



# The Life of Sadeq Hedayat

by

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## Introduction

Like that of most writers, Sadeq Hedayat's biography is not free from controversy. Indeed, increasingly numerous interpretations of his thoughts, words, and deeds make a retrospection of his life especially complicated. To avoid the difficulties of monolithically describing an enigmatic figure like Hedayat, we shall essay his life as factually as we can. This account will include his travels, professional activities, and, to some degree his authorship, especially in relation to his trip to India and his use of Buddhist ideas in his *novella*, *The Blind Owl*. In relation to the latter, our focus will be on structure rather than on artistic abilities. We want to ascertain how Hedayat shapes his themes, in general and the theme in *The Blind Owl* in particular, that they become inherently enigmatic. At the end of the article, we shall speculate whether Hedayat, given Iranian circumstances of the 1930s and 1940s, realized the aspirations of his life (i.e., elevate the level of consciousness of his countrymen so that they could create an independent nation), or, like so many before him, took that desire to the grave. We shall also discuss whether his death was self-inflicted, as it is generally believed, or whether other factors might have influenced it.

## Childhood and Early Youth

Hedayat was born in Tehran on February 17, 1903, to a northern Iranian aristocratic family.<sup>1</sup> He was named Sadeq after his paternal grandfather (*Nayyer al-Mulk*). According to his brother, Mahmud, Sadeq was the center of the family's attention:

Throughout his childhood, all the members of the family, the children as well as the adults, loved my brother Sadeq. His childish antics and his sweet and pleasant speech amused us all. Around the age of five or six, well before the expected time, he became calm and collected. He no longer displayed any desire for childish pranks. Rather he became an introvert avoiding the company of other children.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kamshad, *Modern Persian Prose Literature*, pp. 131-141; Dastgheyb, *Naqd-e Asar*, pp. 12-21.

<sup>2</sup> Dastgheyb, *Naqd-e Asar*, p. 13.

At the age of six, Hedayat was sent to the 'Elmiyeh School where he studied until the end of his elementary school years. Then, in 1915, he joined the *Dar al-Fonun* school where he received a Western education under the supervision of European teachers. He also became acquainted with the ways of life of other peoples. When he lost the desire to pursue a rigorous course of study, like mathematics and its allied subjects that bored him, he opted for learning the French language instead. His family then registered him at the Saint Louis Academy.

When he was seventeen or eighteen, Hedayat broke with his family. This does not mean, however, that he left the family all together.<sup>3</sup> Rather that, for most of the rest of his life in Iran, he occupied a room in his ancestral home, but he did not participate in his family's social life. Nor did he seek, during his school days or later, to use his family's great influence to secure himself a lucrative position.

His "new" life at the Saint Louis Academy consisted of studying the lives of great men of the past and learning French and English. From the early years of his life, Hedayat was a curious, social individual. For instance, in order to receive current and pertinent Western literary materials, he corresponded with relevant European literary circles. They, in turn, supplied Hedayat with the titles that he needed. "Knowledge of the Unknown" seems to have been his main interest at the time—the books he read were on the astrolabe, on the art of divining, and about the occult (*ruh shenasi*).<sup>4</sup> He also wrote. For example, he alone wrote the entire school newspaper, published it, and distributed it.<sup>5</sup> To this paper he contributed such pieces as "Zaban-e Hal-e Yek Olaq dar Vaqt-e Marg" (silent language of a donkey at the time of death). Some of these early writings exist in the newspapers and journals of the time.

Hedayat completed research on and published his first study of 'Umar Khayyam, entitled "*Ruba'iyat-e Hakim 'Umar Khayyam*" (the quatrains of the philosopher 'Umar Khayyam), in 1923, when he was twenty years of age. This was during the final years of the Qajar dynasty, the dynasty in which his family held high offices close to the court. He graduated from the Saint Louis Academy in 1925-26.

Hedayat's study of Khayyam led him to examine the philosophies of two other Aryans, Zoroaster and the Buddha. In 1924, he published his first impressions in a brief study entitled *Ensan va Heyvan* (man and animal). Like Zoroaster's "Gatha of the Ox Soul,"<sup>6</sup> *Ensan va Heyvan* is

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<sup>3</sup> Danesh, *Omnibus*, p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> Whether his choice of examining consecutive lives in *The Blind Owl* reaches this far back in his life is debatable, but worth considering. Cf., Bashiri, "Buddhist Subtext," pp. 11-17.

<sup>5</sup> Cf., Danesh, *Omnibus*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>6</sup> Duchesne-Guillemin, *Hymns*, pp. 56-61.

primarily a defense of the animal kingdom against the ravages of man. And as do the dictates of the Buddha, it condemns the killing of animals for any purpose. Personally convinced, later on Hedayat became a vegetarian himself and remained a vegetarian to the end of his life (see below). Neither this study nor the piece on Khayyam has any claim to stylistic achievement or uniqueness. *Ensan va Heyvan* does, however, show promise.

## Youth

Sometime in 1925-26, Hedayat traveled to Europe as a member of a group of students whom Reza Shah had ordered to study abroad and to return to Iran as teachers. He was to study engineering in Belgium but soon gave it up. He also gave up architecture that he was to study in Paris, and the study of dentistry. Instead, he spent his time traveling and sightseeing. In fact, for the next four years, Hedayat committed himself to the study of the arts, literature, and writing.

While in Paris, in 1926, he published an article entitled "La Magie en Perse" (magic in Persia) in *Le Voile d'Isis*. Using an analysis similar to the 1923 piece on 'Umar Khayyam, Hedayat investigated the origins of magic in ancient Iran and included a somewhat detailed account of the Zoroastrian pantheon, principles, beliefs, and eschatology.<sup>7</sup>

After a brief stay in Paris, Hedayat traveled to Besançon and roomed at a boarding house for a while. Upon his return to Paris in 1927 he tried to commit suicide by throwing himself into the river Marne; he was rescued. The reason for this attempt at self-destruction is not known. In a letter dated May 3, 1928, to his brother, he explains the incident cryptically:

I did something really crazy, but luckily it did not do me in! I will write about it in detail later.<sup>8</sup>

In Europe, Hedayat became extremely self-conscious, devoting a good part of his time to the resolution of the problem of life and death. To this end he studied the works of Rainer Maria Rilke, especially *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. Rilke's adoration of death so intrigued Hedayat that the latter wrote his own commentary entitled "Marg" (death) in 1927. This two-page commentary was published in Berlin in the journal *Iranshahr*. Here Hedayat extolled death as if he were inexorably attracted to it. In the same year he also published "Favayed-e Giyah-khari" (the advantages of vegetarianism) in Berlin, again in *Iranshahr*. This longer study is considered by some to be merely a revised edition of the earlier "Ensan va Heyvan" but by others, including Hassan Qa'emian, who later collected and, in 1955, published

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<sup>7</sup> For the Zoroastrian pantheon, see Bashiri, *Ancient Iran*, pp. 5-12.

<sup>8</sup> Katira'i, *Ketab-e Sadeq-e Hedayat*, pp. 182-183.

Hedayat's *Neveshteha-e Parakandeh* (scattered notes), to be entirely new. Whether a revision or a new piece, the work indicates that Hedayat sustained his interest in the subject.

