The book cover features a dark, high-contrast photograph of a man, likely Hedayatollah Behbahani, wearing a dark turban and a dark jacket. He is looking slightly to the right with a thoughtful expression, his right hand resting against his chin. The background is dark and indistinct, possibly an interior setting with patterned curtains. The title 'Hedayat on Religion' is printed in a bold, orange-yellow serif font in the upper left quadrant. Below the title, the editors' names and the contributors' names are listed in a white, sans-serif font.

Hedayat on Religion

Edited by
**M. R. Ghanoonparvar
Paul Sprachman**

with Contributions by

**Iraj Bashiri
Michael Beard
M. Mehdi Khorrami
Nasrin Rahimieh**



**Hedayat
on
Religion**



Sadeq Hedayat
1903-1951

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Sadeq Hedayat', written in a cursive style. The signature is located below the printed name and dates.

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“When I saw that the horse was pulling the droshky whereas the droshky driver was reaping the reward, and also that they had put blinders over the horse’s eyes, and a noseband over its mouth to ensure that it would have limited vision, eat less, and not grumble, I fully grasped...!
My mind associated that very scene with the woeful tragedy of the miserable life of our wretched people, who have treasures under their feet yet suffer from ignorance, poverty, and adversity.”

Sadeq Hedayat

و قتي ڏيڻم ڊرشڪر را اسب مي کڻند و انعام را ڊرشڪر جي بي پرو

و به چشمان اسب چشم نند زده، برداش پوز بند

تا کم سيند و کم بخورد و دم نرندا

به چيز را فهميدم...!

تداعي تراشوي غم انگيز زندگي فلاکت بار

مردم مکھون، سختي که روي کج نشستند

ولي از جل و فقر و بدبختي رنج مي برند

CONTENTS

- ix* *Acknowledgements*
xi Introduction
 Paul Sprachman and M. R. Ghanoonparvar

PART ONE: Essays

- 3 **Chapter 1**
 A Muslim Mission in a Human Zoo: Sadeq Hedayat's
 Troubled Vision of Islam
 Nasrin Rahimieh
- 22 **Chapter 2**
 The Jew and Judaism in Hedayat's Romantic
 Nationalism
 Paul Sprachman:
- 52 **Chapter 3**
 Hedayat and Zoroastrianism
 M. R. Ghanoonparvar
- 66 **Chapter 4**
 Hedayat and Buddhism: *The Blind Owl* as a
 Complex Text
 Iraj Bashiri

PART TWO: Fiction

- 116 **Chapter 5**
 The Caravan of Islam
 Translated by M. R. Ghanoonparvar
- 148 **Chapter 6**
 Madame Alaviyeh
 Translated by M. R. Ghanoonparvar

- 184 Chapter 7**
Fire Worshipper
Translated by M. R. Ghanoonparvar
- 188 Chapter 8**
The Case of Frigid Hell and Infernal Hell
Translated by M. R. Ghanoonparvar
- 200 Chapter 9**
Pearl Cannon: Chapter Two
Translated by Michael Beard and
M. Mehdi Khorrami
- 233 Chapter 10**
The Pearl Cannon: Afterword
Michael Beard
- 245 Bibliography**
- 250 Photographs from the Hedayat Family Album**
- 256 Appendix A: A Brief Bio-Bibliography**
- 260 Appendix B: Hedayat's Hand-written Segment of**
Tup-e Morvari
- 286 Appendix C: Persian text of *Karvan-e Eslam***
- 300 Index**
- 305 About the Contributors**

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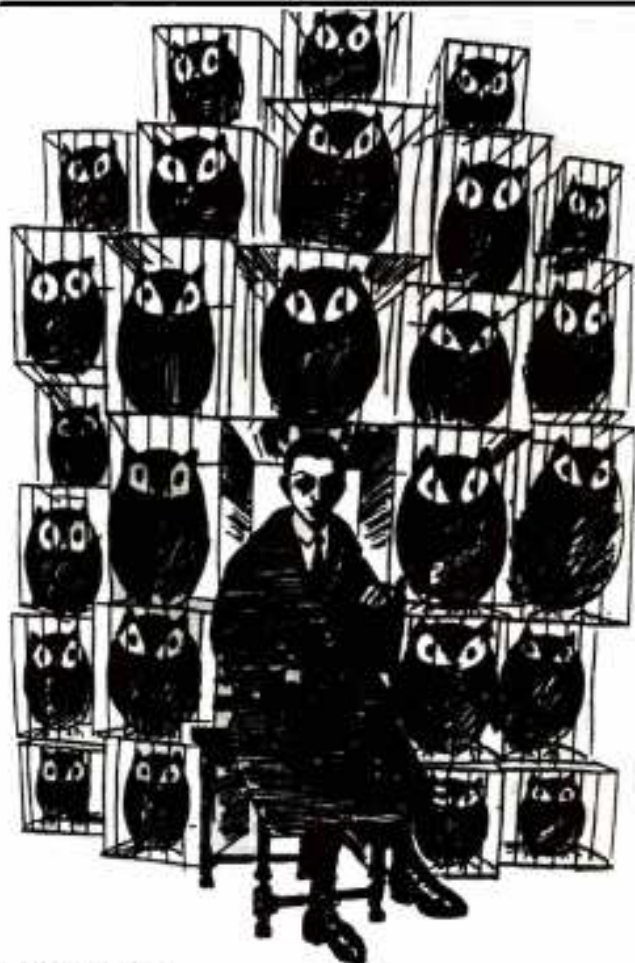


Illustration by Javad Afzadeh.
Source: *Dafn-e Honar*, Vol. 3, No. 8, September 1966.
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Hedayat and Buddhism: *The Blind Owl* as a Complex Text

Iraj Bashiri

In Place of an Introduction

Generally speaking, we know very little about Hedayat's involvement in Buddhism. It is not clear exactly how he came by his knowledge of the faith or how he viewed it. His "*Akharin Labkhand*" (*The Last Smile*, 1933) and "*Sampingué*" ("*Sampingué*," 1937) indicate a casual interest in the subject, but the structure and content of the stories are not substantial enough to be used to make a determination. Hedayat's approach to fiction as a craft, however, provides an in. Hedayat was an experimentalist. He immersed himself in the subjects of his choice and presented fictional characters, in as authentic and natural a light as possible. His "*Seh Qatreh Khun*" (*Three Drops of Blood*, 1931), portraying lunatics, is an example. Apparently, when writing "*Afarinegan*" ("*The Requiem*," 1933), he experimented with immersing himself in Zoroastrian death rituals, but the Zoroastrian rituals lack the degree of complexity that his project required. Therefore, he experimented with Tibetan Buddhist death rituals that are complex, mysterious, fully explained, and last 49 days.

In light of his approach to "*Zنده Be-Gur*" (*Buried Alive*, 1929) and "*Seh Qatreh Khun*," it is safe to assume that he immersed himself in the Tibetan rituals. The outcome, *Buf-e Kur* (*The Blind Owl*, 1937) is as authentic a fictional retelling of the Tibetan death rituals as can be achieved.

Hedayat never discussed the theme of the novella in public, either in formal forums with scholars, or in private conversations with his colleagues. Therefore, any opinion on Hedayat's views about Buddhism would be speculative in nature and limited to what his works disclose. For Hedayat's silence on Buddhism three reasons—religious, socio-political, and personal—present themselves. First, since the time of the Iranian philosopher Abubakr Razi (854-925),¹ no Muslim had broached metempsychosis as a topic. For his choice, Razi was labeled a heretic and the most hated Muslim. Hedayat used reincarnation as the driving force in his *The Blind Owl*. Second, the entire novella is devoted to liberating the individual from the yokes imposed by the powers that be through education. When Hedayat was writing, the very term “freedom” was banned in Reza Shah's Iran. Third, soon after its publication, the mystique of the novella baffled the savants of the land. In view of that, only an insane author would break the spell and divulge the subtext of his work.

There is no indication that Hedayat was interested in the fundamentals of Buddhism. Neither is there any indication that he studied Buddhism as would a student of religion. He was, however, as his *The Blind Owl* reveals, extremely well-versed in the intricacies of Buddhist death rituals and their import.

Viewing Buddhism in the context of his whole oeuvre, therefore, it is not hard to find a place for the novella. Hedayat did not mingle with drug addicts to become a drug addict, or with the insane to become a lunatic. Rather, he endeavored to familiarize his readers with the worlds of drug addicts and lunatics and, in this case, with Tibetan Buddhist rituals, especially their belief regarding afterlife.

Hedayat's *Buf-e Kur* is a complex text. One can say complex texts are devised to carry specific messages to particular audiences. The messages are put in subtexts and masked from the ordinary readers by symbols. Clues encoded in the text by the authors guide the curious readers to the subtexts and the messages. Hedayat's message, in a nutshell, is freedom and how it can be attained.

This essay shows the process of reaching the message of Hedayat by using the clues that he has encoded in the novella.

¹ He is also known as Rhazes, Rasis, and al-Razi.

More importantly, it shows how to use the subtext to reconstruct the sequence of events in the story (as opposed to in the book) as they originally took shape in Hedayat's mind. For example, it reveals the reason why, after reading the story, the reader is not certain whether he has read one or two stories. Similarly, in part two, he wonders why, the protagonist is born twice, once in India and another time in Iran. Using a clue that Hedayat provides, the *nag-serpent*² as a guide, it becomes possible to provide a response to both questions.

The *nag-serpent* decides which of two twin brothers, both of whom have slept with Bugham Dasi,³ has sired a son with her. Research into Buddhist materials, especially the *Bardo Thodol* (*The Tibetan Book of the Dead*), reveals that the dungeon scene depicts a judgment event in which the mortal brother is distinguished as the father. The other brother is set free.

The mortal brother moves his wife and son to Rayy.⁴ The son grows up in Rayy, becomes a painter, and dies. By analyzing the first part of the novella in light of Tibetan death rituals, it is shown that, because the late painter continues to be partial to desire in afterlife, his rebirth-seeking spirit (the ethereal girl) rather than a white lily, presents a black lily (*nilufar-e kabud*) to the old man under the cypress tree. Consequently, her counterpart is destined to be reborn.

The protagonist's second birth occurs centuries later near ancient Rayy. The reborn painter grows up to be an inquisitive young man, afflicted by an incurable malady. Unbeknownst to him, his uncle (the brother who was set free by the *nag-serpent*) guides his efforts against desire, symbolized as *Lakkateh* (whore). The uncle enables the young man to see through the ruses of *Lakkateh*. At the end, the protagonist overcomes *Lakkateh* and, like his uncle, liberates himself.

Using reincarnation, rebirth, recognition of the role of desire, and liberation, Hedayat weaves a convincing subtext that mean-

² *Nag* is a snake-spirit with long fangs and a slit in the middle of the upper lip. It symbolizes the life force and determines birth and rebirth.

³ Bugham Dasi means a slave to pleasure.

⁴ The ancient city of Rayy (also referred to as Rhages) was Iran's capital under the Seljuqs (11th and 12th centuries). As a Silk Road city, Rayy was host to both merchants and invaders. It was sacked and razed by the Mongols in 1220.

ingly welds the two parts of the story together. The Buddhist approach that is proposed in this article for understanding the novella provides answers to many questions raised in the work, including analysis of some enigmatic statements, explanation of the unearthly, near morbid atmosphere of the novella, as well as the sources of temporal inconsistencies and strange characters and locations in the story. From a scholarly point of view, too, the analysis is significant. It provides a different perspective for translating and interpreting complex texts.

