

The Hero's Journey of Encounter with the Transcendental in Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* (1988)

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Submission date: 30.03.2024

Acceptance date : 13.03.2025

Publication date : 10.04.2025

**Ex
PROFESSO**

Volume 10/ Issue 01/ Year 2025

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Abstract

This study examines the journey of spiritual enlightenment in Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* (1988). It shows that the desert space sustains Santiago by illuminating mystical experiences which increase his awareness of the world beyond the phenomenal one. The paper argues that the boy's journey bears strong affinities to Joseph Campbell's description of the heroic journey and ends up with the hero finding a distinctive treasure which lies in spiritual wakefulness and encounter with the Divine. The reading of *The Alchemist* shows that the belief in the desert as a space of rejuvenation and devotion did not end with the Desert Fathers as it still intrigues postmodern authors. The novel redeems the world of the senses by believing that it holds a spark of the Ideal one.

Keywords: Paulo Coelho ; the Alchemist ; desert ; Joseph Campbell; mysticism.

Url de la revue :

<https://www.asjp.cerist.dz/en/Prentati-onRevue/484>

INTRODUCTION

The significance of the desert shifts from one period of time to another. After it has been praised as a place of spiritual and mystical experiences during the 3rd and 4th centuries, the desert lost such significance during the modern era when, says David Jasper (2004), it was considered as a mere test ground into which brave people enter to serve the different projects of the Western "Empire" (p. 56). However, he adds, the "desert wind is again blowing in the unlikely wastes of postmodernity" (P. 57). The reason for this revival, according to Lewis Mumford (1961), is that desert admirers wish to find a refuge from the religiously-alienated and spiritually-distanced societies and dystopian "cities of the dead" within which they live (p; 57-59). These desert lovers provide evidence that religious conviction which is rejected by critics, such as Zygmunt Bauman (1997), as being improper for the mobile contemporary society, can on the contrary, be achieved in mobility and wandering in secluded places such as the desert (p. 172).

Furthermore, having acknowledged the sublime importance of place in the lives of people, Belden Lane (1998) states that the place and the landscape where the individual lives define the way he envisions himself and the Divine. Besides, in "The Spirit of Place", D. H Lawrence (1964) reveals the acute influences which accompany the man-environment relationships by insisting that place influences one's ideas and consciousness (p. 15-17). Yet, Says Belden Lane, those who live in the post-enlightenment society, can hardly "grasp" the correlation between spirituality and landscape essentially because these individuals are more concerned with movement than they are "bereft of rituals of entry that allow us to participate fully in the places we inhabit," and because the individual freedom led progressively to the loss of any heed to spiritual traditions and the way of seeing the world (Lane, 1998, p. 10). In due course, Lane (1998) expresses a sense of anxiety toward the idea that nowadays spirituality is becoming sterile and non-existent nearly in every place in the world (p. 10). Henceforth, critics and theologians explain that experiences in the desert landscape can provide a remedy for the spiritual loss within the human soul (Lane, 1998,p. 20).

In addition to these theologians, contemporary literary figures such as Paulo Coelho, seek to inform that contrary to the prevailing secular beliefs during the contemporary age, God exists in every space and has a word to say in the life of every individual. Many of his works tend to pass the message that man needs to work, displace, contemplate, and search ceaselessly to re-establish belief and harmony with God. Hence, in *The Alchemist*, Coelho illustrates that the desert landscape can afford a valuable help for the one who looks for a mystical apprehension of the Ultimate God.

I. THE HERO'S TRANSCENDENTAL JOURNEY THROUGH THE DESERT

In *The Alchemist*, Paulo Coelho's desert setting facilitates and enriches the protagonist's journey. Due to the desert experience, the youth's journey culminates not only in a material reward, but also in a spiritual growth. Following Joseph Campbell's model of the quest pattern which he depicts in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, this chapter foregrounds the important role that the desert plays in every phase of his journey. In addition, it draws inspiration from the theory of mysticism in order

to read the desert as a land which enhances spiritual awareness. With particular focus put on "nature mysticism," which is characterized by a sense of the "immanence of the Other or God or soul in nature," (Happold, 1970, p. 43) the study will reveal the way the serenity of the land, its silence and peace push the individual to ponder upon the reality of the human self and the universe, seeking higher states of being. By so doing, it will show that the Desert Fathers' account of the desert as a holy place where one can reach beyond the world of the senses and feel the presence of the transcendent still intrigues contemporary authors such as Paulo Coelho.

