

Toward Individuation: A Psychoanalytical Study of Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*

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ABSTRACT

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Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* depicts the protagonist's hunt for treasure which is highly symbolic of the spiritual quest for self-realization and self-discovery. Motivated by the recurring dream of a hidden treasure and desirous of bringing meaning to his life, Santiago undertakes a journey. This paper contends that his journey towards the realization of his dream actually involves a psychological process of individuation that integrates the contrasting aspects of the human psyche and makes use of the unconscious as conscious. It is an attempt to analyse his physical travels from a psychoanalytic perspective so as to posit that seeking spirituality is more about psychological change than temporal and spatial mobility. This investigation is, in fact, based on the exploration of how Coelho's protagonist completes this process of wholeness and it draws on the theory of individuation presented by Swiss Psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung. By using Jungian Archetypal method of analysis, it can be seen that Santiago is very much influenced by operative archetypes, the acceptance and integration of which has an impact on his spiritual development. The realization that the physical treasure lies exactly where he initiated his journey is the consequence of his self-actualization.

Keywords: Self-realization, Spirituality, Collective Unconscious, Archetypes, Individuation, Coelho

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Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* is based on the story of a young shepherd, Santiago, who is driven by a passion for materialising the dream of his life. He has a recurring dream of an enormous treasure buried somewhere in the Egyptian pyramids. Spurred on by the King of Salem named Melchizedek, he makes up his mind to leave his family in pursuit of the treasure. He faces many vicissitudes of fate during his journey and meets different people at various junctures. Leaving his household and herd, the protagonist embarks on a journey through the vastness of desert in pursuit of his dream treasure. Dreams, omens, and insights from objects and people he comes across contribute towards a realization of his strengths and weaknesses. He learns the art of turning his shortcomings into strengths, thereby enabling himself to attain self-knowledge, the treasure that is far more invaluable and precious than what is supposedly hidden somewhere.

Santiago comes to have the knowledge of his inner potential which he can capitalize on for his personal growth. He realizes his traits such as "humility . . . constancy in self-knowledge, self-control, balance of mind in desirable or undesirable things, non-attachment . . . and perception of true knowledge which are necessary to achieve Self-realisation (Parthasarathy, 2007, p. 203). The itinerary leads him to the realization that it is not about the treasure (success) he has to reach; it is about traveling. The conscious exercise of these qualities enables him to refine his intuitive power that can transform an individual from a lower material level to a higher spiritual station. According to Mishra (2012), "The Ulysses-like journey of exploration and self-discovery for a symbolic search for treasure becomes Santiago's mission on earth, which is nothing but to find God, implying happiness, fulfilment and the ultimate purpose of creation" (p.167). The contention of this paper is based on a claim that Santiago's journey in pursuit of a treasure is, in fact, a psychological journey into the recesses of the human psyche where contrasting elements reside. Santiago becomes the Alchemist primarily because he succeeds in what Jung refers to as the assimilation of the contrasting aspects of psyche, famously translated as "the process of individuation." So, his movement in time and space is a psychological journey towards individuation.

The most pertinent question that needs to be addressed here is: Why is there a need for psycho analysing Santiago's hunt for treasure? Or how is it justifiable to study the novel using psychological interpretative tools? The clarification comes from the contention per se that Santiago's journey is, in fact, everyone's journey of coming to terms with oneself and everyone needs to have self-knowledge about good and evil residing inside and outside of them. Secondly, it comes from the fact that we need psychological analysis for reasons that involve our existentialist concerns. The other areas of knowledge cannot be the appropriate alternatives for knowing the inner self. Lastly, the psychoanalytical study of the novel under scrutiny is productive in terms of digging into the latent content which is often independent of the author as well as the context.

