



**The Buddhist Subtext of  
Sadeq Hedayat's *Blind Owl***

(not to be read before reading *The Blind Owl*!)

by

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## Introduction

Sadeq Hedayat (1903-1951) is one of Iran's preeminent writers of short works of fiction. This article is about the role that subtext plays in his works, in general, and in his *Blind Owl*, in particular. The main reasons for writing the article are: to highlight subtext as a literary device; to apply subtext to such Hedayat short stories as "Dāsh Ākol" (Dash Akol), "Sag-i Velgard" (the stray dog), "Āb-i Zendegī" (the water of life), and other short stories; and to illustrate how mourning rituals that Hedayat might have observed in India, serve as a subtext for his *Būf-i Kūr* (the blind owl). In the case of *The Blind Owl*, we shall first study the storyline that is used as subtext and follow that with corresponding events from the *novella*. The article ends with an investigation into whether *The Blind Owl* is a novel, why is it that we have difficulty understanding it, and the meaning of the *novella* to the extent that it can be extracted from the subtext. An understanding of the full meaning of the *novella* belongs to a separate study.

## What Is Subtext?<sup>1</sup>

Unlike today, when short stories as art forms play a prominent role in revealing political, social, and cultural trends, in the early years of the twentieth century, short stories were neither usual nor widespread. Among the authors who promoted the short story genre in Iran and used it as a vehicle to address the problems of Iranian society, Mohammad Ali Jamalzadeh (1892-1997) occupies the most prominent position. His collection of short stories, *Yekī Būd, Yekī Nabūd* (once upon a time), created much commotion in the early 1920s. Even today, the collection's lead story, "Fārsī Shekar Ast" (Persian is sugar), remains an unforgettable signpost, exposing the problems created by ethnicity and religion in contemporary Iranian society. After Jamalzadeh, many authors have tried to use the short story vehicle for revealing the shortcomings prevalent in Iranian society but, thus far, only a few have been successful.

Sadeq Hedayat was one of those successful writers. During the early years of his writing career, he concentrated his efforts on defining aspects of Islamic traditions that were being threatened by the modernism coming from the West. With stories like "Ḥekāyat bā Natījeh" (the story with a result) and "Ḥājī Morād" (Haji Morad), he engaged his readers in social discourses centered on a need for change. In "Ḥājī Morād," for instance, he examined the concept of societal openness as a theme. If Iranian women were not obliged to wear the *chādor*, he intimated, their husbands would have a more tranquil life, and their marriages would last longer.

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<sup>1</sup> Originally, I used allegory, but it proved inadequate. Other terms such as presupposition, underpinning, blueprint, syntax, infrastructure, and plan also were not satisfactory. I use subtext as a device that, while remaining hidden from sight, sustains the literary piece in the same way that a root system sustains a tree.



Subtext is a main feature of Hedayat's works of fiction. What is subtext? Subtext is a simple idea, plan, or sequence of events that the author of a work of fiction may employ as a storyline for the creation of an appropriate atmosphere or story. It is like a blueprint that an architect uses to construct a building. When the building is complete, no trace of the blueprint is visible. The appearance of the building, which depends on the building materials used, the style contributed by the architect, and the purpose for which the building is constructed masks the blueprint.

Except for complex works such as the sonnets (*ghazal*) of Hafiz, the odes (*qaṣīda*) of Rumi, and short pieces like Jami's "Ensān-i Kāmel" (perfect man), the subtexts of most Iranian poems, and short stories, are simple. In order to understand most poems, for instance, it is sufficient to know the meanings of the difficult words and the connotations of any similes or metaphors that the poet might have used. The subtexts of most of Hedayat's stories take source in his personal experiences. At times, if his personal experiences are ignored, or if a particular technique that he might have used is not taken into account, his intended meaning for the piece might not be realized.

As mentioned, subtext can be an idea, an experience, or a part, or the whole of a story. A skillful writer hides the entire subtext from the reader. In fact, writers often search in the myths of far-away places, out-of-reach religious texts, and alien practices unfamiliar or unknown to their audiences for materials that can mask their subtext. Consider the following storyline: A famous man enters a city. The governor of the city recognizes him and invites him to his house to dinner. After dinner, and a good time thereafter, the governor asks the man to stay the night in his house. Then, at midnight, he sends his beautiful daughter to the man's room. The daughter stays the night with the man. The next day, when the man is ready to return to his own town, he says goodbye to the girl. Before leaving, he gives the girl a token and says when our son comes of age, give him this token and tell him to go find his father. This token will help me recognize him.

A myth maker used this subtext and created a story called "Aegeus and Theseus." This is how that story goes. Aegeus, one of the grandsons of the king of Attica enters the city of Troezen. Pitteus, the governor of Troezen recognizes him and invites him to dinner. After dinner, and a good time thereafter, he asks Aegeus to stay the night in his house. At midnight, he sends his beautiful daughter, Aethra, to Aegeus's room. Aethra spends the night with Aegeus. The next day, when Aegeus is returning to Athens, he says goodbye to Aethra. Before leaving, he puts a pair of sandals and a sword under a large rock and says our son will be the only man who would be able to move this rock. When he comes of age, bring him to this place and have him retrieve these sandals and the sword. Tell him to wear these sandals and the sword and come to Athens to find me. The sandals and the sword will help me recognize him.

The story of the seven labors of Theseus on the way to Athens and seeing his father is long and we shall not deal with it. Suffice it to say that when Theseus comes of age, he retrieves the sandals and the sword and goes to Athens. There, he becomes a guest at Aegeus's house. Aegeus's wife, Medea, recognizes Theseus and, in order to keep him away from Aegeus's throne, which she thinks should go to her son, asks her husband to kill Theseus. Aegeus prepares a poisoned cup of wine for Theseus. When Theseus is about to drink the wine, Aegeus recognizes the sandals and the sword and prevents Theseus from drinking the wine. With her treachery exposed, Medea and her son are exiled from Athens.



As can be seen, the author of the new story has added certain names and provided appropriate descriptions for the characters. The names being Greek and the descriptions mythic, the result is an acceptable Greek story. In fact, by using this subtext, he has created a major story in Greek mythology, a story devoid of the uncertainties that existed in the original storyline. Additionally, the author has embellished the story at various points and provided color (i.e., mystery, intensity, and bravado) to the story to overwhelm the reader and distance him from recognizing the underlying storyline. Of course, the chance that the reader might have recourse to the abstracted storyline in the subtext is very slim.

Now, let us compare the story of Aegeus and Theseus with a story written centuries later. The new story, called "Rostam va Sohrāb" (Rostam and Sohrab), is written by the eleventh century writer Ḥakīm Abu al-Qasem Firdowsi (940-1020). This is how that story goes: Rostam, one of the famous champions of Iran, looking for his horse, Rakhsh, enters the city of Samangān. The governor of Samangān recognizes Rostam and invites him to his house for dinner. After dinner and a good time, the governor asks Rostam to stay the night. Then, at midnight, he sends his beautiful daughter, Tahmineh, to Rostam's room. Tahmineh stays the night with Rostam. The next day, when Rostam wants to return to Iran, he says goodbye to Tahmineh. Before leaving, he gives Tahmineh an armband and says when our son comes of age, have him wear this armband and come to Iran to find me. I shall recognize him when I see this armband.