Taking into consideration the world-view of *The Alchemist*, one may argue that the author's representation of the desert and his appeal for spiritual experiences parodies the ongoing process of secularization which is prevalent in contemporary literature, culture and theory. Coelho's narrative is about Santiago, an Andalusian boy who embarks on an archetypal journey of quest to the Egyptian Pyramids to find a hidden treasure. His journey solicits sweet encounters with people from various races and backgrounds. He meets a gypsy woman, a king disguised in the form of an ordinary citizen, a thief who steals all his earnings, an English man who enlightens him with valuable ideas of alchemy, the old wise alchemist, and most important of all, Fatima, the beautiful desert woman with whom he falls in love. Along his path, Santiago is robbed three times, he is captured by a desert tribe and receives many threats of death. Yet, eventually he succeeds to communicate with the universe, to turn himself into wind and to be more powerful than he has ever been before.

During all these experiences, the desert stands as a supporter and a recorder of how he changes from a naïve person to a wise one. Far from being an enslaving power, the desert heightens awareness of the greatness of the world. Basically, it is filled with God's presence and is ready to satisfy the heart which believes and reads all its signs, recalling the experiences lived by the Christian monks during the Monastic Movements when they retreated "to wild and undeveloped landscape, seeking new meaning along the outer margins of familiarity" (Lane, 1998, p. 147).

Basing his argument on the different world myths, Joseph Campbell (1968) shows the physical, psychological and even the spiritual importance of the heroic journey taken away from one's home and family; a journey during which the adventurer grows more self-aware. Campbell divides the quest pattern into three major phases; Departure, Initiation and Return. In fact, this pattern is adequate to discuss the role of the desert in *The Alchemist*, knowing that its land acts as an agent that defines the course of the events.

At the beginning of the novel, the boy is portrayed as a simple shepherd whose father wants him to become a priest. Yet when he receives the dreams about the treasure, his heart is filled with new ambitions leading him to seek their realization. These recurrent dreams are the "Call to Adventure" which comes from the Soul of the World. According to Campbell (1968), when the call is launched, "the familiar life horizon has been outgrown; the old concepts, ideals, and emotional patterns no longer fit; the time for the passing of a threshold is at hand" (p. 51). So, because the destiny "has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown," Santiago decides to take a different move in his life and go in search of his treasure and destiny, defying the will of his father (p. 58).

Before he is ready to cross the "First Threshold" away from Spain into the unknown tracks of the African desert, the boy falls into hesitation and indecisiveness.

Eventually, he tells his father that his dream lies in travel and not in becoming a priest. The father agrees immediately because he wants him to become more than these priests who "come in search of new things, but when they leave they are basically the same people they were when they arrived" (Campbell, 1968, p. 9). Pertinent to this, Paulo Coelho in an interview in 1998 states that:

"At the threshold of our quest, the fear of stepping into an unknown world and the desire to stay at home lie in wait for us, it is a crucial moment of initiation. But we cannot stand on the threshold forever. We must dare to move; only corpses do not move. Life is movement." (1998, p. 35)

Hence, when Santiago commits himself and gets ready for the new challenges, crossing the "First Threshold" and leaving behind the safety of home, he is helped by few persons. That help is not supernatural and can be recapitulated in the few pieces of advice he receives from the Gypsy woman who urges him not to give up because "dreams are the language of God" (p. 56), and Melchizedek, the disguised man who claims to be the King of Salem who persuades him that "when you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it" (p. 23). This advice spreads hope in the boy's heart because he feels that wherever he goes the universe will take care of him.