There are several studies carried out in psychological contexts, the brief overview of which is in order here. Archana Kumari (2020), in her study of *The Alchemist*, has explored some psychological strains using Alfred Adler's theory of individual psychology. Based on the assumptions provided by Adler's theory, the researcher has studied the protagonist of the novel in terms of the motivational pull to initiate his journey for the treasure. The study contends that Santiago suffers from an inferiority complex and, owing to the motivation provided by certain characters and through his personal struggles, he succeeds in achieving the feelings of superiority. Closely related to this is the work carried out by Mandal (2018) whose research is based on constructing an identity through experiences and expeditions. Employing the notions of dreams, exploration and expedition, the research has attempted to examine Santiago's struggle to carve out an identity. This study shows how the recurring dream sets an ideal for him. He pursues that ideal facing many ups and down, hardships and pains to reach his destination. In both these works, the treasure is taken literally as a physical accumulation of gold and jewels. The struggle of the hero in both the cases is horizontally based in a particular physical locale, time and space. Santiago's success is determined by his realization of where the treasure is buried and he is ultimately able to reach that place.

Jungian theory of dreams has been juxtaposed with Michel Foucault's theory of power in an interesting study of *The Alchemist* by Varghese (2020) who has exploited dream theory as a source of individuation and Michel Foucault's theory of power. Since the study is primarily based on the significance of dreams, the conceptualization of the term 'individuation' is thoroughly bereft of the elaboration of important psychological archetypes, the primordial patterns of the psyche. In this research, the power of dreams triggers an upthrust movement with regard to the hero's journey and the significance of dreams is foregrounded in the individuation process without highlighting or explaining the archetypal struggle of Santiago. The study argues that different forms of knowledge serve as the power that controls and governs Santiago's life. The power of dreams, omens, the king of Salem, the Alchemist, and the influence of other characters play a vital role in the protagonist's journey for the treasure.

Another research worth mentioning is conducted by Joshi and Hariyani (2020) for which the researchers have capitalized on Joseph Campbell's theory of the mythic hero in the study of *The Alchemist*. In this study, an effort has been made to bring to the fore structural features of the novel, especially the archetypal representation of the mythic hero. The story is studied in the light of adventure-quest-transformation model. The researchers contend that the mythic heroes are structural archetypes representing the collective unconscious.

As our investigation is based on testing and substantiating the psychological assertion that the protagonist's quest for physical treasure is actually a psychological journey of coming to terms with himself, it is unique and innovative. It attempts to bridge an important research gap. Unlike the previous studies, it

posits that the protagonist is prompted by dreams and omens and his journey through the desert symbolize plunging deep into the unconscious realms of his psyche. Furthermore, his encounters with different people and situations symbolically stand for the eternal archetypes that need be realized and integrated in order to attain individuation. In view of the argument of this study, its controlling research questions are: How does the protagonist undertake the journey of “self-realization”? In what ways is Santiago’s physical journey of seeking treasure compatible with the psychological process of individuation? The theoretical support for the reading of text and finding answers to these questions is discussed in the paragraphs that follow.

The interpretive tools for this study come from the Jungian theorizing. Jung’s emphasis on the extraordinary importance and potential of the human unconscious and with it its archetypal contents fit into the structure and narrative of the novel. In contrast to the Freudian notion of the unconscious, namely the storehouse of infantile repressed materials, Carl Jung believes that the unconscious is a potential half of the Self that regulates the conscious part of the mind. If properly realized and integrated, the archetypes of the unconscious may reveal unspeakable human truths. The archetypal theories presented by Frye (1973) and Campbell (2004) also stand in stark contrast with Jung (1969) and are not relevant to be employed for this study.

Frye (1973), being a literary critic, rather than a psychologist, is mainly concerned with the structures of various literary genres. He views archetypes as reflections of historical myths presented through literature. Notwithstanding the similar threads, the archetypes with Frye are more externally (socio-historically) oriented; in Jung, their orientation is psychological. Both, however, agree on their eternal and timeless quality. Frye notes that “the same archetypes could be found across language and cultural barriers” (1973, p. 121). Influenced by Jung, a prominent mythologist, Joseph Campbell (2008), studies archetypal structures of different narratives. Like Frye, he aims about identifying the typical sequence of events and typical motifs (certainly not in all myths and stories) in the hero’s journey. Campbell is not a psychologist in the first place and hardly engages with the psychological dimension of the archetypes. His exegesis of archetypes is more relevant for research in the field of narratology. Given the purpose and significance of this study, it is therefore more appropriate and justifiable to use the Jungian lens for the interpretation of the selected novel.

