



The Blind Owl: A Summary of the Story

(Revised 2020)

by Iraj Bashiri
The University of Minnesota

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Dr. Iraj Bashiri
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Preliminary Notes

This summary is based on “The Buddhist Subtext of Sadeq Hedayat’s *Blind Owl*,” by Dr. Iraj Bashiri.¹ Before reading the summary, consider the following:

1. Read *The Blind Owl* and enjoy its mystique. That walk in the wilderness will not be possible, if you read this summary first!
2. This is a summary of the “story” in *The Blind Owl* not a summary of the book.
3. The story of *The Blind Owl* begins at least two generations before the beginning of the story in the book.
4. The first part of the book has a Buddhist wake as its subtext. The necessary information about Buddhist wakes is provided below. That information is necessary in order to fill in certain gaps in the narrative. If those gaps are not filled in with the help of the subtext, the story will continue to be vague.
5. The events in the first part of *The Blind Owl*, in the main, take place in the nether regions. The characters, too, except in the beginning, are reincarnations. Thus, their earthly relations are tenuous. Understanding this reality sheds light on the life of the pen-case cover painter and his uncle, as well as the interactions between the two. It also defines the nature of the ethereal being and her relation to the *Lakkateh*. The characters in part two, although born centuries apart, are reincarnations of the characters in part one.
6. In *The Blind Owl*, Hedayat describes the actions and attributes of his unearthly characters in great detail. Then, rather than revealing what precipitates the events, he amplifies the outcome. For the real-world reader, leaving out causes and expanding consequences creates vagueness in the early stages of reading, and mounting confusion as the reading progresses. At the end, a total lack of comprehension sets in and remains. Hedayat uses a similar technique in his “Three Drops of Blood” and “The Stray Dog” as well. In “Three Drops of Blood,” for instance, he portrays the lives of lunatics, especially their illogical notions of time and place, so well that the reader forgets that he is talking to insane people and tries to justify the veracity of their outlandish statements by using logic. Then, he is baffled when he fails to make logical sense of them.
7. The reason for our inability to recognize *The Blind Owl* as a whole story was the existence of two sets of characters and events that, in normal circumstances, could not, logically and meaningfully, be brought together. But now that we realize that the characters are reincarnations of each other, albeit across centuries, the parts come together naturally.
8. Viewed from a general perspective, *The Blind Owl* resembles a coiled cobra sleeping, the head and the tale tucked in. It is hard to tell where the beginning and the end are. But,

¹ Iraj Bashiri, https://www.academia.edu/30937868/The_Buddhist_Subtext_of_Sadeq_Hedayats_Blind_Owl



once the cobra awakens and raises its head, everything becomes clear. Consider the dungeon scene in part two as the head of the cobra. That scene is key to an understanding of how Hedayat organizes the events in the *novella* and how we should interpret his characters and evaluate their relationship to each other. That is why, for this summary, we begin the story with the events in the dungeon.

9. Since it is not possible to include every detail in a brief summary, a section called “Structure of the Story” is added at the end of the summary.

* * *

Summary of the Story

If we interpret *The Blind Owl* according to its Buddhist subtext, we can summarize the storyline therein as follows. In India, before the Mongol invasion, one of identical twin brothers, who had converted to the religion of the *Linga*, sleeps with a Bugam Dasi temple dancer. The Bugam Dasi bears a child. When the other brother, too, sleeps with the same dancer, it becomes difficult to know which young man is the father of the child. To determine the identity of the father, the brothers are put in a dungeon in which a *nag*-serpent is let loose. The *nag*-serpent bites one of the brothers and gives him a slit lip. A scream amid hysterical laughter is heard. Following that, the brother with the slit lip, walks out of the dungeon. He is deranged. The other brother leaves the dungeon unharmed. Although the determination regarding the identity of the father of the child remains uncertain, the child is given to the brother who was not harmed by the *nag*-serpent.