Gradually, he enters the "Initiation Phase" which Campbell (1968) considers, as an important phase during which the adventurer is put into various tests and undergoes "difficult tasks" before he is forged as a powerful hero (p. 97). The adventurer, during this phase, needs to wrestle against the fiends of hesitation, fear and indecision. The first obstacle he confronts during "The Road of Trials" is in Tangier, the crowded city where he is robbed by a thief (Coelho, 1992, p. 40). That accident leaves him desperate and heartbroken: "he was in a different country, a stranger in a strange land, where he couldn't even speak the language... he had nothing, not even the money to turn and start everything over" (p. 41). Hence, he finds himself obliged to accept a job which he does not like in the crystal merchant's shop.

When he is kidnapped with the alchemist by tribesmen who ask him to turn himself into a wind or face death, Santiago faces a new obstacle. It is at this point that he gets supernatural aid from the desert, its sand, sun and wind to transform into Simum wind (p. 156). The last trial he faces is when he arrives at the Pyramids where he is beaten and once more robbed of his gold by two men (P.170). Interestingly, none of these troubles brings him down or prevents him from hearing that strong voice telling him that trials and errors are part of the process of becoming stronger. To borrow from Campbell (1986) : "the original departure into the land of trials represent[s] only the long and really perilous path of initiatory conquests and moments of illumination"(p. 17). For this reason, Santiago moves on and never gives up.

To become a true hero, to fulfill his dream of an unforgettable legend, the archetypal hero needs to complete all the stages of the "Initiation Phase" because the different tests and trials through which he will pass challenge him deeply before he begins his transformation "slaying" all the handicapping hindrances on his road (Campbell, 1968, p. 97). Hence, in addition to the abovementioned difficulties, the desert tests the boy's maturity and his degree of determination to achieve his goal. Yet, the alchemist ensures him that the desert does not do so with a bad intention,

rather, for the sake of training him. For this reason, the desert landscape is never demonized or looked at as an antagonistic space. On the contrary, the alchemist tells him that the Soul of the World is manifested in the desert and before his dream is realized, it tests everything that was learned along the way. It does this not because it is evil, but so that we can, in addition to realizing our dreams, master the lessons we've learned as we've moved toward that dream. That's the point at which people give up. It's the point at which, as we say in the language of the desert, "one dies of thirst just when the palm trees have appeared on the horizon... Every search begins with beginner's luck. And every search ends with the victor's being severely tested. (Campbell, 1968, p. 139)

Paulo Coelho (1992) passes the message that every personal legend is full of tests and obstacles. Yet, every test is an important step in the spiritual growth. Pertinent to this, the boy states that "when I have been searching for my treasure, every day has been luminous... I have discovered things along the way that I never would have seen had I not had the courage to try things that seemed impossible for a shepherd to achieve" (p. 137).

By choosing to become a travelling shepherd pursuing a personal destiny, the boy has to separate from his father at an early age. However, during his journey, he meets the alchemist, the man with whom he reconciles his needs for a constructive father in a step which Joseph Campbell (1968) names "Atonement with the Father" (126). Significantly, then, meeting with the alchemist is one of the blessed gifts of the desert for the boy because since their encounter, he acts out as a caring father and teacher for him. He teaches him to understand many realities of the world and how to inspire power from the inward to understand the realities about the existence of the Ultimate Being. Duly, says Campbell (1968):

"The problem of the hero going to meet the father is to open his soul beyond terror to such a degree that he will be ripe to understand how the sickening and insane tragedies of this vast and ruthless cosmos are completely validated in the majesty of Being. The hero transcends life with its peculiar blind spot and for a moment rises to a glimpse of the source." (p. 147)

The alchemist, who learns how to communicate with the desert natural environment and masters how to transform metal into gold, plays a great role in helping him focus more on his objective. In discussing the elements of magical realism in *The Alchemist*, Stephen M. Hart (2004) considers that the character of the alchemist is reminiscent of Melquiades in Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Year of Solitude*, in the sense that he is "the sage man who knows the answer to all of life's questions" (p. 305). As an example of his support, when the boy is about to give up on his quest in favor of stability with Fatima, the alchemist interferes and convinces him that she is a woman of the desert and will await his return because true "love never keeps man from pursuing his destiny. If he abandons that pursuit, it's because it wasn't true love... the love that speaks the Language of the World" (Coelho, 1992, p. 126). When the two are having their trip through the desert toward the pyramids, the alchemist teaches the boy to mediate on the mystery of the desert in silence and read its omens. This echoes Joe Guse's (2007) proclamation that "until we make peace with our parents we are unable to move forward into the next more rewarding periods of our lives" (p. 13-14).