“Individuation” is a key term in the analytical psychology of Carl Jung. It was first used in 1921. For Jung, it is a “process of forming and specializing an individual nature; in particular, it is the development of the psychological individual as a differentiated being from the general collective psychology” (1921, p.637). The uniqueness and differentiation in individuals come about as a result of the development of consciousness. Jung believes that the unconscious, both personal and the collective, has to do a great deal with one’s psychological growth.

And the process of individuation specifically harmonizes the conscious and the unconscious contents of the psyche. Elsewhere, Jung observes that individuation refers to “[. . .] becoming a single, homogenous being, and, in-so-far as [sic] individuality embraces our innermost and incomparable uniqueness, it also implies becoming one’s own ‘self.’ We may therefore translate individuation as coming to ‘selfhood’, or ‘self-realization” (1993, p.181). Individuation ought not to be confused with individuality which is purely related to ego development. Individuation “seeks to raise consciousness beyond the ego and individual attitudes, habits and cultural identification to a much wider horizon of self-understanding and wholeness” (Stein, 2006, p. XiV). Central to individuation is the concept of archetypes which are primordial recurring images in the collective unconscious of the whole human race. As Jung notes, “[t]he archetype is essentially an unconscious content that is altered by becoming conscious and being perceived, and it takes its colour from the individual consciousness in which it happens to appear” (Jung, 1980, p.5). At an individual psychological level, it is a representation of the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious.

The collective unconscious is a kind of storehouse for a variety of archetypes operating in the lives of people. They are “inherent in our collective unconscious: they are a kind of ready-formed mythology or mental furniture which exists in the human brain as a consequence of past human experiences” (Gray, 1997, p.33). According to Jung (1966), the archetypes are not inborn ideas; rather they are “inborn possibilities of ideas that set bounds to even the boldest fantasy and keep our fantasy activity within certain categories: *a priori* ideas, as it were, the existence of which cannot be ascertained except from their effects” (p.81). The archetypes of individuation are the persona, the shadow, the anima/animus, the wise old man and the Self. As the analysis of the selected text shows in the forthcoming paragraphs, the individuation process involves recognition and integration of the opposing contents of the human psyche.

The masked self

The persona serves as a mask of the collective human psyche. It is a cultural label or assumed role that often makes others believe that one is what s/he in reality is not. Initially, Santiago’s journey seems smooth since he is aware of traditional values and the taken-it-for-granted social ways. However, during his journey, especially in the vast desert (symbolic of the unconscious), he comes face to face with situations that defy the conventional parameters of his social character. He confronts his shadow in the form of impediments, namely the crystal trade that entices him to accumulate more money to buy herd and go back and then the alluring beauty of Fatima, the projection of his anima, that tries to abort his plan. From here, his journey of self-analysis starts that takes him to the deeper realms of the unconscious mind. The masked self (persona) causes damage to the psychic balance because the inner realities are suppressed for the sake of social

expectations. It becomes damaging when one is overly affiliated with one's persona so as to put other realities of the self into oblivion. John Clay rightly argues:

Jungians see the persona as a universal usage, as something of an archetype, applicable to most cultures, a social archetype really, facilitating exchange and relationships, dictated partly by the demands of society, partly by one's fiction of oneself. It only becomes pathological if people begin to identify too closely with their persona, their front to the world. (p. 286)

The first step in the process of individuation is to relinquish the attachments characterised by the persona archetype. One is motivated to detach oneself from the social label(s) and material possessions. Jung (1980) calls the persona, "a complicated system of relations between the individual consciousness and society, fittingly enough a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and, on the other, to conceal the true nature of the individual" (p. 94). While Santiago's parents are desirous of making him a priest which is a symbol of pride for a simple farm family like theirs, Santiago is haunted by his pressing desire for traveling around the world. He is inquisitive by temperament and knowing the world appears to be more important for him rather than "knowing God and learning about man's sins" (Coelho, 2006, p.8). To realize his wish, he becomes a shepherd so that he can travel through the lands and pastures of Andalusia. Albeit his father's reluctance, he manages to seek his permission. "One afternoon, on a visit to his family, he had summoned up the courage to tell his father that he didn't want to become a priest. That he wanted to travel" (ibid.). His father tries to convince him to stay in his own land but hardly to any avail. Left with no other choice but to yield, he gives him a pouch containing three coins to buy the flock. "Take to the fields, and someday you will learn that our countryside is the best, and our women the most beautiful" (pp.9-10).