Simple and Complex Texts

When we choose a poem, a short story, or a novel to read, what we choose might belong to one of the following categories: a literary text designed for instruction and entertainment; a socio-cultural text centered on social, political, economic, or race and gender issues and their global ramifications; or a complex text written about a particular subject and for a particular audience. The particular audience could be local or global depending on the perception of the author and the demands of his society. The following essay deals with the third category: the structure and *raison d'être* of complex texts with a focus on Hedayat's *The Blind Owl*.

Although on the surface a complex text and a simple text may look the same—indeed, in many cases they are the same text—in reality, the complex text commands more than one level of understanding and, consequently, it requires a different level of treatment. The reason for the difference is simple. As mentioned, the author of the complex text has a message that he needs to convey to his readers. He also needs, depending on circumstances, to hide that message and protect it, as well as to protect himself and his family. In order to carry out those tasks, he puts the message in a subtext and masks the subtext from censors by using elements from the subtext, which he brings to the surface. He communicates with his readers by leaving clues that lead them to the encoded message.

Corresponding to the types of texts outlined above, there are various types of readers. Casual readers enjoy the surface understanding of a text and move on to a different text. Their appreciation is limited to describing aspects that the general reader understands and appreciates. Adept readers appreciate the more

technical aspects of a work, especially if it coincides with something that falls within their research. The curious reader, with whom the creator of the complex text communicates, looks for clues in order to uncover the subtext and read the author's message.

Hedayat authored many short stories that fall into the category of simple text. He also wrote works like *Tup-e Morvari* (*The Pearl Cannon*) and "*Ab-e Zendegi*" (*Water of Life*) that illustrate the shortcomings of the government and the clergy. Works like "*Zنده Be-Gur*," "*Seh Qatreh Khun*", and *Buf-e Kur*, by contrast, belong to the category of complex texts.

Mohammad Ja'far Mahjub reports when Hedayat was told that some readers did not understand his writings, he said, "The hell they don't!" Mahjub elaborates, "Hedayat meant that in order for the reader to fathom the depth of the fine points and nuances in various literary or artistic works, he should have attained certain credentials. He must have acquired the basics necessary for understanding the literary work and should have the skill necessary to comprehend it. Otherwise, he should give up reading works of that nature."⁵ The goal of the present essay is to find a method whereby we can read, understand, and appreciate Hedayat's *The Blind Owl*.

In the past our emphasis has been on "teaching" the reader a great deal about Buddhist rituals as explained in esoteric Tibetan texts, by painstakingly comparing and contrasting events in *The Blind Owl* with the contents of those texts and the rituals they support. In this analysis, the reader is given two versions of the novella. One is a simple reading that, as is well known, is fraught with obscurities. The other is a version in which information from the rituals is included. In between those two texts, a brief outline of the major events in the Tibetan rituals is included. That outline is followed by the sequence of events in *The Blind Owl* which, we assume, are modeled on those events. Then the two scenes (i.e., the rituals and their counterpart in *The Blind Owl*) are compared in detail to obviate obscurities and to explain lingering obscurities.

In the section below called "Interpretation of Complex Texts", the findings are further used to interpret a haunting paragraph that occurs in the introductory remarks of the novella. The

⁵ Mahjub, "*Moqaddameh*," *Tup-e Morvari*, p. 11.

difficulties surrounding the translation and interpretation of that paragraph are highlighted to illustrate the enigma surrounding efforts related to translation of complex texts in general, and of *The Blind Owl* in particular. This essay concludes with a brief discussion of the message of the novella and an appendix containing issues that are necessary for a better understanding of the novella, but which could not be included in the paper.

***Raison D'être* for Complex Texts**

Why do authors create complex texts? In countries like Iran, where discussion of certain subjects is strictly forbidden, some by civil authorities and some by religious authorities, authors resort to subtexts and symbolism in order to express their opinions, thoughts, and feelings freely. Of course, not all authors do that, or need to do that. But some who feel compelled to awaken their countrymen and guide them out of untenable situations, undertake the task at a cost. Using subtexts and symbolism, they compose poems or short stories and novels that, on the surface, look nondescript, but otherwise are incendiary. These authors expect their intended readers—those who are sensitive to the clues they place in the text—to find the clues, decipher the symbolism that hides the subtext, uncover their messages, and convey them to like-minded readers. The greatest fear of those authors, of course, is how to explain their work, if their messages are discovered by the censors.

In the 1920s, during the tumultuous era when the Qajar dynasty was falling and Reza Khan (1878-1944) was deciding the fate of the country, Iranian authors were forced to make life and death decisions. Many chose life over death and gave up writing altogether. Others wrote bland pieces. Those who felt a need to voice their opinions conveyed their messages by using established codes. For example, in 1923, Reza Khan, who expected to one day become the president of Iran, became Iran's prime minister. In 1924, his premiership was celebrated in what seemed to be a flattery essay enumerating his worthy accomplishments. The essay turned out to be acrostic verse (*movashshah*).⁶ Only those

⁶ Originally *movashshah* is a verse arranged so that the initials of each line being put together form some word or verse.

who could decipher an acrostic poem understood the intent of the writer.

Every *movashshah* has a special key that, once identified, deciphers the riddle of the *movashshah*. The key to reading this particular type of essay was to string the first words of the sentences in the essay together sequentially. The result read: “How could the illiterate Reza Khan, who was not even capable of introducing his cabinet to the parliament, be worthy of becoming the president of Iran?”⁷

Some authors, under the same circumstances, used analogy. By invoking an established theme in the mind of the reader, they repopulated that theme with similar events and characters with subtle allusions to contemporary affairs. Hedayat’s above-mentioned *Tup-e Morvari*, written during Mohammad Reza Shah’s rule, is an example. In the 1940s, the pro-Reza Shah author Fathollah Bina took this method to extremes. In his *Iran’s Thirty-Six Year Fever*, a cover title for the volume’s actual title: *Napoleon and Reza Shah*, he wrote about the political activities surrounding the abdication of Reza Shah, an abdication that was foisted on the monarch by the European Occupation Army. In his book, apprehensive of the European Occupation Army, Bina explained the political activities in Iran at the time analogizing them to activities in the medical field. For instance, political meetings passing through Bina’s system appeared as medical meetings, and political agreements appeared as decisions made by boards of physicians. Bina’s premise was that those who discover his method would explain the current situation in the country to the others. Here is a sample: “It was at this point that the philosopher/doctor and his assistants, as the remedy for the crisis, prepared a prescription including nine items. They presented this prescription to the physicians’ assembly with a request for its prompt approval and execution...”⁸

The reader was supposed to understand the following from that text: “It was at this point that Prime Minister Mohammad Ali Foroughi (1877-1942), and the cabinet of the time prepared the

⁷ Baraheni, Reza. *The Crowned Cannibals: Writings on Repression in Iran*, Random House, Inc., 1977, p. 117.

⁸ Bina, pp.176-177.

text of an agreement between Iran and the Allied Forces.⁹ The agreement included nine articles. It was presented to Iran's National Assembly with a request for its prompt approval and execution..."¹⁰

Needless to say, no one detected Bina's scheme. Frustrated by this lack of comprehension, in 1951, Bina wrote a second book explaining how to transform his *Iran's Thirty-Six Year Fever* into *Napoleon and Reza Shah!*¹¹

Authors during Reza Shah's rule like Sadeq Hedayat, reacted to Reza Shah's swift and cruel punishments for impudence, by taking extraordinary measures to hide their opinions. Here are a couple of authors whose messages were uncovered. The revolutionary poet and playwright Mirzadeh Eshghi (1893-1924), was murdered for his opposition to Reza Shah's desire to make Iran a republic. The people's poet and journalist Mirza Mohammad Farrokhi Yazdi (1889-1939) composed poems detailing the atrocities of Reza Shah's regime. He was silenced by having his lips sewn together with needle and thread. Later on, he was killed in prison by means of air injection. Seyyed Hassan Modarres (1817-1937), a pro-constitution Shi'ite cleric and one of the five parliamentarians who oversaw the compatibility of the national laws with the Shi'ite *Shari'ca* was poisoned in prison and suffocated to death while praying.

During those trying times, the burden of expressing the extent of social injustice, lack of individual freedom, and insensitivity to human rights in Iran fell on the shoulders of Sadeq Hedayat. Born to an aristocratic family, Hedayat grew up in luxury, and studied at the best schools that the early twentieth-century Iran could offer. As a youth, he continued his studies in France and, to expand his world view, traveled in Europe, India, and the Soviet Union. By temperament, he was reclusive and, by attitude, assertive. His quiet call for a free and equitable society in Iran of the 1930s was anathema to Reza Shah's oppressive rule.

As far as fiction is concerned, Hedayat was an experimentalist. For instance, in 1931, he wrote "*Zendeh Be-Gur.*" To write

⁹ Foroughi, also known as Zoka' al-Molk, was the prime minister of Iran from 27 August 1941 to 9 March 1942.

¹⁰ Bina, *Ibid.*

¹¹ See Bashiri, *Fiction*, pp. 107-110.

that story, he lived among drug addicts. The characters he presented in his story are so compelling that, for a long time, readers mistook Hedayat himself for his characters. In fact, they went as far as identifying Hedayat himself as a drug addict.¹² In 1932, he wrote “*Seh Qatreh Khun*.” For this story, he investigated the world of the lunatic. In order to portray that world accurately, he experienced life in an asylum first hand. Consequently, the characters that he developed are so credible that the reader forgets that they are lunatics. Many readers try to provide logical explanations for the outlandish assertions of the characters in the piece but, at the end, agree that time and space relations in the story are juxtaposed in such a manner that defy logical explanation. The same type of confusion is created by his use of *qeran*,¹³ *peshiz*,¹⁴ *abbasi*,¹⁵ and *dirham*,¹⁶ or his use of the Suren¹⁷ river and Mohammadiyyeh square in *The Blind Owl*.¹⁸ Of course those coins and places have histories of their own; but do those histories shed light on the overall intent of the story?

Returning to Hedayat the experimentalist. He may originally have used Ásvagosa’s *Buddha-carita* (acts of the Buddha) as the subtext for his story.¹⁹ But the atmosphere in the *Buddha-carita* was not eerie enough to serve as the background for the haunting scenes that he envisioned. Then something unexpected happened. In 1933, four years before the publication of *Buf-e Kur* in India, the *Bardo Thodol* was translated into French by the Secretary of *Les Amis du Bouddhisme*, Madame M. La Fuente. It was published as *Livre des Morts Tibétain*. This event could be responsible for Hedayat’s enhancing his original narrative based on the *Buddha-carita* by changing his main subtext to the *Bardo Thodol*. The rituals described in the *Bardo Thodol* provide the very authentic

¹² For further discussion of “*Zنده Be-Gur*” and “*Seh Qatreh Khun*,” see Bashiri, *Fiction*, pp. 92-98.

¹³ *Qeran* is a relatively recent coin not used before the Safavid period.

¹⁴ *abbasi* is a relatively recent coin not used before the Safavid period. It is worth about four *shahis* or twenty *dinars*.

¹⁵ *Peshiz* was a medieval coin with relatively small monetary value.

¹⁶ *Dirham* was a silver coin used in the Islamic lands since the 8th century A. D. It weighed one *dirham*.

¹⁷ Suren is a river that flows through the ancient city of Rayy.

¹⁸ Cf., Daniel, pp. 79-80.