Due to the presence of the alchemist, the sustenance of the desert, and the feelings of love which he carries in his heart, the boy's journey ends up in blessedness, rupture and contentment with the self which realizes its goal. This becomes clear when he reaches the pyramids and kneels down to thank God for "leading him to meet a king, a merchant, an Englishman, and an alchemist. And above all for his having met a woman of the desert..." (Coelho, 1992, p. 169). The boy acknowledges that the other true treasure which his journey grants him is knowledge. This knowledge and wisdom are the "Ultimate Boon" of his trip and his weapons in facing the hostile forces of life.

So, it can be said that the boy's heroic journey through the desert is very particular because it culminates with more than one reward. In other words, Santiago does not only find the hidden treasure of gold, but also a more precious one, which is knowledge of the divine spark which lays dormant in him. In this context, C. Happold (1970) says "it is the chief end of man's earthly existence to discover and identify himself with his true self. By so doing, he will come to an intuitive knowledge of the Divine Ground and so apprehend Truth as it really is, and not as to our limited human perceptions it appears to be" (p. 143). In that sense, the desert becomes a location which evokes "retreat and spiritual growth," when wandering its tracks, the boy enters into a state to mystical enlightenment and illumination (p. 143).

About the "Ultimate Boon," Joseph Campbell (1968) adds that after all the experiences through which the hero goes: "the stature of the divinity that summons to his highest wish increases, until it subsumes the cosmos. Finally the mind breaks the bounding sphere of the cosmos to realization transcending all experiences..." (p. 190). Similarly, in *The Alchemist*, the journey through the desert teaches Santiago to understand the language of the world in the mere time he spends contemplating its mysterious tracks. After that, he can turn to his family and natal home well-equipped with knowledge and wisdom about life and the Ultimate Creator.

II. THE JOURNEY OF ASCENT AND DESCENT: READING SANTIAGO'S MYSTICAL EXPERIENCES IN THE DESERT

In fact Santiago's spiritual experience can best be understood through explanation of mystical insights. Edward Mercer (2008) admits that the definition of mysticism is by no means an easy task. Yet to achieve a close clarification of its significance, Mercer pinpoints that a true mystic is the one who aspires to unite with the "Real," "super-sensuous," "super-rational" and "unconditional Absolute" (p. 8). To be more precise, a true mystic does not mistake the possibility of sensing the Absolute's presence in nature with the idea that every natural element in it is endowed with a spirit, which is basically a primitive "shaman" belief and a dysfunctional use of mysticism (Bharati, 1976, p. 15). Rather, a mystic man believes that the phenomenal can serve to experience the transcendental.

Evelyn Underhill (2002) notes that mystics, whom she considers the pioneers of the spiritual world, have succeeded in what all others failed and established "immediate communication between the spirit of man, entangled as they declare amongst material things, and that only Reality that immaterial and final being, which theologians call God" (p. 4). Mysticism, does not only prove the existence of the Absolute but advances the belief that "knowing and finally attaining it" because

knowledge is not limited to sense impression (Underhill, 2002,p. 23). When exercise of "pure reason" could not offer a great knowledge of this world, knowledge-seekers started to use "natural mysticism" as an instinct for the Absolute "latent in man" (p. 13). In fact, ideas akin to the mystic ones have principally been initiated by the theory of Platonic Idealism which acknowledges the existence of a supreme perfect realm of knowledge. One of the basic tenets of this tradition passed down by Plato, the father of Western philosophy, is to save the phenomenal, "to discover the eternal in the temporal, to know the truth hidden within the apparent, to glimpse the absolute Ideas that reign supreme behind and within the empirical world" (Tarnas,1996, p. 53).

Written in the 1980s, Coelho's *The Alchemist* is surrounded by the atmosphere of secularism and diminishment of religious beliefs which characterized the post Second World War Era (Hungerford, 2010, p. 6). As a result, the human soul is sidelined in favor of the material gains and worldly matters. The logical consequences of the loss of faith in God are the prevalence of nothingness, meaninglessness and disillusionment with and fear from the limits imposed by being human.

