being” is the only true state, that time is just an illusion. There seems to be only distance and space. As a soul that is part of the universe, perhaps you always have been and always will be.

The Alchemist

By Paulo Coelho, 1988

The novel has three sections:

- Prologue
- Part One
- Part Two

MY REVIEW

Don't kill me, but I think this story is rather cliché, employing overused tropes such "we each have our own Personal Legend"; "Dreams are the language of God"; and how "wealth is where your heart is." The general market will always gobble these themes ... similar to Rhonda Byrne's *The Secret* (2006). This is not to say clichés are not valuable. They teach us kernels of truths, but one still has to live their life to make any real meaningful sense of them.

Another critique: it seems like the author picks up the main character like a toy action figure and moves him wherever he wants to next, on a whim, as opposed to having a more reasonable, progressive plot. Characters just reappear and disappear for what seems like convenience, and this takes away from credibility. If we are just making up anything, doing whatever we want, we might as well let a giant space turd drop from the sky and find a scroll of ancient wisdom. Let me then vanish and reappear in Aruba, with a piña colada, and five mistresses. Then, let me learn enlightenment on the mountain top of the Andes. One can just spitball whatever they want, and thread it with clichés, but that doesn't make it a logical or credible.

The story also seems to lack concrete imagery and identity; we know Santiago the shepherd, but it just feels impersonal, allegorical, and quite frankly, forgettable. I don't find the characters having uniqueness, depth, and memorability; they are just vessels used by Coelho to present wisdom. I made this outline, so I don't have to re-read the book, but also so I can remember, "Oh yes, this is how it goes." The wisdom is good however, I will give it that.

Not to mention, sometimes Santiago, and the reader, are *told* rather than *shown* the "laws" of the universe, breaking the conventional writing advice of "show, don't tell."

If you want a great story experience, I recommend *Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien. Very unique characters, reasoning behind movement, actual plots and subplots. It communicates themes without being so explicit, the way *The Alchemist* needs to be, considering it lacks everything else.

PROLOGUE

The Alchemist opens up with the Story of Narcissus, a youth who knelt daily by lake to contemplate his own beauty. One day, he fell into lake and drowned.

The Goddess of Forest asks the Lake: "Why Lake, did you turn into salty tears?" The Lake replies that he is weeping because he enjoyed seeing his own reflection in Narcissus' eyes. Thus, the moral of this prologue is that not just people, but lakes and perhaps other entities (maybe all entities) have narcissism, vanity, or self-interest.

PART ONE

The book opens up with Santiago sleeping with his sheep in an abandoned church. Within the church, an enormous sycamore tree grows. This suggests the church has been abandoned for at least ten to fifteen years, considering sycamore trees reach mature height within fifteen to twenty.

Santiago then tells the story of meeting a merchant's daughter. She had "bright Moorish eyes," "typical of the region of Andalusia (southern Spain)." We have no idea what color these eyes are, i.e. brown, blue, etc., which is just one example of Coelho not giving as much detail as I would want for this story to stick in my mind.

Santiago proceeds to narrate about being a shepherd. He suspects that maybe the abandoned church was haunted because he is having negative thoughts.

Santiago narrates his father's interactions with him regarding pursuing shepherding.

When Santiago is sleeping in the abandoned church in Spain with his sheep, he has a recurring dream. In this dream, a child plays with his sheep and then transports him to the Egyptian Pyramids. The child tells him: "If you come here, you will find a hidden treasure." Just as the child is about to show him the exact location, Santiago wakes up. He wakes up and goes back to shepherding. He was resting on a hill during midday.

He then meets the "old woman, a gypsy, who interprets dreams." "Dreams are the language of God," (12) an often repeated phrase in this story. Santiago tells her his dream, and she implores him to go to the Pyramids in Egypt because the dream is a "language of the world" and the treasure is real.