* * *

The pivotal question is: What role does the *nag*-serpent play in the dungeon? Those familiar with Buddhism know that the *nag*-serpent helps the Buddha free himself from worldly concerns and achieve *Nirvana* (enlightenment). As a novelist, Hedayat takes this key notion for granted. The only thing that he allows is the identity of the serpent (i.e., *nag*). He allows that as a clue pointing to the existence of a message (liberty) in his story. The informed reader then, by putting together the *nag*-serpent, the slit on the lip of the man who walks out of the dungeon, and his deranged state of mind—he does not recognize the child—comes to the conclusion that this person is freed from all worldly binds and is a truly free individual in all senses of the word.

This might sound somewhat strange but, in Buddhist terms, such a being has attained a sublime state. He is free from the binds of time and space, is ubiquitous, strong, and always in control. Hedayat sums up those attributes in a multi-faceted character whom we shall loosely refer to as “uncle.” The roles that “uncle” plays include *lama*, captain, carriage driver, and gravedigger in part one, and butcher and odd-and-ends seller in part two.

* * *

Returning to the story, in time, the father, Bugam Dasi, and the boy move from India to the town of *Rayy* in Iran. There they live in a small house on the outskirts of the town. At the time,



Rayy is a prosperous city indicating that the time of the move is before the thirteenth century devastation of *Rayy* by the Mongols.

The boy grows up in *Rayy* and, as a youth, chooses painting on pen-case covers as a profession. He uses a part of the house as his studio and refers to it as his “dwelling.” As a painter, he is in touch with his uncle. His uncle sells his paintings in India and sends him the money. In addition, whenever circumstances require, irrespective of time and space, and in various disguises, he appears ubiquitously and lends him a helping hand.

The story in the book, *The Blind Owl*, begins on the day that the painter of pen-case covers has died and his family is holding a Buddhist wake for him.² His uncle participates in this wake and serves as a *lama*. His main objective, it turns out, is to liberate his nephew from austerity (see below). The scene described below is the only scene that the painter paints:

A cypress tree under which an old man, wrapped in a cloak, hunching his shoulders in the manner of Indian *yogis*, sits in a squatting position. He wears a *shalma* around his head, and puts the index finger of his left hand on his lips as a sign of astonishment. Opposite him a girl, wearing a long, black dress, bends to offer the old man a lily.³ She is bending because a brook intervenes between them. ...⁴

As mentioned, his uncle sold his paintings in India and sent him the money. The painter marvels that there is a market for his paintings there. The painter describes his own painting as monotonous and uninspiring. In the context of the subtext, however, it is neither monotonous nor uninspiring. It depicts a crucial moment in the afterlife of a Buddhist faithful in purgatory. Let’s say it serves a Buddhist faithful in the same way that a scene (*pardeh*) in a passion play (*ta’ziyeh*) depicting the events in Karbala serves a Shi’ite faithful. On that *pardeh*, Imam Hussein, Shimr, *Zuljanah*, and *ahl al-beyt* (family of the Imam) are depicted, each in a special mode and playing a particular role. The Shi’ite faithful, familiar with those modes and characters, listens to the *ta’ziyeh*, creates a mental connection between his own mental narrative and the picture, and reacts to the picture in a meaningful manner.

Suppose someone in India painted a *ta’ziyeh* scene. Would not there be a market for his painting in Iran? More importantly, suppose an Indian author uses the Karbala *pardeh* as the subtext of his story about the Karbala event, and the only name that he allows is *Zuljanah*. Would not that clue inspire a scholar studying his story to research the events in Karbala for explaining his story? Additionally, would not his Indian audience need a lot of information on Shi’ite rituals before they could make any sense of the story he presents?

For us, the *nag*-serpent, plays a similar role as *Zuljanah*. It directs us to the life of the Buddha and the Buddha’s liberating message. Indirectly, it also leads us to the message of Hedayat. It is obvious, therefore, that the Iranian reader who is not familiar with Buddhist rituals will not be able to understand Hedayat’s characters and, consequently hear his call for breaking barriers through self-confidence and avoidance of decrepit medieval rules.

² Note that there is a difference between the beginning of the book and the beginning of the story.

³ Later on he explains, “I realized that the lilies she carried...were not ordinary lilies.” It turns out that all the lilies in the area are black lilies. After all, how many mortals are elevated to the level of a Buddha? For that reason, in the discussion that follows, we shall assume that the color in question, whether for pebbles, or for lilies, to be black.

