



The metaphor of the journey in Paulo Coelho's
The Alchemist

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Abstract: The present essay deals with Paul Coelho's approach to Eastern culture in general and the Islamic/Arabic frame of thought in particular, and offers a contextual approach to Coelho's self-referential novel *The Alchemist*, highlighting and commenting upon the writer's references to the Arabic frame of thought, religion, and philosophy. Consistent with these such elements as the alchemist, triviality, self-help, and esotericism, the novel engages the reader in history, that is, by reinforcing the maintenance of the status quo, construction of history is directed towards the concretization of the concepts predicted by these tendencies.

Keywords: Coelho, esotericism, journey, *maktub*, pilgrimage, *The Alchemist*

1. Paulo Coelho

The Argentinean writer Paulo Coelho was born on August 24, 1947 on the same day, and same month, as his literary idol, Jorge Luis Borges. To know him personally, after having memorized his poems, being still very young, he got on a bus in Rio de Janeiro and travelled all the way to Buenos Aires where, having found Borges, "he [...] stood mutely before him. He looked at him and thought, 'Idols don't speak', and went back to Rio" (Arias 2007: viii). Coelho does not deny Borges's influence on his works, starting with *The Alchemist*, the book that has made him famous throughout the world. Undoubtedly, it was due to Borges that he decided to become a writer. He liked to read not only Borges but also Henry Miller, and he started to get attached to the theatre. Coelho was always a nonconformist, which led him to try everything good and bad that came his way. When the guerrilla movements and hippies were born in the late '60s, the future writer was attracted to Marx, Engels and Che Guevara, and participated in elections and street demonstrations. He was introduced in all progressive movements and was part of the Peace and Love generation.

From the beginning of his fictional project, the writer Paulo Coelho approaches the Eastern culture. This constant approach to Oriental culture occurs throughout his work, evidencing all the wisdom of the East, so different from the West, and perhaps for that reason, being another element that will arouse the reader's attention. After the 9/11 tragedy, the East became even more prominent. Their systems of government, religion, and culture have come to be explored by the Western media, sometimes criticizing the disparity with Western culture, especially in relation to women, or showing these differences as something that needs to be respected and with which one can live in favour of cultural tolerance among nations.

In his books, Coelho opted for the second condition. The writer is so much appreciated in the countries of the East, both by their leaders and the readers, and his books are read, sold, and pirated on a gigantic scale. Before writing *The Alchemist*, Coelho had travelled to Egypt, visiting the celebrated pyramids. Throughout the course, he is guided by Hassan, who in addition to guiding the horses, constantly reads the Qur'an. The writer's sympathy and admiration of the nations of the East are strengthened by the letter "Thank You, President Bush", issued in 2001, in which he strongly condemns the foreign policy of the US President George W. Bush. The repercussion was immediate, worldwide, and was published in forty-six newspapers, among them the French *Le Monde* and the Spanish *El País*, in addition to interviews of the writer on the letter to a Lebanese TV. He received more than 1,000 e-mail messages from various countries, including Iran, Turkey, Japan, Austria, Argentina, Germany, Greece, Mexico, Switzerland, Serbia and Russia. However, he also received threats from the Americans.

Coelho usually says that he has enough money for three reincarnations. He earns so much that he has decided to dedicate four hundred thousand dollars of his royalties each year to a foundation that bears his name and which his wife, Cristina, is dedicated to helping the abandoned children of the most miserable favelas of Rio, to the most vulnerable elders, to promote the translation to other languages of Brazilian classical authors and to the investigation of the paleontological origins of his Brazil that he loves so much and what he considers the most magical country in the world, because, according to him, there is no difference between the profane and the sacred and nobody is ashamed to believe in the spirit.