Little is known about Hedayat's life and activities in France before 1930, the year he returned to Tehran. We know, however, that he was on government scholarship, did not have to work to sustain himself, and had a good deal of time to read, think, and possibly write.

### **Hedayat's Works**

Upon his return to Tehran in 1930, Hedayat published his first collection of short stories, entitled *Zende Begur* (buried alive). Four of the stories in this collection had been completed while Hedayat was still in Europe; the rest were completed in Tehran.

At this point, Hedayat's government scholarship was cut. He had free residence at his family's home, but he had to find a job to sustain himself. At the time, writing was not a profession in Iran whereby one could earn a living. He, therefore, sought employment outside the government in the National Bank of Iran, where he worked until 1933.

In Tehran, Hedayat joined the ranks of the students who had returned from Europe and who were facing repression, censorship, and threats of incarceration for their criticism of the regime. Among these returnees there were many who shared and supported Hedayat's antimonarchical, progressive, and isolationist views on the course that Iran should take. Indeed, three such young men, Mojtaba Minovi, Mas'ud Farzad, and Bozorg Alavi convinced Hedayat to organize a group to reflect their opinions. Hedayat agreed and soon a group called the *Rab'a* (foursome) was formed. The group reviewed the activities of such conservative literati as Hassan Taqizadeh, Reza Hekmat, Muhammad Qazvini, and Abbas Eqbal Ashtiyani. This latter group clung steadfastly to the Iranian traditional literary staple, poetry. Their main contributions to literature were annotated editions of medieval manuscripts.<sup>9</sup>

As expected, no sooner had the new group begun its activities than it was denounced by the conservatives as "extremist" and was duly shunned by the majority. Gradually, however, the *Rab'a* furthered a body of fresh talent consisting of those musicians, writers, and painters who did not wish to be identified with the conservatives. Many politicians who had been searching for a forum for self-expression also joined the group. Among these new members mention can be made of Mas'ud Razavi, Parviz Natel Khanlari, Sadeq Chubak, Abol Qasem Anjavi Shirazi, and Hassan Qa'emian.

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Dastgheyb, *Naqd-e Asar*, p. 18.

After becoming acquainted with these talented individuals, Hedayat set about educating those who needed his help to improve their social standing.<sup>10</sup> For instance, he assisted many in polishing their manuscripts for publication. At times he went as far as rewriting sections of their works to make them acceptable to certain editors. Thus, in Tehran, two rival literary groups came into existence. One was the traditional group, the members of which worked from desks and offices. The other was the *Rab'a* whose members gathered in downtown teahouses and cafes. About the activities of the *Rab'a*, Mojtaba Minovi says:

Each of us had his own, distinct personality .... Normally we gathered in teahouses and restaurants and, if drinking is not considered a deviation from righteousness, at times we even consumed liquids harder than water! One could even hear us debate issues critically and with utmost vigor. Often people blamed us—some even hated us—but their opposition could do us no more harm than to prevent us from playing chess .... We fought for freedom and we fought with zeal. Hedayat was the hub of our operation. At first we thought that by recognizing Hedayat's value as a literary figure, we were encouraging him, but soon it was obvious that he encouraged us. He was the center and we were the satellites revolving around him."<sup>11</sup>

The works that Hedayat produced between 1930 and 1937 fall into three categories: (a) reformist literature, in which the activities of the *Rab'a* are clearly discernible; (b) works of fiction, primarily short stories, novelettes, and a *novella*; and (c) research dealing with Iranian history and men of letters.

In the present study we shall not address the activities of the *Rab'a*. Works such as *Vagh Vagh Sahab* (Mr. Bow Wow), produced to disdain the handling of contemporary issues, need separate attention as satire and humor rather than as fiction per se. Besides, these are co-authored works and the other contributors, such as Mas'ud Farzad (in the case of *Vagh Vagh Sahab*), will have to be studied before the works can be justly assessed.

In the genre of fiction, Hedayat published his second volume of short stories, entitled *Se Qatreh Khun* (three drops of blood), in 1932, followed by his third collection *Sayeh Rowshan* (chiaroscuro) in 1933. Both volumes must have been received casually: there is no mention of them or of Hedayat in the journals of the time. After *Sayeh Rowshan*, Hedayat published a novelette entitled "'Alaviyeh Khanum" (Madame 'Alaviyeh) in 1934. This piece gained some prominence, not so much as a story but as an example of Hedayat's dexterity in handling the

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<sup>10</sup> *Yadbudnameh of Sadeq Hedayat*, commemorating Hedayat's 6<sup>th</sup> death anniversary, pp. 18-19.

<sup>11</sup> Komissarov, "Sadeq Hedayat," p. 843.

Persian language. This positive development, deriving from almost half a decade of writing and experimenting with techniques and styles, boosted Hedayat's career.<sup>12</sup>

Hedayat's contributions to a better recognition of Iran's past and of her men of learning, like his contributions to the *Rab'a* materials, deserve a separate study. However, it is noteworthy that Hedayat spent a good deal of his time in 1934-35 re-examining the works of 'Umar Khayyam, especially the philosophy that the sage had incorporated into his *Ruba'iyyat* (quatrains). The result of these investigations appeared in print in 1934-35 as a most concise, well organized, and informative introduction to the *Quatrains* entitled *Taraneha-e Khayyam* (Khayyam's quatrains) and illustrated by the painter Darvish. In the same study, Hedayat also examined Khayyam's link to Iran's Aryan past, on the one hand, and to the philosophy of the Buddha, on the other. This latter occupied a good deal of Hedayat's time during this period. He even incorporated an entire story about a Buddhist commander into the *Sayeh Rowshan* collection. Hedayat's involvement with Buddhism is particularly significant because of the influence of Buddhist rituals in *The Blind Owl*, partially discussed in an article entitled "The Buddhist Subtext of Hedayat's *Blind Owl*".<sup>13</sup>

While he was re-examining the philosophy of Khayyam, Hedayat worked at the Chamber of Commerce in Tehran. He found office work tedious, repetitive, and unproductive. He preferred the more relaxed life of learning and investigation. He sums up his nonliterary career, saying:

I was not well-known in places where I worked.... My bosses were always dissatisfied with my performance, and when I left them, they were always happy to see me go.<sup>14</sup>

Hedayat had many friends, both Iranian and European. He corresponded quite regularly and entertained his friends and associates either in his residence or in a nearby cafe. Among his associates, one who kept up with him almost to the last days, is Jan Rypka. Their association began in Tehran in 1934-35 when the Czech writer was there learning about Persian literature. While discussing the current literary trends in the country, Parviz Natel Khanlari, Rypka's teacher at the time, had mentioned the works of Sadeq Hedayat. Rypka later examined one of Hedayat's stories and decided that he should see the Persian author. He records his first impressions as follows:

Hedayat was a slender kind of chap. He was of medium height and had an intelligent face. I shall always remember his simplicity, warm smile, polite wit as well as his

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<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of the language in this and other stories, see Bashiri, *Fiction*, pp. 132; 161.

<sup>13</sup> Bashiri, "Buddhist Subtext," pp. 6-7.