¹⁹ Bashiri, *Ivory Tower*, pp. 148-152.

space, characters, and atmosphere that Hedayat had envisioned. After he internalized the events in the Tibetan rituals, he recreated them in his novella with remarkable dexterity.

The subtext that Hedayat used was unknown to his colleagues, followers, and readers. It grew out of his fascination with India and Indian culture, on the one hand, and his dogged pursuit of creating believable characters, on the other hand. In relation to India, he was very secretive, and for a good reason. He wrote a short story called “*Akharin Labkhand*,” about a historical event in medieval times, and “*Sampingué*,” a brief encounter in India. But he never allowed his colleagues and friends to fathom the depth of his knowledge of Buddhism.²⁰ In the following, Mohammad Este‘lami sums up Hedayat’s fascination with India. More importantly, he provides insight into the degree to which Hedayat’s peers had access to his involvement with Buddhism:

His [Hedayat’s] souvenir from India was gravitation to Buddhism, and transfer of Buddhist texts to French. Sadeq was very conscious about the misfortune of others and, apparently, the similarities of those misfortunes and what he learned about the Buddha, encouraged him to learn more about that school.²¹

The Iranian establishment’s distrust of Hedayat begins with “*Zنده Be-Gur*” and continues until *Tup-e Morvari* and beyond that. His treatment of the clergy in the latter work established him as an even more anti-religionist. For him, both the government and the clergy were fearsome and awe-inspiring “enemies.” In Hedayat’s mind, because in *The Blind Owl*, he had crossed an unforgiveable religious boundary, the clergy were even more awe-inspiring. He had written a novella using metempsychosis as its main theme. He was afraid that someone might discover his theme and report it to the religious authorities.

²⁰ There is a good discussion of the influence of Hinduism on Hedayat and on his use of Hindu imagery in David Champagne’s essay (see Bibliography). Champagne states that most of the images are shared across Hinduism and Buddhism (See Champagne, p. 115). Since the focus of Champagne’s essay is on understanding the relationship between the narrator and his double regarding rebirth, he does not dwell on Hinduism per se.

²¹ Este‘lami, p. 115.

As mentioned, since the 10th century, when Iranian philosopher Abubakr Razi²² (854-925) combined Aristotelian and Pythagorean thoughts and offered an idea that resembled reincarnation, no Muslim had dared approach that subject either in writing or in lectures. The concept is utterly repugnant to Muslims, irrespective of their creed, race or ethnicity. Hedayat was aware of the swift reaction to Razi's attempt to establish reincarnation as a principle in Islam. The reaction was harsh and unforgiving. Razi was called a heretic. He was labeled "the most hated Muslim."

Hedayat could not afford to be labelled the second most hated Muslim. Neither did he want to provide the clerics in Iran a reason to eliminate him and destroy his family. He, therefore, regarded discussion of Buddhism a red line for himself never to be crossed. And he maintained that line to the end of his life.

A cursory reading of *The Blind Owl* indicates that the story occurs in two different places. The assumption is that those places are both in this world, albeit one is mystifying while the other one is not. The Muslim reader does not have any solid reason to think that the characters of the second part are actual reincarnations of the characters in the first part. Hedayat skillfully leaves out all the relations that could connect his story to the germane points in the reincarnation subtext that he uses. He does, however, use all other relevant information. Hence his dilemma. He had broached an aspect of the religious life of his countrymen that had been taboo in Islamic lands since the era of Razi. Something that at the present only Salman Rushdie, the author of the *Satanic Verses*, can identify with. The difference is that Rushdie, at the time of the discovery of his infringement, was out of the immediate reach of the Ayatollah Khomeini. Hedayat lived in Reza Shah's Iran.

The Blind Owl is the culmination of Hedayat's tenacious experimentalist endeavor to present different perspectives on time, space, character, and atmosphere in a work of fiction. In what follows, we shall look at the early events in *The Blind Owl* as a simple text and point out the parts that, in the mind of the reader, create unanswerable questions. That is followed by a brief

²² Razi is known to the west as Rhazes or Rasis, and to the Islamic world as al-Razi. For Razi's contributions, see Bashiri, *Modern Iranian Philosophy*, pp. 61-62.

outline of the Tibetan death rituals, their equivalent in *The Blind Owl*, and a systematic, detailed comparison of the two scenes.

Since this is merely a partial structural analysis of the novella, the discussion of the second part is brief and succinct. It is added for the sake of presenting a fuller picture of the role of the Buddhist motifs, the activities of the uncle of the protagonist, and the development of the protagonist's persona from a spirit smitten with desire for the *Lakkateh* to one determined to eliminate her without remorse. The message of *The Blind Owl* ends the discussion of the novella.

Reading *The Blind Owl* as a Simple Text

The Blind Owl is written in two parts. The first part begins with a series of complaints. The protagonist, a painter of pen-case covers, speaks about sores that do not have any remedy and pains that cannot be shared with others. He repeatedly paints the same picture and his uncle sells them for him in India. The painting depicts a young girl who is wearing a black dress. She stands before an old man who looks like an Indian *yogi*, wears a *shalma*, and has the index finger of his left hand on his lip. The girl carries a handful of lilies as if to hand them to the old man. A brook separates the old man and the girl.

One day, the appearance of the protagonist's uncle in his studio inspires him to bring down a wine-flask that is high up on a niche in the dark closet of his studio. The wine in the flask contains venom from the fang of the *nag*-serpent. It is an elixir of immortality. The flask had been brought from India by the protagonist's mother and left in Rayy as a keepsake.

In the closet, the protagonist stands on a stool and fumbles in the dark to reach the wine-flask. Before reaching it, however, through an air-inlet, he sees a scene in which a young woman in a black dress, with a pair of enchanting eyes that look without looking, stands opposite him. She carries a black lily in her hand.

In his vision, farther away, an old man sits under a cypress tree and chews on the nail of the index finger of his left hand. A brook comes between the old man and the woman. The woman tries to jump over the brook. The old man laughs hysterically. His hideous laughter causes the woman to slip and fall in the water. As for the protagonist, he loses consciousness temporarily.

When he comes to and brings the wine-flask to his uncle, his uncle has left his studio.

The protagonist, obsessed with desire, feels compelled to find the ethereal girl. He looks for the air-inlet through which he had seen her, but there is not even a trace of an air-inlet where he was sure there was one. He then searches incessantly in his neighborhood to find her. Eventually, she comes to his dwelling and dies there. He paints her several times, but is not satisfied with his depictions. Then she opens her eyes. This gives him an opportunity to paint her eyes in a way that he would never forget them.

When he is finally sure that she is dead, he cuts up her body and puts the parts in a suitcase. With the help of a strange old man, he buries the suitcase in a remote place far from his dwelling.

In the second part, the protagonist awakens in a different world. He and a girl whom he eventually marries, his aunt's daughter, are suckled by the same woman, Nanny. He is intensely in love with his wife to the point that he is ready to pimp for her to stay on her good side. She, on the other hand, sleeps with all kinds of men but refuses him.

Nanny tells him that his father and uncle had been identical twins. In India, they slept with the same Bugham Dasi temple dancer. The dancer had a son. In order to find out to which brother the boy belonged, the brothers were put in a dark dungeon in which a *nag*-serpent was released. The serpent bit the upper lip of one of the brothers and made him deranged. The other brother, presumably the father, brought the boy to the ancient city of Rayy, a burgeoning city at the time.

The young man is curious about everything. When his wife is away, he watches a butcher through one of the windows of his house. Sometimes, through the other window, he observes a rag-and-bone dealer. He ponders about the outcome of the actions of those men as well as the futility of the lives of the citizens of his city. They appear to him to be a lowly lot. The meaningless profession of the rag-and-bone dealer, especially his choices, attracts his attention the most.

The young man has a disease for which he sees the doctor. Once the doctor tells him that his disease is incurable, he leaves the town and immerses himself in nature. After much contempla-

tion, he returns home a changed man. The most noteworthy change is that he no longer desires his wife. She appears to him as a lump of meat.

One night, armed with a knife, he enters their dark bed-chamber. His wife, like a *nag*-serpent, is waiting for him in bed. He enters the bed and, inadvertently, stabs her mortally and takes out her eye. In retaliation, before she dies, she bites him on the lip and makes him deranged.

This simple reading raises many questions. Of course, to the individual who reads the novella as a simple text for entertainment, those questions are inconsequential. But to the individual who reads it as a complex text, they are provocative: Why is the protagonist so cynical and distrustful? Who is the uncle? Why is he visiting on the last day of celebration for the departed souls?²³ Why does he look like a zombie who has fled from the grave? Why, even though he inspires the protagonist to bring the wine-flask, does he leave before his nephew returns with the wine-flask? Under the prevailing circumstance, what is the significance of the *nag*-serpent, and the *nag* venom? Who is the ethereal girl? Do her eyes charm the protagonist or is the protagonist charmed by her eyes? The protagonist says he vaguely knows the ethereal being. Have they met before? What is the exact relationship between the two? On the one hand, the protagonist says the ethereal girl came to him through an air-inlet. On the other hand, he says he inspected the wall thoroughly the next day but could not find any air-inlet in the concrete wall. Where exactly did she come from? Why is she carrying a black lily to offer to the old man? Is the color "black" significant? Does the brook have any particular meaning? What is so frightening about the laughter of the old man that makes the protagonist nearly lose consciousness? Is it the laughter that causes him to be distraught, or is it something that the laughter indicates? What role do the butcher, the rag-and-bone dealer, and Nanny play in the life of the protagonist? The protagonist talks about how he and the *Lakkateh* were born in Ray and grew up together. He also talks about how he

²³ Persian New Year is originally a celebration for the departed. The 13th of *Farvardin* marks the end of that celebration.

was born to a Bugham Dasi temple dancer in India. Can the same individual be born twice?²⁴

The answer to all those questions is in the subtext of the story—reincarnation—and in the manner by which Hedayat, out of necessity, mutes it. Recall that any discussion of reincarnation in Islam is taboo. So, Hedayat emphasized the imagery, and reactions to it, rather than provide information that could expose his subtext.

Some of these questions will find their answers in the course of the comparison between Tibetan death rituals and the content of *The Blind Owl*. Those that remain will be discussed separately in a section called “Lingering Questions” at the end of the analysis of part one.

The Makeup of *The Blind Owl*

Usually, in a standard work of fiction with two parts, the storyline begins at the beginning of the first part and continues into the second. In addition, unless otherwise stated, both parts take place in the same world. In *The Blind Owl*, Hedayat does not follow that tradition. As can be seen from the simple text, his storyline, if it can be so identified in the text, begins in the middle of the second part of the novella. In fact, it is presented as a story among other stories.

The fact is that rather than in the same world, the two parts happen in two different worlds with a period in purgatory between the two worlds. The first, presumably, happens in pre-Mongol times, the second in a world resembling early 20th century. An invisible thread, reincarnation, connects the two worlds. Characters in part one undergo a sojourn in a Buddhist-like purgatory, where they—the protagonist and his ethereal double—try to establish new directions for their future lives. With those remarks in mind, and with the reminder that time and space, as well as character identities in the novella are advisedly kept fluid, let us follow the storyline from where it begins in the middle of part two.

²⁴ In his discussion of the life of the character, Elton Daniel comes close to an interpretation of *The Blind Owl* as a reincarnation tale, but not detecting the finer principles involved, dismisses the notion. See Daniel, p. 81.