2. Coelho's *Pilgrimage*, the real and the fictional

The Alchemist (1988) is self-referential, as it is the autobiographical account *The Pilgrimage* (1992). *The two books were triggered by Coelho's decision to go on the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, in Spain – a journey of personal spiritual enlightenment which shaped the writer's decision to follow his personal legend.* First of all, *The Pilgrimage* tells of the pilgrimage made by the author and about four hundred pilgrims before him, that same year, and by millions that followed the route through Spain and to Santiago de Compostela, a city built in a place where it was believed were buried the remains of the apostle St. James, shown to a shepherd by a star that shone above a field. It is the third among the so-called "sacred routes",

followed by those pilgrims whose symbol is a shell, while the other two are those of Rome, leading to St. Peter's tomb, crossed by the *romei* symbolizing a cross and, finally, the one that leads to Jerusalem, followed by the *palmieri* so called from the palms with which Christ was welcomed when he arrived in the city.

The second level is the symbolic one, linked to the reason why Coelho decides to undertake his long journey, material and spiritual, that is his investiture as Master of the Order of Regnus Agnus Mundi (RAM), meaning "penalty, love and mercy", a Brotherhood that brought together the esoteric orders of the whole world known as Tradition. The consecration ceremony should have concluded with the delivery of a steel sword, but things are different, so that the author, in order to try to find and recover the coveted blade, will be obliged, accompanied only by what is necessary, to cover the whole Way is full of intense trials and experiences, which will make him a different man, helped by a gruff guide that the reader will know by the name of Petrus. Deprived of his certainties, away from his wife, from known places and from his own business, he initially feels great uneasiness and uncertainty but decides to continue supported by his own convictions. His is a real, spiritual and initiatory journey, which also has to do with religion, always present in this and in subsequent novels, even if mixed with magic and sometimes interpreted in a very personal manner. For him, religion is lived as a continuous search, as ups and downs determined by doubt and, finally, as a meeting but in the more general framework of a spiritual quest, or rather a contact with the spiritual world, even if, "There is no religion that is capable of bringing all of the stars together, because if this were to happen, the universe would become a gigantic, empty space and would lose its reason for existence" (Coelho 2005: 112).

A year later, therefore, Coelho will realize his dream through writing which for him is an inner process made of understanding and discipline, which leads him to make a book every two years. He believes, inherited from the maternal teaching, that the world is a mirror in which man sees his own face reflected while work is that in which his soul is reflected, therefore, here are born, one after another, his novels: *The Alchemist* (1988), *The Valkyries* (1992), *Brida* (1990), and *The Devil and Miss Prym* (2000). To Santiago, the pilgrimage is a metaphor for life because this is the way of "ordinary people" that can be done by anyone, even simply by observing one's life more carefully. It is an individual journey and depends on what one person seeks and, above all, on the reason. Coelho looked for his sword but the reason will remain his secret. The experience of the Camino de Santiago pushed him to publish what would be his first literary text: *The Pilgrimage (O Diário de um Mago, ("The Diary of a Magus" 1987)*. Then his other books would follow, consecrating him as one of the ten best-selling authors in the world, a writer who provokes polemics, hatreds and violent passions, but who goes on, smiling and confident, on his way to try to awaken in the men and women of this new millennium the lost taste of mystery and magic, which saves from weariness and helplessness within a mechanized and boring society.

3. *The Alchemist* – The Dream

The Alchemist is based on a Persian fable that also inspired the Argentine writer Jorge Luís Borges – "Tale of the Two Dreamers" published in 1935, in *A Universal History of Infamy*. In this story, taken from *Thousand and One Nights*, a man was told, in a dream, of a huge treasure waiting for him in Isfahan, in Persia. Once there, he didn't find any treasure, and the captain of the prison where he was put by mistake, said to him:

"O man of little wit, thrice have I dreamed of a house in Cairo in whose yard is a garden, at the lower end of which is a sundial and beyond the sundial a fig tree and beyond the fig tree a fountain and beneath the fountain a great sum of money. Yet I have not paid the least heed to this lie; but you, offspring of a mule and a devil have journeyed from place to place on the faith of a dream. Don't show your face again in Isfahan. Take these coins and leave". (Borges 1973: 112-113)

The end of the story strikingly resembles that of *The Alchemist*: listening to the captain of the prison, the man accepted the money offered and returned home where, "beneath the fountain in his garden (which was the one in the captain's dream), he dug up a great treasure. And thus Allah brought abundant blessing upon him and rewarded him and exalted him. Allah is the Beneficent, the Unseen" (*ibid.* 113).