The story of Rostam and Sohrab, as we know, does not end on as positive a note as does the story of Aegeus and Theseus, indicating that the writer is not obliged to include all the details of the subtext into his story. He tells his own story using as much of the storyline from the subtext as he sees fit. Subtext imparts a logical equilibrium to the story, provides it with appropriate time and place, and creates a credible atmosphere for the events in the story. The contributions of the author are in the areas of character description, location modification, time setting, and other necessary changes. Therefore, if we see a sword and a pair of sandals instead of an armband, or if the poison is in a cup instead of on the tip of a dagger, we should not be surprised. Neither should we conclude from these modifications that the author has not used a particular subtext simply because those expected elements are used differently, or are altogether missing.

Now that we have become somewhat familiar with subtext and its use, let us return to the works of Sadeq Hedayat. The subtexts of his early stories are very simple. They illustrate the dynamics of the Iranian society of his time, as well as his understanding of, and reaction to, the circumstances created by those dynamics. For instance, in "Dāsh Ākol" he concentrates on the city of Shiraz and its social structure during the rule of the later Qajars and early Pahlavis. In Dāsh Ākol's Shiraz, bravado and manliness had special meanings, as had kindness, self-sacrifice, truthfulness, fairness, loyalty, and piety. They were all summed up in one word: "dāsh." People could fully trust the manliness of individuals like Dash Akol. When Dash Akol accepted to watch over Ḥājī Ṣamad's household, he abandoned his own affairs and looked after Ḥājī Ṣamad's family and its well-being. He even ignored his own love for Marjān, Ḥājī Ṣamad's daughter. The important point that subtext reveals, and which is not in the story, is that the life of Shiraz, an ancient town in the Fārs province, is tied so inextricably to the life of Dash Akol, a



paragon of trustworthiness and manliness, that the death of one would result in the demise of the values of the other.<sup>2</sup>

In "Don Juān-i Karaj" (Don Juan of Karaj), Hedayat presents a picture of Iran during the Second World War. Even though the time of the stories is less than three decades apart, in Don Juan's society there exists no trace of the values that were prevalent in Dash Akol's Shiraz. Don Juan is a superficial young man. He befriends a woman who had originally been brought to Karaj by Hassan, a traditional, insecure young man. Don Juan, using a recently purchased record-player and his charms, clandestinely, takes the lady out of Karaj and causes Hassan to commit suicide.

None of the virtues that distinguish Dash Akol exists in Don Juan. He is not virtuous, chaste, or pious. Not only the social values, but also the deep respect for individuals and families have disappeared. More importantly, the trust that had fostered a sense of belonging among the citizenry in "Dāsh Ākol" has evaporated. Even if it exists, it has become polarized so that one group holds to the traditional values with dear life, while the other abandons them altogether without remorse. The interesting yet disturbing point about the story is that Don Juan is not aware of his own impact on Iranian society.<sup>3</sup> "Dāsh Ākol" and "Don Juān of Karaj" share a similar subtext (i.e., the changing face of Iranian society). This subtext, however, remains hidden from sight.

The subtext for "Tarikkhāne" (the darkhouse), Iran's gravitation to the West, is also interesting. What would happen to an individual who, knowingly, opposes the changes that enter the country as a result of the advent of modernization (i.e., cars, newspapers, and cinemas)? Hedayat's answer is simple. Such an individual will experience a regressive life that will end in death. Hedayat then generalizes the theme to cover the entire country and intimates that if Iran were to refuse adopting the innovations that emanate from the West, it will cease to be a viable nation within a short time.<sup>4</sup>

The subtexts of "The Stray Dog" and "Mihaṅ Parast" (the Patriot), like the subtexts of "Dāsh Ākol" and "Don Juān of Karaj" are the two sides of the same coin. Both stories deal with the life situation of Iranian youths, especially those with a foreign education. "The Patriot" is about the life of Seyyad Naṣrullāh Valī, a 74-year-old man who considered himself the central pole holding up Iranian society. He knew everything. For instance, on an Arabian ship, he corrected the Arabic of the Arabian sailors. He was surprised that Arabs should mispronounce the words of their own language. Seyyad Naṣrullāh Valī and his fellow seniors had occupied all government positions and would not allow anyone from the outside to enter their exclusive circle. They feared that the youth, especially those educated abroad, would destroy the sacred value of the legacy bequeathed to them by their forefathers. Seyyad Naṣrullāh suffocated himself as a result of misunderstanding the directions written in French on a life jacket, regarding how to put the jacket on. His statue was installed at the crossroads as a symbol of greatness of spirit, openness of thought, and extreme love for country.<sup>5</sup>

"The Stray Dog" is the story of "Pat," a Scottish terrier that had spent his early days in

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<sup>2</sup> For other themes, especially trust, in "Dāsh Ākol," see Bashiri 1984, pp.74-75.

<sup>3</sup> See also, Bashiri 1984, pp. 77-78.

<sup>4</sup> See also Bashiri 1984, p. 82.

<sup>5</sup> For a full discussion, see Bashiri 1984, pp. 83-84.



the meadows of Scotland and spends his latter days in the back alleys of Varāmīn.<sup>6</sup> Pat's owner, presumably an archaeologist, comes to Iran to do research. There, he takes Pat with him to his workplace. One day, near the ruins of the Varāmīn tower, he loses Pat. Without the protection of his master, Pat begins a new life in an alien society, a society that considers dogs polluting (*najes*). During the two winters that Pat lives there, the local children make his life worse than hell. Eventually, he encounters a man who is very much like his master. He thinks he will be returned to his past life, but he is wrong. The man gets in his car and drives away. Pat, who thinks his savior angel is in that car, runs after the car until he is exhausted. He dies at the side of the road.

In this short story, Hedayat, in addition to criticizing Iranians' maltreatment of animals, especially dogs and to a certain degree cats, addresses Iranians' treatment of students who return from abroad. Given the fact that these students had originally been sent abroad to learn about the ways of the West and, upon returning, to teach in schools, the treatment they receive is cruel. They are denied suitable jobs and are shunned by society at large. Most of them are forced to return abroad and die there brokenhearted and destitute. Hedayat himself is one such student.

Hedayat, in "The Water of Life," as a result of his disappointment regarding the reception of his *Blind Owl*, changed direction. He abandoned the use of unfamiliar subtexts and, instead, used a simple Iranian storyline about three brothers: Ḥosseīnī, Ḥassanī, and Aḥmadak. Ḥosseīnī seeks position, Ḥassanī wants to acquaint people with the noble religion, and little Aḥmadak looks for the water of life. At the end, Aḥmadak finds the water of life. He also finds out that his brothers, using the ignorance of the people of their cities, are exploiting them. He, therefore, brings his water of life to the cities controlled by his brothers as a gift. When the citizens drink from the water, they are set free. Illiteracy is eradicated and prosperity is ushered in.<sup>7</sup>

At a more realistic level, in "Water of Life," Ḥosseīnī represented Iran's government and Ḥassanī Iran's Shi'ite *ulema*. In simple terms, Hedayat shows how those institutions conspire to keep the Iranian masses illiterate and uninformed. He also shows how the same ignorant people are used as slaves to extract their own oil and gold and hand them over to the king and the clergy. He intimates that, if during his lifetime an Aḥmadak had existed, his water of life would have saved Iran from the hell in which the Pahlavi dynasty and the Shi'ite *ulema* had placed it. It could have been a just and wealthy society.