⁴ https://www.academia.edu/7961787/The_Blind_Owl_by_Sadeq_Hedayat_translated_by_Iraj_Bashiri, pp. 17-18.



The Buddhist Purgatory as Subtext

The Buddhist faithful distinguishes between the earth-plane Body, the immortal Self, and the ethereal Soul. He knows that at the time of death, the earth-plane Body, which has served like a “house” for the other two, remains on the earth-plane, while the immortal Self and the ethereal Soul, enter purgatory. In purgatory, the immortal Self and the ethereal Soul follow their own individual plans for survival. The immortal Self plans to release himself from the wheel of life. The ethereal Soul plans to return to the phenomenal world and live another life.

The wandering immortal Self is guided by the *lama* from the earth-plane. The *lama* inspires the immortal Soul to set himself free from the wheel of life. He directs the immortal Self to concentrate as intensely as he can on a bright Light that is located above his head but, at the present, is in the dark. He should make that bright Light his own. He further tells the immortal Self that certain experiences and thoughts from his past, in the form of ghosts, will try to interfere with his concentration. They will try to insinuate themselves into his consciousness and undermine his concentration on finding the bright Light. To release himself from the wheel, the immortal Self must concentrate exclusively on the bright Light.

Meanwhile, as mentioned, contrary to the immortal Self that intends to free itself from the wheel of life, the ethereal Soul seeks a return to the phenomenal world. The condition for her return is that the immortal Self should accompany her. The top priority of the ethereal Soul, therefore, is to divert the attention of the immortal Self from seeing the bright Light. She will use all the possible ways at her disposal to insinuate herself into the consciousness of the immortal Self and ruin his concentration.

The fate of the immortal Self and the ethereal Soul is determined in the court of the Lord of Death. Adorned with the trappings of death, the Lord of Death sits at the head of an assembly and observes the deeds of the immortal Self and ethereal Soul in the mirror of *kārmā* that he holds in his left hand and assigns them either to *Nirvana* or to the Place of the Wombs to be reborn.

By the time that they arrive at the court of the Lord of Death, the immortal Self has either succeeded in keeping his past experiences and thoughts out of his consciousness through sheer concentration, or he has failed. If the answer is in the positive, his ethereal Soul will carry white pebbles with her to give the Lord of Death. The Lord of Death, who is sitting across the River of Forgetfulness from them, will release the immortal Self from the wheel of life. In that case, the ethereal Soul of the immortal Self would become an unhappy ghost (*preta*).

If the immortal Self has failed, which is the case with almost all Buddhists, his ethereal Soul will carry black pebbles to the Lord of Death. In order to hand the pebbles to the Lord of Death, she tries to cross the River of Forgetfulness. Upon seeing the black color of the pebbles, the Lord of Death laughs hysterically. As for the immortal Self, upon seeing the black pebbles and hearing the hideous laughter of the Lord of Death, he becomes distraught and falls into a swoon. The same laughter causes the ethereal Soul crossing the river to slip and fall in the water. The river



carries her to the Place of the Wombs where she joins the immortal Self and they are reborn together.⁵

The Subtext and the Story

With that explanation in mind, let us return to the story in *The Blind Owl*. The painter⁶ is in his dwelling busy painting. Outside his dwelling, the townspeople are celebrating the thirteenth day after the Persian new year. Out of the blue, the painter's uncle, an uncle he had not seen before, comes to the dwelling to visit him. This is how the painter describes his uncle:

[M]y uncle was a stooped old man. He wore an Indian *shalma* around his head and a yellow, torn cloak over his shoulders. A scarf covered his head and face. You could see his hairy chest through his open collar and you could count the hairs of his thin beard through his scarf. Through his red, fistulous eyelids and leprous lip, he bore a distant and ridiculous resemblance to me, as if my reflection had fallen on a magic mirror. I had always envisaged my father as looking something like that.⁷

The uncle, in the manner of the *lama* who comes to guide the deceased's immortal Self in purgatory, goes and squats in a corner. The painter and the ethereal girl (or, more exactly his ethereal Soul) are already in purgatory, each ready to play their part in the survival game outlined above. The uncle inspires the painter--as if inspired, in the words of the painter—to bring a special wine-flask from his closet. The wine-flask is in a niche high up in the dark closet. To reach it, the painter uses a stool.