The Alchemist is the story of Santiago, the shepherd who decides to leave his Andalusian village for the Egyptian pyramids, in search of a hidden treasure which he sometimes dreamed of. Along the way, he goes through some significant experiences, starting from the moment he arrives in Egypt when all the money he gets from the sale of his sheep is stolen. For a living, he works as a salesman in a crystal store and makes it thrive. But he insists on his quest and, in the company of an Englishman, he travels with a caravan across the Sahara desert to the oasis of Al-Fayoum, to find a supposed old Arab alchemist.

After going through various experiences in this place, two great encounters take place: that of Santiago with Fatima, whose relationship translates love without possession; and that of Santiago with the Alchemist. In the oasis, he loses for the second time the money he had been able to earn until that moment. The Alchemist encourages the shepherd to persist in his dream, in search of his personal legend, and Santiago continues his itinerary towards the pyramids. He finds them at last, but the money he carries is stolen for the third time, and Santiago is beaten and abandoned by robbers.

One of them tells him that he had also dreamed of a treasure hidden at the root of a sycamore, in a ruined church in Spain, but that the dream was too stupid to believe. Unexpectedly, Santiago discovers that the treasure has always been in his village. He can return to Andalusia and, in a ruined church, he finds a treasure. The narrative closes with Santiago feeling the wind calling him, like the first time he decided to leave his village, but now it is Fatima who calls him.

4. In pursuit of the dream

In the composition of the plot, the first part, which consists of the exhibition, presents the character Santiago as a shepherd in Andalusia, Spain. Caring for sheep was a family tradition. He had studied at a seminary, so he could read, but he had given up being a priest to travel. Taking care of the sheep, he felt free. There is a special relationship between the young shepherd and the sheep, which "were able to understand what he said" (Coelho 2005: 4). The daily life in the Andalusian countryside was interrupted, sometimes when he took his sheep to be shared, to market his wool. The merchant with whom he negotiated had a daughter, "the girl with the raven hair", with whom, the shepherd hoped, "his days would never be the same again" (*ibid.* 6). It is an unexpected occurrence in Santiago's life, which makes him feel the need for an entirely different existence, the desire to stop wandering and stay in one place.

The narrative begins when the protagonist has a recurring dream, twice, in the church where he rested with his flock. He dreams that a child was playing with his sheep and then took hold of Santiago's hands and led him to the pyramids of Egypt, saying: "If you come here, you will find a hidden treasure" (*ibid.* 14). Santiago then looks for an old woman who can interpret dreams and she also tells him to go to Egypt, thus confirming the truthful nature of his dream: "And this is my interpretation: you must go to the Pyramids in Egypt. I have never heard of them, but, if it was a child who showed them to you, they exist. There you will find a treasure that will make you a rich man" (*ibid.* 15).

Seeing his son determined to go in search of his treasure, Santiago's father respected his son's decision and blessed him, giving him three gold coins: "Take to the fields, and someday you'll learn that our countryside is the best, and our women are the most beautiful" (*ibid.* 10), and the shepherd proceeds in his journey in search of the treasure:

"I left my father, my mother, and the town castle behind. They have gotten used to my being away, and so have I. The sheep will get used to me not being there too, the boy thought... The levanter was still getting stronger, and he felt its force on his face... The boy felt jealous of the freedom of the wind and saw that he could have the same freedom. There was nothing to hold him back except himself. The sheep, the merchant's daughter, and the fields of Andalusia were only steps along the way to his personal legend." (*ibid.* 28)