Sadeq Hedayat was an engaged writer. In order to describe the thoughts and actions of his characters correctly, he underwent experiences and hardships that ordinary authors would rather avoid. For instance, in order to write "Se Qaṭreh Khūn" (three drops of blood), he spent a few weeks in a sanitarium. He learned that the established norms for time and space play a major role in separating the sane from the insane. The former honors the established norms while the latter is ignorant about their existence or value. For instance, a group of people, including an insane individual, are discussing a poem. The general knowledge is that that particular poem was written two days ago in the Zhāle café. The insane individual, for whom time and place are meaningless, says the poem was written fifteen years ago in Paris. No one supports his assertion. Additionally, everyone knows that the poet is about twenty years old and has never left Iran. Hedayat says, at this

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<sup>6</sup> For a full discussion, see Bashiri, 1984, pp. 99-101.

<sup>7</sup> For a full discussion, see Bashiri, 1984, pp. 119-123.



point only the knowledge of that individual has come into question and his view is considered to be flawed. But if he continues to make similar irresponsible statements, he will be pronounced insane. Soon after, he will be placed in an asylum.

In "Three Drops of Blood," Hedayat looks at the world through the eyes of the insane. We read the story through the eyes of the sane. Unless we take into account this simple technique (i.e., the technique where the writer places himself in the shoes of the character), it would be difficult for us to make sense of the story.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, in "The Stray Dog," he looks at life in Varamin through the eyes of a dog. Hedayat perfects this technique in his unearthly *Blind Owl* where he allows us a view of the Buddhist purgatory through the eyes of the immortal self of a Buddhist painter of pen-case covers. We witness how the immortal self faces failure in purgatory and is triumphant in his next life. (See below for discussion)

### **A Buddhist Wake Used as Subtext**

For years, the present author has insisted on the existence of a Buddhist subtext in the makeup of *The Blind Owl*. In 1974, I approached the story as a structural analyst. I provided a literal translation and a theory stating that, in some way, the story of the life of the Buddha, as explained in *The Buddha-carita of Asvaghosha*, might prove useful for understanding the story in the *novella*.<sup>9</sup> Then, in 1984, I added supporting information in "The Message of Hedayat" based on the *Bardo Thödol* (the Tibetan book of the dead). Although the addition clarified some of the difficult points, it was not sufficient, especially that it did not shed sufficient light regarding a meaningful connection between the two parts of the *novella*.

Scholars working with *The Blind Owl* have either rejected this idea or have kept their silence. For instance, Williams has criticized the very use of structural analysis for understanding the makeup of literary works. He states, "The critic who does not limit himself to the internal point of view [of the *novella*] inevitably misinterprets [it]."<sup>10</sup> One might ask, "What is the internal point of view of the *novella*?" Hillmann observes, "Bashiri, recognizing the inadequacies and the indecisiveness of *Blind Owl* criticism to date, plunges head first into a sea created by his own aqueous categorical and gratuitous assertions and inhabited by the red herrings of his so-called structuralism."<sup>11</sup> Similarly, Beard states, "If Bashiri is correct, *The Blind Owl* doesn't make much sense without his theory, and this underestimates not only Hedayat but the generation of readers who have found in *The Blind Owl* both brilliance and proportion."<sup>12</sup>

I agree with their constructive criticism, but continue to believe that the approach I took in the 1970s has merit and that, before putting it aside, we should cast one last glance at it. I ask the reader to keep an open mind and remember that we are trying to

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<sup>8</sup> See also, Bashiri 1984, pp. 94-96.

<sup>9</sup> See, Bashiri 1974, p. 137-152.

<sup>10</sup> Williams, pp.99-107.

<sup>11</sup> Hillmann, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Beard, pp. 80-84.



make sense of the makeup of the work. In other words, although there are solid grounds for various types of assessments, at the present, we are not evaluating *The Blind Owl* as a work of art, or as a philosophical, or religious, or socio-political statement. We are asking: Do the events in the *novella* have a recognizable sequence that can be arranged logically in a linear way with the help of subtext? Is the atmosphere in the *novella* the result of a hidden Buddhist subtext? Most importantly, is structural analysis forceful enough to break through the many layers of the work and reveal its blueprint?

There are several reasons for us to pay attention to *The Blind Owl's* Indian connection. First and foremost, as we shall see, the first part of the *novella* consists of a wake held for the salvation of the immortal self of a Buddhist character. In fact, this is the first time that the family in the *novella* is identified by religion. The assumption thus far has been that since Hedayat is a Muslim, and Iranians are Muslim, the characters in the story are most likely Muslim. That is not the case. Hedayat's overt statements about Islam in the text and his silence regarding his knowledge about Buddhism buttresses that assumption. The reality is that the family relocates from India to Iran but holds to its Buddhist traditions (see below for discussion). Second, the atmosphere of the *novella*, especially the unearthly nature of the first part and the dense Indian atmosphere of the second part, indicate strong ties to the religion and culture of India. Third, we have shown that subtext plays a major role in determining action sequences, as well as in providing an appropriate atmosphere. As we shall see, the events in the *novella* begin in India and move from there to *Rayy*. In *Rayy*, the action moves into Buddhist purgatory and, eventually, back to this world. Fourth, Hedayat himself provides several clues including the *nāg* serpent and the "*bugām dāsī*". In fact, without those clues, it would be impossible to find an "in" into the subtext of the *novella*.

## **The Blind Owl: An Outline**

In *The Blind Owl*, Hedayat uses a difficult topic as subtext—Buddhist death rituals. The *novella* begins immediately after the death of the narrator, a pen-case cover painter by profession. The immortal self of the painter moves through the Buddhist purgatory, including search for a wine-flask (cf. clear light), a trial presided over by an Indian *yogi* (cf., lord of death), and a journey to *Shāh 'Abdul 'Azīm* (cf. place of the wombs) via a brook (cf. river of forgetfulness). Part one ends with the immortal self being reborn. The second part happens in this world. Reincarnated as a perpetually sick young man, the immortal self of the painter lives with his sister-wife (the ethereal soul) in a precarious relationship. At the end, the immortal self accomplishes what he had failed to accomplish in purgatory, in part one. He disarms and eliminates the ethereal soul (see below for explanation).

With that said, what follows is yet another attempt, albeit a more focused and precise one, at the discovery of a Buddhist subtext embedded in *The Blind Owl*. The study investigates the sojourn of the immortal self of a painter of pen-case covers in two phases: in purgatory and back in a world similar to this world. In both phases, the main focus is on the conflict between the painter's immortal self and seductive ethereal soul both set free by his demise (see below for more information). In the process, the study reconstructs several key issues that impart purpose to the actions and thoughts of the



protagonists and explain the decisions that result in a drastic change in the character of the perpetually sick young man in part two.