<sup>14</sup> Qa'emian. *Nevisandegan-e Bozorg*, p. 277.

pervasive and vivacious disposition. Whenever we met thereafter, my feelings towards him remained the same. He had an unchanging personality, one quite in tune with his works.<sup>15</sup>

At the time of this meeting Hedayat was working with the *Rab'a* and was, as mentioned earlier, studying the works of Khayyam. This effort completed, Hedayat, once again, had to seek a new place of employment. He joined the General Department of Constructions and remained there until 1936.

The gradual rise of the *Rab'a* and the fame of its members as staunch antimonarchical, anti-Islamic writers frightened the government. In 1936, as the world faced the threat of another war, the *Rab'a* became a target for annihilation. So, in the same year, for purely political reasons, it was officially disbanded; some members were jailed and some went into hiding. Hedayat chose to seek a new forum in India. There, he hoped, he would polish his Pahlavi (Middle Persian) language, examine some of the Middle Persian documents first hand and contribute to a better understanding of Iran's past. More than anything, he wanted to delineate what is Persian and what is Arabic in the cultural mix usually known as Islamic. He also hoped that in India he could publish some of his works held back for fear of censorship and, more importantly, that he could write down some of his thoughts—thoughts that he had not dared put down in Iran for fear of search and seizure by Reza Shah's government.

Hedayat stayed in India until sometime in 1938-39. There he completed *Buf-e Kur* (the blind owl) and published it. The book that is available today in many editions and languages was made available in mimeograph form and marked "Not for sale in Iran!" This work, Vincent Monteil believes, had already been completed by 1930 but withheld from publication because of Hedayat's fear of censorship and retaliation against himself and his family.<sup>16</sup> Monteil's contention, as we shall see later, cannot be refuted, given the political situation. But would Hedayat have been able to write his masterpiece so early in his career, especially that the piece includes a rather precise narrative of Buddhist death rituals Tibetan style?<sup>17</sup>

From Hedayat's letters to Jan Rypka, it can be gathered that his stay in India was not happy. Impecunious as always, he had to live with a friend. He writes:

About six months ago I turned all my worldly possessions, valued at less than a grain of barley, into banknotes. Now, after suffering much hardship and overcoming many obstacles, I have succeeded in reaching far-off India where I may be able to earn a

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<sup>15</sup> Jan Rypka, "Yadbudha," p. 461.

<sup>16</sup> Radot, "Yek Nevisande," p. 351.

<sup>17</sup> See further below for discussion.



morsel of food and pray for the well being of my friends. My monetary situation is not noteworthy. For the present I am sponging off<sup>18</sup> one of my friends..."<sup>19</sup>

It was in India that Hedayat began seriously to question the merit of a literary career in Iranian circumstances. He felt that his career as a writer had gained him nothing but enemies. He even considered breaking away and entering a new venture. In a letter to Rypka, he says:

For some time now I have been taking lessons in Pahlavi from Mr. Bahram Angalsaria.<sup>20</sup> But I believe that this (i.e., learning Pahlavi) will benefit me neither here below nor in the hereafter ... Now I realize that all that I have done and do has been and is futile... Recently I have been entertaining the thought of going into business with some partner and opening a small shop. But we lack sufficient capital ... I sent you a copy of a story entitled "'Alaviyeh Khanum" some time ago. Now I have a *novella*, several travelogues, and about twenty stories ready for publication. As of now, however, there seems to be no prospect of their being published at any time soon.<sup>21</sup>

This letter was posted (Bombay, January 29, 1937) about six months after Hedayat's departure from Iran. In it he refers to *The Blind Owl* as a manuscript.<sup>22</sup> We do not hear much from Hedayat until he writes Rypka again (September 5, 1939). In this letter, posted in Tehran, he tells Rypka of his own situation and expresses concern at the takeover of the Czech writer's homeland and for the writer's well being.

With the help of Master Anklesaria, Hedayat made a number of translations from the Pahlavi language into modern Persian. Of these *Zand-e Human Yasht* (commentary on the Vohuman hymn) and *Karnamak-e Ardashir-e Pabakan* (the deeds of Ardashir of the house of Babak) were published in Tehran in 1944 and 1945, respectively.

In India, Hedayat traveled far and wide, initially with no apparent purpose but, after meeting Mirza Esma'il-e Shirazi, the *Wazir* of the *Maharajah* of Mysore, the situation changed. At the *Maharajah's* request, the *Wazir* invited Hedayat to his palace where Hedayat stayed for a fortnight. During this time, he met many prominent Indian personalities, interviewed the *Maharajah* himself and attended many parties. When palace formalities eventually caught up

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<sup>18</sup> In Persian, "sponge off" is "*angal*." See below.

<sup>19</sup> Rypka, "Yadbudha," pp. 463-464.

<sup>20</sup> He means T. D. Anklesaria, the famous Pahlavi teacher. By playing on the first part of Anklesaria's name (i.e., writing *Angal*—parasite—instead of Ankle), he ridicules his own future status were he to become a learned Pahlavi teacher.

<sup>21</sup> Rypka, "Yadbudha," p. 464.

<sup>22</sup> Katira'i, *Buf-e Kur-e Hedayat*, 218.

with Hedayat and he decided to leave, the *Maharajah* offered to pay his train ticket to Delhi. This Hedayat refused, even though he was in need of money."<sup>23</sup>

Hedayat, as you recall, fled to India to prevent the government from incarcerating him along with Bozorg Alavi and many others. But he also hoped, while there, to find a way to commit to writing some of the works that he had held in his mind waiting an opportune moment. In India, where he could write freely, without fear of censors or government confiscators, Hedayat poured out his frustrations, not so much for others to read as to free himself from their pressure. The result, of course, is the completion of *The Blind Owl*, a work noteworthy for its narrator's confession of his inadequacies and for its author's eulogy of figures who have shown perseverance and self-motivation—not to mention compassion, sensitivity, and humanity.

Upon his return from India, Hedayat found to his dismay that the situation in Iran had gone from bad to worse. Of the repressive rule and the stifling of the intellectuals in the early 1940s, Parviz Natel Khanlari says:

For a three-to-four-year period—until after the events of *Shahrivar* 1320 [August 1941]—there existed no literary magazine throughout Persia, except for the official magazine *Iran-e Imruz* (contemporary Iran) whose editor was held in trust by the police ...<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, Hedayat set about living as he had lived before his trip to India. Again he worked in the National Bank of Iran. Then in 1943 he joined the *Journal of Music* and, a year later, moved to the Faculty of Fine Arts. He worked in various capacities in the latter organization until the end of his stay in Iran.

By 1942, the shock waves of the Second World War reached Iran. Reza Shah abdicated in favor of Mohammad Reza, his crown prince. The change, which allowed a temporary relaxation of censorship, gave the artists and writers in the capital an opportunity to regroup and to assert their views on the socio-political and literary trends of the day. Hedayat seized this opportunity and published his *Blind Owl* piecemeal in the daily *Iran*.