Coelho (2005) himself has experienced a similar disillusionment and doubt in his life leading him to seek spiritual enlightenment on the road between France and Spain. He declared that "during the twentieth century we experienced the dictatorship of science, which tells us that the world consists only of scientifically provable things. Thus the amazement and surprise of experiencing our souls were lost to us" (p. 4). He assumed that one of the aims he wants to achieve through his mystic and spiritual tale, *The Alchemist*, is the restoration of belief in the goodness of the world and human essence (p. 4).

Writing out of this background, Coelho (2005) tries to rescue the importance of the spiritual and the metaphysical by portraying characters who are willing to establish contact with the Divine. These characters' long journey of search is only significant because, says the narrator: "every second of the search is a second's encounter with God and with eternity," their hearts do never enjoy happiness till they "have God within them" (p. 137). In this sense, the manifestation of the desert in *The Alchemist* mirrors David Jasper's (2004) hypothesis that "people sometimes go out into the desert to find new beginnings and a new place from which theological articulations can be found and recovered" (p. 4).

Jasper (2004) explains that mysticism is at the heart of the spiritual life of human beings. If they fail to hear its voice, then the life of the spirit is spoiled. Most importantly, he says, the magnitude of mysticism can be sensed only in the very particular spaces of the desert. Accordingly, every journey into the desert is motivated by the hope to "recover" mystical experiences because it is a place "outside the law where nothing superficial can be tolerated" (p. 5). In relation to this, *The Alchemist* is more than a mere story of a boy wandering in the desert looking to find the treasure of his dream as it reenacts the need of the contemporary individual to reestablish the lost sense of religion and spirituality.

Leading a heroic journey through the desert, Santiago learns to enter into a harmonious communion with its paraphernalia. During this process, he finds out that the world can "conspire" to make realize one's dreams, and that a human possesses stunning inner capacities and abilities which remained hidden and unknown to him. When he is obliged to turn himself into wind, the boy reveals that it is his heart which teaches him how to speak the language of the desert and the wind (Coelho, 1992, p.

140). In this context, Edward Mercer (2008) observes that the accurate capacity to unite with nature that certain persons may develop is not only a mere "source of the purest pleasure" but "a subtle and powerful agent in aiding men to realize some of the noblest potentialities of their being" (p. 4).

Having reached that high level of consciousness, Santiago is more willing to benefit from all his talents. He longs "to blow away the sands" and to carry the voice of his beloved Fatima (Coelho, 1992, p. 154). The encounter with the desert geography stirs unwavering reliance on his skills. There, in the vastness of the land, Santiago displays significant efforts to liberate himself from the shortcomings of being human. His insistence is fruitful by the end as he comes to recognize that self and nature move in harmony with each other and that man has inside of him "the winds, the deserts, the oceans, the stars, and everything created in the universe" (p. 154).

The isolation of the desert is given positive effects on the spirits of Santiago and the alchemist. For instance, as they approach the places which are disturbed by violent battles between the tribes, Santiago becomes very sensitive toward the landscapes which grant him the feeling at home (p. 135-6). The reason, says David Mercer (2008), is that the more salient feature of the desert has always "arrested attention and stimulated the mystic sense" (p. 242). As such, the solitude of the desert is romanticized by Coelho as pivotal for the tranquility of human beings.

Belden Lane (1998) praises the silence of the desert and strongly links it to the human self which is "an inner desert of its own, stripped of worldly care, is delighted in silence...to become an inner desert is to abandon the rampant race of thoughts, feelings, and worries that continually distract the soul from attentiveness to God" (p. 13). Assumedly, a self perceived as an inner desert is a self cleaned up from all the unquietous and evil preoccupation which distracts the individual from devoting his soul to belief in God. The goal of a journey through the desert, such as the one initiated by Coelho's protagonist, can be turned by the desert's silence into a spiritual quest for the Divine.