## The Buddhist Subtext

In Buddhist societies, belief in, and discussion of reincarnation are topics as prevalent as belief in predestination and discussion about life after death in Islamic societies. The Buddhists believe that after death the immortal self and the ethereal soul are released into purgatory where they are subject to reincarnation and rebirth. They further believe that the transition period between the two lives can take as long as forty-nine days. During those days, the immortal self and the ethereal soul (see further below) endeavor to individually achieve their different goals. The immortal self is intent on setting himself free from the wheel of life forever; the ethereal soul is intent on keeping the immortal self tied to the wheel as a vehicle for herself to move into the next life. The union of the immortal self and the ethereal soul takes place only if the ethereal soul can prevail over the consciousness of the immortal self, undermine his concentration on the clear light, and show the lord of death that the immortal self is still enchanted by her and is tied to worldly values. If she fails, she will join the company of forsaken ghosts.

In what follows, we shall describe the events that a Buddhist faithful experiences from the moment that he dies to the time when he is reincarnated and reborn (i.e., when the immortal self and the ethereal soul, if so decreed, begin a new life).

Before getting into details, it is important to indicate that of the three stages discussed below, the second stage is the most significant. Events that happen in that stage take place in purgatory or the void between the two lives (i.e., the life lost and the life that might be imposed). Needless to say, the events in the Buddhist purgatory are extremely unfamiliar to both Iranians and Muslims. That is perhaps why Hedayat chose this rather enigmatic circumstance as the mainframe for his *novella*. Although the outline presented below is very brief, it is sufficient for our purpose. The full text can be found in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.<sup>13</sup>

### Stage I

This is the normal life of the individual. He is born, grows up, chooses a profession, forms a family, and dies. His remains stay in this world and disintegrate. Immediately after his death, two elements leave his body. They are an immortal self and an ethereal soul. As mentioned, the two are in conflict. During the transition period, a trial determines whether the immortal self has acquired the necessary requirements to be set free from the wheel of life, or whether he should be granted another existence.

The ethereal soul is the façade of a complex aspect of the individual summed up in the literature as *māyā* or desire. While the immortal self is inclined towards freedom from the wheel of life, the ethereal soul is determined to remain on the wheel. More importantly, the ethereal soul is determined to use her charms to keep the immortal self, her past companion and only possible vehicle for her future life, on the wheel forever. If

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<sup>13</sup> See Evans-Wentz, W.Y. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.



that does not happen, as mentioned, the ethereal soul will become a forsaken ghost.

It is important to note, therefore, that when entering the second stage the immortal self and the ethereal soul have opposing goals. Additionally, it is important to keep in mind that the activities of the immortal self happen in the open. The activities of the ethereal soul do not. We know of her activities only because of the consequences of her actions. Her purpose is to show that the immortal self, having intense feelings for her, is not ready to be released from the wheel of life.

## Stage II

Understanding this stage is of paramount importance for understanding the subtext and, eventually, the first part of *The Blind Owl*. During this stage, the immortal self and the ethereal soul participate in a cosmic trial. In the trial, they present the results of their efforts to the lord of death. In preparing for the trial, the immortal self is assisted and guided by a *lāmā*. The *lāmā* exhorts him to concentrate on the hidden clear light and, through sheer concentration, make it his own. If the immortal self can make the clear light his own, he will be set free from the wheel of life and from bondage to desire. If he fails, he will be condemned to share at least one more life with the ethereal soul.

Similarly, the soul is trained by *māyā* in hiding. She is instructed to use her charm, attract the attention of the immortal self, and undermine his concentration on the clear light. If with her ethereal ideal body and her charming eyes she can engage the immortal self so that the lord of death can see his attachment to worldly desires, her mission is accomplished.

In sum, during stage two, the immortal self uses all his powers to concentrate on the clear light and show the lord of death that worldly concerns have no significance for him. The ethereal soul uses all her charm (seductive body and unforgettable eyes) to insinuate herself into the immortal self's consciousness and make him fail (i.e., show the lord of death that the immortal self continues to be interested in worldly matters and is far from being pure).

## Stage III

During this stage the immortal self, if he has failed in the trial to set himself free from the wheel, joins the ethereal soul and together they are reincarnated and reborn.<sup>14</sup> Through *kārmā*, they are destined to live another life together until another opportunity and another trial.

## Buddhist Wake: A Description

Now that we are somewhat familiar with the fundamental dynamics of the reincarnation process, especially with the hidden struggle between the immortal self and the ethereal soul, let us look at the actual ritual as it is described in Buddhist texts. It is the contention here that an abbreviated Iranized and Islamized version of this ritual is

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<sup>14</sup> For the details of the trial see below.



used as a subtext in writing *The Blind Owl*.<sup>15</sup>

[Beginning of the Subtext]

In Buddhist countries, when a person passes away, the family closes all the doors and windows, leaves the corpse alone in the house, and waits outside for the *lāmā* to arrive. After he arrives, the *lāmā* sits at the head of the corpse and addresses the immortal self that hovers around the body. The *lāmā* tells the immortal self that his previous body is dead and that he (the immortal self) is floating in purgatory between condemnation to another life, on the one hand, and being set free from the wheel of life forever (*nirvānā*), on the other hand. He tells the immortal self that there is a long way between him and salvation or another life. In order to release the immortal self from the wheel of life, the *lāmā* inspires the immortal self to look above his head for the clear light. The light, the *lāmā* tells him, is hidden from him but, if he blocks all worldly values from his consciousness, through sheer concentration, he will be able to see the light and make it his own. If he succeeds, he will be released from the wheel. Otherwise, he will be reincarnated.

In order to materialize the clear light, the *lāmā* says, the immortal self must use absolute concentration. He must not allow any of his past thoughts and actions to intrude, occupy his mind, or undermine his concentration. During the many days that the *lāmā* talks to the immortal self, he describes various attractive scenes that *māyā* (read ethereal soul) might create to undermine his concentration. One such scene is the following judgment scene.

In the scene, the lord of death sits on a throne at the head of an assembly. He is decorated with symbols of death, including the mirror of *kārmā* that he holds in his left hand. In the mirror, he observes the ethereal soul of the immortal self. The soul, in the guise of a beautiful, ethereal girl approaches the lord of death to present the results of her success in undermining the concentration of the immortal self (i.e., proving that there are still impurities that prevent the clear light from occupying the immortal self's consciousness). The results are in the form of pebbles. White pebbles indicate a positive outcome for the immortal self and black pebbles indicate the opposite. In other words, white pebbles would imply that the immortal self has mastered the ability to concentrate, discern, and take action (i. e., is ready to be released from the wheel). This, of course, would be a very rare case. Black pebbles indicate that the person is given to mediocrity, imitation, and intense attraction to the worldly. The lord of death sees the results in the mirror of *kārmā* in his left hand.

The *lāmā* urges the immortal self not to allow scenes like that (i.e., scenes from his past experiences) to enter his mind. If such a scene does enter his mind, the *lāmā* warns, the color of the pebbles that the ethereal soul presents to the lord of death will be black. That means reincarnation and rebirth for him.

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<sup>15</sup> In the past critics have been meticulous on outlining technical issues regarding certain descriptions offered. Those issues are vital and should be accurate, if we were having a scholarly discussion about them. Here we are dealing with the issues in the way that Hedayat might have observed them, heard about them, or read about them in the literature.