Another major change on the socio-political and, eventually, literary scene at this time was the emergence of the *Tudeh* Party or the party of the masses. Beginning among the youth who had been imprisoned with veteran Communists, the *Tudeh* party emerged from Reza Shah's prisons with a set of plans and goals for the future of Iran. Supported by prominent men such as Ehsan Tabari and Bozorg Alavi, the party soon found numerous followers in Tehran and

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<sup>23</sup> Katira'i, "Buf-e Kur-e Hedayat," P. 132.

<sup>24</sup> Kamshad, *Modern Persian Prose*, p. 183.

spread to the northern cities. Hedayat, it seems, did not join the Party officially but kept in close contact with its upper echelon through Alavi and others.<sup>25</sup> His major concern now was to redirect his own writing in a way that, rather than emphasizing philosophy, would concentrate on mirroring the realities of the time. He wanted to give every Iranian an opportunity to read his material, but more than that, as with the *Rab'a* members, to provide an opportunity for them to identify with his concerns. The more he delved into the insurmountable social problems of Iran, however, the more he became depressed and dejected. The atrocities of the monarchy, the clergy, the landed gentry, the nobility, and the intelligentsia were such that one could not see where even to begin to reform the society. To ward off the depression of genuine helplessness, Hedayat turned to drugs and alcohol. In addition, to expose corruption he turned to a less symbolic, but, nevertheless allegorical, mode of writing. Hedayat the realist was born.

His last volume of short stories was entitled *Sag-e Velgard* (the stray dog). This collection, published in 1942, contained eight stories and was written mostly before his trip to India. Later in 1944 he published a volume of humor and satire entitled *Velengari* (tittle-tattle). This volume, like *Vagh Vagh Sahab*, must be analyzed by a critic of satire. In the same year, he paid a two-month visit to Tashkent in Soviet Uzbekistan, where he was intrigued by the abundance of manuscripts dealing with aspects of Persian literature, life, and culture. That year, he also published a rather simplistic but scathing story entitled "Ab-e Zendegi" (the water of life). Could his trip to Tashkent and the proletarian pieces "Farda" (tomorrow) and "Ab-e Zendegi" point to a possible official affiliation with the *Tudeh* Party? We cannot provide a convincing answer. Bozorg Alavi, an ex-*Rab'a* member, was now a prominent figure in the Party, but Hedayat's actual relation to the *Tudeh* remains unknown. "Ab-e Zendegi" was followed in 1945 by another direct attack on the top. This work, entitled *Haji Aqa* (Haji Aqa), surpassed "Ab-e Zendegi" in political daring. In it, Reza Shah was portrayed as a peddler, selling Iranian resources to foreign and domestic "customers" alike.

With the loosely constructed *Haji Aqa*, Hedayat's career as a short-story writer had come full circle. It had started with mild criticism in *Zende Begur*, it reached the height of self-analysis and artistic criticism in *The Blind Owl*, and was ending with abusive criticism in *Haji Aqa*. There now remained very little of the artistry and the creative force that had produced *The Blind Owl*. Now, however, he was caught on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, the translation of *The Blind Owl* into French had brought him international renown; on the other

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<sup>25</sup> Malaki, "Hedayat va Hezb," pp. 17-23; Abrahamian, *Between Two Revolutions*, p. 334.

hand, drug addiction and alcohol had sapped his ability to present works comparable to *The Blind Owl* or even a story like "Sag-e Velgard." The end of a creative career was in sight.

In the 1930s, as we saw earlier, Hedayat was happy to work with the *Rab'a* and to create a forum for self-expression of the youth of that time. In the 1940s, he apparently channeled the same kind of enthusiasm in the direction of the *Tudeh* Party. He hoped that the Party would eventually set the Iranians free both from the bondage of the Pahlavis and their Western overlords, as well as from the snare of Islam and its fossilized 'ulema. His last piece of fiction, "Farda", published in 1946, reveals an unusual degree of sympathy for the rank and file of the *Tudeh* Party.

In 1947, Hedayat participated in the first Congress of Iranian Writers. The Congress, which was sponsored by the Iranian and Russian cultural centers, was dominated by the same conservative writers who had caused the downfall of the *Rab'a* and the incarceration of its members. The activities of the Congress are reflected in its proceedings. It shows that the ex-*Rab'a* members, like Alavi and Hedayat, had little room to assert themselves even though Hedayat was on the Board of Directors of the Congress.

*Tup-e Morvari* (the pearl cannon) is Hedayat's last satire. It was written in 1947 but remained unpublished until the early days of the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Even when published then, it was immediately confiscated and those who had contributed to its publication were imprisoned. As we shall see, in *Tup-e Morvari*, Hedayat becomes even more abusive with respect to the Pahlavis than in *Haji Aqa*. His treatment of the clergy recalls the rise of Bachcha Saqaw in Afghanistan and the Islamic republic that he established there (1929).

Hedayat was aware that mere abuse was not sufficient to impress his critics or his admirers. The frustration of loneliness, drugs, and his inability to produce the type of works his public expected drove him deeper and deeper into himself. Finally, in 1948, Hedayat exploded once more—but for the last time. In an introduction to *Goruh-e Mahkumin* (the condemned group), a translation of Franz Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* by his long-time friend and associate Hassan Qa'emian, he examined man's role in the cosmos. He found man helpless against society, time, and other forces and as obedient to them as a dog. He lamented that man must die like a dog at their hand because, as he said, man does not have the ability to master those unknown forces. This is the last piece to be published during Hedayat's lifetime.

Hedayat, according to Vincent Monteil, loved music, especially the works of Beethoven and Tchaikovsky.<sup>26</sup> Often he hummed the "Pathetique" as he went about his work. Hedayat also

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<sup>26</sup> Monteil, "Dar Bare-e Sadeq," p. 23; Dastgheyb, *Naqd-e Asar*, p. 17.

painted. There is not much left of his paintings, but what exists has been brought together by Hassan Qa'emian and published in *Dar Bare-e Zohur va 'Ala'em-e Zohur* (about occultation and its signs). Of Hedayat's paintings the most controversial is his depiction of a deer: some have assigned it little artistic value; others have seen in it the wave of the future."<sup>27</sup>

### **About Hedayat**

Hedayat was a recluse by nature. Rather than confront people and voice his opinion about contemporary socio-political issues, as was the case with Ali Shari'ati, for instance, he tried to influence public opinion through his essays and stories. To this end he organized his thoughts independently and on a higher plane, discussed them with his close friends, while avoiding the daily squabbles of his peers who jockeyed for better and more lucrative social positions. This was not difficult for him because he was not looking for either a lucrative position or a higher salary.

Hedayat so valued his freedom from social bonds that, although he had a number of female friends, he did not marry. Moreover, he saw little merit in the institution of marriage.<sup>28</sup> It comes as a surprise to learn this about a person as knowledgeable about the principles of the Zoroastrian faith as he. But once we remember that Hedayat's interest in religions was motivated more by research than by faith, his equivocation becomes less puzzling. For instance, alongside the teachings of Zoroaster, Hedayat followed the precepts of the Buddha. According to Buddhist tradition, marriage leads to reincarnation, a process that necessarily perpetuates misery, old age, and death. Hedayat deemed individuals capable of ending rebirth<sup>29</sup> by exercising perseverance and by avoiding desire, the most destructive element in the mix. This, however, did not mean that the individual should end his own life; but rather that the individual, when placed in the dungeon with the *Nag*-serpent, use his foresight and become at one with the *Nag*-serpent.