The Beginning of the Story

To recap the story: In India, in a dungeon, there are identical twin brothers, one of whom is a convert to Buddhism. Both have slept with the same Bugham Dasi temple dancer and one of them has sired a son with her. A *nag*-serpent is used to determine which one is the father of the child. The serpent bites one brother, gives him a slit lip, and makes him deranged. The other brother, supposedly the father, takes the child and the temple dancer to the city of Rayy, at the time a prosperous metropolis. The mother brings a flask of wine with her and leaves it as a keepsake for her son. The wine in the flask, because it contains venom from the fang of the *nag*-serpent, serves as an elixir of life. In Rayy, the child grows up, becomes a painter of pen-case covers and, with the help of his uncle, sells his paintings in India.

Hedayat is notorious for keeping vital information from the reader. The reader, by weighing the words and deeds of the characters, as well as information from other sources must gradually determine the significance of their contribution to the story and their relationship to each other. For instance, in "*Three Drops of Blood*," Hedayat does not identify the characters who are deranged. Motivated readers sort them out for themselves. In *The Blind Owl*, due to the nature of the theme, this tendency is heightened. Hedayat does not want anyone to discover that an actual process of reincarnation is included in the piece. For this reason, information such as the fact that an individual who is bitten by the *nag*-serpent is not only freed from the wheel of life, but also becomes ubiquitous, powerful, knowledgeable about things not overtly mentioned, is left out. So is the fact that such a person can shape-shift and is invisible to mortals. Yet, in essence, the character of the uncle of the protagonist is based on exactly such a person.

As for the nephew, he has lived in Rayy since the time when his parents had brought him there from India. Over the years, he becomes a painter of pen-case covers and dies. The actual death of the painter, however, is withheld and must be intuited from the statements of the protagonist.

Rather than going into details of what is revealed and what is concealed, let us look at the Tibetan death rituals that we assume are used as the subtext of the novella. It is important to mention that we don't know about the extent of Hedayat's knowledge of

the lengthy and involved ritual (49 days) but, as we shall see, he made extensive use of them.

The Tibetan Death Rituals

The partial *explication de texte* that will be presented below is based on the death rituals routinely performed by Tibetan *lamas*. In recreating Hedayat's narrative, it is assumed that Hedayat had used those rituals as a blueprint for his novella. It is also assumed that he has made additions, deletions, and changes where his narrative has required.

A brief version of the subtext is presented below. The reader is asked, in addition to the *nag*-serpent, to pay special attention to such clues as purgatory, luminous light and its placement, rebirth-seeking spirit, black pebbles, hysterical laughter, and rebirth.

The Tibetans believe that every person has two spirits: a freedom-seeking spirit (also called Immortal Self) that intends to liberate himself from the shackles of life, and a rebirth-seeking spirit (also called Ethereal Soul), that wants to return to the material world. After a person's death, and before the arrival of the *lama*,²⁵ the two spirits of the deceased are already in purgatory. The spirit that seeks rebirth lurks in the darkness of purgatory and is not seen. The freedom-seeking spirit is utterly perplexed and distraught. In a state of confusion, he encounters various beings but does not know how to relate to them.²⁶ The arrival of the *lama* calms him down.

Upon his arrival, the *lama* inspires the freedom-seeking spirit that above his (freedom-seeker's) head, in the darkness, there is a luminous light (also called Clear Light).²⁷ The spirit should focus all his energies on that light, bring it out of darkness, and make it his own.²⁸

The *lama* also warns the freedom-seeking spirit that during his passage through the darkness of purgatory, many gods and demons, all of them created by his own imagination, will try to destroy his concentration on the luminous light. He further warns

²⁵ *Lama* is a Tibetan priest.

²⁶ See, Evans-Wentz, W. Y., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Causeway Books, 1973, p. 18.

²⁷ For luminous light, see, Evans-Wentz, W. Y., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Causeway Books, 1973, p. 89.

²⁸ For the role of concentration in the ritual, see, 168.

the freedom-seeking spirit that his own rebirth-seeking spirit, too, is among those creatures. The rebirth-seeking spirit is particularly aggressive, the *lama* warns, because she needs the freedom-seeking spirit to be with her in order to be reborn. The freedom-seeking spirit must ignore the words and deeds of all those creatures appearing to him, especially the temptation of his own rebirth-seeking spirit. If he fails, he will be reborn.

The gate of purgatory opens into the court of the Lord of Death, who sits on a throne and holds the mirror of *Karma* in his left hand.²⁹ The rebirth-seeking spirit appears at a distance from the Lord of Death. She holds a number of pebbles in her hand. The pebbles represent the result of the "conflict," in purgatory, between the two spirits. If the pebbles are white, it means that the freedom-seeking spirit has retained his concentration and the rebirth-seeking spirit has lost. In that case, the freedom-seeking spirit is freed from the wheel of life, while the rebirth-seeking spirit becomes a *preta*³⁰ or wandering ghost. This happens rarely. If, to the contrary, the pebbles are black, it means that the rebirth-seeking spirit has successfully undermined the concentration of the freedom-seeking spirit.³¹ Consequently, the freedom-seeking spirit is condemned to rebirth and must live another life with the rebirth-seeking spirit. This is the normal situation.

At this juncture, the rebirth-seeking spirit carrying black pebbles tries to cross the River of Forgetfulness, located between them, to hand the pebbles to the Lord of Death. Upon seeing her move, the Lord of Death laughs hysterically. As a result of this hideous laughter, the rebirth-seeking spirit falls into the river and is carried to the Place of Wombs to be reborn. As for the freedom-seeking spirit, he faints.

This is as much of the Tibetan rituals as we need to know in order to decipher the symbolism in *The Blind Owl*. With the clues mentioned in relation to the rituals, the reader is asked to pay special attention to the following clues in *The Blind Owl* in

²⁹ *Karma* is the totality of an individual's actions in various states of existence. It is considered a deciding factor in the fate of the individual in future existences.

³⁰ For *preta* (wandering ghost) world, see, Evans-Wentz, W. Y., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Causeway Books, 1973, p. 170.

³¹ For the black pebbles, see, Evans-Wentz, W. Y., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Causeway Books, 1973, pp. 165-166.

relation to the clues in the Tibetan rituals: purgatory, wine-flask and its placement, ethereal girl, black lilies, hysterical laughter, and rebirth.

The Rituals and *The Blind Owl*

In the first part of the novella, like a carpet weaver, who puts the plan of a carpet in front of her and brings out the flowers of the carpet by following the directions on the plan, Hedayat uses the elaborate Buddhist subtext outlined above and, using Iranian/Islamic warp and woof, creates the most important part of his novella, its theme.

The Blind Owl begins with a series of complaints. The protagonist speaks about sores that do not have any remedy, pains that cannot be shared with others, and extraordinary echoes of life in *Barzakh*³² at moments when sleep and wakefulness are indistinct. He provides snapshot examples of events that, he says, have poisoned, and will continue to poison, his existence forever.

Will it be possible that some day someone would penetrate the secret of these supernatural happenings and recognize these reflections of the shadow of the soul that manifest themselves in purgatory, a coma-like limbo between sleep and wakefulness?³³

Hedayat's protagonist is a lonely spirit. He complains that, in the purgatory wherein he is trapped, there is a dearth of individuals with understanding, individuals to whom he could confide. Consequently, he does not have any alternative but to talk to his own shadow. Furthermore, he is suspicious about the motives of the shadow-like existences that surround him.

Are not these people who resemble me, who seemingly share my needs, whims and desires gathered here to deceive me? Are they not shadows brought into existence to mock and beguile me?³⁴

³² *Barzakh* means purgatory, it is the world between this and the next world; from death to resurrection.

³³ Hedayat. *Bu-f-e Kur*, p. 9.

³⁴ See, Bashiri, "The Blind Owl by Sadeq Hedayat translated by Iraj Bashiri," p. 16. https://www.academia.edu/7961787/The_Blind_Owl_by_Sadeq_Hedayat_translated_by_Iraj_Bashiri

He ends these incoherent statements with the following:

I shall describe one of these incidents that I experienced personally. That incident shocked me so much that I shall never forget it; its ominous scar will poison my entire life from beginning to the end of eternity where no man's understanding can fathom.³⁵

How do these seemingly incoherent statements fit into the makeup of the book? We can easily attribute the incoherence in their presentation to Hedayat's experimental technique in portraying events as he sees them, in snapshots, as opposed to in narrative format. But there is more. Recall we said the protagonist dies, but Hedayat does not mention his death overtly. But he does do so, indirectly.

The proof of the protagonist's demise is in his own statement where, in purgatory, he says he *saw* his uncle for the first time. We know that his uncle is invisible to mortals. So, if the protagonist is not in purgatory, how else was he able to see his uncle?

The fact is that the protagonist, for whatever reason, is undergoing a Tibetan Buddhist funeral. This is apparent from the chaotic state in which he finds himself. His situation is tantamount to the exact situation in which the initiates to the Buddhist purgatory find themselves.

With that discussion in mind, we can assume that before the arrival of the painter's uncle in the painter's studio, the two spirits of the painter are already in "purgatory". We know them as the narrator (representing the freedom-seeking spirit of the painter, hence, the painter), whose arrival was discussed above, and the ethereal girl who, as mentioned, remains unseen. To the reader of *The Blind Owl* only the ethereal girl appears somewhat otherworldly. In reality, however, both they, and the world they are in, are otherworldly.

Meanwhile, the painter's uncle arrives and, like a *lama*, inspires him to bring the keepsake that his mother had brought for him from India. By that he means the wine-flask containing the wine in which venom from the fang of the *nag*-serpent is dis-

³⁵ Hedayat. *Bu-f-e Kur*, p. 10-11.

solved. The wine-flask is high up in the dark in the closet of the painter's studio. Unaware of circumstances, the painter fumbles in the dark for the wine-flask but, inadvertently, is attracted to a pair of captivating eyes, the eyes of the ethereal girl. Rather than ignoring the eyes, as he should under the circumstances, he is ensnared by them and, momentarily, stops his search.

Following this brief encounter, in the course of which the ethereal girl undermines the painter's concentration on bringing down the wine-flask on time, the two spirits of the late painter appear before the "judge," an old man who wears a *shalma*,³⁶ sits under a cypress tree, and chews the nail of the index finger of his left hand. The ethereal girl carries a black lily in her hand. When she tries to cross the brook that runs between her and the old man to hand the lily over to him, the old man laughs hysterically. As a reaction to the laughter, the ethereal girl slips and falls into the water, while the painter nearly loses consciousness.

The Two Scenes Compared

A comparison between the two scenes yields a number of significant results, including visual similarity, similarity in placement of people and objects, and similarity in intention.

Regarding visual similarity, in addition to the similarity between the arrival of the freedom-seeking spirit of the deceased Tibetan and the painter in purgatory, there is a similarity between the Tibetan purgatory itself and the closet of the painter's studio (housing luminous light versus wine-flask, both potent agents of liberation). A comparable similarity holds between the behaviors of the "judges" (mirror of *Karma* in the left hand of the Lord of Death versus the old man chewing the nail of the index finger of his left hand). The falling in the River of Forgetfulness versus falling in the brook, the hysterical laughter, etc.

Regarding similarities in placement of people and objects, note the location of the luminous light versus the place where the wine-flask is kept (both are in the dark and high up above the individual's head), and the location of the River of Forgetfulness versus the brook (both are located between the judges and the rebirth-seeking spirits).

³⁶ *Shalma* is a turban worn by some Indian yogis.