Every ethereal soul that appears in the judgment court is seen by both the lord of death and the immortal self. In general, the immortal self thinks that he is incapable of making mistakes and hopes for seeing white pebbles leading to freedom. But when the soul presents the result of a life of mediocrity, imitation, and intense attraction to the worldly (i.e., when the color of the pebbles is black), the scene impacts the immortal self adversely. He becomes distraught. Overwhelmed with the burden of reincarnation and rebirth, he falls into a swoon.

The lord of death, on the other hand, seeing the black color of the pebbles, laughs hysterically. His laughter is so hideous that it causes the ethereal soul to slip and fall into the river of forgetfulness. The river carries her to the place of the wombs where she joins her companion, the immortal self, and together, they are reincarnated and reborn.  
[end of subtext]

This was a brief summary of the activities that, according to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the individual experiences during the first forty-nine days after death occurs. In light of the above discussion, it will be shown below that Hedayat has used a form of the above narrative as the mainframe of the first part of *The Blind Owl*.

## **The Structure of *The Blind Owl***

In what follows, we shall present a close, step-by-step account of the events in the first part of the *novella*, alongside the events of the storyline in the Buddhist subtext outlined above. The knowledge gained from understanding the events in part one will then be used to find an avenue to the resolution of the events in the second part, especially with regard to the characters in the dark dungeon scene.

It is important to note that the main focus of the study is on the establishment of correspondences between the key events in the Buddhist and Iranian storylines. Therefore, Hedayat's details (i.e., the lengthy description of the girl, the distraught situation of the narrator, his incessant search for the ethereal girl, etc.) are summarily pushed aside. That does not mean that those descriptions are not important, or that we are not aware of their value, but that, at this point in the analysis, they are not the focus of attention.

## **The Story of *The Blind Owl***

### **Part One**

The book, as opposed to the story of *The Blind Owl* begins with the assertions of a painter of pen-case covers (hence painter) about his life situation, the austerity of his dwelling, the monotonous nature of his profession, and his addiction to alcohol and drugs. He tells us that he lives on the outskirts of the ancient city of *Rayy*. His description puts the time of the story in pre-Mongol times when *Rayy* was a burgeoning metropolis. The time in the year is the thirteenth day of the month of *Farvardin*, a day that Iranians celebrate the *sizdah bedar* out of doors. In fact, some are celebrating outside his dwelling, the painter says. The painter is alone and, as usual, is painting. He paints the same scene over and over. His uncle sells the pen cases in India and sends the money to him. Here is



the scene that he paints:

An ethereal girl in a black dress stands before an old man who looks like an Indian *yogi*. He wears a *shalma* 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.

According to the Buddhist storyline discussed above, we are dealing not with the living painter, but with his immortal self personified. The painter himself has died very recently. It is his immortal self that thinking he is still alive, out of habit, continues to do what he habitually does.<sup>16</sup> He paints. Those celebrating the *sizdah bedar* outside his dwelling are Hedayat's equivalent for the family of the deceased. The members of the family, leaving the corpse alone, have gathered outside the house, waiting for the arrival of the *lāmā*.

As expected, the painter's work is interrupted by his uncle who enters his room, sits in the corner, and inspires him to bring down a particular wine-flask to entertain him. The wine-flask is high up in a niche in the dark closet of the painter's room. The painter climbs a stool to get it. He fumbles in the dark to find it, when an extraordinary thing happens.

Let us take a minute and ask, who is the uncle? Additionally, is there a meaning to the wine-flask and the painter's mission to get it? What do we know about the uncle? We know certain facts about the him, but due to the effects of reincarnation (see below), especially because of the way Hedayat presents the events, we relate them to the uncle of the sick young man in part two. That is because we do not take into account the fact that reincarnated elements, like the immortal self of the painter, do not have parents in the normal sense of the word. In essence, the father of the perpetually sick young man in part two, in reality, is the father of the painter of the pen-case covers and his mother is the *būgām dāsī* (see below for further explanation). In light of this discussion, we can now go to the beginning of the story of *The Blind Owl* as it unfolds as a story, as opposed to the way that Hedayat arranges the events in the book.

In pre-Mongol times, decades before the story in *The Blind Owl* begins, the pen-case cover painter is one of identical twin boys born to an Indian family. The brothers grow up in India and both fall in love with the same working woman, a *bugām dāsī*, at a *Linga* temple. Both sleep with the woman and one of them makes her pregnant. In a dark dungeon, a *nāg* serpent identifies the father and marks the uncle with a slit lip. Deranged, the uncle leaves the dungeon.

Over the years, the uncle remains in touch with the nephew and helps him make a living by selling his unusual pen cases in India and forwarding the money to him. The painter and the uncle never meet in person. Now that his nephew has died, the uncle appears in the painter's dwelling to guide his immortal self to salvation by giving him some of the wine he knows the family keeps in a wine-flask in the dark closet of the painter's room, high up on a niche.

Our knowledge about the painter's father is scanty. We learn from the story that he moved his family from India to Iran and settled in the town of *Rayy*. There, his son

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Evans-Wentz, p. xxxv.



became a painter. How old the painter was when he died is also not clear. All we know is that at the time when the story begins he is dead and that the family, having retained its Buddhist traditions, is holding a Buddhist wake for him. Thus, his corpse is being attended to in the manner of the Buddhists. It is natural for the uncle, a man of the world and, indeed one set free from the wheel of life by the *nāg* serpent itself, to guide his nephew to bring the wine-flask (cf. clear light) to him. A sip from the wine would set the painter free from the wheel of life.

At this point in the story, Hedayat gives us the first clue about the significance of the wine in the wine-flask. A special poison, he says, acquired from the fangs of the *nāg* serpent, is dissolved in the wine (i.e., if the painter had drunk from this wine, he would have been set free from all worldly concerns). In other words, the wine has the same effect on the immortal self of the painter as the dawning of the clear light has on an ordinary Buddhist.

In the Tibetan text, the *lāmā* repeatedly emphasized the significance of absolute concentration. He also explained the dire consequences of failure (i.e., reincarnation and another cycle of rebirth, suffering, old age, and death). In sum, the possibility of being destined to live a second life.

Now that we are familiar with the role of the uncle and the significance of the wine-flask, let us return to the story in *The Blind Owl*. The painter's determination to bring down the wine-flask is undermined by a scene that protrudes itself through the solid wall of his closet and fascinates him. He is smitten with the ethereal being in the scene. She faces an old man across a brook. Her eyes captivate the painter's imagination and make him desire her intensely.<sup>17</sup> The attraction of the scene is so overwhelming that the painter temporarily forgets about his uncle and the wine-flask. (Even after the event, he cannot forget her. He looks fervently for her, but to no avail. She was so distant from me, yet so close, the painter says).

In Buddhist terms, visions from the painter's past (i.e., the painting that he had repeatedly painted) assail his consciousness and destroy his concentration on bringing down the wine-flask.

In the scene, there are two individuals. One is an old man whom Hedayat refers to as an old Indian *yogi*. The other is an angel-looking, ethereal girl with seductive and unforgettable eyes. The immortal self of the painter sees her as an ethereal girl in a black dress carrying a handful of black lilies as if to hand them to the old man.