III. THE DESERT AS A SPIRITUAL GUIDE

A short time before his journey ends, Santiago experiences a high level of self-realization, individuation and self-balance (Coelho, 1992, p. 136). Progressively, he and the alchemist become "content simply to contemplate the desert, and to drink ...from the Soul of the World. The boy and his heart had become friends and neither was capable now of betraying the other" (p. 141). In the same context, Carl Jung (1964) considers that man's personality appears at first as "an inborn possibility," it may emerge very "slightly, or it may develop very relatively completely during one's lifetime" till one becomes a complete human being, aware of all his hidden aspects (p. 162). The process is completed when the boy turns himself into wind; an act which the chief of the Twariq tribe respectfully believes to show the greatness of Allah (Coelho, 1992, p. 156).

Interestingly, Santiago interacts with nature as a living being which can feel his joy and misery. For example, shortly after he enters the African desert, he meets the crystal merchant; the boy is so optimistic and offers to work for a whole day to earn money for the travel. But, the merchant encounters him with the harsh reality that even a whole year of work will not suffice to gain enough money. At that time, a kind of despair and sadness enters the boy's heart and the whole world of the desert

falls sad "it was as if the world had fallen silent because the boy's soul had" (Coelho, 1992, p. 49). This shows the fusion between the inner state of the boy's heart and that of the surrounding nature. By so doing, Coelho zooms on the self as a part joined strongly to the desert natural space rather than something alien and outside its realm.

In the desert of *The Alchemist*, there is an ambiguous power which may satisfy one's longing for spiritual knowledge. Few days after his meeting with Fatima, the boy sits in the desert thinking about many questions related to man and his existence. Suddenly, he "felt an urge to go out into the desert, to see if its silence held the answers to his questions" (p. 104). In this sense, the desert is a land which forges a mystic individual who believes that its natural world holds super sensual abilities and is "a genuine primary manifestation of the ultimate Ground" which can please one's hunger for comprehensions (Mercer, 2008, p. 27). For this reason, the desert becomes the friendly companion and the trustful teacher for the characters who acknowledge that by saying: "Everything we know was taught to us by the desert" (Coelho, 1992, p. 113).

The alchemist who lived the two hundred years of his life in the desert, has developed a Platonic sense of belief in the reality of the world and its Creator. In typical Platonic words, he restates that:

"This natural world is only an image and a copy of paradise. The existence of this world is simply a guarantee that there exists a world that is perfect. God created the world so that, through its visible objects, man could understand his spiritual teachings and the marvels of his wisdom." (Coelho, 1992, p. 133)

He believes that being pure, clean and vast, the desert can substitute for all other places on earth and provide a best example for the manifestation of the divine spark in nature. Thus, he simply advises the boy to embrace its purity by telling him: "so immerse yourself in it. The desert will give you an understanding of the world... all you have to do is contemplate a simple grain of sand, and you will see in it all the marvels of creation" (p. 134). In this passage, the desert is seen as a medium of knowledge.

IV. THE MYSTICAL UNION WITH THE SOUL OF THE WORLD

The protagonist of *The Alchemist* walks away from the city of Andalusia and that of Tangier and heads toward the unknown mysterious desert where he will seek and find spiritual perception. After some months of wandering in its geography, contemplating and touching everything on its surface, he gains satisfaction. In contrast, the city, which is demographically crowded, constitutes a source of melancholy and depression for those who experience peace in the desert (Coelho, 1992, p. 56).

Paulo Coelho represents the desert as a buoyant space which strengthens one's self confidence and leads one to understand that he is himself "vital—a free centre of energy;" a being who can move to higher levels, to greater realities and self-fulfillments (Underhill, 2002, p. 31). Helped by the desert omens, the boy becomes conscious of many secrets that rule the world. He understands that man can be the master of the world because he is endowed with an inner power that can change the way the universe responds to his dreams and wishes. So, his heart tells him that "most people see the world as a threatening place, and, because they do, the world turns out,

indeed, to be a threatening place”(Coelho, 1992, p. 138). That is to say, the way we perceive things has its power and influence on the whole world.