He then meets an old Arab, Melchizedek, whose garments and wisdom seemed to confirm that he was the King of Salem, as he said. With his oriental wisdom, the king helps him to go in search of the treasure, of his personal legend. The relationship between Santiago and the old Arab is very similar to that of the narrator-character and his master in *The Pilgrimage*. The wise Arab elder represents one of the frequent elements in the work, associating wisdom to the experience acquired throughout life. Symbology, a recurring element in the rabbinical text, appears in the work in question, several times: "Before the boy could reply, a butterfly appeared and fluttered between him and the old man. He remembered something his grandfather had once told him: that butterflies were a good omen. Like crickets, and like grasshoppers; like lizards and four-leaf clovers" (*ibid.* 30).

Actually, Melchizedek comes from Salem (Jerusalem). He is a Biblical figure, who blesses Santiago, as he had blessed Abraham:

"Melchizedek watched a small ship that was ploughing its way out of the port. He would never again see the boy, just as he had never seen Abraham again after having charged him his one-tenth fee. That was his work. The gods should not have desires, because they don't have Personal Legends. But the king of Salem hoped desperately that the boy would be successful." (*ibid.* 34)

The symbols that appear throughout the narrative (as well as in all the work of Paulo Coelho) are not gratuitous and their meaning contributes to the understanding of the text. The omens told him to continue

his journey. The symbols always have a determining meaning in the text, functioning as a kind of an enigma to be deciphered. The writer himself is very attentive to the omens that appear in his life, valuing and seeking to decipher their meaning. Pressures, destiny and, intuitions also arise in the text, composing the mystique present in the narrative.

The symbology explored in the text attributes an air of mystery to the narrative, awakening the reader's imagination. Also, the reflections raised in the text lead the readers to pause in their life to think about their existence, their daily life, because "[...] every day was the same, and when each day is 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" (*ibid* 28).

5. The pilgrim's stations

Selling his sheep to get money for the journey is a serious decision for Santiago, a solution to his dilemma: either to remain a shepherd and marry the wool merchant's daughter or to go in search for the hidden treasure – his Personal Legend, "to choose between something he had become accustomed to and something he wanted to have. There was also the merchant's daughter, she wasn't important as his flock, because she didn't depend on him" (*idem* 29).

The first station along the protagonist's journey is Tarifa, a port in Andalusia, which marks the beginning of the journey. This is where Santiago meets the old Gypsy woman who interprets his dream, and Melchizedek, the King of Salem, who teaches him a lesson that will accompany him all along his journey. Santiago learns the meaning of the Personal Legends and the Soul of the World, and the importance of Love as the force capable of transforming and improving the Soul of the World. Melchizedek says: "It is we who nourish the Soul of the World, and the world we live in will be either better or worse, depending on whether we become better or worse. And that's where the power of love comes in. Because when we love, we always strive to become better than we are" (*idem* 156). Symbolically, Tarifa gives Santiago the possibility of choosing between what he already has (his sheep) and what he wishes to have (the hidden treasure in his recurrent dream).

The shepherd's next station is Tangiers, in Africa, where the business didn't go very well, and, as a consequence of the new prosperity of the nearby city of Ceuta, people were moving away, with only a small number of shops left, and "no one was going to climb the hill just to browse through a few small shops" (*idem* 46). During the time that Santiago worked at the crystal store after all his money from the sale of the sheep was stolen, he lives with the store owner, the crystal merchant. He followed the Koran, seeking to fulfil the five obligations:

"The Prophet gave us the Koran, and let us just five obligations to satisfy during our lives. The most important is to believe only in the one true God. The others are to pray five times a day, fast during Ramadan, and be charitable to the poor. [...] The fifth obligation of every Muslim is a pilgrimage. We are obliged, at least once in our lives, to visit the holy city of Mecca." (*idem* 56)

Santiago makes the crystal store thrive, proving to be a successful businessman: "But we could sell tea in crystal glasses. The people will enjoy the tea and want to buy the glasses. I have been told that beauty is the great seducer of men" (*idem* 59).