Shortly after leaving the Gypsy, Santiago is sitting in the plaza reading a book when he meets the Old man, who identifies himself as King Melchizedek, King of Salem³. He appears out of nowhere and sits down next to him. The Old man does not like the book Santiago is reading (a book about a burial ceremony). He says it ends all the same way, with a single lie, which is “at a certain point in our lives we lose control and become controlled by fate.” The Old man is an adamant believer of free-will.

He randomly states “I will help you find the hidden treasure.” He either has some idea of Santiago’s dream, or, his statement is a pure coincidence. We don’t know. Another example of Coelho where characters conveniently know information.

So, the Old man says “give me one-tenth of your sheep, in exchange for the answer.” To be more convincing, the Old man writes on the sand the personal information of the boy. Old man explains the “Personal Legend,” which is what one has always wanted to accomplish, from when they are young (21). “When you really want something, it’s because that desire originated in the soul of the universe. It’s your mission on earth” (22). “To realize one’s destiny is a person’s only real obligation” (22). OK, I can agree with that. “When you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it” (22). This is a very common phrase or message throughout the novel. For example, he repeats it quite literally on page 114: “When a person really desires something, all the universe conspires to help that person to realize his dream.” Let’s pause right here. I feel like people orgasm over Coelho’s genius but it’s not a new thought in literature. In case you live under a rock, Rhonda Byrne published *The Secret* in 2006 and it basically regurgitated this same cliché. Everyone seemed to be jizzing over this “newfound knowledge” but it’s really nothing new. The concept of the “Law of Attraction” (that human thought can influence physical reality) gained traction throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Early insights emerged from works like Prentice Mulford’s *Essays of Prentice Mulford* (1887) and William Walker Atkinson’s *Thought Vibration or the Law of Attraction in the Thought World* (1906). This line of thinking was refined for practical, material success by Wallace D. Wattles in *The Science of Getting Rich* (1910) and later solidified for a broader audience by Napoleon Hill in *Think and Grow Rich* (1937). These texts established a framework for success based on the power of focus and intent, serving as the primary precursors to modern self-help literature. Nonetheless, let’s us stay grounded: the idea that the universe, God, or nature responds to human intention is a recurring theme found across thousands of years of human thought, from the Stoics to various Eastern traditions. Anyway ...

³ Most Jewish and Christian scholars traditionally identify Salem with Jerusalem, located in present-day Israel, or, depending on political perspective, in the region of historic Palestine.

The Old man continues: "People learn, early in their lives, what is their reason for being" (24). Alright, we fux with that. "When each day is the [considered] the same as the next, it's because people fail to recognize the good things that happen in their lives every day that the sun rises" (27). Very true, you ingrate!

The Old man explains Beginner's Luck; basically the universe wants you to realize your Personal Legend, so it's going to make it easy for you initially by giving you a "taste of success." He then explains omens. "In order to find the treasure, you will have to follow the omens. God has prepared a path for everyone to follow. You just have to read the omens that he left for you" (29).

Old man gives Santiago two small stones: Urim (black stone) and Thumim (white). The black stone signifies "yes," and the white stone signifies "no." If Santiago ever feels confused or unable to read the signs around him, these will help him read any omens. He gives them to Santiago as a backup. However, he specifically instructs Santiago to try to make his own decisions whenever possible. As we will see, the stones serve as a metaphor for Santiago's own growth. Throughout the journey, Santiago chooses not to use them because he realizes that relying on the stones prevents him from trusting his own intuition.

The Old man then tells story of boy who wanders through a castle with spoon of olive oil. He ends up spilling all the oil because he was too busy looking and marveling at all the beautiful castle features. The lesson here is to not lose care and attention towards life's super sensitive, fragile aspects while enjoying life. He finishes the story with: "The secret of happiness is to see all the marvels of the world, and never to forget the drops of oil on the spoon" (32).

He also says: "Old king sometimes has to take some pride in himself" (33). This suggests that not all pride is bad: one needs some for integrity, confidence, and self-love. The Old man leaves and then Santiago goes on his journey.

