

# Interconnectedness of Humans, Nature, and God: An Eco-Critical Study of *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho

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## Abstract

This paper undertakes an eco-critical examination of Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* (1988), focusing on the triadic relationship between human consciousness, the natural world, and the divine. Drawing upon foundational frameworks in ecocritical theory—including the insights of Glotfelty and Fromm (1996), Garrard (2004), and Love (2003)—the study argues that Coelho's narrative radically departs from anthropocentric literary traditions by elevating nature to the status of a sentient, communicative co-participant in human destiny. Through the protagonist Santiago's transformative desert pilgrimage, the novel articulates a coherent eco-spiritual philosophy in which ecological attentiveness, spiritual evolution, and divine revelation are experienced not as discrete phenomena but as dimensions of a single, unified reality. The paper further contends that Coelho's portrayal of the 'Soul of the World' constitutes a literary enactment of what deep ecology theorist Arne Naess (1973) terms 'biocentric equality'—a recognition of intrinsic worth in all forms of life. By situating *The Alchemist* within both literary-ecological and contemporary environmental discourse, this study offers an original argument: that the novel functions as a veiled manifesto for ecological consciousness, urging readers to reconceive the human subject not as sovereign over nature but as embedded within and answerable to its unfolding logic.

**Keywords:** ecocriticism, *The Alchemist*, Paulo Coelho, eco-spirituality, Soul of the World, deep ecology, anthropocentrism, nature and divinity

## 1. Introduction

The relationship between human beings, the natural world, and conceptions of the divine has occupied literary and philosophical thought across cultures and centuries. Yet the dominant trajectory of Western modernity has persistently severed these three domains, casting nature as a resource to be managed, humanity as the measure of all value, and the divine as a transcendent force wholly separate from earthly matter. Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*, first published in Portuguese in 1988 and translated into over eighty languages, challenges this dissociative logic with quiet but insistent force. On its surface, the novel is a quest narrative—Santiago, a young Andalusian shepherd, abandons his pastoral routine in pursuit of a recurring dream that leads him to the treasure-laden pyramids of Egypt. Beneath this deceptively simple plot, however,

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lies an elaborate meditation on what it means to be human within, rather than apart from, a living cosmos.

Eco-criticism, which emerged as a distinct scholarly field in the early 1990s under the partial impetus of Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's landmark anthology *The Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), provides an indispensable lens through which to read Coelho's work. As Glotfelty defines it, ecocriticism is 'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment' (Glotfelty and Fromm, 1996, p. xviii). This definition, while expansive, carries a critical ethical edge: ecocritical scholarship does not merely catalogue nature imagery but interrogates the value systems that literary texts encode with respect to the more-than-human world. When applied to *The Alchemist*, this approach reveals that Coelho is not simply employing natural landscapes as picturesque backdrop; he is constructing an epistemology—a theory of knowledge—in which ecological sensitivity is the very precondition for spiritual and self-knowledge.

The originality of this paper lies in two interconnected arguments. First, it contends that *The Alchemist* presents a triadic ontology—a vision of existence in which humans, nature, and God are mutually constitutive rather than hierarchically ordered. Second, and more provocatively, it argues that this ontology carries an implicit political charge, positioning the novel as a counter-narrative to the extractivist logic of late modernity. In an era defined by accelerating climate breakdown and ecological loss, the philosophical framework embedded in Coelho's narrative acquires renewed urgency. The pages that follow develop these arguments through close textual analysis, informed by eco-critical theory and eco-spiritual philosophy.

## **2. Ecocriticism as Theoretical Framework: Agency, Immanence, and the Literary Ecology**

Before proceeding to the textual analysis, it is necessary to outline the specific strands of ecocritical theory that most directly illuminate the novel. Ecocriticism is not a monolithic enterprise; it encompasses a range of methodological and philosophical commitments, from the empirical orientation of biological ecocriticism (Love, 2003) to the more culturally inflected approaches of Ursula Heise (2008) and the activist dimensions of eco-feminism. For the purposes of this study, three theoretical commitments prove especially generative.