The ethereal girl, on the other hand, uses the celebration outside to fire up the painter's desire to know about the celebration outside his dwelling. In that way, she insinuates herself into the consciousness of the painter. Her aim is to prevent the painter from reaching the wine-flask. Thus, when the painter is fumbling in the dark for the wine-flask, the eyes of the ethereal being emerge from a non-existing air-inlet in the concrete wall and bewitch him. The painter falls passionately in love with those eyes, forgets the wine-flask and his uncle altogether, and begins a relentless search to find the owner of those eyes.

Now let us review the details of this event between the time when the painter leaves his uncle to get the wine-flask to the moment that he sees the enchanting eyes of the ethereal girl. Before doing that, however, it is crucial to note that our intention in reconstructing the scene is not to criticize Hedayat, to show whether he is correct in what he does, or whether he has followed all the rules, or whether he should not have left certain information out. Rather, our intention is to throw light on the subject. That is to say, to show the complete scene and how much of the

⁵ The actual time for the passage of the soul in the Buddhist purgatory is 49 days. The outline provided above, therefore, is an extremely summarized version. For more detail, see Bashiri, "The Message of Hedayat," *Studies in Islam*, January 1980, p. 43.

⁶ In the story of *Buf-e Kur*, by painter we mean the immortal Self of the painter. It is important to keep the Self/Soul distinction in order to follow the developments that follow in the rest of the *novella*. Like Hedayat, we, too, shall refer to the protagonist as painter, even though we know that he is the immortal Self of that painter.

⁷ Bashiri, [https://www.academia.edu/7961787/The Blind Owl by Sadeq Hedayat translated by Iraj Bashiri](https://www.academia.edu/7961787/The_Blind_Owl_by_Sadeq_Hedayat_translated_by_Iraj_Bashiri), p. 18.



information therein is taken for granted. More importantly, whether addition of that information facilitates our understanding of the scene, the characters, and the *novella*.

The uncle continually inspires the painter to avoid being distracted by outside images and to concentrate solely on bringing the wine-flask down as quickly as possible. He warns the painter of the dire consequences of ignoring the directives and of allowing outside thoughts to enter his mind. If that happens, he warns the painter, you will see an ethereal girl carrying black lilies to the judge who sits under a cypress tree across a brook from her. The color black indicates that you are still under the influence of the ethereal girl and are not worthy of being released from the wheel. The consequence of her not reaching the old man, he is told, would be rebirth for you in the company of that same ethereal girl.

Through a structural analysis of the painter's thoughts (not included here), we learn that the painter could not prevent himself from taking a peek at the celebration that he knew was happening outside his dwelling. He became engaged involuntarily. After that, he became infatuated with the ethereal girl, and doggedly sought her.

To continue the story, before reaching the wine-flask, and within a moment of seeing those enchanting eyes, as his uncle had warned him, the painter finds himself face to face with a court in session. As described, the presiding judge is an old man. He wears an Indian *shalma*, squats under a cypress tree, and chews on the index finger of his left hand. A girl, clad in black, stands across a brook in front of the old man. She holds a handful of black lilies, which she intends to give to the old man. The color black indicates to the old man that the painter is still dominated by his ethereal soul (i.e., he is continuing his attachment to worldly values and thus is not ready to be set free from the wheel). He laughs hysterically. As a result of the black color and that hideous laughter, the painter becomes distraught and falls into a swoon. As for the girl in black, she slips and falls into the brook.

* * *

Back in the dwelling, when the painter's uncle realizes that his nephew has failed to bring the wine-flask down on time, he leaves the dwelling. As for the painter, he remains under the charm of those eyes and begins an unending search for the girl.⁸ Eventually, after a long search, he and the girl meet. The girl, assured that her passage to the next life is certain, dies. The painter, in order to make sure that she would not interfere in his future life, dismembers her body and puts the limbs in a suitcase. When he closes the suitcase for the last time, the girl's eyes are still alive. The important thing, of course, is that the painter is concerned about some bodily harm that the girl might inflict on him. He is not mindful of the impact of the girl's influence on him, influence that thus far, perhaps over ions, has resulted in his perpetual rebirth alongside her.

