



The Blind Owl: A Summary of the Story

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Bashiri Working Papers on Central Asia and Iran

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

1. Read *The Blind Owl* and enjoy its mystique. That walk in the wilderness will not be possible, if you read this summary first!
2. This is a summary of the “story” in *The Blind Owl* not a summary of the book.
3. The story of *The Blind Owl* begins at least two generations before the beginning of the story in the book.
4. The first part of the book has a Buddhist subtext, a Buddhist wake to be exact. The necessary information about Buddhist wakes will be provided below. That knowledge then will be used to explain the vague points in the *novella*.
5. When the sick young man in part two of the *novella* speaks about a dungeon, a *nāg* serpent, and his parents and uncle, he is speaking about the parents of the painter of pen-case covers. Hedayat does not inform the reader that reincarnated beings—of which the sick young man is one—do not and cannot have real-world parents. This reality not only sheds light on the life of the pen-case cover painter, but it also confirms that the characters in part two, although born centuries apart from each other, are reincarnations of the characters in part one.
6. The narrator of *The Blind Owl* is not the living pen-case cover painter that Hedayat portrays, but rather, the immortal self of that painter. The immortal self is in purgatory engaged in conflict with the ethereal soul of the painter. Because the word “narrator” is usually used for living human beings, in the summary that follows we shall replace it with the term “immortal self” (i.e., the being that struggles with the ethereal soul in purgatory).
7. In *The Blind Owl*, Hedayat describes the actions and the attributes of his unearthly characters in great detail, but he leaves out the causes and the consequences of those actions. That creates vagueness in the early stages and confusion as reading progresses. At the end, a total lack of comprehension sets in and remains. That is what makes the *novella* the enigma it has become.
8. The reason for our inability to recognize *The Blind Owl* as a whole is the existence of two sets of characters and events that cannot be meaningfully brought together. It becomes a possibility, however, when the characters are reincarnations of each other, albeit across many centuries.

In the context of its Buddhist subtext, the story in *The Blind Owl* can be summarized as follows: In pre-Mongol times, in India, a couple has identical twin boys. The boys grow up together in India and, as young men, they both sleep with the same temple dancer. She becomes pregnant. To identify the father of the child the brothers are thrown into a dungeon with a *nāg* serpent. The serpent identifies the father and bites the other brother on the lip. The latter walks out of the dungeon a deranged man. In time, the father



of the child moves his family from India to Iran and the family settles in the town of *Rayy*. In *Rayy*, the boy grows up and chooses painting pen-case covers as a profession. The story in Hedayat's *Blind Owl* begins on the day that the painter of pen-case covers has died and his family is holding a Buddhist wake for him.

To summarize, in a Buddhist wake, it is customary for the family to leave the corpse in a room, close all doors and windows, and wait for the arrival of the *lāmā* outside the house. Upon his arrival, the *lāmā* sits at the head of the corpse and tells the immortal self of the deceased that his earthly body is dead and he (i.e., immortal self) is in purgatory. He then inspires the immortal self to set himself free from the wheel of life. He directs the immortal self to concentrate as intensely as he can on a bright light that is located above his head but, at the present, is in the dark. He tells the immortal self that certain actions and thoughts from his past, in the form of ghosts, will try to interfere with his concentration. They will try to insinuate themselves into his consciousness and undermine his concentration on finding the light. The immortal self must concentrate exclusively on the bright light.

The ethereal soul, on the contrary, seeks a return to the phenomenal world. The condition for her return, however, is that she should be accompanied by the immortal self. Diverting the attention of the immortal self from seeing the bright light, therefore, is the ethereal soul's top priority. She will use all the possible ways at her disposal to insinuate herself into the consciousness of the immortal self and ruin his concentration.

The fate of the immortal self and the ethereal soul is determined in the court of the lord of death. Adorned with all the trappings of death, the lord of death sits at the head of an assembly and observes the deeds of the immortal selves and ethereal souls in the mirror of *kārmā* that he holds in his left hand.

The immortal self can either keep his past actions and thoughts out of his consciousness through sheer concentration or not. If the answer is in the positive, his ethereal soul will carry white pebbles to the lord of death and the lord of death will release him from the wheel of life. If the immortal self is not able to keep his past actions and thoughts from entering his consciousness, his ethereal soul will carry black pebbles instead of white pebbles to the lord of death. Upon seeing the black pebbles, the lord of death laughs hysterically. As a result of seeing the black pebbles and the hideous laughter of the lord of death, the immortal self becomes distraught and falls into a swoon. The same laughter causes the ethereal soul who tries to give the black pebbles to the lord of death to slip and fall in the river of forgetfulness. The river carries her to the place of the wombs where she joins the immortal self. There they are reborn together.

According to what was outlined above, the narrator of *The Blind Owl* is not the painter of pen-case covers himself, but his immortal self who, accompanied by the painter's ethereal soul, has entered purgatory and, in spite of her, is moving his own plan ahead. Hedayat narrates the story through the eyes of the painter's immortal self and brings the ethereal soul in as he sees fit.