The woman who interpreted dreams, the old man and the merchant of crystals represent the common people, but the reader wants to be Santiago, or even the simple sweet man who sold his delicacies in the market, because he did what he liked – he had already found his personal legend. The character Santiago shows the reader as the person who can adapt to adverse circumstances and overcome obstacles. The reader identifies with this characteristic of the character.

The crystal merchant, who worked in the same square where Santiago met the old Arab, is presented as a person who works, economizing, to travel in old age; like that individual who is afraid to risk, to go in search of his personal legend, which also leads the reader to a reflection. This section contains biographical elements: Paulo Coelho always travelled a lot around the world, even when he did not have the financial resources to do so. Reading a lot and travelling contributed decisively to his writing.

The same crystal merchant teaches the shepherd the word *maktub*. Repeated seven times in the novel, *maktub* means, in Arabic, "it is written" and it shows Paul Coelho's deterministic approach to existence. In her article, "Free Will and Determinism" (2005), Lleana Marcoulescu explains that, "Islam holds the belief that major events are fated and decreed by God; this allows one to affirm the underlying uniformity and rationality of the universe. The concept of fate [...] became subordinated in Islam to divine predestination

that by itself does not preclude the actual freedom of the individual's will" (2005: 3202). In Al-Fayoum, before the decisive battle, we read Santiago's own understanding of the concept:

"He was alarmed by what had happened. He had succeeded in reaching through to the Soul of the World, and now the price for having done so might be his life. It was a frightening bet. But he had been making risky bets ever since the day he had sold his sheep to pursue his Personal Legend. And, as the camel driver had said, to die tomorrow was no worse than dying on any other day. Every day was there to be lived or to mark one's departure from this world. Everything depended on one word: 'Maktub'." (Coelho 2005: 112)

Six months had passed and Santiago had already made enough money to return to Spain. However, there is the remembrance of the wise old Arab and the sweet man of the market. He learns of a caravan heading to the desert and decides to join it, in search of a supposed Arab alchemist in the oasis of Al-Fayoum, of which an Englishman, a member of the caravan and interested in alchemy, had told him.

Al-Fayoum, in Egypt, is the third station of the pilgrimage, the place where Santiago learns that "Courage is the quality most essential to understanding the Language of the World" (115), and where he meets the Alchemist, who tells him that "When a person really desires something, all the universe conspires to help that person to realize his dream," and that "another person was there to help him toward his Personal Legend" (*idem* 119).

And Santiago continues his journey. On the way, other reflections are raised by the camel driver, who used to live off the land, but had to go in search of another means of survival; the camel driver only cared about the present, without anxiety for the future. It is from the camel driver that Santiago learned about someone else's decision to completely change his life after the flooding of the Nile destroyed all his possessions. Similarly, Santiago was a shepherd before he decided to leave in pursuit of his dream, in search of his personal legend.

Two important meetings take place in the oasis. The first is the meeting of Santiago with Fatima at the water source. The merchant's daughter no longer represents him, for he finally finds his true love. The second is the meeting of the shepherd with the Alchemist, who exercises a function of master of Santiago. The protagonist perceives signs of war. The visions of Santiago were confirmed and five hundred men attacked the oasis of Al-Fayoum. The five hundred men died and Santiago won five hundred gold coins, as one of the leaders had promised him, asking him to be the oasis's counsellor. But the Alchemist encourages Santiago to persist in the search for treasure, his personal legend. And at this point in the narrative, we have the climax of the story, for Santiago could live peacefully there with Fatima, his great love. After much reflection, the shepherd says goodbye to Fatima. She allows him to go, saying, "If I am really a part of your dream, you'll come back one day" (*idem* 101).

