**ENG 445: Literature and the Individual**

**ASSIGNMENT 2   
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The following are the names of 4 pieces of literature that at the outset seem to be completely unrelated.

*The Alchemist* by *Paulo Coelho  
Jonathan Livingston Seagull* by *Richard Bach  
Ithaca* by *Constantine P. Cavafy  
No. 4 of four quartets* by *T.S. Eliot*

However, upon closer inspection, a deep connection seems to reveal itself. That connection is the belief that everyone on this planet has a destiny, or a personal legend to fulfill and the point of us being alive is that we are here to follow our journey to attain our destiny. While the Alchemist takes on a direct approach through Santiago’s journey to claim his treasure and in the process meeting the alchemist and fulfilling his destiny, the other texts too, in one way or the other, try to establish the same principle of not being satisfied with mere existence and rather look out for our true purpose of existence.

**A comparison between *The Alchemist* by *Paulo Coelho* and *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* by *Richard Bach***

*The Alchemist* is the story of a young boy named Santiago and his journey through lands both known and unknown and his encounters with people who are all very different from each other and yet make significant contributions towards him achieving his treasure, thus fulfilling his destiny. On the other hand, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* is the story of a seagull who really enjoyed flying and was outcast from his clan because he did not “fit in” to their customs and norms. As a result he learned flying on his own and also had help from other seagulls like him and finally he returns to his flock to be a teacher to them and help them enjoy and learn the art of flying.

Reading these descriptions, one might begin to believe that the 2 pieces of literature have completely independent and mutually exclusive content and thus the ideas that they are trying to disseminate are different. However, upon thorough reading of both the texts, the reader can find various similarities and comparisons between the 2 texts, many of which I have highlighted in the coming paragraphs.

**The idea of Personal freedom**

Both Santiago and Jonathan lead lives that allow them to express their individual freedom without any constraints of the society. Santiago leaves the respectable life of studying in a seminary which would allow him to become a priest, to become a shepherd which allowed him to travel and marvel at the beauties of the world and nature. Jonathan leaves the respected life of an ordinary seagull who lives for food to enjoy and learn flying even though it came at a cost of being outcast from his own flock. In the end, we see that both of them end up happy with their choices. Both these examples convey the common idea that runs through both the texts that our decisions should not be subject to approval from the society as true happiness follows only when we are free to make our own decisions according to our preferences.

**The idea of Destiny charting a course for our lives**

While Destiny is obviously the major theme of *The Alchemist* as it dictates every incident that happens to Santiago throughout his journey towards his final treasure indicated quite beautifully via a word from the text, namely, “Maktub”. The meeting of Santiago with the Alchemist itself was part of Santiago’s destiny which allowed him to learn so much about his own self and about life in general.

The idea of Destiny is also pervasive in Jonathan Livingston Seagull as the author makes us believe that it was truly Jonathan’s destiny to pursue the art of flying and no matter what circumstances he would have found himself in, he would have sooner or later, ended up being a master of flying all the same. Even his encounter with the elder, Chiang, was part of his destiny which allowed him not only to understand the true nature of flying but also made him realize that he needed to go back to teach the birds from his flock.

**The idea of People needing a mentor in their lives**

Both the texts highlight the need of a mentor figure in the lives of Individuals who guide them through their journey so that they can learn vital lessons at the right moments in their path towards excellence. While Santiago had the Alchemist to teach and guide him about the various aspects of life and dreams and treasures which enabled him to understand and control his life, Jonathan had Chiang to teach him the true meaning of flying and the mental concentration that is required to understand that the only forces that stop him from excelling are the ones that he himself is applying. In fact, later Jonathan himself acted as a mentor to the birds in his own flock and helped them understand the nature of flying. These mentors act as liberators and lead their subjects to enlightenment.

**The Idea of People exceeding their own expectations upon true understanding**

In *The Alchemist*, Santiago manages to talk to the sun, the winds, and the desert and manages to turn himself into the wind as he finally realizes how they truly function. But before he began talking to them, he was very unsure of himself and his capability of being able to perform the said task. However, once he started trying, he found out that it came naturally to him thanks to the learning that he had gathered through his journey. Similarly, Jonathan could not believe that he too could travel through space and time without any limits. However, when he concentrated and practiced enough, he came to the realization that he only had to understand the true nature of flying and then he too could perform those “miracles”. Both these examples highlight the fact that practice and concentration elucidate life’s mysteries and allows people to perform tasks that they once looked upon as “miracles”.