Between 1940 and 1974, Hedayat was distinguished as an immensely creative genius on the one hand, and, a drug addict and lunatic, on the other hand. Little was known about Hedayat's life and craft. Kamshad's study, published in 1966, although quite comprehensive, revealed

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<sup>27</sup> For a discussion of Hedayat's paintings see Qa'emian and Hedayat's *Dar Bare-e Zohur*; Katira'i, *Buf-e Kur-e Hedayat*, pp. 3-14.

<sup>28</sup> Much has been written about the reasons for Hedayat's remaining a bachelor to the end. Among them are his desire to break away from *Karma*, desire to remain free, and homosexuality. Cf., Danesh, *Omnibus*, pp. 23-24; Monteil, *Nevisandegan*, p. 37.

<sup>29</sup> For the rebirth process, see, Evans-Wentz, W. Y., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Causeway Books, 1973, p. 180.

little of the depth of Hedayat's knowledge of the world outside Iran, especially India. Since then, many scholars have elaborated on the assertions of this author in various publications and have contributed to our understanding of Hedayat.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, it is now readily accepted that Hedayat was an excellent and responsible craftsman, dedicated equally to the craft of short-story writing and to the enhancement of Iranian culture and its liberation from foreign domination. The contention that his writings are hallucinations is no longer credible.

During the last years, Hedayat spent much of his time translating for pay the works of Kafka and other European writers.<sup>31</sup> The dissolution of the *Tudeh* Party, alleged to have made an attempt on the life of the Shah in 1948, further drove Hedayat to translations and to mute forbearance of his fate. Years went by but he did not produce anything substantial. Neither did circumstances reveal the changes envisaged by the supporters of the Constitutional Revolution. Hedayat became increasingly restless. In a letter to Jamalzadeh, another longtime friend, he wrote:

The crux of the matter is that I am tired of it all. It has to do with my nerves. I pass the night in a situation much worse than that of a sentenced criminal. I am tired of life. Nothing gives me incentive or comfort and I cannot deceive myself any more. A gap has severed the line of communication between life, circumstances, etc., and me. We cannot understand each other any more.<sup>32</sup>

At the end of 1950, Hedayat left Tehran for Paris. There he visited some of his earlier haunts, an exercise that frustrated him further and drove him deeper into depression and self-destruction. During his last four months in Paris, he was totally isolated. There, on April 4, 1951, he ostensibly gassed himself, ending a decade of misery, seclusion, addiction, fear, and loneliness.

Hedayat was a sensitive man. When leaving Iran, at the airport, he could not bear to say goodbye to his aged parents. He carried a bag of dirt as a token of his devotion to his motherland; he also wrote a rather chilling note as a consolation to his friends and admirers: We left and broke your heart. See you on Doomsday. That's all!<sup>33</sup>

The circumstances under which Hedayat lived his last years are not at all clear. For a number of reasons, one could call his final days tragic. One tragedy is that although he had

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<sup>30</sup> For instance, most of the articles in Hillmann, *Hedayat's 'The Blind Owl'* revolve around the assertions in the present author's *Hedayat's Ivory Tower*.

<sup>31</sup> Qa'emian, *Neveshteha*, pp. 12-15.

<sup>32</sup> Jamalzadeh, "Yadi az Hedayat," *Sokhan*, vol. 16, no. 1340, p. 218; Nikooyeh, "Buf-e Kur: Per Lashez", pp. 3-6.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Kamshad, *Modern Persian Prose*, p. 201; Qa'emian and Hedayat, *Dar Bare-e Zohur*, P. 11.

done his best to raise his readers' consciousness of their own plight, he had not succeeded even in familiarizing them with the major issues of the time. This realization, coming at a time when his physical and mental abilities could no longer support a new campaign (a short stint began with "Ab-e Zendegi" and ended with "Farda"), distressed him more than anything else. Then, too, his critics were not treating him any better. Equally ignorant of the true issues before them, they were happy to question his sanity, to discredit his ability to write in Persian<sup>34</sup> and, above all, to accuse him of creating a model of self-destruction for the youth of Iran. That the notes of a number of recent young suicides cited the influence of *The Blind Owl* further supported the critics.<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, the government and the court exerted a great deal of pressure. The latter could not ignore the tarnished image of the reigning monarch's father. Besides, in *Tup-e Morvari*, reproduced under the assumed name of Hadi Sedaqat, Hedayat had insulted the royal family not by merely insinuating but indeed by openly stating much that could not be tolerated about even an ordinary household. Together these forces first tried to attract Hedayat into their camp where he was supposed to live a happy life, but Hedayat refused the offer. Consequently, they decided to expel him from Iran.

In Paris, however, Hedayat was beset by a totally different, though equally powerful, enemy. Old and irrepressible memories of his youth were returning and he had no option but to give them room to pass; but they would not leave. They became stronger and more telling. To this was added the fear of assassins who might have been engaged to forestall the return to Iran of someone who would spoil the delicate British machinations designed to secure the Shah's position and British interests. Thus, like Gholam and Zaghi, the insomniac characters in "Farda," Hedayat could not sleep at night. In short, he was being hounded by the very concerns from which he had tried to forge a solution for the misery of the people of Iran. Now, having failed to affect the situation, these intentions were coming back to settle on Hedayat's own threshold. By this time, however, they had grown into concrete fears such as persecution, execution, and extermination. "The Message of Kafka" clearly underscores the initial impact of these disturbing thoughts on the helpless author.

Hedayat's life was complex. His death could not be any different. As long as his personal life is concerned, he tried to take his own life in 1927. Additionally, he was attracted to death, the existence of an afterlife, and the immortality of the soul. Socially and politically, his writings

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<sup>34</sup> Katira'i, *Buf-e Kur-e Hedayat*, p. 233.

<sup>35</sup> Moqaddasi, *Afkar va 'Aqayed*, pp. 65-68.

were like a thorn in the side of the government and the clergy. He was an unwanted gadfly. As for his public, during his career, they had identified him with the characters of his stories (i.e., a drug addict and a lunatic). No wonder his departure from the scene did not raise any substantial questions. The circumstances in the 1950s in Iran were not amenable to inquiry. Should that continue to be the norm?<sup>36</sup>

### Hedayat's Death

Whether Hedayat committed suicide or was “put to sleep” remains a question. As far as his literary career is concerned, the difference between suicide and elimination is academic. It is obvious that by 1951 he had neither the inclination nor the ability to create works like *The Blind Owl*. By the same token, his hours of desperation had made his pen a most lethal weapon against the monarchy and the clergy. In this regard, his death easily fits a pattern that includes the lives of Amir Kabir, Ahmad Kasravi, Samad Behrangi, and Shapour Bakhtiar. The very existence of those individuals threatened the interests of the state and the clergy. The best way to get rid of their meddling in affairs was to eliminate them. Some, like Amir Kabir were murdered by decree (i.e., “make Amir Kabir comfortable”),<sup>37</sup> and some, like Samad Behrangi, died mysteriously. About the death of Samad Behrangi, Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Gholam Hossein Sa’edi alleged that Behrangi died at the hands of the operatives of the Pahlavi regime, while others stated that he died because he could not swim.<sup>38</sup>

In the case of Hedayat, we are not looking for a particular culprit. We are restating the question that was raised in 1984 about the uncertain circumstances of Hedayat’s death.<sup>39</sup> In 2019, it still remains a valid and relevant question. In fact, other questions have emerged since 1984. Those questions include why did the intelligentsia of the time choose to ignore the Hedayat persona that emerges from “Sag-e Velgard,” “Ab-e Zendegi,” *Tup-e Morvari*, and *The Blind Owl*? Why did they choose to remain silent? Why didn’t they, like Al-e Ahmad and Sa’edi, launch an investigation? Why didn’t the government of the time investigate?

