

Analysis of Biblical Cultural Elements and Imagery in *The Alchemist*

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This paper examines the cultural connections between *The Alchemist*, a representative work by the renowned Brazilian author Paulo Coelho, and the Western classic, the Bible. It aims to explore the cultural elements and imagery inspired by the Bible in the novel, focusing on the aspects of character roles, natural elements, and novel settings. Through this analysis, the paper seeks to deepen readers' understanding of the cultural significance embedded in the work and provide a comprehensive and profound interpretation.

Keywords: Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist*, biblical cultural elements, imagery

Introduction

The Alchemist is a representative work by the renowned Brazilian author Paulo Coelho. This novel has broken the Guinness World Record for the most translated book by a living author, and Paulo Coelho has become one of the most widely read and influential Latin American writers since Gabriel García Márquez. The preface of the novel describes it as a work of symbolic significance (Coelho, 2009, p. 1). *The Alchemist* incorporates numerous cultural elements and imagery inspired by the Bible, which contribute to its immense literary value and wide-ranging influence. Based on a close reading of the text, this paper analyses the cultural connections between *The Alchemist* and the Bible, focusing on character roles, natural elements, and novel settings, in order to deepen readers' understanding of the cultural significance embedded in the work and provide a comprehensive and profound interpretation.

The novel *The Alchemist* is not only a captivating treasure-hunting story but also a fable about listening to one's heart and pursuing dreams. The protagonist of the story is a Spanish shepherd boy named Santiago. He has two recurring dreams under a fig tree in an old church, where he envisions a hidden treasure buried in the Egyptian pyramids. Inspired by the King of Salem, Melchizedek, Santiago decides to sell his flock and embark on a journey to pursue his dream. Throughout his quest for the treasure, Santiago encounters various adventures and faces numerous challenges. He leaves his homeland and travels south, crossing the Mediterranean Sea to reach Africa and venturing through the treacherous expanse of the Sahara Desert. The young boy undergoes hardships and eventually gains a profound understanding of the true essence of the treasure near the pyramids in Egypt. In the end, he returns to his hometown and finds the treasure beneath the fig tree in the ancient church where he has his recurring dreams.

Cultural Elements and Imagery From the Bible in the Characters of *The Alchemist*

The protagonist of *The Alchemist* is named Santiago, a daring Spanish shepherd boy. In Europe, Santiago has long been regarded by pilgrims as a sacred city, the third-largest religious holy city in the world, following Jerusalem and Rome. It is the final destination of the famous Camino de Santiago, the Way of St. James. The author deliberately named the protagonist Santiago in *The Alchemist*, and this choice is not accidental. From the perspective of religious literature, Santiago symbolizes the Christian faith. Through subtle descriptions and details, it can be observed that the young boy is a devout Christian. When the old woman interprets his dream, he silently recites the Lord's Prayer (Coelho, 2009, p. 23).

Why did Coelho choose the identity of a shepherd boy for the protagonist? In Christian culture, the term "shepherd" is often used to describe God, Jesus, and His servants. The 23rd Psalm in the Old Testament of the Bible states, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want" (Psalm 23:1-2). In the New Testament, Jesus refers to Himself as the Good Shepherd, as recorded in John 10:11 and 10:14. The word "pastor" in Old English translates to "shepherd" and is now used to refer to clergy in Christianity. In the novel, the story revolves around the dreams and pursuit of Santiago, the shepherd boy, as he fulfills his "Personal Legend". In a sense, Santiago symbolizes a servant of God and plays a role of guidance and example for the flock.

During his quest for his "Personal Legend", Santiago encounters a soulful guide named Melchizedek, the King of Salem. In the Bible, Melchizedek is the high priest of God and a foreshadowing of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. Melchizedek, with his wise words, continuously guides Santiago to pursue and fulfill his "Personal Legend", which is the thing he has always desired to do. "Never stop dreaming. When you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it" (Coelho, 2009, p. 35). Throughout the story, Melchizedek assumes the role of a prophet and provides spiritual guidance and direction to the young boy, helping him overcome various obstacles and ultimately fulfill his "Personal Legend". By examining these character roles, the novel portrays cultural elements and imagery related to the Bible, deepening the reader's understanding of the cultural significance embedded in the work.

Cultural Elements and Imagery From the Bible in Nature in *The Alchemist*

In the novel *The Alchemist*, natural elements such as the flock of sheep, snake, tree, and water no longer exist solely in their original literal meanings. They possess richer and hidden symbolic meanings as the author assigns them content that goes beyond their literal significance. The novel describes the flock of sheep as follows:

The boy climbed to his feet, drank a bit of wine, and then picked up his shepherd's staff and called the still-sleeping flock. He had long realized that as soon as he woke up, most of the sheep also began to wake up, as if there was a mysterious force connecting his life to the lives of those sheep. (Coelho, 2009, p. 11)

The English word "flock" also carries the meaning of saints in the church. Therefore, it is not difficult to infer that the "flock of sheep" in this context symbolizes the majority of ordinary believers, even the still-unawakened people, whose state of existence represents the normal life of most individuals. The author bestows upon the protagonist Santiago the mission to awaken those who are still asleep using a certain power.

