

**Freedom Responsibility and the Search for Meaning: An Existentialist
Analysis of Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist***

Rajeswari R

Assistant professor Department of English,PSG College of Arts &
Science,Coimbatore.

Article Received: 16/02/2026

Article Accepted: 17/03/2026

Published Online: 18/03/2026

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.03.237

Abstract:

This paper explores the themes of freedom, responsibility, personal growth, and self-actualization in Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*, using an existentialist framework. The novel follows the journey of Santiago, a young shepherd who embarks on a quest to find his Personal Legend, a metaphorical treasure that symbolizes the pursuit of true fulfilment. Through Santiago's experiences, the novel illustrates existentialist principles, particularly the idea that meaning is not externally given but must be actively created through individual choices and actions. Central to this exploration are the concepts of freedom and personal responsibility, which allow Santiago to shape his destiny by taking ownership of his decisions, despite the challenges and uncertainties he faces. As he progresses, Santiago also undergoes significant personal growth and self-actualization, moving from a state of uncertainty to one of clarity and understanding. His journey reflects the existential belief that individuals must take responsibility for their own lives and actively seek meaning in a world that offers no inherent purpose. Ultimately, the paper argues that in *The Alchemist*, freedom, responsibility, and the search for meaning are not mere prerequisites for happiness they form the very essence of the human experience, guiding Santiago to a deeper understanding of both himself and the universe around him.

Key Words: Existentialism, Freedom, Personal Growth, Self-Actualization, Existential Choice

Introduction:

Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* (1993) can be read as more than a spiritual fable; its narrative also resonates with existentialist ideas. The protagonist, Santiago, repeatedly exercises his freedom and responsibility as he pursues his Personal Legend. Throughout his

journey from selling his sheep and overcoming obstacles in the desert to loving Fatima and finally unearthing treasure Santiago must confront the core existential themes of freedom, self-determination, and the creation of meaning. His experiences mirror key existentialist notions: that individuals are “condemned to be free” and must assume responsibility for defining their own existence. In *The Alchemist*, freedom is portrayed not as license but as an opportunity for personal growth. As one episode has Santiago reflecting, “There was nothing to hold him back except himself” (Coelho 30). This insight parallels Jean-Paul Sartre’s assertion that human beings are inherently free and thus must be responsible for everything they do. Integrating Coelho’s text with existentialist philosophy reveals how Santiago’s choices exemplify freedom and authenticity, showing that personal growth and self-actualization arise only when one forges meaning through one’s own decisions.

Coelho’s narrative repeatedly emphasizes that Santiago alone can choose his path. Early on, Santiago must decide between two very different lives: the familiar routine with his sheep and the risky quest for treasure. As Coelho writes, “He had to choose between something he had become accustomed to and something he wanted to have” (29). This moment epitomizes existential freedom: Santiago recognizes his liberty to choose in spite of comfort or convention. The character of the wind itself becomes a metaphor for freedom in the novel. When Santiago observes the wind’s vast liberty, he realizes that he too “could have the same freedom. There was nothing to hold him back except himself” (30). In these lines, Coelho captures an essential existential insight: the only true limits on our freedom are the ones we impose. Jean-Paul Sartre famously concurs, proclaiming that “man is condemned to be free”: although we did not choose to exist, once “thrown into this world” we are entirely at liberty and therefore accountable for our choices. Like Sartre’s hypothetical man, Santiago did not choose his birth or initial station as a shepherd, but he must now define himself through choices. His decision to pursue his dream even at the cost of losing what was safe and familiar demonstrates the existential maxim that existence precedes essence: Santiago creates his essence by the very act of choosing his destiny.