In order to bury the suitcase in a desolate place far away from his dwelling, he seeks assistance from the outside. His uncle, in the guise of a carriage driver appears from nowhere and helps him carry the suitcase to a desolate place far from his dwelling. When he looks for a gravedigger, again, his uncle appears ubiquitously, digs a perfect pit, and helps him bury the suitcase. When he tries to pay him, the uncle refuses any payment.

* * *

⁸ For further information, see Bashiri, *The Fiction of Sadeq Hedayat*, Mazda Publishers, 1984, pp.169-171.



Before moving to part two, let us review why the painter of pen-case covers failed. Although our information about the life of the painter is limited, we know that he lived alone and used drugs and alcohol. The fact that he painted the same picture over and over indicates that he lacked drive, curiosity, and ambition. Most importantly, the fact that he was obsessed with the eyes of an ethereal being, not because he was pursuing a plan with an outcome, but because he was driven by desire to own those eyes, indicates that his life was not grounded in reality. Therefore, when in purgatory his actions are reviewed, it becomes apparent that he had spent his entire life following directives and performing rituals meriting no more than a stack of black lilies. The judge laughs at the absurdity of his efforts and sentences him to rebirth. He thought the painter might learn from his past mistakes and emerge successful in the next round. That is why, at the end of part one, the water carries the ethereal girl to *Shah Abdul Azim* to be reborn with the painter.

Another Life

As expected, centuries later, the painter and the ethereal girl are reborn near *Rayy*, by now an ancient city. The painter is reborn as a sick boy, and the object of his desire as a beautiful little girl. The same nanny suckles both.⁹ The sick boy grows up and becomes a perpetually sick young man. The girl becomes a domineering, seductive young woman. The young man's intense desire for the young woman is such that he marries her. In fact, the young man's desire is so intense that he is willing to pimp for her to keep her happy. He feels the best life for him would be living on a deserted island with her. But, when his sickness becomes worse, he hopes to die of natural causes. The doctor prescribes traditional remedies to cure him.

Hedayat skillfully shows that there are some fundamental differences between the sick young man and the painter. The sick young man is inquisitive. Rather than slavishly following the doctor's directions, he escapes from the house, leaves the city and its citizens whom he detests, and makes himself at one with nature. In that state, he evaluates everything that he had been taught regarding God, prophets, and saints. He finds in them nothing but religious ritual, blind imitation, and absolute obedience. More importantly, he realizes that all those religious rituals, blind imitation, and absolute obedience are not worth a cent at the court of the old man who sits under the cypress tree and bites his index finger. He feels happy to have separated himself from religious circles and governmental institutions, so that they cannot harm him. In that regard, he says, "*Na mal daram ki divan bekhoraad va na din daram ki shaytan bebarad*" (I do not own any property that the government could confiscate, nor do I profess a faith that Satan could take away).¹⁰

In that same context, he also assesses his relationship with his wife, from the time when they were children, as teenagers, and later as husband and wife. He realizes that, contrary to the doctor's diagnosis, his illness does not have a physical cause. Rather, he singles out intense

⁹ More accurately, the painter's Self is reborn as a sick boy, and the painter's ethereal Soul is reborn as a beautiful little girl. Both are inextricably tied to the nanny, their mutual body in their previous life.

¹⁰ Bashiri, https://www.academia.edu/7961787/The_Blind_Owl_by_Sadeq_Hedayat_translated_by_Iraj_Bashiri, p. 60.



desire for his wife as the main cause for his illness. He then relates his wife's domination over him to his own actions, i.e., that his wife's dominance over him is rooted in his own intense desire for her.¹¹

In order to understand his situation better, he talks to his nanny and learns about the dungeon, his parents, and about the interaction of his father and uncle with the *nag*-serpent. This point about the events in the dungeon engages the young man's thought: What made the two brothers different in the eye of the *nag*-serpent? Why was one brother allowed to live and have a family while the other brother was shorn of all worldly concerns? He concludes that the *nag*-serpent released the brother who was not tied to earthly binds from the wheel but kept the one who was interested in having a wife and children on the wheel.