On the way to the pyramids, Santiago and the Alchemist are captured by warriors dressed in blue, with a black tiara on the turban. The shepherd is robbed for the second time. And it had only three days to turn into the wind, otherwise, the two would die. After the phase of distress and discouragement, Santiago, encouraged by the Alchemist, manages to turn into the wind, showing supernatural powers. In this passage, as well as in so many other narratives of the writer, one perceives the operation of the fantastic, which also fascinates the reader. The two are released and continue their journey.

The next station is the Coptic Monastery, three hours away from the Pyramids, where the Alchemist, through a lesson of simplicity, teaches Santiago to turn lead into gold, and gives him a quarter of the gold plate, leaving another quarter with the monk, for emergencies. Santiago thanks the Alchemist for teaching him the Language of the World.

Finally, Santiago finds the pyramids and is robbed for the third time, but the robber unintentionally reveals where the treasure is: in the village where the shepherd lived. With the fourth part of the gold that the Alchemist had asked the monk to guard for him, Santiago manages to return to Spain and find his treasure. The search for his personal legend is realized and a reflection that is inferred from the outcome is that the treasure, of the material order, to be found, depends on another treasure: that related to the existential quest. Only in this way is it possible to find his great love, Fatima.

The composition of the story follows a structure that also has much of the medieval, because the character adopts the role of apprentice and learns from four different masters: the old and enigmatic king of Salem, the Merchant of Crystals, the English Traveller and the great Alchemist. Each of these teachers represents a way of approaching the inner world. Of the three types of alchemists that Coelho announces in the preface, the Englishman belongs to those who "are lazy because they do not know what to say", the Alchemist to those who "know what they say, but they know the language of alchemy is aimed at the heart and not the

reason” and finally, Santiago himself belongs to those who “have never heard of alchemy, but have managed to find the Philosopher’s Stone through their lives”.

The plot is linear, which is a characteristic of the narrative. As for the characters, Santiago is the protagonist, figuring himself as a hero, but of everyday life, very close to ordinary people, which favours the identification of the reader with him. There is no antagonist because the search for the treasure itself is a path of difficulties and conquests. The other characters inserted in the narrative exercise different functions, but all contribute in some way to Santiago’s spiritual evolution, causing him finally to find his treasure.

The time of the narrative is chronological, transcending in the natural order of the facts of the plot. In this element, one perceives a certain skill of the writer-narrator, dosing the facts in the right measure and keeping the attention of the reader. As for space, the story takes place in two countries: Spain, precisely in the region of Andalusia, and Egypt: in the city of Tangier, in the desert, in the oasis of Al-Fayoum and the Pyramids. The European atmosphere is something recurrent in the narrative of Paulo Coelho. Although he is criticized for never having set up a narrative in Brazil, it is noted that the writer, nevertheless, manages to make the Brazilian reader identify himself, or get interested in his stories, since the imagination of this reader is populated by the European universe, which presents itself as different and mysterious, culturally wrapped in tradition.

5. The inner journey

The inner journey of the protagonist consists of the search of his own identity through reflection and the spiritual search of his body. The real journey of the protagonist takes place in five or six different places depending on the division that is made. The first of which in Andalusia where his dream is repeated while he is a shepherd, in Tarifa where he meets King Melchizedek, which begins to indicate the path of his Personal Legend, in Tangier where he works with a Crystal Merchant to continue on his way, in Ceuta, where he decides to go to Egypt and take the caravan that will cross the desert and take him to the pyramids, in addition to knowing English here in Al-Fayoum, where he meets the Alchemist who It will lead you to the end of your trip and in the pyramids of Egypt which is where you find the treasure that is not really there. He also has a trip back to Andalusia but from which we know very little data except that he finds the treasure in an abandoned church and returns with his beloved Fatima.