As for the snake, due to its role in the story of the Garden of Eden, according to biblical tradition, it is often associated with evil and the temptation of the devil. After the young boy encounters love, he contemplates giving up on pursuing his "Personal Legend". At this moment, the author portrays a scene: During a conversation between the boy and the alchemist, they encounter a snake. The alchemist uses his curved sword to "draw a circle

on the ground and put the poisonous snake inside it, and the snake immediately becomes calm” (Coelho, 2009, p. 158). When he erases the circle on the ground, the snake quickly slithers away and disappears. This scene reflects the inner state of the shepherd boy at that time. Just like the trapped snake, Santiago becomes immersed in his love for a girl and contemplates giving up on pursuing his “Personal Legend”, intending to remain stagnant. Fortunately, Santiago ultimately overcomes the “snake” in his mind and chooses to continue his journey. The Bible begins with the description of the Garden of Eden in the book of Genesis, where the focus of imagery lies on the tree and water. “The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye” and “a river watering the garden flowed from Eden” (Revelation 22:1-2). When Adam and Eve ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and sinned, they were expelled and forever separated from the lush Garden of Eden and the life-giving water of God. In the closing of the Bible, in Revelation 22:1-2, it states,

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. (Revelation 22:1-2)

The trees and the water of life are restored to save humanity. These two symbols become the most prominent intentions at the beginning and end of the Bible, symbolizing the world regained by humanity.

In *The Alchemist*, the tree of life and water of life from the Bible are given more specific references, namely the fig tree and wine. They also hold significant positions at the beginning and end of the work: At the beginning of the novel, there is a description that says, “Long ago, the roof of the church had fallen in. For some reason, a large, old, and gnarled fig tree had begun to grow right in the middle of the ruined sacristy” and “The boy climbed to his feet, drank a bit of wine” (Coelho, 2009, p. 11). In the closing of the novel, observant readers will notice a parallel between the beginning and the end:

At nightfall, the boy reached the abandoned church. The fig tree had grown in the spot where the sacristy had once stood... He looked up at the sky for a long time, and then he took out his bottle of wine from his bag and drank. (Coelho, 2009, p. 215)

This also carries symbolic significance.

Cultural Elements and Imagery From the Bible in the Novel’s Settings

According to Northrop Frye’s theory of archetypal criticism, biblical imagery includes sharply contrasting and completely opposing oracular imagery and diabolical imagery. The oracular imagery represents scenes of vitality, happiness, and harmony, while the diabolical imagery portrays desolate, suffering, and lonely landscapes. In *The Alchemist*, the Temple and the Pyramids, the desert and the oasis, exemplify such opposition. The Temple, which appears at several crucial moments in the story, can be understood as the oracular imagery from the Bible, representing a place of faith where one is in the presence of God. On the other hand, the Pyramids in Egypt symbolize the world, and the entire process of the treasure hunt is an experience of faith and the fulfillment of one’s personal Legend within the vast world. The desert, a place with scarce human presence, represents the hardships described in the Bible. Coelho’s depiction of the various hardships in the desert symbolizes the obstacles encountered in the pursuit of one’s Personal Legend and the realization of self-worth. The oasis, for those who originally dwell in the desert, is an image of blessing and order, a place of divine protection and a garden bestowed and nurtured by God. In the novel, the protagonist encounters his destined true love in the oasis, making it a paradise of their love.

Through the analysis above, it is evident that *The Alchemist* has rich cultural associations with the Western classic, the Bible. The cultural elements and imagery in the novel, including characters, nature, and settings, can all be traced back to prototypes in the Bible, demonstrating the work's literary integrity.

Conclusion

The Alchemist incorporates various cultural elements and imagery from the Bible to enrich its narrative and convey deeper meanings. The protagonist, Santiago, embodies Christian faith and embarks on a symbolic pilgrimage. Nature, with its flock of sheep, represents the faithful followers, while the serpent symbolizes temptation. Trees and water symbolize rebirth and transformation, and sacred places and deserts serve as metaphors for the spiritual journey. *The Alchemist* acts as a divine guide, providing spiritual guidance and wisdom. By incorporating these biblical cultural elements and imagery, Coelho creates a rich and layered narrative that resonates with readers across different cultural backgrounds, highlighting the universal nature of spiritual quests and personal transformations.

References

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