Sartre’s concept of “condemned to be free” implies that freedom inherently carries responsibility. The novel underscores this link as well: Santiago is free to go after the treasure, but he must also bear the consequences of every decision. After being robbed in Tangier, Santiago could have blamed fate or given up entirely, yet instead he takes responsibility for recovering from the loss. He begins anew by working at a crystal shop, learning lessons that ultimately bring him closer to his goal. Coelho writes that Santiago “realized that he had to choose between thinking of himself as the poor victim of a thief and as an adventurer in quest of his treasure. ‘I’m an adventurer, looking for treasure,’ he said to himself” (44). This self-dialogue illustrates Santiago’s embrace of responsibility: he refuses

the role of helpless victim and reaffirms his agency. In existential terms, he rejects “bad faith” and accepts authentic freedom. Sartre’s lecture-essay *Existentialism Is a Humanism* drives home this point when he insists that once a person finds themselves in the world, “from the moment that [he] is thrown into this world he is responsible for everything he does.” Similarly, Santiago’s journey suggests that he has no external destiny forcing his hand; his success or failure depends on his own engagement with the world and the choices he willingly makes.

Santiago’s freedom is not abstract but grounded in concrete possibilities he must actively choose. Heidegger’s philosophy further clarifies this by explaining that human existence continually faces the choice to be itself or not to be itself. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger notes that “Dasein always understands itself in terms of its existence in terms of a possibility of itself: to be itself or not itself.” In other words, each person’s being is a question of realizing potential or remaining inauthentic. He continues that “to exist authentically is to be myself, to choose my possibilities of being.” Santiago’s journey reflects precisely this Heideggerian ideal. Initially, he exists in a comfortable but routine manner among his flock; but then, when faced with a choice, he chooses his possibility as an adventurer rather than remain a complacent shepherd. By actively shaping his own path, Santiago exemplifies the authentic mode of existence: his identity and meaning emerge only through the concrete project of achieving his Personal Legend.

Furthermore, the novel shows how freedom and responsibility yield personal growth. Each step of the journey expands Santiago’s understanding of himself and the world. The realm of personal growth in existential thought can be seen as discovering or actualizing one’s potential through free engagement. In *The Alchemist*, knowledge often comes through experience an experiential learning that echoes existentialism’s emphasis on action. For instance, Santiago learns from every setback. The Englishman teaches him that understanding the Soul of the World requires patient study and openness, and Santiago gradually learns to “read the Language of the World” through observation of nature (Coelho 72). His heart and mind expand as he deciphers omens and elements around him, suggesting that freedom means learning to interpret reality on one’s own terms. This personal growth aligns with Albert Camus’s idea that freedom involves the pursuit of self-betterment. Camus writes: “Freedom is nothing but a chance to be better.” In Santiago’s case, freedom indeed becomes a chance to be better: by choosing to pursue his dream, he grows in wisdom and courage beyond his humble beginnings.

Love itself in *The Alchemist* also intersects with existential growth. Santiago falls for Fatima at the oasis and faces the choice of staying with her or continuing to chase his

treasure. Coelho uses this to dramatize the existential tension between attachment and freedom. Even as love offers deep fulfillment, Santiago realizes he cannot sacrifice his own journey for comfort. The alchemist helps him see that true love will not thwart one's freedom; instead, it can strengthen one's resolve. This mirrors Sartre's idea that even interpersonal relationships must be negotiated freely, not as obligations that nullify one's subjectivity. Santiago's refusal to settle permanently at the oasis, reconciliation of love with existential responsibility: he does not abandon Fatima permanently, but he also does not allow love to imprison him. In existential terms, he remains faithful to his own potentiality, while also choosing love as a meaningful part of his life. This echoes Heidegger's notion that authenticity does not mean living in isolation but involves choosing one's own values and commitments – indeed, Santiago chooses Fatima out of love, knowing he can continue on his quest.

Camus's philosophy of rebellion and the absurd provides another lens on Santiago's experience. The world of *The Alchemist* is unpredictable and sometimes hostile: thieves, tribal wars, and the deserts' harshness could all extinguish Santiago. These experiences evoke Camus's absurdity, the sense that the world may appear indifferent or even hostile to human hopes. Yet Santiago persists. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus imagines Sisyphus eternally pushing a rock uphill only to have it roll down, and concludes that "one must imagine Sisyphus happy" – not because his task has meaning, but because he defiantly owns it. Similarly, when faced with danger, Santiago refuses to see himself as a hapless victim. Recall how he chooses to see himself not as "the poor victim of a thief" but as an adventurer in search of treasure (Coelho 44). This mirrors Camus's idea of revolt: the existential rebel does not surrender to despair even in an absurd situation but instead finds meaning in the struggle itself. Indeed, Camus famously wrote that "I rebel, therefore I exist." Santiago rebels against fate each time he consciously decides to go on, reaffirming that his life has the meaning he grants it through action.