Santiago's journey is led basically by a revealed intention to find out a hidden treasure. However, in its symbolic implication, it is a journey of quest for absolute truths about the whole existence in the physical terrain of the desert. Measured by mystical standards, says Evelyn Underhill (2002), “hidden truth is the object of man's craving”(p. 4). The boy, the Englishman, and the alchemist, are all after one unified objective which is the reality of the universe, its soul and Creator. As far as the boy is concerned, his utmost perception is noticed when in the silence of the desert he “reached through to the Soul of the World, and saw that it was a part of the Soul of God. And he saw that the Soul of God was his own soul. And that he, a boy, could perform miracles” (Coelho, 1992, p. 160).

Near the end of his journey, the boy has to climb some heights to reach the destined pyramids. This climbing is very much symbolic of the spiritual ascent he is about to accomplish and the discovery of reality to which he is heading: “when he reached the top of the dune, his heart leapt” (p. 168). Underhill (2002) affirms that “inside your spirit there is a little door, so high up that only by hard climbing can you reach it” (p. 43). Hence, he climbs the heights to reach the spiritual within himself. Before that, when he is wandering in the desert's magnificent landscapes, the boy applies the entire mystic pieces of advice which can be summed up in Underhill's (2002) words: “trust your deep instincts: use your latent powers. Appropriate that divine, creative life which is the very substance of your being. Remake yourself in its interest, if you would know its beauty and its truth”(p. 15). By so doing, the boy gets a double treasure because his self is completely freed from the imprisonment of the mere senses. By being able to turn himself into wind, which is basically an ability consecrated to the Divinity, Coelho advances the belief that

“Mysticism is essentially a movement of the heart, seeking to transcend the limitations of the individual standpoint and to surrender itself to ultimate Reality; for no personal gain, to satisfy the transcendental curiosity, to obtain no other worldly joys, but purely from an instinct of love.” (Underhill, 2002, p. 7)

It is clear that in Coelho's narrative a harmonious relationship is established between human beings and the desert geography. They coexist in peace without trying to monopolize each other. The desert landscape in this text is highly alluring, for it stimulates encounter with that reliable human faculty which grants the individual the capability of discerning spiritual truth. A similar account of the desert experiences appears in the Judao-Christian writings of Philo and Clement who see the desert as the most suitable place for decency. In this land all the conditions conduct to contemplation, detachment from the amoralities of the crowd and focus on the inner self in a search for tranquility and peace of mind.

In the same token, the desert allows the boy to reach beyond the known phenomenal world to acknowledge that all things are one. Step by step, his journey becomes a mythic one, unlimited by the confinements of space and time. In the magical scene when he talks to the sun, he says: “I know the Soul of the World, because we have talked at great length to each other during this endless trip through the universe” (Coelho, 1992, p. 157). As such, his journey is also one of descent into the soul of man and that of the universe.

Having immersed himself in the quietness of the desert and its majestic emptiness, the boy is granted the chance to communicate with his heart and listen to its advice and enjoy tranquility. His heart transmits to him that it receives a revelation from The Soul of the World, saying that: "everyone on earth has a treasure, that awaits him... we people's hearts, seldom say much about those treasures, because people no longer want to go in search of them. We speak of them only to children" (Coelho, 1992, p. 138). Therefore, the suggestion that his heart has already told him about the treasure means that he still possesses the innocence which can nurture his faith.

According to Crossfiled Happold (1970) explains that there are two urges in life; one toward selfhood, individualization, and separation; the other is toward "escape from the loneliness of the self into something bigger than self," this is the mysticism of knowledge, of finding the secret of the universe and how to make it work on one's behalf (p. 40). Accordingly, as he spends a longer time in the desert, Santiago's understanding of the mystic forces that permeate every element in it becomes larger. There, in the open serenity of the land, he communicates with his horse, the flying birds, the wind, the grains of sand, the sun, and, above all, with the Soul of the World, which speaks to him through dreams and visions. David Klemm (2004) maintains that:

"the experience of the desert is an experience of the overturning of human finitude, the opening of human being to the mystical basis of its identity. This place is where the divine as "God" empties itself into finite human being and where finite human being discovers its own deep participation in transcendence." (p. xii- xiii)

