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**The Alchemist Graphic Novel**

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# Celt

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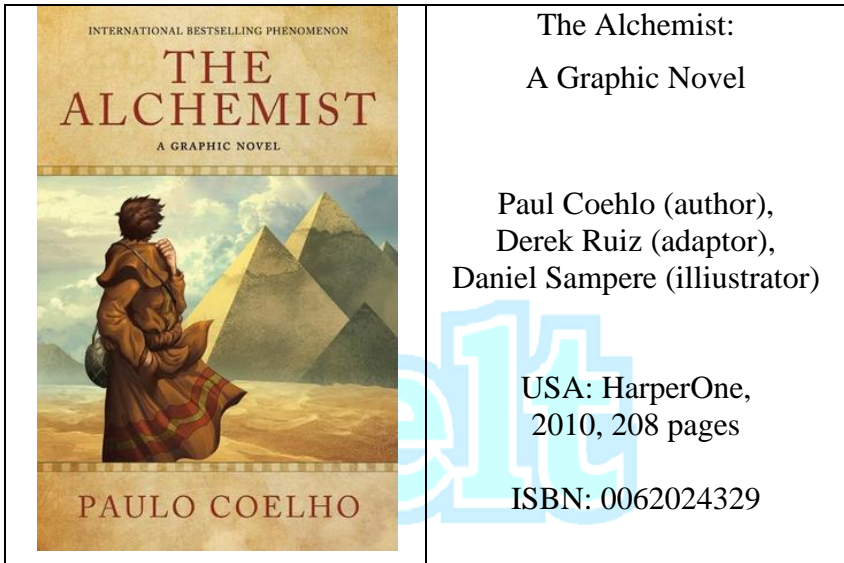
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## A BOOK REVIEW: THE ALCHEMIST GRAPHIC NOVEL



Reviewed by **Brian Locker**<sup>1</sup>

“People are capable, at any time in their lives, of doing what they dream of.”

— Paulo Coelho, *Alchemist*

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What is *the Alchemist: A Graphic Novel* and why is it important? Created from the literary classic and best-selling novel of 30 million copies worldwide, *The Alchemist* is created as a graphic novel for the first time to a new audience of visual readers. Adapted by Derek Ruiz with art by Daniel Sampere, the graphic novel relies heavily on portraits to represent the details of the classic novel form. Although new in form, the themes, symbols, and philosophical elements of the original are retained with an artistic twist.

The main character's journey is a time-honored tale. He ventures forth from his home, encounters trials and tribulations, and, in the end, discovers treasure *within himself*. But how could this graphic adaptation become so popular? In other words, what is the global appeal?

As reviewer Susan Sylvia (2013: ¶13) explains, the plot is inspired by “The Ruined Man that Became Rich again through a Dream,” a short story from *One Thousand and One Nights*, a product of the golden age of Islamic literature. The author, Paul Coehlo, took four of the fable's themes (personal quest, awareness of omens, soul of the word, and listening to one's heart), and crafted *The Alchemist* within two weeks in 1988 (Sylvia 2013: ¶14). Nearly 22 years later under Coehlo's supervision, Derek Ruiz retained these themes when modifying the content of *The Alchemist* into graphic novel format as did the artist, Daniel Sampere, by drawing readers to the visual symbols of the plot such as the oasis, hawk, and pyramids (see below). The storyline can be seen as a remodel of a classic story, but more importantly, as both a reflection of Paul Coehlo's life and as a product of 1960s spirituality—centrally focused on self-realization.





As Coehlo expressed in a past interview (Elnadi, Baghat and Rifaat 2013), as a product of the 60s, he experimented with drugs, different religions, and mental institutions (including forced electroconvulsive therapy), before making his mark on literary history.

I will begin with a brief description and summary followed by an analysis of what I find most appealing about the graphic novel's philosophy.

The setting is an undetermined time in Spain and Africa. The hero and protagonist, Santiago, is a shepherd boy of the Andalusian highlands who dreams of finding treasure near the Pyramids. Two dispatchers – an old gypsy woman and an old wise man, who turns out to be the biblical King of Salem – tell the boy he must go to Egypt to follow his dream. After selling his sheep and boarding a ship, Santiago arrives in Egypt and encounters a host of characters before completing his journey – including villains (thieves and enemy soldiers), a donor of magical knowledge (the 200 year old “Alchemist”), helpers (“the crystal merchant” and caravan leader), a princess (Fatima, Santiago's soul mate of a desert oasis), and a false hero (“the Englishman”).