As a result, the sick young man decides, with respect to desire, to follow the example of his uncle and abandon the weak stance of his father. Therefore, from then on, he seeks physical distance from his wife. When that does not work, he seeks emotional distance. His wife, recognizing the change in her husband's attitude, tries to reestablish her control over him. First she uses her small brother and then her own pregnancy to restore his sense of desire. But none of those old tricks works and, gradually, she loses her charm. According to her husband, she becomes like a piece of meat at the butcher's.

The most positive point in favor of the protagonist is that his uncle, in spite of the intervening centuries, has not abandoned him. He has appeared in his life in various guises and alerted him to the ruses of his wife, whom the young man refers to as the whore. For instance, he has taught him to distinguish between what seems valuable and what *is* valuable. Consider the following statement by the uncle, as the odds-and-ends seller, when the young man inquires about a jar on his display:

I recall that on that same day I went over to his display and asked him for the price of the jar... with a laughter that made one's hair stand on end, he said to me, 'Don't you look at what you buy?!'¹²

As mentioned, unlike the painter, who was stationary and blind to the dynamics of the world around him (i.e., he ritually painted the same picture, or searched intensely for a phantom girl), the sick young man is mobile, observant, and very inquisitive. In addition, the more he discovers about the ruses of his wife, the more he wants to know. He talks to nanny about his parents and about his wife. He observes nanny's daughter-in-law. He even questions his wife's little brother about her.

The main difference between him and the painter is that the more the painter thought about the ethereal being, the more he desired her. But, the more the sick young man learns about the ruses of his wife, the more he despises her. Eventually, he seeks total distance from her, an act that was unthinkable for the painter. As a result, the whore loses her grip on him. Consider the following statement that appears at the culmination of the young man's search for discovering the source of his wife's domination over him:

Was she the gentle lady, the delicate, ethereal girl who wore a wrinkled black dress, who played hide-and-seek with me on the banks of the Suren River, the childish, transient and

¹¹ Bashiri, https://www.academia.edu/30937868/The_Buddhist_Subtext_of_Sadeq_Hedayats_Blind_Owl

¹² The Blind Owl translated by Iraj Bashiri, https://www.academia.edu/7961787/The_Blind_Owl_by_Sadeq_Hedayat_translated_by_Iraj_Bashiri, p. 56.



free girl whose provocative, sexy calves were visible through her skirt? Until now, whenever I looked at her, I was not aware that she was that same ethereal girl, but now, as if a curtain was removed from before my eyes, for some reason I was reminded of the sheep in front of the butcher's shop and that she resembled a lump of lean meat. All the traces of her inherent attractiveness had been lost. She was a mature, grave, made-up woman who was preoccupied with the thought of life! A complete woman!¹³

At the end, his uncle, through nanny, equips the sick young man with a special knife, a bone-handled, long-bladed knife. The young man takes the knife with him to the dark bedchamber and, without allowing anyone or anything to interfere with his concentration, kills the whore and, in the process, takes out her eye. Before she dies, the whore slits the sick young man's lip. The sick young man leaves the bedchamber looking like an odds-and-ends seller.

* * *

The story of *The Blind Owl* is not complex. All that is required to understand it is that we pay attention to its Buddhist subtext. The blind owl says we all will go through purgatory willy-nilly, and we all will become acquainted with our past mistakes. Would it not be marvelous, if we arranged our purgatory in this world ourselves, evaluated our actions, and eliminated our shortcomings? In that case, would not the rest of our lives pass in absolute tranquility, serenity, and freedom?

Hedayat's message, which draws on the philosophies of Zoroaster, the Buddha, Omar Khayyam and European thinkers, especially Rilke and Kafka, crystalizes in his *Blind Owl*. He brings that message to us from the depths of Reza Shah's repressive regime with the assistance of Buddhist rituals. It is a liberating philosophy of self-reliance and avoidance of decrepit medieval dictates. Is it not a shame that the muffled voice of his blind owl should continually fall on deaf ears!?