His first stop is in Tangier (Morocco). There, at a bar, a thief tricks him into going out into the market with him. While at the market, the thief steals his gold. Santiago asks the stones if he will ever find his treasure. As the response, they both fall out of a newly appeared hole in his sack. So the answer is Yes and No. The reader just has to wait and find out.

In Part One, we see repeated: "A language happening without words," "language without words," and "language of the universe." Such is clearly a theme in the novel. In various ways, we learn not to trust or rely solely on people's words. We also see how things, whether people, nature, or simply life, speak without words.

Another repeated phrase: "All things are one."

PART TWO

Still in Tangier, Morocco, Santiago goes to work for a crystal merchant for exactly 11 months and 9 days. During this time, he is conflicted between his desire for travel and finding the pyramids and potential wealth with current comfort of a fixed job: "But I am afraid it would all be a disappointment, so I prefer just to dream about it" (55). The merchant says, "You must always know what it is that you want" (56).

Santiago encounters the concept of *Maktub*, an Arabic term meaning "it is written," whether by divinity or fate. Instead of viewing his job as something random, he decides to look at it as a spiritual act: "It [his job] was the language of enthusiasm, of things accomplished with love and purpose, and as part of a search for something believed in and desired" (62). When Santiago says "it" is the "language of enthusiasm," he is describing his own internal commitment. He isn't just "working"; he is participating in the universe. He feels that because he is working toward his Personal Legend (going to Egypt), everything he does, even sweeping the floor or arranging crystal, is infused with his own personal purpose. He sees his work as a direct reflection of his soul.

Santiago eventually joins a caravan to Egypt and meets an Englishman who is searching for an alchemist. We don't know what the alchemist does, but he seems intriguing. The Englishman believes in a hidden unity within nature and is seeking "the mysterious chain that links one thing to another" (72). As they travel, Santiago begins to grasp the concept of *interconnectedness*, realizing that his own journey is part of a larger cosmic narrative. "The boy was beginning to understand that intuition is really a sudden immersion of the soul into the universal current of life, where the histories of all people are connected, and we are able to know everything, because it's all written there" (74). He finds comfort in this realization. "We are afraid of losing what we have, whether it's our life or our possessions and property. But this fear evaporates when we understand that our life stories and the history of the world were written by the same hand" (76).

Interconnectedness even extends even to inanimate objects, suggesting that all things participate in a shared purpose. The Englishman says to him: "Everything on earth is being continuously transformed, because the earth is alive ... and it has a soul. We are part of that soul, so we rarely recognize that it is working for us. But in the crystal shop, you probably realized that even the glasses were collaborating in your success" (79). He further explains how *true dedication* aligns one with this cosmic intent: "When you want something with all your heart, that's when you are closest to the Soul of the World" (78). The Englishman says, "If you can concentrate always in the present, you'll be a happy man" (85), since anchoring oneself in the moment helps one to align with cosmic intent.

Nature itself mirrors the fluid movement toward a cosmic goal: "The dunes were changed constantly by the wind, yet these were the same sands he had known since he was a child" (86). Even

though he is in a completely different landscape, far from the pastures of Andalusia, the nature of the earth (the "Soul of the World") remains constant, even when form changes. Much like how he is the same person even as his life changes. He understands that caution is necessary to maintain focus: "If he pushed forward impulsively, he would fail to see the signs and omens left by God along his path" (89).

Upon reaching the oasis, Santiago experiences the transformative power of love through his sudden, profound meeting with Fatima, a young woman he encounters at a water well. This connection immediately shifts his focus from the exterior quest for treasure to an internal realization of the world's unity. "It was the pure Language of the World. It required no explanation, just as the universe needs none as it travels through endless time" (93). This encounter transcends mere attraction, feeling instead like the culmination of a destiny he had been moving toward all along. As he grapples with the intensity of his new feelings, he realizes, "He had loved her before he even knew she existed" (94).