The general view is that many people, including Abol Qasem Anjavi Shirazi, Mostafa Farzaneh, and Banu Mahin Firuz have provided their impressions about the last days of Hedayat.<sup>40</sup> But have they provided any substantial reasons regarding the question at hand? Why should an author with Hedayat’s depth of knowledge, intelligence, and foresight, an

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<sup>36</sup> See Hedayat, “Letters,” pp. 199-209; Jamalzadeh, “Dargozasht,” pp. 1016-1023; Bashiri, *Fiction*, pp. 225-227.

<sup>37</sup> Dowlatshahi, “Qatl-e Amir,” pp. 36-37.

<sup>38</sup> Behnud, “Khatirat-e Hamzeh,” 2007.

<sup>39</sup> Bashiri, *Fiction*, p. 13.

<sup>40</sup> Katira’i, *Ketab-e Sadeq-e Hedayat*, pp. 266-295.



author enjoying international fame, a writer with sharp political views and an acerbic, biting pen suddenly decide to commit suicide? As far as the difficulties of life were concerned, Hedayat was a veteran. He was not an inexperienced youth unable to weather the storm. To the contrary, he was fully familiar with life, death, and the afterlife. More importantly, he was dedicated to seeing every story to its logical and final conclusion. Suicide is not a logical and final conclusion.

The secret Qajar files were eventually made available to the public. Perhaps one day the secret Pahlavi files, too, will be released. Only then can we write the final word on not only the tragic end of Sadeq Hedayat, but also the deaths of Samad Behrangi and countless others.

### **Hedayat's Use of Themes**

Hedayat's themes concentrate on social and political aspects of life in Iran, especially during the rule of Reza Shah and immediately after his abdication. In his earlier works, Hedayat deals primarily with social themes. For instance, in *Zende Begur* he examines the theme of judgment, in *Se Qatreh Khun*, he examines trust, and in *Sayeh Rowshan* he deals with modernization and the dynamics of change. In his later stories, he adds political criticism, mostly cloaked in symbols, to his social assessments. For instance, as we shall see below, in “Sag-e Velgard” he examines free will and determinism, alongside the treatment of animals. His political critique that must be inferred from the story reflects the manner with which the government of the time dealt with the students who had returned from abroad. *Haji Aqa*, *’Alaviyeh Khanom*, “Ab-e Zendegi,” and “Farda” deal with particular situations in a more or less similar fashion.

In his later writings, Hedayat directed his pen towards political themes using allegory and subtext,<sup>41</sup> targeting both the court and the religious establishment. For instance, in *Tup-e Morvari*, the court is portrayed as the epitome of incompetence and the clergy as the embodiment of ignorance. Anyone familiar with the creation of the first Islamic republic in Afghanistan about two decades earlier under Bachcha Saqaw cannot ignore parallel developments in *Tup-e Morvari*. In that work, Hedayat clearly warned about the potential

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<sup>41</sup> The difference between allegory and subtext is that in allegory parallel stories are discussed in tandem. The reader is familiar with both stories. This is the case, for instance, in *Tup-e Morvari*. In subtext, for all intents, the reader is familiar with only the narrative story. The other story is hidden from the reader. For instance, in *The Blind Owl* very little of the Buddhist rituals used in the hidden story (subtext), is apparent; see Bashiri, “Buddhist Subtext,” pp. 6-7.

threat posed by the clergy in Iran. In fact, he not only warned about the possibility of a clerical takeover, but also described the society that would emerge as a result of such a takeover.

In this essay, on the life of the author, we cannot examine his works in any detail.<sup>42</sup> We can, however, illustrate the fact that Hedayat was a responsible writer in the sense that he felt compelled to expose societal ills wherever he encountered them. Depending on whether those ills were related to the social, political, or ideological aspects of life in Iran, he accommodated them in themes with proper settings. Furthermore, he provided appropriate characters for their expression and, where necessary, included elaborate subtexts to support them. As a responsible author, he even accepted to undergo the trauma, and the ordeal, that some of his true-to-life characters underwent in their every-day existence. All that in order to portray the contributions of the characters that he created accurately. For instance, he visited lunatic asylums, and possibly lived with the insane temporarily, in order to understand the mindset of the unhinged, their speech patterns, and their thought processes.

This demanding lifestyle may come as a surprise to some readers of Hedayat, but an analysis of Hedayat's works shows that unless the reader is familiar with Hedayat's own mindset when he writes about true-to-life characters, it would be difficult to understand his stories, especially those like "*Se Qatreh Khun*." The characters in "*Se Qatreh Khun*" do not follow the time sequences that they themselves establish, and unknowingly mix the settings in which they claim certain events had happened. Only the reader who realizes that the characters are lunatics, but more importantly that their behavior should be interpreted accordingly, can navigate the distorted time and space dimensions he encounters. Only then can he feel comfortable and able to deal with the chaotic world of the story logically.<sup>43</sup>

Readers and some critics alike have been waiting for Hedayat to tell them exactly how to read his "*Zende Begur*," or "*Three Drops of Blood*" when all they need to do is to live with drug addicts and lunatics for a while and observe how they cope with the problems they encounter. More than that, they should, like Hedayat, empathize with the plight of the insane and the addict and seek solutions. Some readers mistake an author like Hedayat for his characters, and some mistake Hedayat's dexterity for addiction to drugs and alcohol. Those types of appreciation are a disservice to Hedayat. He tried to develop techniques with which to illustrate the existence of societal problems and the urgency to find remedies for them.

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<sup>42</sup> See Bashiri, *Fiction*, pp. 61-91.

<sup>43</sup> For details, see Bashiri, *Fiction*, pp. 94-96.

Consider the following. On the surface, the dog in “Sag-e Velgard” is an object of pity. Many readers understand the story at that level. But Hedayat provides much more written and unwritten information about the dog and, consequently, expects his reader to pay attention to them. The dog is a Scottish dog used to the treatment that dogs receive in Scotland. He is brought to Tehran by someone who often goes to Varamin and looks at the tower and the other structures there. At least that is the dog’s observation. What Hedayat insinuates is that the dog’s master is most likely a visiting archaeologist. Around Varamin, unknowingly, the dog lives in two different worlds separated by a sluice. One is the world that his owner provides for him, a world that resembles Scotland. The dog feels safe in this world because he comes to it in a jeep and leaves it in a jeep. The other world is beyond the sluice. He is attracted to that world by pure instinct. Unbeknownst to his master, he moves into that world and becomes trapped in it. In the absence of his master, his life is turned into a violent, merciless hell.