Camus also emphasizes that genuine freedom in an oppressive world requires self-definition: "the only way to deal with an unfree world is to become so absolutely free that your very existence is an act of rebellion." In pursuing his dream, Santiago literally transforms an unfree world of convention into an opportunity for liberation. His personal legend is to travel and seek treasure, but by embracing the journey, he turns every obstacle into part of his own story. Even the master alchemist's test turning lead into gold becomes a trial of resolve. Through these ordeals, Santiago becomes "so absolutely free" in the Camusian sense: his existence rebels against any narrative that he is just a simple shepherd or destined to a solitary life. Each time he acts from conviction, he affirms his freedom in a universe that might otherwise seem indifferent.

Through these experiences of choosing and learning, Santiago moves toward self-actualization. Though Maslow did not use existential terms, the idea of self-actualization overlaps with becoming one's true self – a concept central to existentialism. Coelho's text suggests that only by pursuing his deepest desires does Santiago come to understand who he really is. When he finally reaches the physical treasure, he realizes that the journey itself was the real transformation. The lessons he learned – faith in omens, trust in love, confidence in himself – were his true treasures. This echoes existentialism's emphasis on the journey of self-creation. As Sartre noted, "existence precedes essence man first of all exists, encounters himself and defines himself afterwards." In Santiago's case, his essence is forged through experience: he does not carry a predefined identity to the desert, but discovers it along the way.

Finally, the narrative illustrates how personal responsibility and existential freedom can lead to genuine fulfillment. By the novel's end, Santiago has lived the life he consciously chose. He reflects that "when [his] heart is alive, it has no other choice but to love" and to pursue his legend. He recognizes that ignoring one's own blessings becomes a curse, for in knowing "how immense [his] possibilities are," failing to act on them would leave him forever dissatisfied. This realization vindicates Camus's hope that humans can find meaning by affirming life even amid absurdity. The treasure's location is rooted back to the abandoned church where his quest began metaphorically returns Santiago to his starting point, but now he is a fundamentally changed person. His past comfort cannot compete with the richer understanding he gained. In existential terms, Santiago illustrates the authentic individual: he has become "the author of [his] life-story" through free choices, as Sartre puts it, and thus self-actualized in the only way existentialists allow – by forging meaning through his own existence.

Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist* may be wrapped in mystical imagery, but Santiago's journey concretely mirrors the existentialist emphasis on freedom and responsibility. Throughout the novel, Coelho continually highlights that Santiago alone must choose his path and own its consequences. At every turn, whether gazing at the unfettered wind or deciding between comfort and adventure, Santiago faces the truth that freedom requires taking action. This aligns with Sartre's insistence that humans, "thrown into the world," are inevitably free and thus "responsible for everything [they] do." Santiago embraces this role. He acknowledges his freedom ("the boy felt jealous of the freedom of the wind") and never again doubts that "there is nothing to hold him back except himself" (Coelho 30). By exercising this freedom, he grows personally and ultimately realizes his destiny. In doing so, he exemplifies Heidegger's notion that authenticity means choosing one's own possibilities. He also embodies Camus's vision of the rebel-hero who asserts meaning despite absurd risks.

The Alchemist, in short, dramatizes existential themes: freedom is an opportunity to choose, responsibility is the price of that freedom, and self-actualization emerges as we define ourselves through choice. Coelho's narrative thus becomes a parable not only of spiritual fulfillment but also of existential self-definition.

Works Cited:

Camus, Albert. *The Rebel*. Knopf, 1951.

Coelho, Paulo. *The Alchemist*. HarperSanFrancisco, 1993.

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Harper & Row, 1962.

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. Yale UP, 2007.