Regarding intention, both the freedom-seeking spirit of the deceased Tibetan, and the painter, have a common goal. They intend to free themselves from the shackles of life by way of a liberating source (luminous light versus the wine in the wine-flask). Similarly, the rebirth-seeking spirit of the deceased Tibetan and the ethereal girl have a similar intention. Both want to prevent their rival spirits from reaching their desired goal and, of course, they want to prevent themselves from becoming wandering ghosts. Both have visible evidence that they have defeated their rival spirits (the black color of the objects they carry). In other words, the scenes share similar symbolism. It is noteworthy that the ethereal girl's intention must be intuited from the outcome of her action (i.e., the black lily she carries).

These similarities, however, do not mean that there are no dissimilarities. There are. In the rituals, the *lama* is eloquent in his guidance of the freedom-seeking spirit, while the painter's uncle is virtually mute (more on that later). In addition, the outward appearance of the two scenes is different. The reason for that is obvious. The scenes are depictions of a particular reality expressed in terms of two very different cultures.

After his tremendous loss in "purgatory," and after being condemned to rebirth, the painter concludes that the ethereal girl is the cause of his downfall. But he does not know where in his actions he had made a mistake.

Nevertheless, he searches relentlessly for the ethereal girl to find and eliminate her. Eventually, she comes to him, accompanies him to his dwelling, and dies there. He paints her eyes. Then he dismembers her body, puts the body parts in a suitcase, and looks for someone to help him carry it to a far-off place. An old man, driving a hearse, helps him carry the heavy suitcase to a remote burial ground. There, the old man digs a grave exactly the size of the suitcase. The painter opens the suitcase and looks at the ethereal being. Her eyes, still alive, look at him. He closes the suitcase and buries it. At his dwelling, he tries for a second time to pay the old hearse driver, but the old man refuses payment.

Lingering Questions

Before leaving this part, there are a few questions that deserve attention. For instance, if the uncle intended to liberate the

painter, one might ask, why didn't he warn his nephew about the ruses of the ethereal girl? After all, the rituals emphasize the importance of intense concentration.

The answer could be that, at this point in the story, the uncle's intention was to place his nephew on the way to salvation so that, in the long run, *he* could save himself. Otherwise, the uncle knew from personal experience that his inexperienced pen-case cover painter nephew would not have any chance to measure up to the task. This attitude also explains the next question. Why didn't he wait for the protagonist to return with the wine-flask? Perhaps because he was aware of the extent of the lack of his nephew's capability, especially when contending with the ruses of the ethereal being.

As mentioned earlier, the role of the uncle, with the powers at his disposal, requires special consideration. A close examination of the text indicates that the old hearse driver is actually the uncle. He supervises the burial of the ethereal being but, at the crucial juncture where he can alert his nephew to the devastating power of the ethereal girl's eyes, he remains silent. He could tell the protagonist that rather than the body, he should disable the girl's eyes. But he does not. His nephew has to come to that realization on his own.

As we shall see in part two, the uncle travels through time to Rayy, where the painter and his double are reborn. There, by shape-shifting as a butcher and a rag-and-bone dealer, he continues the "education" of his nephew.

Another question that needs further explanation pertains to the event in the closet. In the rituals, the gods and demons that are determined to undermine the concentration of the freedom-seeking spirit and destine him to rebirth come from within the deceased. But we know that, in *The Blind Owl*, the protagonist sees the ethereal girl through an air-inlet in the wall of his closet.

The answer is that, in reality, the ethereal girl is the embodiment of the painter's desires, and that she is projected by the protagonist from within himself. Only if we follow the painter's initial perception at the moment of the encounter would it be correct to say that she came through the air-inlet. But, the next day, the protagonist examined the concrete wall thoroughly and reported

that there was no air-inlet in the wall. So, where did she come from?³⁷

The first part of the story, which ends here, is about a character who spends his life in vain and who, in purgatory, faces the consequence of his misdeeds, whatever they are. The uncle comes to his aid, but finds the painter's case to be beyond help. The painter is reborn.

Buddhist texts also speak about individuals who, after rebirth, research the reason for their failure and take measures to prevent it from occurring again. Their preventive measures include self-awareness, recognition of desire, and elimination of the cause of desire without remorse. The character that Hedayat portrays in the second part of *The Blind Owl* is such an individual. Serving as a personification of the Buddha, the protagonist's shape-shifting uncle leads him to the achievement of his goal. That is why we have consistently called this all-encompassing benevolent being in the life of the protagonist his "uncle".

Part Two

In part two, attached to each other like the stalks of a rhubarb plant, the protagonist and his ethereal double are awakened in a world similar to where they had lived in their previous life.³⁸ However, except for some vague memories, they do not have any recollection of the events of that life.

They grow up together and, forced by instinct, marry each other. The intensity of the wife's enchantment, but more so the young man's intense desire for her, forces the husband to do the unthinkable for her to stay on her good side. But to no avail.

In time, the unorthodox activities of the wife, whom the husband calls *Lakkateh* (whore), make the husband's sickness worse. According to the family doctor, the husband's sickness is incurable. The more the sickness progresses, the more the patient becomes distraught and, through flights of imagination, often expressed in very concrete terms, tries to meld the two aspects of

³⁷ For a full discussion, see the section called "Interpretation of Complex Texts," pp. 104-105, below.

³⁸ Williams takes "*dar donya -ye jadidi keh bidar shodeh budam*" (*Buf-e Kur*, p. 45) literally and concludes that one of the parts, more likely the first, is a dream and that the dream might be a greater reality for the protagonist than reality itself. See Williams, p. 106.

his being—the visible and the hidden—together. The impact of those flights brings about a great change in him:

I was no longer the creature that I used to be, and if I could materialize that creature and speak to him, he would not hear me, nor would he understand my words.³⁹

He enters a realm where life and death are interchangeable, and obliterated and suppressed desires shriek for vengeance. He gives himself up to annihilation in the eternal flux and, in order to make that state permanent, questions the validity of life after death:

The thought of a second life frightened me and made me tired. I was still not used to this world in which I was living; what good would another world do me?⁴⁰

That state brings him to an appreciation of the world of the rag-and-bone dealer:

[T]he rag-and-bone dealer was not a commonplace, vulgar and colorless man like the stud-males who attract foolish women with an inordinate desire for coition. The layers of misfortune encrusted on the old man's head and face, along with the misery that emanated from him, distinguished him as a demi-god; and even though the old man was not aware of this, he was a manifestation, a representative of creation itself.⁴¹

Finally, he describes himself as a demi-god privy to the ruses of the *Lakkateh*. He discovers the pains that she takes, and the

³⁹ https://www.academia.edu/7961787/The_Blind_Owl_by_Sadeq_Hedayat_translated_by_Iraj_Bashiri, p. 44.

⁴⁰ https://www.academia.edu/7961787/The_Blind_Owl_by_Sadeq_Hedayat_translated_by_Iraj_Bashiri, p. 54.

⁴¹ https://www.academia.edu/7961787/The_Blind_Owl_by_Sadeq_Hedayat_translated_by_Iraj_Bashiri, p. 58.

tools that she employs (i.e., woad⁴² and collyrium,⁴³ etc.) to mask her identity from him:

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 shop and 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! My wife!⁴⁴

At the end of part two, holding a bone-handled, long-bladed knife firmly in his hand, he enters their dark bedchamber in which his wife, like a *nag*-serpent, is waiting for him. Still holding the knife, he enters the bed, but unlike other times, does not allow his wife the opportunity to charm him. Instead, he stabs her mortally and takes out her eye. In retaliation, before she dies, she slits his lip and makes him look like the rag-and-bone dealer.

Reading *The Blind Owl* as a Complex Text

Reading the novella as a complex text differs from reading it as a simple text in that, with the help of the Tibetan rituals, actions and their consequences are rationalized. A major difference is that this reading begins with the event in the dungeon in India where it was decided to which brother the boy belonged. In other words, it starts with the first life of the protagonist.

The boy is given to the presumed father who takes him and his mother to the city of Rayy. There the boy grows up, becomes a painter, and dies. In purgatory, his uncle, who had thus far been invisible to him, becomes visible. In fact, he comes to his studio and visits him.

Another difference is that we have more information about the ethereal girl. As the protagonist's rebirth-seeking spirit, she enters purgatory alongside the protagonist, but lurks in the dark

⁴² Woad is a kind of blue dye obtained from the woad plant.

⁴³ Collyrium is a lotion or liquid wash used as a cleanser for the eyes.

⁴⁴ https://www.academia.edu/7961787/The_Blind_Owl_by_Sadeq_Hedayat_translated_by_Iraj_Bashiri, p. 59.

and is not seen. Furthermore, the protagonist is oblivious to her ruses and his uncle, who is aware of her activities, does not alert him. Instead, he inspires the protagonist to bring the wine-flask in the wine of which poison from the fang of the *nag*-serpent is dissolved, from his closet. At the same time, knowing that his nephew does not have the necessary concentration capability to bring the wine-flask down on time, leaves the studio.

As his uncle had predicted, the painter's concentration is easily undermined by the captivating eyes of his rebirth-seeking spirit who emerges through an air-inlet in the wall of the dark closet. Seeing those eyes, the protagonist becomes overwhelmed and loses all track of time. When he returns with the wine-flask, his uncle has already left.

In the next scene, in "court," the protagonist faces the consequence of his inability to concentrate on bringing down the wine-flask quickly. An old man, who wears a *shalma*, presides. He is to decide whether the protagonist should be liberated or be condemned to rebirth. Considering the black lilies displayed by the protagonist's rebirth-seeking spirit, the old man refuses the protagonist's request for freedom and condemns him to rebirth. That means another life with his rebirth-seeking counterpart. The immensity of his unexpected failure makes the protagonist temporarily lose consciousness.

From here on, except for a couple of points, the simple and complex texts read pretty much the same. One point is that the old hearse driver, who comes to help him bury the suitcase, is his uncle. The old man's agility, overall knowledge, and strength correspond to the attributes of one who is freed from the wheel of life.

The other point applies more to part two than to part one. It is noteworthy here because this is where Hedayat launches the character of the protagonist's uncle as a Buddha-type figure determined to free his nephew. However the uncle intends to carry out his mission indirectly (i.e., without providing direct instructions). For instance, at the graveyard, when the painter opens the suitcase and sees that the eyes are still alive, the uncle could have told the protagonist that rather than the body, he should disable the eyes. But he did not do that. The uncle's attitude is that the protagonist must learn the significance of the ethereal girl's eyes on his own.

In part two, the protagonist's uncle, who can travel across centuries, and who knows the root cause of the young man's malady (i.e., ignorance created by desire), comes to the ancient city of Rayy to set his nephew free from the control of his wife. In other words, he tries to compensate for his nephew's lack of the knowledge necessary to thwart the ruses of the ethereal girl.

In order to help, he sets up a butcher shop near the protagonist's house and, 'acting' as a butcher, teaches him how life, using its attractive charms, masks the reality of death. He also sets up a rag-and-bone dealer's display nearby and, through the incongruous assortment of trinkets on his display, teaches the protagonist how to distinguish between reality and what masquerades as reality.

The protagonist gathers a wealth of information about his past through watching the butcher, the rag-and-bone dealer, as well as through conversations with Nanny and his wife's brother. He acquires the most useful information, however, through introspection and contemplation, when he gives reigns to his thoughts and imagination to move out of the confines of the city and become at one with nature.