As can be seen, Hedayat provides a great deal of unwritten information that is not readily available to those who do not read the story carefully. Such readers also do not meticulously examine the moves that the character makes, as well as his motivation and decisions. How can the outcome be any different? One reason why readers do not pay close attention to the text of “Sag-e Velgard” is because they consider the story to be a simple dog story. To them dogs are like objects. They do not associate dogs with intelligence and emotion. Hedayat is the opposite. To Hedayat there is a difference between this dog and that dog, a dog in this city or country and a dog from a different city or country. More importantly, the differences are essential. Similarly, the approach of the character to life situations, his human attributes, his ghostly persona, or ethereal mien are all subjected to deliberate scrutiny and are meaningful.

The catalyst for change in “Sag-e Velgard” is desire, one of Hedayat’s most cherished subjects. What imparts political direction to the story is a lack of belonging. The dog does not belong to the second world in the same way that he belongs to the first. Hedayat compares the dog’s belonging to the two worlds with the lives of Iranian students who have lived abroad and the lives of their fellow countrymen in Iran. Those students, when they returned home, instead of being welcomed as intellectuals and assets for the country were treated as spies, as if they were stray dogs. The irony is that the Iranians themselves had sent them abroad and paid their tuition and room and board. In “Mihan Parast” (the patriot), Hedayat deals with this theme with more realism.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> See Bashiri, *Fiction*, pp. 83-84.

*The Blind Owl* illustrates Hedayat's empiricism and use of technique in a most convincing manner. In it, time and space are fluid, relationships among characters are tenuous, and character identities are advisedly kept uncertain. In order to showcase those aspects, we shall concentrate on his use of subtext. And rather than the entire *novella*, we shall examine the first few episodes. The reader is referred to the sources mentioned at the end of this article for further explanation.

There are many summaries of the *novella*. They describe the unexpected setting of the story and highlight its unusual characters. What they provide, however, are brief appreciations of the work, at the expense of the type of inexhaustible perspective that such summaries attempt to present. The following summary by Mahmud Afruz is a noteworthy example:

*Buf-e Kur* is a symbolic work, containing many motifs and diverse metaphors. It is also redolent with culture-oriented vocabulary. The book is generally divided into two parts. It tells the story of a reclusive, anti-social man constantly sinking into the swamp of suspicion. The whole story, or better yet, the dream, is narrated in first person. It starts in the late afternoon of the 13th day of the month of Farvardin and ends the next morning.<sup>45</sup>

Contrary to Afruz's view, we shall show that *The Blind Owl* is a complex work that spans across two different lives, in two different eras, and two different worlds. In the story, the spirits of the protagonist, a mortal, experience life in purgatory before they are reborn. In order to illustrate Hedayat's dexterity in dealing with complex issues, we shall compare the following death ritual ceremony, predominant in Tibet, with the initial episodes of *The Blind Owl*:

*The Blind Owl* is 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 in a black dress. She stands before an old man who looks like an Indian *yogi*,<sup>46</sup> wears a *shalma*,<sup>47</sup> and puts 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.

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<sup>45</sup> Afruz, "Assessing Equivalents" [https://www.academia.edu/Library?from\\_navbar=true&trigger=tools](https://www.academia.edu/Library?from_navbar=true&trigger=tools)

<sup>46</sup> *Yogi* is an individual who practices *yoga*.

<sup>47</sup> *Shalma* is a turban worn by some Indian yogis.

On a day, when people are celebrating the *Sizdabedar*,<sup>48</sup> the protagonist's uncle, who looks like a zombie, appears in his studio and inspires him to bring 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 for him 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 from him. She carries a black lily in her hand. Farther away, an old man sits under a cypress tree. He chews on the nail of the index finger of his left hand. A brook intervenes between the old man and the woman. The woman tries to jump over the brook. The old man laughs hysterically. His hideous laughter frightens the woman and causes her to slip and fall in the water. The laughter frightens the protagonist, too. He nearly loses consciousness. When he comes to and brings the wine-flask to his uncle, his uncle has left his studio.

This simple reading raises many questions. For example, at the beginning, 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? Why does he look like a zombie who has fled from the grave? He inspires the protagonist to bring the wine-flask. Then, why does he leave before his nephew returns with the wine-flask? Under the prevailing circumstance, what is the significance of the *nag* venom? Who is the ethereal girl? The protagonist says he vaguely knows the ethereal being. Have they met before? 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? What is the exact relationship between the protagonist and the ethereal girl? Why is she carrying a black lily? 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?<sup>49</sup>

The subtext of the story, reincarnation, answers most of those questions. While reading the summary of the rituals presented below, pay attention to the following clues: purgatory, luminous light and its placement, rebirth-seeking spirit, black pebbles, hysterical laughter, and rebirth.

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<sup>48</sup> Persian New Year is originally a celebration for the departed. The *Sizdabedar* or the 13<sup>th</sup> of *Farvardin* marks the end of that celebration.

<sup>49</sup> 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 Tibetans believe that every person has two spirits. A freedom-seeking spirit that intends to liberate himself from the shackles of life, and a rebirth-seeking spirit that wants to return to the material world. These two spirits are in conflict. After a person's death, and before the arrival of the *lama*,<sup>50</sup> the two spirits of the deceased are already in purgatory. 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. He has a vague premonition of future events.<sup>51</sup> The spirit that seeks rebirth lurks in the darkness of purgatory and is not seen.

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.<sup>52</sup> The spirit should focus all his energies on that light, bring it out of darkness, and make it his own.<sup>53</sup>

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 the freedom-seeking spirit that his own rebirth-seeking spirit, too, is among those creatures. The rebirth-seeking spirit is particularly aggressive, the *lama* emphasizes, 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 the creatures that appear to him, especially he should not fall to 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.<sup>54</sup> 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 black, it means that the rebirth-seeking spirit has successfully undermined the concentration of the freedom-seeking spirit.<sup>55</sup> Consequently, the Lord of Death condemns the freedom-seeking spirit to rebirth and another life with his rebirth-seeking spirit.

At this juncture, the rebirth-seeking spirit tries to cross the River of Forgetfulness, which is located between them, to hand the pebbles to the Lord of Death. The Lord of Death laughs

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<sup>50</sup> *Lama* is a Tibetan priest.

<sup>51</sup> See, Evans-Wentz, W. Y., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Causeway Books, 1973, p. 18.

<sup>52</sup> For luminous light, see, Evans-Wentz, W. Y., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Causeway Books, 1973, p. 89.

<sup>53</sup> For the role of concentration in the ritual, see, 168.

<sup>54</sup> *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.

<sup>55</sup> For the black pebbles, see, Evans-Wentz, W. Y., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Causeway Books, 1973, pp. 165-166.

hysterically. The hideous laughter frightens the rebirth-seeking spirit. She falls into the river and is carried to the Place of Wombs to be reborn. The laughter frightens the freedom-seeking spirit as well. He faints.