Significantly, reading in the history of the word "mysticism," Happold (1970) states that the word has its origins in the Greek mysteries when a mystic man was understood to be the person endowed and given access to the knowledge of these mysteries, allowing rebirth into eternity (p. 18). In this sense, after his achievements during the journey, the boy could become a mystic person who creates a long-lasting legend for himself. For instance, when he succeeds to turn himself into a Simum wind, he became a legend (Coelho, 1992, p. 161). Though people's reactions were varied, those who considered it as a sign of God's glory do showed ecstasy.³ Turning one's self from one state of being into another is stunningly a divine activity, and when he does it successfully, the boy confirms one of the basic tenets of mysticism which is the belief that "man is in some way a sharer in the divine life" (Happold, 1970, p. 44).

Far from the mystical manifestations of the desert, this land is loaded with other positive images. On the one hand, the boy looks at it with longing; with hope for coming back, and with desire for finding a treasure. On the other hand, for Fatima, the desert represents a "hope for return" because she waits for the man who wanders its tracks and endures all its obligations. In Coelho's narrative, just as we see it in The Odyssey and Ulysses' journey, the motif of "going back" is apparent because true treasure is to be found in one's home.

The treasure Santiago was looking for lays buried under the sycamore tree in Spain where he sees the dream for the first time. This consolidates the belief that the intended goal of the journey is, in addition to material gains, to test one's determination, inner strength and endurance. Above all, it makes one understand that the true treasure is in discovering the energy within, finding a home and in having a family to care and to commit one's self to. Departing from Campbell's quest pattern,

Coelho's protagonist does not encounter any trouble in his way back home and there is no "Refusal of the Return" in his journey (Campbell, 1968, p. 193). This shows that when home summons, the individual shall answer the call because it is a blessed act.

The journey motif and the appearance of a Ulysses, who embarks on a journey looking for Penelope, appear in other works by Coelho, such as *The Zahir*. However, according to Mansour Wissam (2006), while Ulysses undergoes all the physical and spiritual difficulties to reach Ithaca and restore his position by force, Coelho's protagonist in *The Alchemist* is a "postmodern European subject with mystical tendencies that mediate and soften any possibility toward aggression" (p. 93). Hence, when the majority of Campbell's heroes have destructive forces with which they crush their enemies, a hero by Coelho, adds Wissam Mansour (2006), "arms himself with sensitivity, sensibility [and] a passionate heart" (p. 93).

CONCLUSION

Paulo Coelho's representation of the desert is colored by the spiritual tendencies to which he becomes a devotee after a trip of enlightenment along the medieval pilgrims' route between Spain and France in the late 1970s. The spiritual awakening that he achieved prompts his writings and personal perception of the natural sceneries, starting from his books *The Pilgrimage* and *The Alchemist*.

Coelho is a writer who has faith that once one sets himself to his purpose and dreams, he can succeed and overcome all the obstacles that life puts in one's way. This becomes obvious in portraying the desert as a space which responds to the needs of the individual whose inner force is able to stimulate sustenance from nature. In *The Alchemist*, Santiago, the alchemist, and the Englishmen show a force of will which influences the course of the events and makes of the land a place of possibilities rather than a space of obstacles. Coelho teaches the lesson that once one believes in the magic of being human, positivity one will reign over his world; a doctrine which is best manifested in the constructive way the desert reacts toward the needs of man.

The reading of *The Alchemist* showed that the belief in the desert as a space of solace, rejuvenation and devotion did not end with the Desert Fathers. In this narrative, the dessert empty space and its silence sustain Santiago by several illuminating mystical experiences which increase his awareness of the world beyond the physical and phenomenal one. The analogy between Coelho's representation of the desert and that of the Desert Fathers appears clearly in this narrative where the phenomenal and the transcendental realms coexist. The world of the senses is redeemed by believing that it holds a spark of the Ideal one.

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TO QUOTE THE AUTHOR :

ENTEGHAR Kahina – RAHIL Faiza, (2025), « The Hero's Journey of Encounter with the Transcendental in Paulo Coelho' The Alchemist (1988) », *Ex Professo*, V 10, N 01, pp. 85- 97, Url :

<https://www.asjp.cerist.dz/en/PresentationRevue/484>