When Santiago asks Fatima about the dangers of the desert, she says, "Those who don't return become a part of the clouds, a part of the animals that hide in the ravines and of the water that comes from the earth. They become a part of everything ... they become the Soul of the World" (98).

After spending time at the oasis with Fatima, he encounters a mysterious horseman who reveals himself to be the Alchemist. Dressed in all black and showing only his eyes, the Alchemist challenges Santiago to leave the safety of the oasis to pursue his true destination (like a metaphor of leaving behind comfort to experience trials that will make you a better person). As they travel together through the dangerous desert, the Alchemist acts as Santiago's final guide, pushing him toward a deeper understanding of the world. The Alchemist explains, "The secret is here in the present. If you pay attention to the present, you can improve upon it. And, if you improve on the present, what comes later will also be better" (103). He further says that when God reveals the future, it is "for only one reason: it's a future that was written so as to be altered" (103). Despite his growth, Santiago remains thoughtful of Fatima. He reflects on the promise he made to her before departing: "*Maktub*; If I am really a part of your dream, you'll come back one day" (97).

The Alchemist warns him of the necessity of respect and vigilance: "You must love the desert, but never trust it completely. Because the desert tests all men: it challenges every step, and kills those who become distracted" (111). He teaches Santiago that his true goal is inseparable from his internal state: "Wherever your heart is, there you will find your treasure" (116). Regarding his relationship with Fatima, the Alchemist reinforces that "True love ... love that speaks the Language of the World" (120) is a positive force, adding that it "never keeps a man from pursuing his Personal

Legend” (120). In other words, focus on your purpose. I think this can be a little misleading, because what if your purpose is strongly tied to being there for a spouse? Nothing wrong with that in my humble opinion.

Nonetheless, he encourages Santiago to trust his love emotion without over-intellectualizing it: “Don’t say anything. One is loved because one is loved. No reason is needed for loving” (122). He further distinguishes fleeting moments from true spiritual connection: “If what one finds is made of pure matter, it will never spoil. And one can always come back. If what you had found was only a moment of light, like the explosion of a star, you would find nothing on your return” (123). Now that is some deep, poetic, Shakespearean shit right there!

The Alchemist goes on. “Everything is written in the Soul of the World, and there it will stay forever” (123). This reinforces to Santiago that his destiny is already secured within the “Soul of the World,” and that his attachment to the past should not distract him from the path ahead. He learns to rely on his internal compass: “Listen to your heart. It knows all things, because it came from the Soul of the World, and it will one day return there” (127). When Santiago questions why he should trust it, the Alchemist replies: “Because you will never again be able to keep it quiet. Even if you pretend not to have heard what it tells you, it will always be there inside you, repeating to you what you’re thinking about life and about the world” (129). This process involves overcoming the fear of the unknown: “The *fear* of suffering is worse than the suffering itself” (130). Obstacles are necessary for growth: “Before a dream is realized, the Soul of the World tests everything that was learned along the way. Not because it is evil, but so that we can ... master the lessons we’ve learned as we’ve moved toward that dream” (132). “Every search begins with beginner’s luck. And every search ends with the victor’s being severely tested. It said that the darkest hour of the night came just before the dawn” (132).

As Santiago nears his goal, he understands “When something evolves, everything around that thing evolves as well” (137). He recognizes the shared essence of all creation: “We were all made by the same hand, and we have the same soul” (146). “All things are one. That there’s no need for iron to be the same as copper, or copper the same as gold. Each performs its own exact function as a unique being...” (149).