In different ways, his uncle guides him through the various facets of life and shows him the true nature of the *Lakkateh*, a beautiful but lethal *nag*-serpent. For instance, the uncle shows the protagonist that his wife not only sleeps with the lowest of the low in the city but, in spite of his despicable looks, she sleeps with him as well. At the end, he brings the protagonist to the realization that *Lakkateh* masks reality from him (i.e., she pretends to be young and incredibly attractive while, in reality, she is mature and interested only in pleasure, sex, and procreation).

In time, the protagonist traces the actions of his wife to the disposition of the innocent girl who had played hide-and-seek with him on the banks of the Suren River and finally, to the deceitful nature of the ethereal girl and her captivating eyes in the dark closet of his studio. He discovers how, on the one hand, she had mesmerized him and how, on the other hand, had deprived him of his freedom.

Once the uncle becomes convinced that his nephew has accumulated the necessary knowledge and experience to pass the test of the *nag* (i.e., not to be charmed by his wife). Through Nanny, the uncle empowers the protagonist with a bone-handled,

long bladed knife. The protagonist kills the *Lakkateh* and extracts her eye. The *Lakkateh* bites him on his lip and turns him into a rag-and-bone dealer, the exact state that his uncle had planned for him.

The Message of *The Blind Owl*

As we have observed, Hedayat focuses on the actions of his characters and evaluates the outcome of those actions judiciously. In order to emphasize the extremely delicate nature of what the protagonist was unknowingly seeking (i.e., freedom), he concentrates on the character's profession, a profession that had limited the protagonist's worldview to painting the same picture over and over on the narrow cover of a case for holding pens. Such individuals, he says, would spend their lives chasing fleeting phantoms and, in purgatory, would see their rebirth-seeking spirits carry black lily branches against them *ad infinitum*.

That, however, he implies, does not have to be the case. Every individual must learn that he, and he alone, is responsible for his own salvation. In addition, the individual must learn that freedom is not something that befalls a person by accident, nor is it something that is bestowed on a person, like a king would grant a piece of land to a subject. Rather, freedom is something precious that is earned through retrospection, and is achieved by exercising one's God-given foresight. Foresight that melds the whisper of ions with the fleeting nature of being.

Translation and Complex Texts

I do not consider myself a translator in the true sense of the word but, whenever my work has required, I have provided translations from Persian into English and vice versa. When translating, I have tried to stay as well informed about the thought processes of the authors of the pieces I translate as possible. In fact, a good translation for a complex text cannot be achieved unless the storyline that the author follows is clearly understood by the translator. Otherwise, the accurate intent of the author might be jeopardized.

In the case of *The Blind Owl*, the Tibetan materials made me realize that Hedayat's protagonist whom I had assumed all along to be a Muslim, or a Zoroastrian, was, for whatever reason, un-

dergoing a Buddhist death ritual.⁴⁵ The clues provided by Tibetan rituals gave a vague indication that some kind of tension kept the protagonist and the ethereal being at loggerheads with each other, a tension that, in part two, surfaces as a clash of wills between the sick young man and his wife (*Lakkateh*). In fact, without access to Hedayat's thought processes, I could not know that the setting of the first part of the novella is a reproduction of a Buddhist purgatory, and that the purgatory motif is repeated in one of the most revealing paragraphs in part one, a paragraph that sums up the whole theme of the novella, even before the event in the closet begins. That paragraph will be discussed in the last section of this essay.

In *The Blind Owl*, Hedayat confronts the reader with a number of strange characters, unfamiliar settings, and an extremely bizarre atmosphere. He manipulates time sequences and juxtaposes scenes. A lack of understanding of the dynamics of the work creates confusion in the mind of the translator which, in turn, is conveyed to the reader. That confusion must be obviated before a final translation is made. Again, in my case, the Tibetan materials helped a great deal. For instance, the most shocking moment for the freedom-seeking spirit in purgatory is when, after much struggle to achieve enlightenment, he realizes that his quest for salvation has failed and that he will be reborn. The Tibetan materials describe that intense moment in great detail and fully document the intensity and the anxiety that the freedom-seeking spirit undergoes. To his credit, Hedayat reflects the same intensity when his protagonist comes to a similar realization.

It is the translator's task, therefore, through selection of appropriate semantic connotations, to convey that exact feeling to the reader. The reader must know that the protagonist is unhappy to have allowed himself to be attracted to the seductive eyes of his rebirth-seeking spirit, that he has failed to bring down the wine-flask quickly, and that his failure has given his rebirth-seeking spirit the opportunity to carry a black lily to the old man across the brook.

For the reader to have an opportunity to fathom the depth of the author's intent on his own, and for the author's ideas to be conveyed without overt discussion of the content of the subtext, it

⁴⁵ For details, see Bashiri, *Fiction*, pp. 169-171.

is essential that the translator present the author's cues as the author reveals them. But he should discuss them in the context of the subtext only if the translation is being undertaken for analytical purposes. Otherwise, nothing should be divulged beyond what the author allows. For instance, Hedayat advisedly used the word "*nag-serpent*," as opposed to *mar-e kobra* ("cobra-serpent"), or simply *kobra* ("cobra"), to alert his reader that there were certain subtle levels to his novella, and that they were masked from the casual reader. The translation must reflect that reality but not, for instance, what the real effect of the sting of a *nag-serpent* on an individual might be.

Some authors make delving into a particular aspect of society a hallmark of their work. For instance, Sadeq Chubak focused on the vernaculars of southern Iran. Hedayat cataloged those aspects of Iranian culture that he felt were unique and that, in light of a rapid-paced program of modernization and westernization, they were likely to vanish. To preserve them, therefore, he cataloged as many lullabies, folktales, proverbs, titles, names, and the like as he could.⁴⁶ Often he used the knowledge that he gained as a result of this effort to create distinct and memorable events and characters in short stories like "Alaviyyeh Khanom" (*Madame Alaviyyeh*, 1933) and "*Haji Morad*" (Haji Morad, 1921). In "*Haji Morad*," he used the word "*morad*" (desire) as the name of a person whose main wish in life was to be recognized as a *haji*. His family, using a cultural loophole, had given him the name *Haji*. Even though he had never gone on a pilgrimage, he expected everyone who knew him in the bazaar, to treat him as if he were a real *haji*. The shopkeepers and others acquiesced and called him "*haji*." Behind his back, however, they laughed at him. The fact remained that *Haji* desired but did not, in fact could not, behave like a *haji*. He did not know how to, even if he tried. In the long run, that cultural shortcoming caused him to bring down a great deal of embarrassment on himself.⁴⁷ Therefore, when Hedayat assigns a name, or uses an attribute, there might be a reason behind his choice. When that happens, it is crucial that the words that the translator chooses have the connotations that Hedayat had intended. Otherwise, the translation may not measure up to Hedayat's expectation.

⁴⁶ See Ghanoonparvar, pp. 69-70.

⁴⁷ Bashiri, *Fiction*, p. 64.

Take for instance, the choice between the words “bitch” and “whore” as a translation for the word *lakkateh* in Hedayat’s *The Blind Owl*. When Hedayat was choosing an attribute for the wife of the protagonist in *The Blind Owl*, he had a number of terms from which he could choose. They include *jendeh*, *fahesheh*, *ruspi*, *harjai*, *lakkateh*, *qahbeh*, *khiyabani*, and others. He chose “*lakkateh*.” Similarly, when Costello was choosing an English equivalent for *lakkateh*, he had a similar number of words in English to choose from, including prostitute, bitch, whore, harlot, strumpet, streetwalker, call-girl, and the like. He chose “bitch.”

Is the English word “bitch” the most appropriate word to represent the Persian word “*lakkateh*”? And if it is, why? The answer is in how a bitch uses her sexuality. In the Persian catalogue, all but *jendeh* and *lakkateh* use their sexuality for payment. Since the protagonist’s wife, in spite of sleeping with almost every man in town, does not ask for pay, *fahesheh*, *ruspi*, *harjai*, *qahbeh* and, *khiyabani* are not appropriate. In English, too, prostitute, strumpet, streetwalker, and call-girl are not applicable for the same reason. Harlot, which some translators have used, would be a good choice except for its strong Biblical overtones. That leaves “bitch” and “whore.”

In English, “bitch” is usually used for a woman who is beligerent and aggressive, especially with regard to safeguarding her rights. In spite of the possibility of allegations of sexual misconduct, she is mindful of her reputation and is very protective of the honor of her family. Conversely, a whore is an immoral, scheming woman who uses her sexuality as a means for moving her affairs forward. She is not mindful about either her own reputation, or the honor of her family or her community. In a general context, bitch fits the profile of a *jendeh*, while whore fits the profile of a *lakkateh*, respectively.

The translator should not confuse structural analysis with analogy, a device that Hedayat uses extensively in his *Tup-e Morvari*. In analogy, events proceed in tandem. Structural analysis is a device for the researcher to discover the covert make up of a story or a poem. Its ultimate goal is to reveal those thought processes of the author that are not overtly stated, but which drive the author’s thoughts like an engine. They manifest themselves through the clues that the author provides. Unlike in analogy, in structural analysis all aspects of a piece are constantly

examined and reexamined and subjected to decision. Without such a device, a *Sufi* understanding of the “*Shirazi Turk*” *ghazal* of Hafiz, “*Ensan-e Kamel*” (“*The Perfect Man*”) of Jami,⁴⁸ or a critical understanding of “*The Three Drops of Blood*” of Hedayat, or of his “*Stray Dog*” would be impossible. The task of the translator is to grasp the significance of the clues and use them only in the manner that the author allows.

Another significance of the application of structural analysis to complex texts is that it assists the translator to choose appropriate definitions for words and phrases from among a spectrum of semantic connotations presented in dictionaries and encyclopedias for the same word. The interaction of those connotations places the reader within the milieu for which the complex text is intended. In the case of *The Blind Owl*, it reveals Hedayat’s zeal in educating his contemporaries to distinguish between “making a judgment” and “making an *informed* judgment.” He made every effort to rescue his countrymen from the yoke of a horde of greedy government officials and a bevy of ignoramus clergy whose combined effort was focused on keeping their subjects obedient through ignorance—perpetual ignorance to be exact. The tragic fact was, and to a degree continues to be, that there is a dearth of informed judgment.

Finally, many comparisons have been made between the translations of *The Blind Owl* by Costello and Bashiri. Before getting into that, a word about Costello. Desmond Patrick “Paddy” Costello was born in New Zealand in 1912. He was educated at Auckland Grammar School. He also attended Auckland University College of the University of New Zealand and the Trinity College of Cambridge University. He was a linguist, a soldier, a professor, and a diplomat-cum alleged KGB agent. He was fluent in French, German, Italian, Spanish and Greek. To that he added Gaelic, Russian, and Persian. Costello died in England, in 1964.

The objective of most of these comparisons has been to determine which translation is better. A logical approach to the

⁴⁸ For “Abd al-Rahman Jami’s “Ensan-i Kamel,” see “Abdul Rahman Jami’s Perfect Man,” in *The News*, Academy of Sciences of Tajikistan, No. 1 (237), 2015, pp. 120-129.

question, however, would be to assess which translation conveys the depth of the author's knowledge, foresight and, in the case of complex texts like *The Blind Owl*, the skill of the author in storytelling and conveyance of message. Furthermore, one should consider which translator allows the culture of the language being translated to blend into the culture into which the text is being translated. In other words, is the translator intimately familiar with the languages and cultures involved on both sides of the translation effort? If the author uses materials or images borrowed from other cultures, is the translator familiar enough with the necessary background information about those cultures so that his reader can follow the author's cues and discover more information about the subject than a simple reading of the text allows? If the answer to any part, or parts, of those concerns is in the negative, then the translation under consideration is lacking in those particulars.