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. While reading, pay attention to the following clues: purgatory, wine-flask and its placement, ethereal girl, black lilies, hysterical laughter, and rebirth.

Now, it is possible, with the help of the subtext, to reconstruct the events as Hedayat has conceived them. In order for the story to reflect Hedayat's thought process, we begin with a key encounter that happens in a dungeon in India. Instead of at the beginning of the book, the encounter is tacked in the middle of the second part of the book. We move this important event to immediately before the beginning of the book. Without this change in the sequence of events, we will not have the necessary information on the protagonist's uncle and the effect of the *nag* venom on him. More importantly, we will not have any lead regarding the setting in which the characters interact, as well as their relation to each other. With that said, here is the story with the new beginning.

Two identical twin brothers sleep with the same *Bugham Dasi* temple dancer. She has a son. To determine which of the two brothers is the father, they place the brothers in a dark dungeon in which a *nag*-serpent is released. The serpent bites one of the brothers and makes him deranged. The child is given to the other brother.

At this point, there are certain facts that are crucial for understanding the initial episodes in the story. Hedayat takes those facts for granted. From the text of *The Blind Owl* the reader understands that the brother who is bitten by the serpent sells the protagonist's paintings and one day pays him a visit. What we need to know, however, is that an individual, like the uncle, who is stung by the *nag*-serpent, is freed from the wheel of life. He becomes ubiquitous, powerful, and knowledgeable about affairs. Additionally, he shape-shifts and is invisible to mortals. Hedayat uses the capabilities of this "invisible" character extensively, especially in the second part of the *novella*.

Returning to the main story, the brother who was not harmed by the snake brings the boy and his mother to the city of *Rayy*. There the boy grows up and becomes a painter. Then, one day, out of the blue, his uncle comes to visit. The protagonist, a mortal, says he saw his uncle for the first time and describes him in terms befitting a zombie who has fled from the grave.

Recall, at the beginning of the book, before the arrival of his uncle, the protagonist spoke about sores that do not have any remedy and pains that cannot be shared with others? Examined in detail, in the context of the rituals, it becomes clear that the protagonist being visited by the uncle is not the painter himself, but his freedom-seeking spirit. The state he is undergoing is the same as the state that any freedom-seeking spirit that enters purgatory undergoes. In other words, at the beginning of the *novella*, the painter of pen-case covers is dead. His spirits are in purgatory, where his uncle can reach them.

The reader of *The Blind Owl* knows the personification of those spirits as narrator (representing the freedom-seeking spirit of the painter, hence, the painter or the protagonist) and the ethereal girl. Initially, the latter remains unseen. To the reader only the ethereal girl appears somewhat otherworldly. In reality, however, both they, and the world they are in, are otherworldly. (Needless to say, as a novelist, Hedayat did not need to make the fine distinctions that we are making in order to explain his thought process.) In any event, the uncle arrives and, like a *lama*, inspires the protagonist to bring the keepsake that his mother had brought for him from India. By that he means the wine-flask in the wine of which venom from the fang of the *nag*-serpent is dissolved. But, at the same time, knowing that the protagonist lacks the ability to withstand the ruses of his own ethereal spirit, does not wait for him to bring the wine-flask and leaves.

The wine-flask is in the dark, high up in the closet, above the head of the painter. Unaware of his environs, 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 figments of his own imagination, he is ensnared by them and, momentarily, stops his search.

Following this brief encounter, during which the ethereal girl successfully 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*, 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. The laughter frightens the ethereal girl. She slips and falls into the water. The painter, too, is frightened and nearly loses consciousness.

A cursory look at the two scenes reveals a number of similarities. The two purgatories are similar (luminous light versus wine-flask, both potent agents of liberation). In purgatory, initially, both freedom-seeking spirits experience difficulty before the coming of their guides



(the *lama* versus the uncle). 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) are similar. So are the falling in the water, the frightening hysterical laughter, etc.

Neither do the similarities between the two scenes end here. Both the luminous light and the wine-flask are in the dark and high up above the individual's head, and both the River of Forgetfulness and the brook are located between the judges and the rebirth-seeking spirits.

Most importantly, both freedom-seeking spirits 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), and both rebirth-seeking spirits share a similar intention. They want to prevent their rival spirits from reaching their desired goal. Both have visible evidence that they have defeated their rival spirits (the black color of the objects they carry). 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).

Taking the above-mentioned comparisons into account, we can summarize the events analyzed thus far as follows. Two identical twin young men sleep with the same *Bugham Dasi* temple dancer. The dancer has a son. In order to decide which of the two brothers is the father of the child, a trial is set up. The trial takes place in a dungeon in which a *nag*-serpent is released. The serpent frees one brother from the wheel of life. Consequently, the child is given to the other brother. The "father" brings his family to the city of *Rayy*. There, the boy becomes a painter of pen-case covers and continues this profession until he dies. In purgatory, the protagonist's uncle, who thus far had been invisible to him, becomes visible to his freedom-seeking spirit and pays the freedom-seeking spirit of his nephew a visit. Then, like a *lama*, he puts the spirit on his journey towards the court of the old man who judges spirits. At the same time, aware of the shortcomings of the nephew's spirit and the potency of the ruses of the ethereal being, the uncle leaves the spirit on his own. The ethereal girl, a figment of the painter's own imagination, easily captivates the protagonist with her eyes. Then, at the court of the old man, she produces a black lily indicating that her counterpart is too partial to desire to be awarded freedom. The old man condemns both spirits of the deceased painter to rebirth.

In this part of the story, Hedayat focuses on the actions of his characters, especially the painter, and evaluates the outcome of their actions judiciously. In order to emphasize the extremely delicate nature of what the protagonist instinctively sought (i.e., freedom), a commodity for achieving which he had not made any effort, Hedayat concentrates on the profession of the character pursues, a profession that limits an individual's worldview to painting the same picture over and over on the narrow cover of a case for holding pens. Such

individuals, Hedayat says, spend their lives chasing fleeting phantoms. In purgatory, they should not be surprised when they see their rebirth-seeking spirits carry black lily stems against them.

This summary about the author's life shows that Hedayat is an experiential storyteller. He investigates the subjects of his stories thoroughly and presents them in a way that suits their circumstances. He is not bound by the conventional rules of his time and often creates appropriate rules of his own. In order to understand his stories, we need to get to know his principles, methods and techniques, as well as make inroads into the knowledge base on which he draws. In that case, we can not only enjoy reading his stories, but also know him as the creator of a series of invaluable works written over a relatively short period of time.

Finally, Hedayat made a remarkable prediction about the future of Iran of his time. He predicted that Iran, like Afghanistan, will fall under the rule of the clergy. And, in his *Pearl Cannon* (1947), accurately described the treatment that the Iranians would receive at the hand of such a government.

At the end of his life, he was hopeful that, after realizing their mistake, Iranians would gain the necessary insight to understand the true value of enlightenment and, beyond that, to acquire the necessary determination to doggedly pursue their goal of achieving freedom. Fortunately, that hope, symbolically expressed in his *Blind Owl*, is gradually being realized in concrete terms in almost all segments of Iranian society.

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