The old man who chews on the index finger of his left hand is Hedayat's re-creation of the lord of death as he holds the mirror of *Kārmā* in his left hand. He watches the activities of the ethereal girl in front of him across a brook. The ethereal girl is the seductive soul of the painter personified. Having successfully undermined the painter's concentration, and having prevented him from reaching the wine-flask, she reveals the result of her efforts to the old man (read the lord of death). The results are in the form of a handful of black lilies (cf. black pebbles) in her right hand. The painter, upon seeing the color of the lilies (the sign of his failure and condemnation to another life), predictably,

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<sup>17</sup> Later on in the *novella*, we find that the walls of the painter's closet were solid concrete and that no air-inlet existed through which the painter could have seen the scene. The scene played itself out in his mind, proof for his soul to present to the old man that he [the immortal soul] continues to be interested to earthly concerns.



becomes distraught and falls into a swoon.

The painter's uncle, once he realizes that his nephew is not ready to be set free at this time, leaves the dwelling. He leaves the door of the dwelling ajar to comfort his nephew that there will be many more opportunities for him to save himself. As for the old man in the judgment scene, upon seeing the black color of the lilies, he laughs hysterically. His hideous laughter causes the girl to slip and fall into the brook.

After this event, the painter looks everywhere for the girl but cannot find even a trace of her. Then one night, she comes to his dwelling, gives herself up to him, and dies. He paints her, cuts her body up, and puts the body pieces in a suitcase. Before burying her, he looks into the suitcase. Her eyes are alive. They look at him, a seductive look. He closes the suitcase and buries it near *Shāh 'Abdol 'Azīm*. He then returns home, smokes opium, and feels he is falling down an abyss, shrinking.

The brook (cf. river of forgetfulness) carries the ethereal soul to *Shāh 'Abdol 'Azīm* (cf. place of the wombs). There, the immortal self (of the painter) and his seductive ethereal soul become reincarnated and reborn.<sup>18</sup>

## Part Two

Here we shall discontinue the step-by-step correspondence between the scenes in the subtext storyline and the events in *The Blind Owl*. The intention was to show the existence of a Buddhist subtext accounting for the special sequence of events, unearthly atmosphere, and the intriguing happenings in part one. The hope is that that goal was achieved.

In part two, we follow the immortal self and the ethereal soul of the reincarnated painter; both, as was the case in part one, are personified. The immortal self appears in the guise of a perpetually sick young man (hence young man), who is afraid of everything and is extremely curious about the activities of his wife. The ethereal soul appears as a seductive woman who continues to dominate the immortal self's life, as she had before reincarnation. The immortal self routinely refers to her as that "whore".

Part two begins after the immortal self of the painter and his seductive ethereal soul meet at *Shāh 'Abdol 'Azīm* and are reincarnated in this world. This means that the couple that Hedayat presents as a sick young man and a voluptuous woman are not two human beings in the true sense of those words. Rather, they are the human manifestations of the reincarnated immortal self and the ethereal soul beginning a new life. The world into which they are born is the same world—*Rāy* and its environs—albeit centuries later. The couple's birth, growing up together, and forced marital relationship are in tune with their reincarnated status and environ.

In the initial section of part two, the young man is sick. He hopes to die of an ordinary illness, but after the doctor attends to him, he recovers. However, he discovers by himself, that his sickness is not physical in nature. It is some unknown ailment related to the mystery surrounding his relationship with his sister-wife, on the one hand, and the circumstances of their birth, on the other hand.

What was the real reason for his malady, if we can call it that? With the latent

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<sup>18</sup> Hedayat leaves out the reincarnation of the accompanying soul. Both the reincarnated immortal self and the soul reappear in part two.



struggle between the immortal self and the ethereal soul in mind, let us treat the couple in part two as if they are two ordinary people. The young man marries his strange step-sister (i.e., the girl who was born at the same time as he was and shared the same nanny with him) and investigates the circumstances of their imposed marriage. Based on the unusual behavior of his wife, especially her sleeping with everyone and her demands on him, he concludes that his wife's power over him is the main cause of his unhappiness and, by extension, of his malady.

Where does his wife's power come from? Searching for the source of his wife's power, he comes to the conclusion that it takes source in his own intense love for her. In other words, he identifies his own intense desire for his wife as the reason for his slavery to her, pimping for her, and undertaking other menial tasks for her. Pushing the issue further, he relates the power of his wife to the dark dungeon, and to his mother, the *bugām dāsī*. The story of the painter's birth, of course, is a story that we already know very well. By the same token, however, as it was mentioned briefly above, it is the story that misguides us. There are certain far-fetched assumptions on the part of Hedayat that demand explanation.

The painter's father and uncle had been identical twins. They both had slept with the painter's mother and one of them had made her pregnant. To identify the real father, both men had been thrown into a dark dungeon with a *nāg* serpent. The uncle, who had been familiar with the culture of India, and with the true nature of the *nāg* serpent, had refused the seduction of the *nāg* serpent (even when it had appeared to him in the guise of the beautiful and seductive *bugām dāsī*). The serpent, therefore, had bitten him on the lip. He had left the dungeon, a deranged man.

The other brother had not been as fortunate. Unaware of the ruse of the *nāg*, he had given in to his desire for the *bugām dāsī* and accepted her dominance. As a result of the coming together of the immortal self and the ethereal soul of the weak brother, and, subsequently, the failure of the painter, the sick man and his wife had entered existence. In sum, the young man recognizes the painter's birth, but more so the dominance of the *būgām dāsī*, as the culprit for the ills that have befallen him.

That birth happened decades before the death of the painter and centuries before the emergence of the young man and his wife in part two of *The Blind Owl*. That is when the painter of pen-case covers was born, his father moved the family to *Rayy*, the boy grew up, became a destitute painter, and died. His uncle tried to guide his immortal self to free itself from the wheel of life, but the painter failed him. The seductive soul of the immortal self was more powerful than imagined. She undermined the concentration of the immortal self and rendered the uncle's attempt to reach the wine-flask to release his nephew from the wheel of life, futile. As a result, she and the painter were permitted to start a new life together.

In the end, the young man realizes that the ethereal soul, assuming seductive forms, has been undermining all efforts, including his uncle's, to keep him subservient. More importantly, she does that to satisfy her own desire to enjoy the splendor of life. In retrospect, the dungeon story helps the young man to not only identify the source of his wife's power, but also the reason for his own weakness in relation to her. After this discovery, he decides to follow in the solid footsteps of his uncle, who is still with him and guides him, and to avoid the weak example of his father, who died centuries ago.

Fortunately for him, in the guise of an odds-and-ends man, his uncle, who never dies,



serves him as a loyal *guru*. He is the main focus of the study of the young man alongside the butcher, nanny, and many others. More importantly, in crucial circumstances, as an odds-and-ends man, he reaches out and helps his nephew. (See below for explanation.)

After the discovery of the source of his wife's power, the young man's eyes are opened onto a different world. In that world, he studies his wife's every move and analyzes her every utterance. The more he learns about her ways, the more he becomes knowledgeable about her strange activities, the people she sleeps with, the fights she picks with her neighbors, and the dexterity with which she masks her serpentine attitude and her devastating "bite". At the end, he becomes convinced that, like his father before him, through his intense desire for her, he is snared by his own *bugām dāsī*.

In the context of his study of her moods and activities, the young man fortifies himself against the assaults of his wife by seeking distance from her. He intends to make sure that were he to be thrown into a dark dungeon with her, he would be able to overcome her ruses and, like his uncle (who never ages, never changes, and is eternal), walk out of that dungeon a free individual.