Interpretation of Complex Texts

As discussed in some detail earlier, *The Blind Owl* begins with a series of complaints about sores that do not have any remedy, pains that cannot be shared with others, and extraordinary echoes of life in purgatory. In that context a snapshot was presented that was interpreted as either a recollection of past lives, or a premonition of events to occur.

After becoming acquainted with the text that follows, it seems that the latter interpretation, (i.e., premonition of events to occur) might be a more likely one. The event that follows after the paragraph presenting that statement does, indeed, poison the protagonist's being, and will continue to do so for the near future.

Our discussion up to this point has been focused on discovering means by which we can fully understand the meaning of those introductory paragraphs and to provide apt translations and convincing interpretations for them. In other words, to explain how those often-complex paragraphs fit into the makeup of the rest of the novella.

Those statements, as explained, lead to the fateful paragraph about which I talked earlier. However, before getting into that paragraph, a question. Who is the individual making those complaints? Many readers confuse this individual with the author of the work. For example, in books that discuss Hedayat's life and

his novella, especially where the complaint under consideration is discussed, the text is illustrated with a silhouette of Hedayat in a fedora hat against a blank wall. In other words, they insinuate that the person who utters those words is Hedayat himself. Similarly, is it Hedayat himself who, in the novella, says:

I have decided that I should write. That I should introduce myself to my shadow—the stooped shadow on the wall that voraciously swallows all that I put down. It is for him that I am making this experiment to see if we can know each other better. Since the time when I severed my ties with others, I want to know myself better.⁴⁹

The fact is that the silhouette did not have anything to do with *The Blind Owl*. It was created by an acquaintance of Hedayat and given to him during his first trip to Paris, a decade prior to the writing of those introductory words.⁵⁰ Neither is this misidentification of the author for his character limited to the casual reader. Mohammad Estelami, a prominent Iranian scholar and the author of a survey of modern Iranian literature, saw Hedayat in basically the same light. In 1976, he commented on the works of many contemporary Iranian writers, including Hedayat. Interestingly, to explain the events in the novella, he chose these very introductory remarks to illustrate his explanation. About the protagonist's complaint, especially about the events that the protagonist identifies as those with the most impact on his life, he says the following:

This event, the spark of which will truly burn Hedayat to the end of his life, is an imaginary story written in the style of the surrealists.⁵¹

As can be seen, Estelami clearly identifies Hedayat as the person experiencing those pains and explains that Hedayat will suffer until the end of his life because of those experiences. He further explains how, as a surrealist, Hedayat considers the imag-

⁴⁹ *Buf-e Kur*, p. 10.

⁵⁰ Mehrin, p. 7.

⁵¹ Estelami, *Barrasi*, p. 118.

inary to be a part of the real and, consequently, evaluates Hedayat's novella as a *mélange* of the imaginary and the real:

Once they [the surrealists] give themselves up to the groundswell of their thoughts they allow whatever comes to their mind to spill over onto the paper.

Este^lami also sees a hint of the style of the stream of consciousness writers in *The Blind Owl*. Such writers, he says, Hedayat included, are not concerned with either the intellectual or the logical relations that obtain among things. They reflect social reality as it occurs to them:

[The surrealists suggest that] the writer should put down events as they happen to him, irrespective of any sensual or intellectual relations that might obtain among the constituent themes in the work.⁵²

Finally, about the events in *The Blind Owl* as a whole, he adds:

The events that Hedayat writes about in *The Blind Owl* are related to the same subjective realities that were outlined above. For us [Iranians], who have not been exposed to such events in our literature, they resemble an ecstasy or a dream that someone has recorded in his sleep.

What is noteworthy, however, is that Hedayat is not the protagonist, and *The Blind Owl* is not written without a lifetime of sober preparation, experimentation, as well as undergoing a painstaking process of choosing events and finding exact language with which to accurately describe them. The following paragraph for which the Persian text and two translations are provided is the full text of the premonition mentioned above in relation to the protagonist's state upon entering purgatory, and before the arrival of his uncle. We shall analyze it in light of the Tibetan rituals discussed in the previous section, and with a view to "*The Summary of The Blind Owl*" and "*The Buddhist Subtext of The Blind Owl*." (see bibliography)

⁵² Este^lami, *Barrasi*, p. 119.

Dar in donya-ye past por az faqr o maskanat, bara-ye nakhostin bar goman kardam keh dar zendegi-ye man yek sho^oā^e-e aftar darakhshid – amma afsus, in sho^oā^e-e aftar nabud, balke faqat yek partov-e gozarandeh, yek setareh-ye parandeh bud keh be surat-e yek zan ya fereshteh be man tajalli kard va dar roshanaⁱ-e an yek lahzeh, faqaṭ yek saniyeh hame-ye bad bakhtiha-ye zendegi-ye khodam ra didam va be^e azamat va shokuh-e an pey bordam va ba^d in partov dar gerdab-e tariki keh bayad napadid beshavad do bareh napadid shod – na, natavanestam in partove gozarandeh ra bara-ye khodam negah daram.⁵³

Costello's translation:

In this mean world of wretchedness and misery I thought that for once a ray of sunlight had broken upon my life. Alas, it was not sunlight, but a passing gleam, a falling star, which flashed upon me, in the form of a woman—or of an angel. In its light, in the course of a second, of a single moment, I beheld all the wretchedness of my existence and apprehended the glory and splendour of the star. After, that brightness disappeared again in the whirlpool of darkness in which it was bound inevitably to disappear. I was unable to retain that passing gleam.⁵⁴

Bashiri's translation:

I thought, for the first time, in this base world, full of poverty and misery, a ray of sunshine shone on my life. But alas, instead of a ray of sunlight it was a transient beam, a shooting star that appeared to me in the likeness of a woman or an angel. In the light of that moment that lasted about a second, I witnessed all my life's misfortunes, and discovered their magnitude and grandeur. Then that transient beam of light disappeared into the dark abyss for which it was destined.⁵⁵

⁵³ Hedayat, *Buf-e Kur*, pp. 10-11.

⁵⁴ Costello, D. P. edpf.pub/the blind owl.

⁵⁵ Bashiri, https://www.academia.edu/7961787/The_Blind_Owl_by_Sadeq_Hedayat_translated_by_Iraj_Bashiri, p. 17.

As can be seen, on the surface, the two translations are very similar to each other. There are, however, substantial differences when the view of a literary analyst and the view of a structural analyst regarding the ramifications of the actions outlined in the paragraph vis-à-vis the protagonist are compared.

At the level of the literary analyst, the statement describes an episode in the past life of the protagonist. The protagonist describes his encounter with a transient beam that he says he has mistaken for a ray of sunlight. That encounter, he says, has shocked him to the core, to the level of despondency. That mistake, the author tells the reader, has turned the protagonist's world upside down.

The enigma for the literary analyst and, similarly for the reader, as far as the cause of the protagonist's distraught is concerned, is that they are left in the dark. The author does not mention any cause for the protagonist's distraught. Logically speaking, however, mistaking a transient beam of light for a ray of sunlight is not something that can create such havoc in one's life, unless there are extenuating circumstances, which there are.

To solve the enigma, the structural analyst treats the event as a constituent part of a series of events in a complex novella. Then, through clues in the novella, he establishes an organic relationship between this paragraph and the subtext of the novella. Finally, he studies this particular action in the context of the involvement of the protagonist in the story as a whole. He searches for a reason for the protagonist's strong reaction to the two beams of light, especially with the perspective that one prevents him from attaining the other. In other words, the structural analyst tries to read the mind of the author at the time of creation and to impart meaning to the statement through that medium.

That is the approach that we have taken in analyzing the novella. We relate this premonition to the anxiety of the painter as he tries to find his way in purgatory before the arrival of his uncle. Needless to say, his premonition comes true soon after the arrival of his uncle.

The paragraph begins with *dar in donya* (lit., in this world). The literary analyst, having assumed that *donya* refers to the world in which we live, proceeds and interprets events in the manner of Este^lami. The structural analyst, on the other hand,

with an eye to the subtext of the story, provides two meanings for the phrase *dar in donya*: “in this world” and “in this purgatory.” The purgatory being the one that the protagonist refers to in the paragraph prior to the statement. Then he interprets the language that follows using the same dual value attributions mentioned above. In other words, he allows the subtext of the story to indirectly color his thoughts to match the protagonist’s thought.

If the protagonist is referring to a purgatory, in what purgatory has he experienced that harrowing experience? Does it look like our expected Islamic purgatory? Or does it look like the less known Zoroastrian purgatory? Or does it look like an altogether different purgatory? Could what he is complaining about be an actual event in that purgatory? In other words, could this be a summary description of what this person has actually witnessed in that purgatory, or presumes to experience again?

As the structural analyst proceeds, he notices that from among *tabidan*, *darakhshidan*, *tajalli kardan*, *monavvar kardan*, and *nur afkandan*, all meaning “to shine,” Hedayat has chosen *darakhshidan* for the ray of sunlight and *tajalli kardan* for the transient beam. Is that choice significant? The use of *darakhshidan* for the ray of sunlight is normal. In that context, he could have used *tabidan* without making a difference. *Tajalli kardan*, however, is an altogether different type of shining. It has the sense of something conjured and manifested from within an object or individual. It is something that happens, for instance, to those who get lost in the hot desert and see a lake of fresh water in the distance, a mirage. Later on, the mirage is described as something conjured by the mind: something without real-world existence. In fact, when clerics explain the appearance of saints to the devout, they use *tajalli kardan*.

Thus, equipped with a new understanding of vocabulary items like *tajalli kardan*, but more importantly, with an eye to the subtext (i.e., the *lama* sending the freedom-seeking spirit to concentrate on the luminous light; the spirit’s concentration being undermined by the rebirth-seeking spirit lodged within the freedom-seeking spirit itself, and the spirit’s realization of his mistake leading to his utter distraught, etc.), the structural analyst asks: Could the ray of sunlight symbolize the wine in the wine-flask in which poison from the fangs of the *nag*-serpent was dis-

solved? This question then leads to the following: If the ray of sunlight is the wine-flask, would not the transient beam that he has mistaken for a ray of sunlight be the enchanting eyes of the ethereal being that supposedly penetrate the concrete wall and beguile him? And consequently, isn't the distraught that he feels a direct result of his failure to keep his concentration on the task at hand? Is not his despondency related to the failure that led to the black color of his lily and the inevitable verdict for him to be reborn with the ethereal girl?

Those questions and answers bring the structural analyst to the conclusion that the protagonist resembles a freedom-seeking spirit that has just left the court of the Lord of Death with a negative verdict. He is confounded by the impact of the *tajalli* of not only what he had gone through in his previous life but, more poignantly, the life that awaits him in an uncertain future.