The inner journey begins in his adolescence when he decides to enter the seminary, then continues when he leaves the seminary and begins to be a shepherd. Then follows the search for the meaning of the dream he had repeated going to Tarifa where he reflects with Melchizedek on the Personal Legend of each person. This trip continues with his stay in the store of the Merchant of crystals which is where he realizes that he is able to make his Personal Legend and continues with the English traveller to learn things about alchemy and reflect while crossing the desert and finally, the inner journey ends with the Alchemist, who teaches him to reflect on life and learns to follow his instincts through the signs of the path and listening to his heart. With all this he gets to know himself, to search for the Elixir of Life and the Philosopher’s Stone, and to fulfil his Personal Legend. It is the Englishman who explains the essentials of Alchemy:

“The alchemists spent years in their laboratories, observing the fire that purified the metals. They spent so much time close to the fire that gradually they gave up the vanities of the world. They discovered that the purification of the metals had led to a purification of themselves... the Philosopher’s Stone has a fascinating property. A small sliver of the stone can transform large quantities of metal into gold”. (84)

Fatima, the girl at the Al-Fayoum oasis, who “was more important than his treasure” (99), also learns “the universal Language and the Soul of the World” (100):

“The desert takes our men from us, and they don’t always return... we know that, and we are used to it. 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” (101).

She encourages him to pursue his dream: “*Maktub*,” she said. “If I am really a part of your dream, you’ll come back one day” (*idem*).

6. Conclusions: Paul Coelho’s esotericism

The Alchemist is considered by the critics like the main work of Paulo Coelho and, also, one of the best-known. In it, according to Brazilian researcher Isabel Mattei, one clearly perceives the presence of the elements analyzed in this work, that is, one can identify, clearly, marks of triviality, self-help and, esotericism. The very presence of triviality can be perceived in the set of elements that make up the narrative: linguistic and ideological marks. In relation to language, one perceives in its organization characteristics

that lead to readability: periods in the direct order, simplicity of resources and vocabulary, linearity of the text, short periods. It is a type of reading that does not generate any difficulty of understanding, which attracts a readership not accustomed to the contact with denser narratives, who exploit the work with the unusual and creative language, able to evade common sense.

Referring to Paulo Coelho's works, Mattei refers to Mário Maestri who, in his volume, *Por que Paulo Coelho teve sucesso* ("Why was Paulo Coelho successful", 1999) points out that the esoteric theme of such works was tailored to a generation dazzled by the neoliberal discourse of the time, yet distressed and demoralized by the lack of perspective of the world in which it lived. These works served (and still serve), therefore, as a relief to a man terrified before a world and a life that does not understand and that cannot control.

Consistent with these characteristics, the alchemist, triviality, self-help and, esotericism join a plot without great novelties, although it was built in such a way as to engage the reader in history, that is, by reinforcing the maintenance of the status quo, construction of history is directed towards the concretization of the concepts predicted by these tendencies.

Marks of esotericism are present throughout the plot, from the departure of the young shepherd who, one night, has a repeated dream and goes out in search of his material treasure, facing from the beginning of this journey with great mysteries, which appeal for mysticism, magic. The meeting with the old king Melchizedek; the Favourable Principle (beginner's luck); the signs of God (nature); the Personal Legend that each one must experience; the mysterious Soul of the World; the force of the winds are elements wrapped in a mystery that seduce the reader and lead him to think his life in the observance of these mysterious signs.

This quest for treasure occurs in a typically trivial way, meaning the character faces a series of obstacles before reaching a destination. The narrative presents an unsurprising end to the hero: he overcomes all obstacles, conquers love, money (material treasure) and happiness. Being good, honest, loving and dedicated, you can overcome obstacles and conquer all that you desire most.

And finally, Santiago would not have conquered his dream if he did not believe in his potential, his inner strength. The reference to this force is the great allegory of the book. The boy leaves the place where he lived, in Spain, to find his treasure in a distant place: the pyramids of Egypt. After arriving at his destination, he realizes that the treasure has always been in the mountains of Andalusia, from where he had left.

When he finds the treasure, he finds himself and is happy, having everything he has ever wanted. One can thus perceive the presence of the maxim of self-help: the treasure is within us. Joining these elements to other typical narratives of the genre, Paulo Coelho, with the success of the book *The Alchemist*, became worldwide known.

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