Relinquishing the grip of the persona allows an individual to live out life as one actually wishes to. One no longer poses himself to be what he is not; nor does he cherish any wish to impress upon others. Prior to ridding himself of the persona, Santiago was very much conscious of how he looked and the impression he made on others. The initial encounter with the merchant's daughter is marked by a degree of simulation on his part. He wants to show himself as an adept shepherd in order to gain her applause as Coelho points: "Actually he was thinking about shearing his sheep in front of the merchant's daughter, so that she could see that he was someone who was capable of doing difficult things. He also tried to remember some good stories to relate as he sheared the sheep. Most of them he had read in books, but he would tell them as if they were from his personal experience" (p.17). Later on, Santiago relinquishes his work as a shepherd, though after having learned a great deal from that job:

In two years he had learned everything about shepherding: he knew how to shear sheep, how to care for pregnant ewes, and how to protect the sheep

from wolves. He knew all the fields and pastures of Andalusia. And he knew what was the fair price for every one of his animals. (p.27)

He has already matured being a shepherd by spending a couple of years with sheep in different moors of Andalusia. But his restlessness is ignited by the repetition of the dream he has again and again, over a short span of time. He instinctively feels that being a shepherd is not the end of life for him. He should explore more, travel more, and know more, so that he is able to know the meaning of his quest for life. From the Jungian perspective, Santiago does not stick to his persona and does not want to appear to be what he is not. He does not wish to lead a stereotypical life conditioned mainly by cultural and social obligations: "I left my father, mother and the town castle behind. They have gotten used to my being away, and so have I" (p.29). He successfully leaves his persona and steers himself toward the path of self-knowledge. This is the first step towards achieving individuation.

Facing the other

Here the 'Other' refers to both the shadow and sexually contrastive aspects of the psyche. In Santiago's case, the shadow may be any event or person that impedes or demotivates one in materialising the purpose of life. Being a male, Santiago's sexually contrastive psychic part is represented by a character named Fatima. In Jungian psychology, the psychic equilibrium is achieved not simply by disowning the 'Other' but by facing and integrating it. The process of denying of "a person's shadow can be described as the development of the persona or the unconscious mask that a person puts on to fool him or herself of who he or she really is" (Hendrix, 1988, p. 31). The shadow should be accepted and integrated into one's psyche in order to ensure the personality development. De Laszlo notes that "[t]he ego hides those aspects that do not fit a person's imagined, perfected, idea of self. Those parts that do not fit a person's perfected self-image are rejected by his or her ego and stored in what Jung termed the 'shadow'" (De Laszlo, 1959, p. 178). The term shadow, therefore, refers to "that part of the personality that has been repressed or forgotten for the sake of the ego ideal" (Whitmont, 1969, p. 14).

In Santiago's life, particularly during his quest as it is revealed, there are two things that serve as his personal shadow, namely the fear of failure and the character of the crystal merchant. The former is augmented by the latter unless he succeeds in its integration. Both, however, exist in complementary relation to one another. Notwithstanding his long travel, Santiago is haunted by feelings of uncertainty, doubt, and the fear of failure. At various junctures during his journey in the desert, he thinks of going back and resuming his job as a shepherd.

I know why I want to get back to my flock, he thought. I understand sheep; they are no longer a problem, and they can be good friends. On the other hand, I don't know if the desert can be a friend, and it's in the desert that I have to search for my treasure. (Coelho, 2006, P.67)

The fear of failure contributes a great deal to his indecisiveness, which he becomes the victim of most frequently, and is also ashamed of it. This is perhaps one of the things that he wishes to hide. This weakness exerts a debilitating impact on his thought process, actions, and decisions. The crystal merchant, albeit with his sound pieces of advice, acts as his shadow. Santiago's fear of failure is enhanced when the crystal merchant repeatedly mentions his plan to embark upon a journey to Mecca but not giving it a practical shape. At times, he expresses his wish to be like the merchant: "Maybe it's better to be like the crystal merchant: never go to Mecca, and just go through life wanting to do so, he thought, again and again trying to convince himself" (p.66). However, no sooner does he realize the intensity of his desire to fulfil the legend of his life, he doesn't downrightly reject the shadow but assimilates its contents, particularly in terms of learning from his experience as a shepherd as well as a salesman. He gleans the brighter things from his shadow. Now his thinking is changed: "I have learned things from the sheep, and I have learned things from crystal, he thought. I can learn something from the desert, too. It seems old and wise" (p.76).