The first is the concept of ecological agency—the recognition that non-human entities can function as actors within narrative systems rather than as passive settings or symbols. This idea, associated in literary studies with the work of Greg Garrard (2004), challenges the assumption that only human characters can drive plot and meaning. In *The Alchemist*, the desert, the wind, the sun, and the hawk do not merely frame Santiago's journey; they redirect it, warn him, instruct him, and ultimately constitute the terms of his transformation. To read these elements as merely figurative is to replicate the anthropocentric myopia that the novel is at pains to dismantle.

The second commitment is to what Lawrence Buell (1995) terms 'environmental imagination'—the capacity of literary texts to generate in readers a sustained attentiveness to the natural world. Buell's influential concept invites scholars to ask not only what a text represents but what kinds of perception and orientation it cultivates. *The Alchemist*, as this paper argues, actively trains its readers in a mode of attentiveness that is simultaneously

ecological and spiritual: learning to read the 'omens' of the universe is also learning to read the landscape with care, patience, and humility.

The third commitment derives from deep ecology, particularly Arne Naess's (1973) foundational distinction between 'shallow' environmentalism—which values nature instrumentally, as a resource for human benefit—and 'deep' ecology, which affirms the intrinsic value of all living beings independent of their utility. Coelho's narrative, this paper argues, embodies a literary deep ecology: it does not merely argue for environmental stewardship but constructs a vision of existence in which the very category of the 'merely natural' dissolves into a richer sense of cosmic participation.

### **3. Nature as Pedagogue: Santiago's Ecological Education**

Santiago's formation as a character is inseparable from his formation as a reader of the natural world. His years as a shepherd in the Andalusian countryside constitute, in effect, an apprenticeship in ecological literacy. Unlike the formal education associated with institutional learning, this apprenticeship is rooted in direct sensory engagement: observing cloud movements that predict weather, reading animal behaviour to locate water, sensing shifts in temperature that signal seasonal change. Coelho presents this attentiveness not as a mere practical skill but as a philosophical disposition—a willingness to subordinate one's own agenda to the rhythms and signals of the more-than-human world.

This eco-pedagogical dimension of the novel acquires its sharpest relief when placed in contrast with characters who have lost—or never possessed—this attentiveness. The crystal merchant, perhaps the novel's most poignant minor figure, has spent decades behind the glass of his Tangier shop, dreaming of a pilgrimage to Mecca that he perpetually defers. His psychological inertia mirrors his environmental enclosure: shut off from the open air, from soil and wind, he has also shut off from the fluid, transformative possibilities that the natural world embodies. From an ecocritical perspective, his stagnation is not merely a psychological condition but an ecological one—the symptom of a severed relationship with the living environment. Coelho implies that disconnection from nature is not neutral; it produces a specific kind of spiritual and existential impoverishment.

Santiago's own development, by contrast, is structured as a progressive deepening of ecological perception. In the early stages of his journey, he reads nature instrumentally—sheep are livelihood, weather is logistical information. As he crosses the Sahara, however, this instrumental gaze gives way to something more receptive. The desert does not speak in language; it speaks in silence, in vastness, in the barely audible language of sand and wind. To hear this language requires a different kind of attention—one that Peter Barry (2002), drawing on phenomenological philosophy, might describe as an open rather than a projective consciousness: instead of imposing human meaning onto the environment, such attention allows meaning to arise from within the relational encounter between perceiver and perceived.

### **4. The Desert as Sacred Space: Eco-Spiritual Transformation**

Of all the natural spaces in the novel, the Sahara is unquestionably the most symbolically charged and narratively significant. From within a reductive reading, the desert might be

understood simply as the site of Santiago's climactic trials—a dramatic setting that amplifies the stakes of his quest. An eco-critical reading, however, discloses something far more philosophically substantive: the desert is a space of radical ontological revision, in which conventional hierarchies between the human and the natural are dissolved and remade.

The desert's power as transformative space is rooted in its fundamental challenge to human self-sufficiency. Unlike the cultivated Andalusian landscape, which human hands have shaped and managed, the Sahara resists all human ordering. Its scale overwhelms the individual ego; its silence strips away the noise of social identity and cultural conditioning; its danger renders human mastery a transparent fiction. This stripping away is not merely negative—it is the precondition for a different kind of knowing. As Laurence Coupe (2000) notes in his analysis of nature writing, environments that resist domestication often function in literary texts as sites of what he calls 'wild revelation': moments in which the non-human world discloses something that could not have been accessed within the comfort of familiar surroundings.