To that end, the young man tries to lose himself in the desert. But, like his shadow, his wife materializes beside him everywhere. Rather than seeking physical distance, he discovers, he needs to seek sentimental distance from her (i.e., show more indifference towards her). This practice works. It enables him to disarm her completely. When the abandonment process becomes total, his wife's face reflects the adverse impact; she loses her seductive beauty altogether and becomes an ordinary, middle-aged woman. A piece of meat at the butcher's, according to her husband.

Given the circumstances of her life thus far, the situation in which the wife finds herself is quite unusual. Never before had she been treated with so much indifference by her husband. To compensate, she uses her little brother's charms and the loss of their child to redirect her husband's attention. But those ploys do not work. He does not react as she expects he would. In fact, she reminds him of his father's weakness (i.e., the immense mistake that his father had made in the dark dungeon, staying as the slave of the *bugām dāsī*). It also reminds him of his own lack of concentration, especially at that crucial moment, when everything was hanging in the balance. He had failed to bring down the wine-flask in time and share the wine with his uncle. He concludes, that were he ever to allow his wife to give birth, he would be repeating his own mistake, as well as the mistake of his father. In fact, he felt he would be sealing the fate of generations of future existences. He determines the eye of the "whore" must be put out.

In the end, his total lack of interest in his wife and in worldly things in general make the young man resemble the odds-and-ends man. He feels he is at a stage in his relationship with his wife whereby nothing can undermine his resolution to render her incapable of harming him any more. With full determination to destroy that "whore," he picks up the weapon for the deed, a knife that has already been sent to him by the odds-and-ends man.

He enters the dark bedchamber in which his wife awaits him, lies beside her, and feels her unearthly nature. She moves not only like her own seductive self, but also like the *nāg* serpent, and the *bugām dāsī*. He condemns them all for their share in his suffering and for forcing him to carry the burden of a second existence. Then, unlike the time when he fumbled for the wine-flask, without the slightest hesitation, he plunges the knife into the whore's seductive and unforgettable eye and takes it out of the socket,



holds it in the palm of his hand, and feels relieved. Moments later she is dead. As for the young man, he is transformed from an individual who entered the bedchamber as a potential odds-and-ends man, into an individual leaving the bedchamber as a genuine odds-and-ends man.

### **Is *The Blind Owl* a Novel?**

In 1974, I argued that *The Blind Owl* should not be considered a novel. I prefaced my argument with the following, “It is indeed with a great deal of reserve that I am applying the techniques for analyzing novels to *The Blind Owl*...There are [in the novella] no attempts at creating a significant plot, no indications of coherent features in character creation and no sign of a unifying thread that can hold the cycles of the story together.”<sup>19</sup> At that time, I was not aware that the narrator of the *novella* is a Buddhist, that the subtext of the story is a Buddhist wake and, most importantly, that reincarnated beings do not have parents of their own. In other words, I did not know that the brother, in the dungeon, who was not harmed by the *nāg* was the father of the painter of pen-case covers. The story identifies him as the father of the young man in part two. That bit of information has changed everything.

Additionally, by making the immortal self of the painter the narrator of the story, Hedayat blocks the flow of much of the pertinent information regarding the motives and the actions of the characters. He also leaves the explanation of the consequences of those actions out. For instance, the narrator is sent on an errand. The true purpose for the errand is not clear as is the tremendous amount of distress for the simple act of not bringing down a wine-flask. Even the most significant part of the plot, the conflict between desire and a quest for a tranquil life is masked. Consequently, the characters do not emerge as personifications of inherent human characteristics that decide the fate of man. In the present analysis, there are, at least, five threads that relate the first part of the *novella* to the second. None of these facts is apparent from the *novella*. They come to light only when they are explained in the context of the *novella*'s supporting Buddhist subtext. The five threads that relate part one to part two are:

1. The immortal self and the ethereal soul are reborn at the end of part one and reappear as a young man and a seductive woman in part two. Their personas, however, are complex. For instance, when the narrator of *The Blind Owl* says “I”, it is not clear from the surface reading that the pronoun could have more than one referent. But it does. It could be the living pen-case cover painter, whom we never meet alive; it could be the immortal self of the painter, when he is floating in purgatory, being guided by his uncle; or it could be his reincarnated persona, the young man in the second part. Unless we properly distinguish the activities of the various manifestations of the “I” and assign time and space to them—the activities of a living, recently deceased, or reincarnated individual—it would be difficult to plough through the maze of the confusion that misplaced identities can obtain. The same is true for the transformations that the girl goes through—the girl painted on pen-case covers, the ethereal being in the judgment scene, and the beautiful woman in part two.

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<sup>19</sup> Krstovc, p. 138-142.



2. The intense attraction of the immortal self to the ethereal being, the cause of his downfall, moves into part two with the same intensity.
3. The conflict between the protagonists (i.e., quest for immortality and desire for life) pours from part one into part two. In fact, it becomes the main issue to be resolved.
4. The uncle, who in part one cannot release his nephew from the wheel of life, reappears in part two as the odds-and-ends man. He continues to influence his nephew, from afar. In the end, he provides the knife that the young man uses to disable the eye of the whore. One important fact about the uncle is that he is immune to the effects of time and space. Except for the reincarnated characters, he is the only one who survives the passage of centuries.
5. In part one, the trial scene decided the fate of the protagonists. In part two, the dark bedchamber serves that purpose. In the dark bedchamber, the immortal self is able to see what he had been blind to in part one (i.e., the difference between his father and his uncle). As a result, the immortal self is released from the wheel of life, while the ethereal soul is relegated to the realm of the forsaken ghosts.

In view of all these differences, especially with regard to the discovery of a logical progression of events outlined above, the answer to the question whether *The Blind Owl* is a novel or not is a resounding yes. It is a *novella* comprised of two related parts, with an unusual plot, a cast of unearthly characters, and a similarly unearthly treatment of atmosphere, time, and space.

### **Why Is *The Blind Owl* Hard to Understand?**

There are many factors that make *The Blind Owl* hard to understand. Several of those factors that create this feeling of confusion in the mind of a non-Buddhist reader are discussed below. For instance, Hedayat uses a Buddhist death ritual as the subtext for *The Blind Owl*. Iranians, or Muslim readers in general, are not aware of this fact. Even if they were, it is not easy for them to create analogies that could help their understanding. In addition, Hedayat uses the subtext with a twist (i.e., he relegates the role of the normal narrator of the ritual, the *lāmā*, to the immortal self of the deceased, his narrator). As a result, the immortal self reacts to the guidance of the *lāmā*, but he cannot provide the vital information that the *lāmā* contributes. Consequently, the reader is left with a number of action sequences with no clear motivation, purpose, or consequence (cf., silent movies without subtitles). Since these are the very pieces of information that the reader needs to comprehend the events and move forward, a feeling of confusion sets in. When more actions of this type are added, that feeling of confusion becomes more intense. In the end, the first part appears as some extraordinary happening in the life of a painter of pen-case covers in pre-Mongol times in the city of *Rayy*. What made the happening so extraordinary to Iranian/Muslim eyes? No one knows.