The anima is the unconscious figure of feminine qualities that compensates for a man's consciousness. It is the feminine unconscious image in man. Jung explicates its nature and function: "Man cannot make it; on the contrary, it is always the apriori element in his moods, reactions, impulses, and whatever else is spontaneous in psychic life" (Jung, 1980, p.27). Santiago's sudden infatuation with Fatima and yielding to her fascinating beauty may well be viewed as the anima operating within – the femininity in him. He feels captivated by her and wishes to stay in the oasis. At this moment, he seems to be in grip of his anima. Similarly, the kiss can be read as a symbol of elevating his anima. He submits himself to it and finds ecstasy in it. He feels "the touch of a kiss—a kiss that came from far away, slowly, slowly, slowly, until it rested on his lips" to which he had replied "I'm coming, Fatima" (Coelho, 2006, p.161). However, owing to the timely advice of the Alchemist, he manages not merely to free himself of its grip but assimilates this factor into her spiritual quest.

In Jungian terms, falling in love itself is an instance of projection of one's anima onto the object of love. At this stage, if the anima is inflated, the journey towards individuation can't last unless one is able to integrate it: "Fatima appeared at the entrance of the tent. The two walked out among the palms. The boy knew that it was a violation of the Tradition, but that didn't matter to him now" (p.128). Through the experience of love, he comes to know that now it is a matter of life and death for him not to stop with Fatima but to continue his journey. Love never weakens one's pursuit to meet the personal legend; instead, it strengthens the belief and gives motivation. As Santiago is in the habit of taking everything in minute details, he also contemplates the reason for loving at first sight. He gets the realization that there should not be any reason for loving somebody. Love itself is the reason for loving somebody. All other reasons sprout out of the reason for love. Love for Fatima (his anima) becomes motivation in adverse times.

The assimilation of his anima is marked by his becoming one with the object of love as Fatima herself remarks: “The day after we met...you told me that you loved me. Then, you taught me something of the universal language and the Soul of the World. Because of that, I have become a part of you” (p.101). Their first embrace also carries symbolic significance. The “embrace” indicates Santiago’s integration of anima which is an important development on his path toward individuation. Fatima becomes a source of inspiration for him. His motivation is furthered after experiencing love. The powerful impact of love is exerted on his upcoming adventures as it pushes him forward: “When we love, we always strive to become better than we are. When we strive to become better than we are, everything around us becomes better too” (100). So his love for Fatima is a step forward to his individuation.

The individuated self

The narrative recounts the protagonist’s initial detachment from the core of his Self and his struggle with the shadow and anima in order to attain a cumulative vision of wholeness. He journeys towards self-realization that entails intimations to the ego from the unconscious mind reflected through various ways. A balance between the inner and outer realities leads to a realization of the Self which is called individuation. The process involves decentring of ego identity and entering the realm of the Self. The Self archetype connotes wholeness and psychological balance. It encompasses different facets of psyche. It is interpreted in various ways in different situations. The Self is the centre of one’s personality which is reached after peeling off different layers of the conscious mind. In Jungian psychology, the Self is synonymous with individuation. It, in fact, lies beyond the confines of the ego as well as the archetypal existence. The Self is often equated with the Divine, God, or the Soul of the world: “[. . .] there is a force that wants you to realize your destiny; it whets your appetite with a taste of success” (Coelho, 2006, p.30). According to Jung (1980), the Self “is not only the centre but also the whole circumference which embraces both the conscious and the unconscious; it is the centre of this totality, just as the ego is the centre of consciousness” (p.422). It embraces good and bad, bright and dark, masculinity and femininity, and aims at bringing these opposing elements into a harmonious and meaningful whole, the final stage of individuation, when the person becomes truly an “in-dividual.”