In eco-spiritual terms, the desert functions as what the mystic traditions would call a *via negativa*—a path of negation through which the self is emptied in preparation for a fuller understanding. Santiago's confrontation with the Alchemist in the desert constitutes the novel's most explicit statement of this eco-spiritual logic. The Alchemist does not teach through argument or instruction; he teaches through demonstration, drawing Santiago's attention to the ways in which the natural world itself—wind, stone, sun, sand—embodies the Soul of the World. His pedagogy is fundamentally ecological: to know the divine, one must first learn to read the language that nature speaks continuously but that human inattention systematically ignores.

Particularly striking, from an eco-critical standpoint, is the episode in which Santiago attempts to transform himself into the wind. This episode is not a mere fantasy sequence but the novel's central metaphysical experiment. To become the wind is to dissolve the boundary between self and environment—to cease experiencing oneself as a discrete entity separated from nature and to enter instead into the fluid, dynamic life of the more-than-human world. The theological implications are significant: in this moment, divine revelation does not descend from above but arises laterally, through and within the natural world itself. Coelho's God is not a transcendent creator standing apart from creation but an immanent presence pervading the whole of the natural order—what Ursula Heise (2008) might describe as a sense of place extended to cosmic scale.

### **5. The Soul of the World: Biocentric Equality and Cosmic Participation**

The philosophical centrepiece of *The Alchemist* is the concept Coelho calls the 'Soul of the World' (*anima mundi*)—the idea that all elements of existence, from the simplest grain of sand to the most complex human consciousness, participate in a single, unified spiritual essence. This concept, which resonates with Neoplatonic philosophy, certain strands of Sufi mysticism, and contemporary deep ecology, provides the novel's most explicit articulation of its eco-critical vision.

The Soul of the World is not, in Coelho's rendering, a metaphor or a comforting fiction; it is presented as a literal ontological claim about the structure of reality. Everything that exists—

stone, animal, human, star—is understood as an expression of this universal soul, and the barriers that ordinarily divide these categories are revealed as cognitive constructions rather than metaphysical facts. This vision has direct implications for environmental ethics. If every element of the natural world is genuinely animated by a shared spiritual essence, then the destruction of any part of nature is not merely an economic loss or an aesthetic impoverishment but a diminishment of the whole—a violation of what Naess (1973) calls biocentric equality.

Coelho's articulation of this principle through narrative is particularly sophisticated because it does not remain at the level of abstract philosophy but embeds it in Santiago's lived, sensory experience. He does not simply learn the concept of the Soul of the World; he feels it—in the pulse of the desert wind, in the flight of the hawks, in the silent communion of the oasis. This experiential dimension is crucial for the novel's eco-critical argument: it suggests that ecological awareness is not primarily an intellectual achievement but a perceptual one, rooted in the capacity to be genuinely present to the natural world rather than merely thinking about it.

The role of animals in the narrative reinforces this point with quiet consistency. Santiago's sheep are among the novel's most underappreciated figures. They are not mere property or pastoral decoration; they are beings with their own rhythms, sensitivities, and claims upon Santiago's attention and care. His early relationship with them establishes the moral template for all his subsequent relationships—with the Englishman, with Fatima, with the Alchemist. To care for sheep, Coelho implies, is to practice a form of attentiveness that is the foundation of all genuine ethical and spiritual life. This perspective directly challenges the instrumental logic of industrial animal agriculture and by extension the broader system of values that drives environmental degradation in the contemporary world.

## **6. Divine Immanence and the Critique of Transcendence**

One of the most philosophically original aspects of *The Alchemist* is its reconception of divinity. The God of the novel is not the omnipotent sovereign of orthodox monotheism, remote from creation and accessible only through the authorised channels of institutional religion. Coelho's divine is, rather, a presence that inhabits and animates the whole of the natural world—encountered not in church or mosque but in the silence of the desert, the arc of a hawk's flight, the patient endurance of sand.