As the Alchemist and Santiago continue their journey across the desert, they find themselves caught in the crossfire of ongoing tribal warfare. The pair is intercepted by a group of hostile, armed tribesmen who suspect them of being spies. These soldiers take them captive and bring them to a military camp, where they threaten the men with immediate execution. In a final, desperate gamble to save their lives, the Alchemist tells the tribal chief that Santiago is a powerful sorcerer who can destroy their entire camp by transforming himself into the wind. Under the pressure of this impos-

sible challenge, Santiago sits on a cliff overlooking the camp, meditating in an attempt to communicate with the desert, the wind, and finally, the Sun. Through this profound, climactic dialogue, he moves beyond fear and realizes that *his capacity for love is the key to his survival*. He declares, “Love is the force that transforms and improves the Soul of the World” (150). “When we love, we always strive to become better than we are” (151). He summons a massive, violent sandstorm that obscures the camp and allows him to disappear from sight, as his consciousness merges with the wind. The warriors are struck with awe and terror. When the storm clears, Santiago is revealed to be safe on the other side of the camp, having survived his trial. The tribal chief allows the pair to go free, recognizing that Santiago is a man connected to the forces of nature whom it would be dangerous and sacrilegious to attempt to control.

After the pair parts ways, the Alchemist leaves Santiago to complete the final leg of his journey to the Pyramids alone. Upon arrival, Santiago is so overwhelmed with emotion that he falls to his knees and weeps. He believes his treasure is buried at the spot where his tears have fallen, and begins to dig frantically. His strange behavior attracts a group of refugees who are also hunting for treasure; believing Santiago is hiding something, they attack and beat him, demanding to know what he has found. Santiago manages to explain that he was digging because of a recurring dream. In response, one of the attackers mocks him, revealing his own recurring dream of a treasure hidden under a sycamore tree at an abandoned church in Spain, the very same place where Santiago first had his own dream. This revelation provides the final, vital piece of Santiago’s journey: the treasure he traveled across the world to find was actually buried beneath the tree where he started it all in his homeland.

As the Alchemist once advised him, “Where your treasure is, there also will be your heart” (159). Santiago understands that his treasure was never just gold; it was the transformation of his soul and the discovery of his ability to listen to his heart.

I also found this quote fascinating: “No matter what he does, every person on earth plays a central role in the history of the world. And normally he doesn’t know it” (159).

QUESTIONS

1. At the end, what if there is no gold under the sycamore? What would that mean?
It could mean several things. For one, literally the gold is not there and there is no significance beyond that. Or maybe it would mean that his true fortune is not in material accumulation, but in being in Spain, working as a shepherd. This could also mean that his Personal Legend was not the destination, but the metamorphosis he underwent along the way.
2. The Alchemist says, “Where your treasure is, there also will be your heart” (159). Where is the treasure in your life? What are the things you value most?
3. The Alchemist says, “Be aware of the place where you are brought to tears. That’s where I am, and that’s where your treasure is” (159). What things, moments, thoughts, or experiences have brought you tears?
4. What lesson is wrapped up in this statement: “...when something evolves, everything around that thing evolves as well” (137). Provide one example from your life and from society at large.
5. What does it mean to listen to the “language of your heart?”
6. What do you think is your Personal Legend? Try to answer both generally and specifically.
7. What was your experience reading this novel?

8. How could this novel be written better?

The novel could be improved by replacing generic uses of “him” and “man” with gender-inclusive language, such as “one,” “they,” or “person.” While *The Alchemist* utilizes a universal “he” to cultivate a tone of ancient wisdom and timelessness, mimicking the cadence of fables or religious texts, but this convention feels dated by modern standards.

Also, this book could have been abbreviated in certain parts where it seemed to drag with no real benefit or purpose. For example, the mentorship scenes with the King of Salem and the Englishmen.

Additionally, scenes can be shortened where they repeat phrases. For example, where Santiago spends at the Al-Fayoum oasis, the dialogue between him and the Alchemist, which centers heavily on the same few aphorisms about “The Soul of the World,” repeats the same themes *ad nauseam*. Overall, the repetition of phrases like “when you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it” makes the book feels more like a repetitive sermon than a progressing story.

Thank you for reading.

As Lil Jon would say:

Yeaayugh!

Whhat?

Ohh-kkay!