Structure of the *Novella*

1. Image and Narrative Sources

- a. *The Buddha-Karita*. Striking images from the life of the Buddha are interspersed throughout the text.¹⁴ They provide the narrative with an underlying message of liberation based on the life of the Buddha.
- b. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. This text is used, among other things, for event sequences, systematic development of message, and atmosphere.¹⁵
- c. *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*.¹⁶ Like the *The Buddha-Karita*, this work, and the works of Franz Kafka, are used for image enhancement. The latter also create a balance between ancient and modern times.

¹³ Ibid., p. 59.

¹⁴ See, Bashiri, *Hedayat's Ivory Tower*, pp. 136-166.

¹⁵ See, Bashiri, https://www.academia.edu/30937868/The_Buddhist_Subtext_of_Sadeq_Hedayats_Blind_Owl, pp. 11-17.

¹⁶ Rilke, Rainer Maria, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, trans. M. D. Herter Norton, W. W. Norton and Co., Inc., New York, 1949; Bashiri, *Hedayat's Ivory Tower*, pp. 175-187.



- d. Iranian (Zoroastrian and Shi'ite) locations, symbols, and images are used to mask Buddhist subtext.
- e. The *Ruba'iyat* (quatrain) of Khayyam is used to emphasize the inevitability of the passage of time and to enhance the concept of *carpe diem*.

2. Character roles

- a. Unchanging character: Nanny. She ages but her attitude does not change.
- b. Changing characters:
 - i. Dominating ethereal being (part one); reborn as dominating whore/wife (part two).
 - ii. The painter, despondent imitator (part one) reborn as an inquisitive, discerning, sick young man (part two).
 - iii. The painter's liberated uncle assumes various roles: captain, merchant, carriage driver, gravedigger (part one), butcher, odds-and-ends-seller (part two). His intent is to help his nephew liberate himself.

3. Time

- a. Life span of the painter:
 - i. On the earth-plain: childhood in India, dejected painter in *Rayy*, death
 - ii. In purgatory: failure at judgment, rebirth
 - iii. In the next life: childhood, sick young man married to a whore, becomes aware of the ruses of his wife, overpowers the whore in the dark bedchamber and is liberated
- b. Life span of the brother/uncle:
 - On the earth-plain: childhood in India, victory in the dungeon, liberation. He assists his nephew to liberate himself.
- c. Historical time:
 - i. Pre-Mongol (part one)
 - ii. Modern Times (part two)

4. Setting

- a. Other worldly; enchanting and incredible (part one)
- b. Normal, but bizarre (part two)

5. Atmosphere

- a. Generally gloomy (part one)
- b. Uplifting (part two)

6. Attitude

- a. Negative and increasingly cynical (part one)
- b. Hopeful and increasingly liberating (part two)



7. **Literary Technique**¹⁷

- a. Deliberate distortion of time and space for special effects
- b. Inclusion of passages from well-known texts for special effect
- c. Juxtaposition of scenes for special effect
- d. Repetition of scenes in full or in part as required by the story
- e. Borrowing images from Indian, Iranian, and European sources for narrative enhancement

8. **Symbolism**¹⁸

- a. The wine-flask as a symbol of the Bright Light.
- b. Imitation, improper use of the life force, leading to doom is symbolized in painting pen-case covers
- c. Observation and acquisition of wisdom leading to liberation is symbolized in an inquisitive, sick young man
- d. Black lilies symbolize failure
- e. Bone-handled long-bladed knife symbolizes concentration needed to destroy desire,
- f. Desire is symbolized as an ethereal girl (part one), wife/whore (part two)
- g. Uncle symbolizes a liberated individual who is not bound by time and place (both parts)

9. **Message**

- a. A stagnant life, enmeshed in ignorance and driven by alcohol, drugs, and avarice necessarily ends in doom and rebirth (part one)
- b. Innate ability, acquisition of wisdom/knowledge, concentration, and control over desire leads to liberation from the wheel of life (part two)

¹⁷ Bashiri, *Fiction*, pp. 92-105.

¹⁸ Bashiri, *Fiction*, pp. 106-131.

