The Alchemist

Topics for Research and Writing Projects

1. Research the history of alchemy and explore the way Coelho uses the concepts and practices of this mystical science in The Alchemist. You might want to consider the relationship between alchemy and the Pyramids; alchemy in Christian and Islamic cultures; or alchemy as a means of both material and spiritual transformation.
2. Much of the action in The Alchemist hinges on the right interpretation of omens, signs, and meaningful coincidences, which the Swiss psychologist Carl Jung termed synchronicity. Research synchronicity and discuss those moments in the novel where “coincidence” plays and important role in guiding Santiago.
3. Spend several weeks closely observing how you make decisions. Consider the following questions: Do non-rational factors play an important role in your choices? Do you ever look for signs or “omens” to guide you? Has reading The Alchemist changed the way you view this process? Compose a narrative essay in which you recount a decision that you made and reflect on the factors that influenced your decision-making process.
4. In The Alchemist, King Mechizedek explains the principle of “favorability,” or beginner’s luck, a concept that is also important in Zen Buddhism, which emphasizes “beginner’s mind.” Do some research on this topic and discuss how it works in the novel. In what situations does it help Santiago? Why would a beginner be luckier than someone with more experience? Have you ever benefited from beginner’s luck or witnessed someone else who did something surprisingly well the first time?
5. Write a paper discussing what you think your own “Personal Legend” is. Do you have a dream you want to achieve in your life? Using The Alchemist as a guide, create a multimedia visual essay that describes your “Personal Legend.” Your essay should incorporate images, sound, and text.
6. Many spiritual quests involve a journey into the desert. Research the subject of desert spirituality and discuss the relationship between the outer landscape and inner world in The Alchemist. In what ways is the desert the perfect landscape for a spiritual journey? What does Santiago learn about himself from the desert?
7. Write a paper discussing the significance of the novel’s ending – of the boy finding his treasure back where his journey began, buried among the roots of a tree, in the very church where he dreamed of his treasure. Did the ending surprise you? Did it change the way you look at everything that leads up to it? What might the tree represent in this context? Why did the boy have to go so far to find that the treasure was back home?