The tone is simple yet purposely educational – so overly informational, in fact, that the graphic novel sometimes reads like a self-help book. For instance, when the King of Salem declares, “There is a force that wants you to realize your Personal Legend” anyone familiar with *The Secret*, a recent bestseller by Rhonda Byrne, would see the similarity.

The author’s objective in narration, as Sylvia (2013: ¶ 21) argues, combines simplicity in language (as in a fable) with symbolism and magical realism (a realistic setting with magical occurrences). The artwork is simple yet powerful besides the typical display of females with slim waists and large busts. The point of view is primarily third person omniscient combined with first-hand introspection from Santiago, and the panels transition smoothly for the most part except for occasional disjointedness. Ruiz retained important literary elements of the novel in-tact, while shortening and modifying the majority of the dialogue, for instance, including an occasional “Baah” from a sheep.

Now, let us look more deeply into the philosophical elements. More specifically, let’s focus on how Paul Coehlo successfully integrated mythology, animism, and self-empowerment into a well written text, and how by doing so he targets a New Age audience. Furthermore, let’s see how Sampere pictured these aspects in the graphic novel to draw in visual readers.

The importance of alchemy, a pre-scientific chemistry concerned with transformation and longevity, is evident throughout the novel. The 200-year-old Alchemist (whose face is patterned on Coehlo himself) conquers mortality through alchemy, and learns, as Santiago does, to converse with and transform into different natural elements, such as the wind. Alchemy also allows Santiago’s transformation of fear

into courage and ignorance into wisdom – a common theme throughout the graphic novel.

Other legends and myths include the story of Melchizedek, the biblical King of Salem; the ancient, Hebraic divination devices, Urim and Thummim; the alchemic legends of the philosopher's stone and the elixir of life; and the story of Narcissus in the Prologue. Coehlo (together with Sampere's imagery) blend these mythological elements together with symbols from history (including the pyramids and the abandoned Church), as well as from nature (including the sheep, desert, a hawk, and the Andalusia highlands). Sampere targets these aspects with size, shape, and color to model the important ideas to the reader. Furthermore, the complexity of these symbols helps differentiate this graphic novel from a comic book.



In addition, by combining these myths and legends together with historical and natural symbols, Coehlo develops sophistication in the plot that attracts an audience similar to that reached by “Da Vinci Code” author Dan Brown years later, but without the suspense and conspiracy.

The ‘going back to our ancient roots’ philosophy of the graphic novel also includes animism, an important and

appealing aspect of the novel's theology. From the talking lake and goddess of the forest in the prologue to the talking wind (which unfortunately appears anthropomorphically in the graphic novel), desert, and sun later in the book, natural elements are animate subjects and part of the speech community. Furthermore, within the story is a belief that everything is evolving and everything (animate and inanimate) deserves to evolve as evident when the Alchemist warns of not respecting iron when trying to transform it into gold. Viewing nature as living and intelligent mirrors the Gaia hypothesis, as well as other aspects of the modern environmentalist movement, all of which appeal to modern and educated readers.

Within this evolving eco-system, wisdom depends on reading nature and omens. In the beginning as a shepherd, Santiago listens to and watches nature for protection for him and his sheep. Later, as Santiago's "reading" skills enhance, he is able to see deeper into the omens of the natural world in the form of visions – for example, with the hawk and the beetle (which are both pictured beautifully). And in the end, he is able to communicate verbally and transform directly into the wind itself.

As such Santiago's stages of enlightenment correspond directly with Santiago's ability to connect with the natural world—indigenous spirituality at its core—and is another reason Paul Coehlo succeeds in attracting readers who are open to other spiritual viewpoints.

Coehlo's message to the reader is simple: seek personal religious experiences outside of institutionalized dogma. The novel suggests ordinary people such as "the baker" and "the crystal merchant" become "sheep" through social customs, and once sheep, are unable to recognize and follow their personal omens.



So why is *The Alchemist: a Graphic Novel* successful? The answer, I believe, is that the novel's language is simple; the moral messages of following one's heart and reconnecting with nature appeal to a modern audience; and the graphic novel format attracts a new generation.

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