In Santiago, the ultimate union with the Self, indicative of individuation, comes about in his life when he merges his soul with the Soul of the world. Through deep meditation, he becomes one with Nature and feels himself a part of the whole cosmos that has a sublime way of communication comprehensible by the inner Self. When the wind, the sun, and the sand, all speak the language of the World, they all, with Santiago, become one with the Soul of the World. Santiago says, “I have inside me the winds, the deserts, the oceans, the stars, and everything created in the universe. We are all made by the same hand, and we have the same soul” (Coelho, 2006, p.140). It is the apex of spiritual development as the ego identity is

distilled to let the Self shine through. At this stage, an individual becomes a pure being, free of all the prejudices and impurities of the limited ego.

Santiago as an individuated individual who comes to realize that his true Self virtually lies within him. This self-realization involves incessant struggles, a great deal of time and knowledge. His journey back from Egypt to the place he had started his embarkation from is the process of locating his inner self. Towards the end of the novel, Santiago gains more willpower and curiosity to translate his dream into reality. His long struggle towards merging with the Self renders him an undaunted spirit. He reaches the place of his dreams and feels stunted. Nothing can stop him or subdue his spirits. The leader of the refugees from the tribal war shares his disappointing experience of the treasure hunt. He too has made his way for the treasure in response to the dream but to no avail. That's why he says to Santiago that, "I'm not so stupid as to cross an entire desert just because of a recurrent dream" (p.172). But Santiago has a strong and deep desire to follow his dream. He is willing to accept the pain involved in achieving the treasure and attains the treasure in the end. He knows that one should listen to one's heart, "Remember that wherever your heart is, there you will find your treasure" (p.111). In the novel, the Soul of the world can safely be juxtaposed with the archetype of the Self. Santiago's becoming one with this force is not embracing some external reality 'out there', but it actually lies within him. He is now capable of making a connection with his 'Self', the essence of his personality. Finally, the Alchemist gets to know that the boy's heart has merged with the Soul of the World. He exclaims: "[C]ontinue in the direction of the Pyramids... and continue to pay heed to the omens. Your heart is still capable of showing you where the treasure is" (p.139). Just like the Self, the soul of the world is not a stagnant substance but is ever moving and ever-evolving force. It is the highest part of one's psyche – an abode of collective myths, memories and imagination of the whole of humanity. Connection with the soul of the world, that is the Self, allows us to find the essence of existence and the hidden treasure: "The boy reached through to the Soul of the World, and saw it was a part of the Soul of God. And he saw that the Soul of God was his own soul" (p.160). His immersion in the soul of the World or the Self helps him achieve individuation and makes him understand the nature of life and the value of love.

This study provides a new perspective on the explanation of the phenomenon of spiritual development in Santiago, the protagonist of the novel *The Alchemist*. The study reveals that the protagonist's spiritual transformation is underpinned by a psychological process called individuation, whereby he is able to integrate the conscious and the unconscious elements (presented in the form of certain archetypes) of his psyche in order to achieve unity and wholeness. It is essentially the process not only of realizing one's archetypal existence but going successfully beyond its realm to become what Jung calls 'a single homogeneous being'. Santiago learns about his unconscious through the archetypes operating unconsciously in his life. He does not simply disown the existing patterns culturally and socially established as negative or immoral. Rather he assimilates the opposites

and seeks integration. It is only after the integration of his conscious and unconscious experiences and knowledge that he realizes that his real treasure is hidden within himself.

As an individuated being, the integration of the conscious with the collective unconscious ultimately results in Santiago's self-actualization. This psychoanalytical study has managed to fill an important research gap that the spiritual development of the protagonist shows a strong affinity with the process of individuation, whereby he is able to harmonize different contrasting parts of his psyche. And his spiritual development is marked by psychological wholeness and unity. A spiritually developed individual, therefore, is likely to have more self-control, self-knowledge and psychological balance in his/her personality. For him/her, the real treasure is to have self-realization that essentially lies within.

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