The immortal self pursues his quest for immortality while the ethereal soul strives to return to her previous phenomenal existence. The condition for the success of the ethereal soul in reaching her goal is that the immortal self must accompany her. In other words, if the immortal self succeeds in releasing himself from the wheel of life, the ethereal soul will have to join the company of forsaken ghosts.

The family of the painter have left the house to celebrate the *Sizdabedar* out of doors and the immortal self of the painter, who thinks he is alive, is alone and is busy with his daily work (i.e., painting). The painter's uncle, who had never met his nephew but who has helped him from a distance (e.g., selling his pen cases in India), comes to his nephew's wake. He sits in a corner and inspires the immortal self to bring down a special wine-flask that is placed high up on a niche in the dark closet of his room. The wine in the wine-flask has poison from the fang of the *nāg* serpent dissolved in it. Were the immortal self to drink from the wine, he would be set free from the wheel of life. The immortal self, not being aware of this fact, does not concentrate as intensely as he should in bringing down the wine-flask.

While fumbling in the dark to find the wine-flask, the immortal self is unexpectedly distracted by a pair of unforgettable eyes that protrude through the solid wall of the closet and enchant him. Those are the eyes of the ethereal soul beckoning the attention of the immortal self away from the wine-flask and towards themselves. The immortal self, in a passionate state, forgets about both the wine-flask and his uncle. The painter's uncle, who realizes that his nephew has failed in bringing down the wine-flask, leaves the painter's dwelling. He leaves the door ajar to comfort the immortal self that there will be other opportunities to bring the wine-flask down.

At this same time, the immortal self finds himself face to face with a court in session. The presiding judge is an old man. He wears an Indian *shalma*, squats under a cypress tree, and chews on the index finger of his left hand. The ethereal soul of the painter of pen-case covers stands across a brook in front of the old man. She holds a handful of black lilies in her hand. Black lilies indicate to the old man that the immortal self is still enchanted by the ethereal soul of the painter and that he continues to be attached to worldly values (i.e., not ready to be set free from the wheel). Upon seeing the black color of the lilies, the old man laughs hysterically. Then, viewing the distraught state of the immortal self who, upon realizing his mistake (i.e., failing to bring down the wine-flask in time) had fallen unconscious, sends him to *Shāh 'Abdol 'Azīm* to be reborn. The ethereal soul, too, hearing the old man's hideous laughter slips and falls into the brook.

The overt contribution of the subtext ends here. Hedayat continues the story as follows. At this time, the immortal self is visited by the ethereal soul. She gives herself up to him and dies. He paints her eyes, then cuts her body up into pieces and puts the body pieces in a suitcase and takes it somewhere near *Shāh 'Abdol 'Azīm*. There, he looks into the suitcase. Her eyes are still alive. They look at him, a seductive look. He closes the suitcase and buries it. Then he goes home, smokes opium, and feels he is being reborn.

In part two, which takes place sometime during the Qajar era, the immortal self and the ethereal soul are reborn. They grow up together and get married. They are personified as a sick young man and a seductive young woman. They live in the same environ near *Rayy* but centuries later. The immortal self's intense desire for the ethereal soul in



purgatory also is reborn with them and enters part two. In fact, in the beginning of their marriage, the desire of the perpetually sick young man for his wife is so intense that he is willing to pimp for her to keep her happy. When his sickness becomes worse, he hopes to die of natural causes, but the doctor cures him.

Gradually, however, doubt about his intense desire for his wife creeps in. As a result, he refuses the doctor's opinion that he is cured. His malady, he thinks, has deeper roots in his intense desire for his wife and in his wife's unbound control over him. He also regards his father's submissiveness to his mother and his mother's control over his father as contributing factors to his unhappiness and sickness.

The dungeon scene in part two is the key to our understanding the way Hedayat has organized the events in the *novella*, as well as to the nature of the characters in the story and their relationship to each other. The sick young man speaks about his parents and uncle. As young men, his father and uncle had slept with the same woman. One of them had made her pregnant. A *nāg* serpent in a dark dungeon had identified the father and had bitten the other brother on the lip. He had become a deranged man.

If we recall that reincarnated beings do not have parents of their own, it becomes obvious that the parents that the young man speaks about must be the parents of the pen-case cover painter (i.e., the brother who was not harmed by the *nāg* serpent and the *Būgām Dāsī*). The brother who was bitten by the serpent and was released is the uncle who attends the pen-case cover painter's wake. What engages the sick young man's thought at this point is this: What made the two brothers different in the eye of the serpent? Why one brother was allowed to live and have a family while the other brother was shorn of all worldly concerns?" In fact, the answer to this question is the very answer to the dilemma of the sick young man. His father had accepted subservience to *Būgām Dāsī*. His uncle had refused subservience and had been marked for his impunity.

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

In a dark bedchamber, analogous to the dark closet where the wine-flask was located, the sick young man triumphs over his wife. Using a knife provided by the odds-and-ends man, he takes her eye out of its socket before she can seduce him in the way that she had done when he had tried to bring down a wine-flask. His triumph transforms him from a sick young man into an odds-and-ends-man, a free man like his uncle.