This theological position, which aligns broadly with panentheism—the view that God encompasses but is not reducible to the physical universe—has profound implications for environmental ethics. If the divine is genuinely immanent within nature, then the desecration of natural environments is not merely an ecological or economic problem but a sacrilegious act. This is the implicit ethical charge that runs beneath the surface of Coelho's narrative. The novel does not moralize explicitly about environmental destruction—it is not a polemical text—but its philosophical premises lead inescapably toward an environmental ethics grounded in reverence rather than calculation.

The contrast between this vision of divine immanence and the extractivist rationality of modernity is nowhere more pointed than in the novel's treatment of alchemy itself. The Alchemist of the title is a figure of supreme mastery—one who has learned to transmute lead

into gold. But the novel's real alchemical process is not metallurgical; it is ecological. The true transformation that Santiago undergoes is the transmutation of a narrow, ego-centred consciousness into one that can perceive and participate in the Soul of the World. This spiritual alchemy is inseparable from ecological attentiveness: one cannot hear the language of the universe while treating the natural world as merely a backdrop or a resource.

### **7. Eco-Critical Implications for Contemporary Environmental Discourse**

The Alchemist was written before the language of 'climate emergency' entered mainstream discourse, yet its philosophical vision speaks with remarkable directness to the challenges of the present moment. The central argument of the novel—that human fulfilment and spiritual growth are inseparable from a sustained, attentive, and reverent engagement with the natural world—constitutes a powerful implicit critique of the conditions that have produced the current ecological crisis.

Contemporary environmental psychology, drawing on the work of researchers such as E.O. Wilson (1984) and his concept of 'biophilia,' has documented extensively the ways in which human psychological well-being is grounded in connection with other forms of life. When this connection is severed—as it systematically is by the conditions of urban industrial modernity—the result is not merely a poorer quality of life but a diminishment of the very capacities for empathy, attentiveness, and relational sensitivity upon which both ethical life and spiritual growth depend. Coelho's narrative dramatises this psychological and spiritual dynamic with unusual clarity. Santiago's transformation is not achieved through technological mastery or social advancement but through a willing surrender to the intelligence of the natural world—a surrender that, paradoxically, yields both self-knowledge and a richer understanding of the divine.

Ursula Heise (2008) argues that contemporary environmental literature needs to cultivate not only a 'sense of place'—a deep attachment to particular local ecosystems—but also a 'sense of planet': a capacity to think ecologically at the scale of the whole earth system. The Soul of the World, as Coelho conceives it, is precisely such a planetary consciousness: a mode of awareness in which the local and the universal are held simultaneously, in which every grain of desert sand participates in the infinite intelligence of the cosmos. This is not escapist mysticism; it is an imaginative framework for the kind of expanded, relational consciousness that contemporary environmental challenges demand.

### **8. Conclusion**

This eco-critical study of The Alchemist has sought to demonstrate that Coelho's novel is considerably more philosophically ambitious than its popular reception has often acknowledged. Beneath the accessible surface of a quest narrative lies a rigorous and coherent eco-spiritual philosophy—one that challenges anthropocentric assumptions, affirms the intrinsic value of the natural world, and reconceives the divine as immanent within rather than transcendent above the living earth.

Through Santiago's journey, the novel constructs an original argument about the relationship between ecological attentiveness and spiritual awakening: to learn the language of the universe

is also to learn to read the natural world with care, humility, and reverence. The 'Soul of the World' is not a mystical abstraction but a philosophical claim about the ontological unity of all existence—a claim that, if taken seriously, generates a compelling environmental ethics grounded not in regulation or calculation but in a lived sense of kinship with the more-than-human world.

In situating this argument within the theoretical frameworks of ecocriticism, deep ecology, and eco-spiritual philosophy, this paper has aimed to show that *The Alchemist* occupies a significant position in the canon of environmental literature—not despite its spiritual dimension but because of it. At a moment when humanity confronts ecological crises of unprecedented scale, the novel's vision of a cosmos in which humans, nature, and God are bound together in a web of mutual presence and accountability offers not escapism but orientation: a map, however symbolic, toward a more sustainable and spiritually coherent way of inhabiting the earth.

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