It is not, therefore, unusual for the literary analyst to think that the protagonist was despondent because he could not possess the eyes of the ethereal girl before they disappeared from his sight. And for the structural analyst to conclude that the protagonist was despondent because he had involuntarily allowed the eyes of the ethereal being to appear to him at all.⁵⁶

Tajalli kardan, as a clue catapults the structural analyst from the world of the protagonist and the Tibetan purgatory to the cosmic arena where free will and predestination rule. Here is the question: How did the mistake that impacted the protagonist's world so adversely happen in the first place? More than that, why did the protagonist allow it? Because, the protagonist says, "[It was] a shooting star that appeared to me in the likeness of a woman...and disappeared in the dark abyss for which it was destined." The words "appear" (in its *tajalli* sense) and "disappear in the dark abyss for which it was destined" connote a lack of control on the part of the individual, first in seeing something involuntarily and then in being affected by it defenselessly. They are both related to a third word, "control." The protagonist complains that he was destined to make the mistake that he made. Later on in the story, he laments this lack of control that he believes constitutes a major part of the makeup of his being:

⁵⁶ For the significance of the Whore's eyes, see Ghanoonparvar, p. 73.

It was as if ... I had passed all my life lying in a black coffin, being carried about amid mist, and hovering shadows by a stooped old man whose face I could not see.⁵⁷

On a grand scale, in the statement being analyzed, the protagonist complains that all along his many lives (i.e., the statement can be repeated at the beginning and end of each life), he has been the victim of transient beams that have appeared in his life, deprived him of reaching his expected ray of sunlight, and departed. He complains that he does not have any control over either their appearance or disappearance. He does not have control even over his own obsession. More grievously, he finds himself inextricably attached to obsession and is punished for that involuntary attachment.

Hedayat repeats the same complaint in his "*Payam-e Kafka*" ("*The Message of Kafka*," 1948). He says, "Man is helpless against society, time, and other forces and is as obedient to them as a dog." He further laments, "Man must die like a dog at the hand of those unknown forces because he does not have the ability to control them."⁵⁸

The lesson that we learn from the paragraph, and indeed from *Buf-e Kur*, is this: While living, we mortals assume that when the time comes, somehow, we will be able to bring the wine-flask down on time and gain the white lily required for our salvation. But when the time comes, we find ourselves lacking. Somehow, unbeknownst to us, a pair of enchanting eyes enters our sanctuary, beguiles us, and diverts our attention off our path to our ray of sunlight. The diversion affects the color of the lily that indicates whether we should cross the brook in front of us or fall into it. At that point, we have no say in it.

Neither Costello's translation, nor Bashiri's, or any other translation of *The Blind Owl* reflects, or can reflect, the complexity that Hedayat incorporates in the novella. No simple translation can. After all, it is in the nature of a complex text to be different in its deep structure than in its overt form. So, what is the

⁵⁷Bashiri, https://www.academia.edu/7961787/The_Blind_Owl_by_Sadeq_Hedayat_translated_by_Iraj_Bashiri, p. 30.

⁵⁸ Cf., Bashiri, *Fiction*, p. 10; Bashiri, "The Message of Hedayat," pp. 30-56.

translator to do? Should he try to “read” the author’s mind into his translation, or should he present his own cursory understanding of the story? A solution is yet to be found. The practical approach applicable to poetry has been to provide a simple translation and an elaborate interpretation. In the case of prose works, however, the simple translation needs to be augmented with a guide explaining the story’s subtext, the symbolism involved, and the clues that help the reader uncover the message of the author. A guide explaining the dynamics of George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* as a complex text is already available.

Conclusion

This essay discusses complex texts, their structure, and their *raison d’être*. It shows how the author of a complex text incorporates his message in a subtext and enables his reader/analyst to discover it by placing clues in strategic locations in the text.

The subtext is usually farfetched and obscure. The degree of the obscurity of the subtext depends on the type of message that the author has to encode, as well as on how proficient, or in the case of Hedayat, how desperate, the author is in masking his subtext.

Hedayat chooses Tibetan death rituals as the subtext in which to hide his message. His message is based on the Buddha’s efforts to gain liberation by putting an end to desire and ignorance. In order to illustrate how Hedayat uses Tibetan rituals, a simple reading of *The Blind Owl* is presented first. Then the obscurities that make the text of the novella nearly incomprehensible are identified. This is followed by a brief discussion of the Tibetan rituals in tandem with areas in *The Blind Owl* on which they bear. A comparison between the two texts obviates the obscurities.

No attempt is made at a serious discussion of either translation or interpretation of the novella. Only a few remarks are presented. It is shown that translation and interpretation go hand in hand. It is further shown that without a firm knowledge of those two distinct processes, conveying the true intent of Hedayat in writing *The Blind Owl* can be jeopardized.

Appendix Structure of the Novella

Image and Narrative Source

- a. The *Buddha-carita*. Striking images from the life of the Buddha are interspersed throughout the text.⁵⁹ They provide the narrative with an underlying message of liberation based on the life of the Buddha, as well as accommodate crucial concepts from the *Bardo Thodol*.
- b. The *Bardo Thodol* provides systematic developments in the Buddhist afterlife leading to the message outlined above.⁶⁰
- c. The *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*.⁶¹ This work, and the works of Franz Kafka, are used for image enhancement, as well as creating a balance between ancient times and modern affairs.
- d. Popular Iranian (Zoroastrian and Shi'ite) locations, symbols, and images are used to mask the eerie Buddhist atmosphere of the subtext. Nevertheless, many of the haunting images remain.
- e. The *Ruba'iyyat* (quatrains) of 'Umar Khayyam is used to emphasize the inevitability of the passage of time and to enhance the concept of *carpe diem*.

Character Roles

- A. Unchanging character: Nanny. She ages but her attitude remains unchanged.
- B. Changing characters:
 - a. Dominating ethereal being (part one); reborn as *Lak-kateh*, a dominating whore/wife (part two).
 - b. The painter, despondent imitator (part one); reborn as an inquisitive, discerning, sick young man, who watches, internalizes values, and makes decisions accordingly (part two).

⁵⁹ See, Bashiri, *Hedayat's Ivory Tower*, pp. 136-166.

⁶⁰ See, Bashiri, https://www.academia.edu/30937868/The_Buddhist_Subtext_of_Sadeq_Hedayats_Blind_Owl, pp. 11-17.

⁶¹ See Rilke, in Bibliography; Bashiri, *Hedayat's Ivory Tower*, pp. 175-187.

- c. The painter's uncle. Liberated by the *nag*-serpent from the wheel of life, assumes various roles: captain, merchant, hearse driver, gravedigger (part one), butcher, rag-and-bone dealer (part two). He serves as a Buddha figure for the protagonist. His main goal is to educate his nephew and help him liberate himself.

Time

- A. Life span of the painter:
 - a. On the earth-plain: childhood in India, dejected painter in Rayy, death
 - b. In purgatory: failure at judgment, rebirth
 - c. In his second life: childhood, sick young man married to *Lakkateh*, becomes aware of the ruses of his wife, overpowers her in the dark bedchamber, and kills her. He turns into a clone of his uncle.
- B. Life span of the brother/uncle:
 - a. On the earth-plain: childhood and youth in India, victory in the dungeon, liberation.
 - b. He assists his nephew to bury the ethereal girl
 - c. He assists his nephew to liberate himself.
- C. Historical time:
 - a. Pre-Mongol times (part one)
 - b. Modern times (part two)

Setting

- a. Other worldly; enchanting and incredible (part one)
- b. More normal, yet bizarre (part two)

Atmosphere

- a. Generally gloomy (part one)
- b. Increasingly uplifting (part two)

Attitude

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

Literary Technique⁶²

- a. Deliberate distortion of time and space for special effects
- b. Inclusion of passages from well-known eastern and western 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

Symbolism⁶³

- a. The wine-flask as a symbol of the luminous 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 young man with an incurable sickness
- 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), *Lak-kateh* (part two)
- g. Uncle symbolizes a liberated individual who is not bound by time and place (both parts)

Message

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

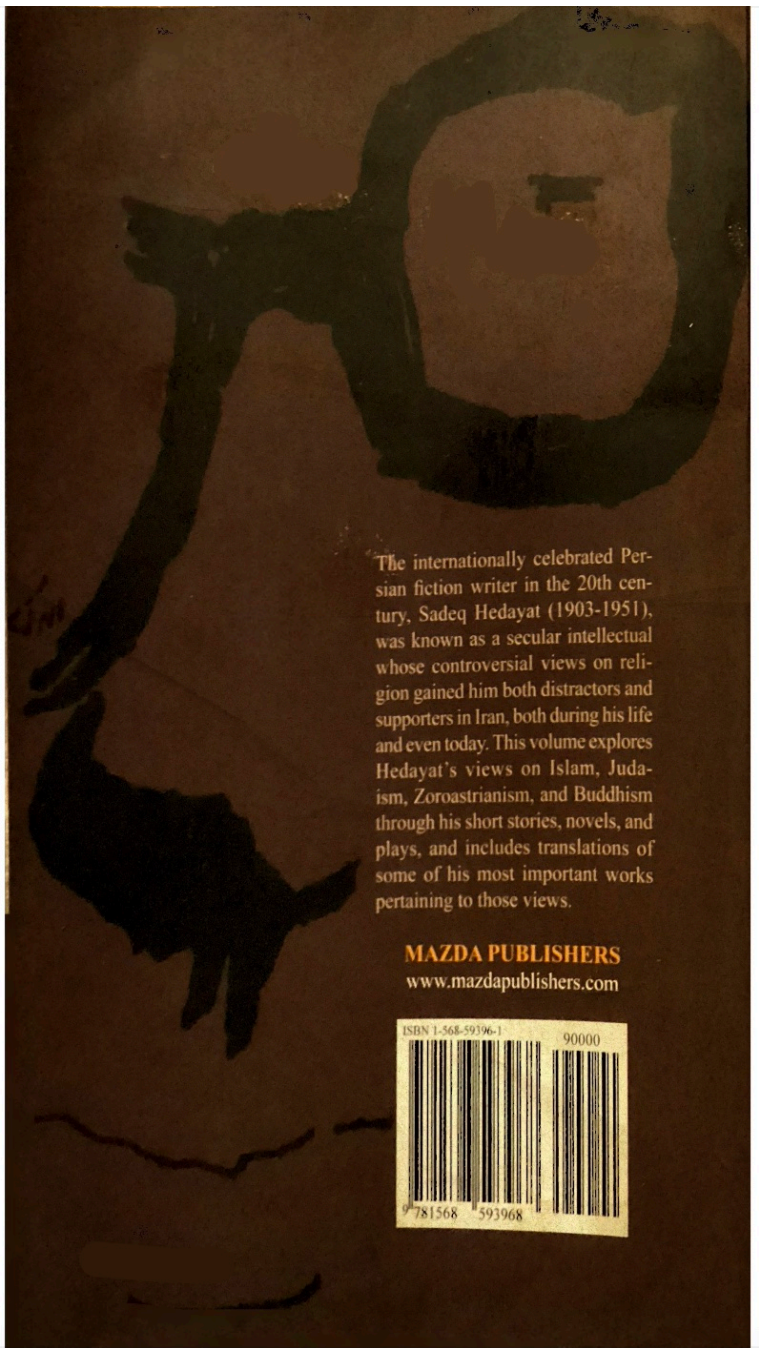
⁶² Bashiri, *Fiction*, pp. 92-105.

⁶³ Bashiri, *Fiction*, pp. 106-131.

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The internationally celebrated Persian fiction writer in the 20th century, Sadeq Hedayat (1903-1951), was known as a secular intellectual whose controversial views on religion gained him both detractors and supporters in Iran, both during his life and even today. This volume explores Hedayat's views on Islam, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and Buddhism through his short stories, novels, and plays, and includes translations of some of his most important works pertaining to those views.

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