The second part has an even more important piece of information that is not overtly communicated. When reading the account of the events in the dungeon, the young man speaks about his Indian parents and their encounter with a *nāg* serpent in a dungeon. His vivid account creates a genuine father and a mother in the mind of the reader for him. At the same time, the reader, who had hoped the second part would provide a thread to relate



the two parts together, becomes disappointed. The painter of pen-case covers and the young man live in two different worlds. The two parts cannot be related to each other meaningfully.

In reality, however, as explained above, the two parts are connected. The father that the young man attributes to himself is the father of the pen-case cover painter. As a reincarnation, the young man cannot have a father of his own. This discovery turns the *novella* on its head (i.e., the events in the dungeon scene that appear to be happening in Rayy in part two, had happened in India centuries before the existence of the young man.

In the context of its Buddhist subtext, the story in *The Blind Owl* is quite straight forward. It is about the adventures of the immortal self and the ethereal soul of a boy who is brought from his native land, India, to the town of *Rayy* in Iran. The boy grows up in *Rayy*, becomes a painter of pen-case covers and dies. In purgatory, the immortal self describes his struggles with the ethereal soul regarding whether he should stay on the wheel of life or be released from it. See “Summary of *The Blind Owl*” for further discussion.

### **The Subtext Meaning of *The Blind Owl***

*The Blind Owl* can be analyzed on many planes and at many levels each with a separate set of values. For instance, we can analyze *The Blind Owl* from a sociological point of view and try to understand the relationship between the narrator and his associates—especially the relationship between his associates and his wife. We can even extend that to Hedayat’s own views on women and marriage. Similarly, we can discuss Hedayat’s philosophy with regard to Islam, Zoroastrianism, and Buddhism. Clearly he is not a friend of Islam, but he is dedicated to Zoroastrianism, a religion that he regards as the mainstay of the glory of ancient Iran. As for Buddhism, he is quite tight-lipped. Neither the extent of his knowledge, nor his dedication to Buddhism are known. Many have recognized *The Blind Owl* as an artistic phenomenon, while others regard it to be nihilistic in nature. On the way to a comprehensive understanding of the meaning of the *novella*, all those approaches are valuable and, as such, must be supported, followed through, and built upon.

This article, like the present author’s other works on Hedayat, does not address any of those issues. With regard to meaning, the main objective of this study is to extract as much meaning as the subtext allows. That might turn out to be the whole meaning or a mere aspect of it. That remains to be seen. It can be surmised, however, that the total meaning of the work is much more grand, complex, and forceful than what the subtext reveals. A comparison between the content meaning of the full story of “Aegeus and Theseus” with the full story of “Rostam and Sohrāb” reveals the extent of an author’s capacity to reshape and embellish the shared storyline of the subtext. Firdowsi, for instance, discusses the lush environ in which the story takes place. He talks extensively about Rustam’s killing a deer and roasting it by a spring. None of that, however, is in the subtext. Firdowsi presents those details to embellish his theme, as well as to put distance between the reader and the subtext.

One of the meanings that can be derived from the subtext of *The Blind Owl* is with regard to the impact of imitation on an individual’s life. In part one, the pen-case cover



painter is the epitome of imitation. He takes orders from his uncle for the same picture. Day in and day out, according to his own description, he paints that same picture. Not even once does he question what the scene is about, who the characters in it are, or why the people of India should be so interested in it. One could argue that the painting is more in control of him than he is in control of the painting. In fact, the ethereal soul used the same image as the vulnerable point in his persona; using it, she entered his consciousness, diverted his attention, and proved to the old man that he (the painter) is not ready to be released from the wheel. We can say she made him fail the wine-flask test, symbolized in the *novella* by the black lilies she holds.

Believing in oneself and focusing on the essentials in life constitute a bulwark against imitation. The reincarnation of that same painter, the young man in part two, is inherently curious, probing, and deductive. In order to understand his surroundings, he studies everything. When he realizes that his wife or, more exactly, his wife's attraction, and, even more specifically, her eye is the cause of his downfall, he becomes determined to pull that eye out of its socket. He does that without the slightest hesitation or remorse. Believing in himself transforms him from a weak painter of pen-case covers to a genuine odds-and-ends man. The transformation empowers him to sit in judgment of the citizens of *Rayy* (the drunken watchmen, the butcher, as well as the *Qur'an* reciter, nanny, and others).

Judgment is another meaning that can be derived from the subtext of the *novella*. Hedayat is partial to this theme and uses it in his "Ḥājī Morād," "Sag-i Velgard," and other stories.<sup>20</sup> In "The Stray Dog," forced by his inner desire, "Pat" leaves his master and follows a bitch. This decision, motivated by desire, causes him great anxiety and trouble. For two years, he runs around in the back alleys of Varāmīn until, eventually, he dies a miserable death. Similarly, Ḥājīji Morād, a fake *hājī*, slaps a woman on the street because the border of her *chādor* resembles the border of the *chādor* of his wife. When proven wrong, he pays a fine, is whipped in public, and divorces the woman he loves. His problem is symbolized in his name, *morād* (desire).

Although Hedayat employs literary techniques in most of his stories, in *The Blind Owl* he takes the employment of this technique to the highest level of perfection. The cosmic content of the *novella*, its seemingly earthly appearance, and its flexibility in bending space, time, and normal societal relations impart a special brand of brilliance to the work. At the cosmic level, it deals with a major inner conflict within human beings: a desire to live life to the fullest versus a quest for unconditional tranquility and freedom. On the earth plane, the parties to the same cosmic conflict assume human attributes and show how fate and desire shape man's daily concerns and, more importantly, how, on a cosmic scale, those concerns are trivial and unworthy of attention. As human beings, Hedayat says, we are given the necessary fortitude to rise above desire and land in the coveted realm of tranquility. Yet we fail. The reason for our failure is simple: the myriad of faces that desire is afforded. Each face is sufficiently empowered to engage us for lifetimes to come.

By one account, *The Blind Owl* is a giant leap from the edge of the world of the living into the depths of the abyss of nothingness where the forsaken ghosts of accomplished immortal selves reside. By another account, it is the ascent of the accomplished immortal

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<sup>20</sup> For more information, see Bashiri 1984, pp. 70-72.



self to the pinnacle of watchfulness and concentration where suffering, old age, and death are not known. Put differently, *The Blind Owl* is the account of a cosmic conflict that, once born, continuously renews itself within the individual, *ad infinitum*, a struggle between power and control versus a quest for freedom and tranquility. The losses and gains in this cosmic conflict are settled in a court presided over by an old man who looks like an Indian yogi and wears a *shalma*. In that court, white lilies denote salvation; black lilies denote rebirth. Only in *The Blind Owl*, a second life is dreaded, while a bite from the fang of a *nāg* serpent is a ticket to eternal tranquility and immortality.

Those who try to resolve the riddle of *The Blind Owl* through an interpretation of the actions of its cosmic-cum-earthly characters, at the expense of understanding the purpose and consequences of those actions, do so at the risk of missing Hedayat's intended message for the piece. He loudly says: life and tranquility are mutually exclusive. We say goodbye to tranquility at birth; desire sees to it that we never meet. Our only route to tranquility is to circumvent desire, close our eyes to life, and look at the depth of futility as would a blind owl.

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