**A comparison between *The Alchemist* by *Paulo Coelho* and the poems *Ithaca by Constantine P. Cavafy* and *4th quartet by T.S Eliot***

**The idea of exploring the unexplored/ The idea of expanding one’s horizon**

The above idea is strongly indicated in *The Alchemist* by Santiago’s desire to travel and marvel at the beauty that the world has to offer. Santiago mentions that he was not content with spending his entire life at one place and wishes to see the beautiful creations of nature and people from other parts of the world. He does eventually manage to do that and his life ends up richer for having done so. His life becomes more meaningful owing to his journey through the world and all the knowledge that he gathers in the process.  
  
In the poem *Ithaca,* the author highlights the notion that he wants the traveler to hope for a long journey full of adventures and knowledge as he tries to convey the idea that in the process, one would find the true meaning in our being and true happiness in our lives. The author points out that in the process the traveler would attain true wisdom and would understand the reason for his great journey.

In the poem by T.S Eliot, he emphasizes that one should not stop learning and exploring until one understands the fundamental nature of everything one experiences in life. One should be in constant pursuit of expanding one’s horizon.

**The idea of appreciating the journey and not obsessing over the destination**

After reading *the Alchemist*, the reader can appreciate that the point of the novel was never the treasure that he seeks throughout his journey and which he in fact manages to get his hands upon at the end of his journey. Rather, the true meaning of the novel emerges in the encounters that he has in his journey and it’s these encounters that enrich his life and makes him rich and not the treasure that he unearths.

Similarly, the poems by the two authors mentioned in this article, also seem to resonate the idea that in the process of running after the destination, one should not forget the gems that the journey itself has to offer. The poem *Ithaca* mentions that one should not expect the destination itself to be rewarding. Rather one should look for happiness at every point during the journey.

**One of the questions asked in the assignment was: Which of the 3 given pieces of literature appealed to me the most and why? Also we had to recount any conclusions we arrived at for our own personal growth.**

I think Richard Bach’s *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* had the most profound impact on me amongst them and a prime reason for that would be the direct relatable nature of the way the story has been presented to the reader. While the poems also convey deep meanings about exploring the value of the journey of our lives and the transformation we experience through them, the mode of their discourse is not something that I could relate on a personal level. However, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* presents the narrative in such an inspiring fashion that I could actually learn to implement the messages from the novella directly into my life. For example, Jonathan’s passion for flying easily triumphs over his momentary thought for leading an ordinary life. This is a major life lesson that I firmly believe in. I think that the right amount of passion for any purpose that makes us happy is sufficient to triumph over any negative thoughts or ideas that try to pull us back in our pursuit. Also the fact that Jonathan did not feel shattered when he was outcast from his flock shows us his temperament at handling adversities. I am constantly trying to achieve the same in my own life where I am trying to not let meaningless outside criticism affect my actions or feelings. Also, Richard Bach has made such grand points about life and its meaning through such simple ideas like the flight of a seagull. This is a wonderful aspect of the novella, one that makes me like it instantly. It has also made me realize, through Jonathan’s gratification upon learning to fly, that I should look for happiness in every day actions rather than waiting to achieve some goal and expecting happiness upon success. It also made me realize that there is always more to learn in life and we should never be arrogant over our achievements. The way Jonathan returns to teach his fellow flock members exemplifies his humility and thought for the upliftment of his society. In a similar manner, I strive to be able to help others around who are in need of help. Finally, I would like to conclude with the description of Heaven that Chiang proposes to Jonathan. He says that “heaven is not a place and heaven is not a time. Heaven is being perfect.” This is a statement that exemplifies the pursuit of excellence and is a constant reminder to us that we should not form an image of an ideal world in our eyes that once we achieve a certain amount of material possessions in our lives, we would live in a world of eternal happiness. Rather, we should strive for perfection in whatever we do and as a consequence happiness would follow without us explicitly striving for it.