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Paulo Coelho's The Alchemist on Love

Love comes in many various forms, and can be described in infinite ways. There is a scientific aspect to love, with emotions being the result of various hormones and attraction having a chemical formula, based on evolutionary theory and genetic design. One could also examine love from a spiritual standpoint, as a devotion that extends past the boundaries of reality, or a connection forged through fate. Love can even be described as completely circumstantial, simply a result of the culmination of certain actions. Paulo Coelho's The Alchemist has many ideas about love, especially that it is instant and makes a person whole. However, those who have experienced an extended and committed relationship would agree that a strong love is built on communication and time. Because of this, Coelho's descriptions of love appear to be more useful when applying them to self-love, as opposed to a romantic relationship with another person.

The Alchemist is best described as a fable, filled to the brim with metaphor and imagination. Simply put, its events cannot be taken at face value. A man cannot become the wind, materialising from nothing on the opposite side of the desert. That being said, fables are not read to be taken literally. Those who can gather meaning from Coelho's work are able to take the ideas presented within the plot and apply them to the actual world. Because of this, it can be argued that Santiago's love for Fatima is not designed to be taken literally as well, and is yet another metaphor to be adjusted to fit one's own life. Fatima is rarely seen within the story, but is used more as a motivation or a goal. As is the case for many physical objects in the story, such as the treasure or the pyramids, Fatima is utilized for her emotional effect on Santiago as a concept, and not her physical presence. Fatima herself even admits this, in comparing herself to the desert: "I'm a desert woman, and I'm proud of that. I want my husband to wander as free as the wind that shapes the dunes." (Coelho) In this possible foreshadowing of Santiago's physical transformation into the wind near the end of the story, Fatima understands that she is a part of Santiago's journey. She accepts the role of the dunes that his wind shapes, and because of this, becomes a concept of trust and love as opposed to a woman that lives in an oasis.

A major portion of the story of Santiago is dedicated to a conversation that he has with his own heart, which is designed to represent him sorting through his various emotions. There are many conversations with inanimate forces or objects within the story, which is a common theme within fables. Santiago speaking with his heart is most likely a fantastical explanation for the common practice of talking to oneself, which has been shown to improve emotional health (Mari-Beffa). In this conversation, Santiago and his heart discuss love at great length. Coelho seems to elude to the fact that in order to truly connect to 'The Soul of the World', one needs to

have a strong connection with their own heart, and listen to it. He even emphasizes this relationship over Santiago's with Fatima, writing "He lost his fear, and forgot about his need to go back to the oasis, because, one afternoon, his heart told him that it was happy." (Coelho) Fatima, of course, was waiting for Santiago at the oasis, but his bond with his own heart, pulling him towards the pyramids, was stronger than that of him and Fatima, who pulled him back to the oasis. Fatima represents safety, as does the other girl that Santiago meets at the beginning of the novel. He feels that he is truly in love with both of them, but they are both overshadowed by his bond with his own heart, which urges him to move forward.

To follow one's Personal Legend, they must be wholly and completely dedicated to completing their journey, which is often not one that leads to physical possessions, but rather emotional and spiritual growth. Simply examining the changes in Santiago's inner dialog from the start to the end of the novel, where he finds himself in the exact same physical location, reveals this. Santiago's relationship with Fatima is certainly not one that is built on a strong foundation, or one that has tremendous potential to last. They come from completely different cultures, and actually spend very little time together. It is a consensus among psychologists that communication is essential to a healthy relationship (Schwartz), so it must be asked why Santiago believes so strongly in his relationship with Fatima, even when it seems to be a simple aesthetic attraction. Once Santiago leaves the oasis with the Alchemist, he uses Fatima as a gateway to better communicate with his own heart. "He tried to deal with the concept of love as distinct from possession, and couldn't separate them." (Coelho) Santiago is initially confused as to how Fatima can consider love to be something that can be felt even from a great distance, but as he begins to consider this, his love is a way for him to better appreciate and become more connected to the world. "When you are loved, you can do anything in creation. When you are loved, there's no need at all to understand what's happening, because everything happens within you, and even men can turn themselves into the wind." (Coelho) The fact that he has experienced a connection allows Santiago to unlock even more of his potential, and gives him the strength to conquer the final and most difficult challenges leading up to his Personal Legend. Santiago's love for Fatima is not one that will blossom into full commitment and create a lifelong partnership, it was an opportunity for Santiago to experience emotional growth and evolve into a man who has the power to do such feats as turn into the wind.

If The Alchemist was read as a non-fiction story, there would be many times when raising an eyebrow would be more than appropriate. Setting aside the obvious scientific impossibilities that occur within the story, Santiago's "true love" seems as though it was torn from the pages of a middle school girl with a crush on a boy she saw at the water fountain. However, there is still much to gain from this love story, if it is more closely examined. Fatima is a concept, a part of Santiago's journey, more than she is a woman. This is just as Urim and Thummim are a guide to omens more than they are two stones. Fatima's inclusion in the story is

a way for Santiago to gain the emotional consciousness that being in love requires. He then is able to apply this love to

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his own heart, and allow it to guide him to the end of his journey, and help him have the confidence and faith to conquer his final challenges. Before placing judgement on Santiago for falling so deeply for someone he has barely met, one must consider that his love for her is simply one aspect of his growing emotional intelligence throughout the story, and that though a love not based on communication and built through time and trust may not last, it gave Santiago the power to accomplish his Personal Legend.

Works Cited

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