Iranian Studies (2025), **58**, 928–947
doi:10.1017/irn.2025.23

Association for Iranian Studies
انجمن ایران‌پژوهی

ARTICLE

Récit: Narrative Movement in Sadeq Hedayat's *Buf-e- Kur* (*The Blind Owl*)

Marziyeh Kameli

Department of Comparative Literature, University of California, Riverside, CA, USA
Email: mkame002@ucr.edu

(Received 9 September 2024; revised 30 October 2024; accepted 17 March 2025)

Abstract

This paper examines Sadeq Hedayat's *The Blind Owl* through the lens of *récit*, focusing on the non-linear structure and elusive nature of the narrative. By analyzing the fluidity of time, space, and identity, the study argues that the seeming narrative flaws – including the instability of characters and shifting perspectives – are deliberate artistic strategies. Central to this reading is the concept of *barzakh*, the in-between state, which frames the narrator's ongoing struggle to navigate the boundaries between life and death, reality and imagination. The narrator's inability to fully express himself through art reflects this tension, as each attempt to articulate his vision reveals the inadequacy of language and the inherent impossibility of fully capturing the essence of life in art. The *récit* form reinforces this theme by immersing the reader in an unfinished, ever-shifting narrative, where meaning remains just beyond reach. This study highlights the importance of reading *The Blind Owl* as a *récit* to better understand its existential exploration and critique of the artist's role in grappling with the unknown.

Keywords: in-betweenness; narrative structure; *récit*; Sadeq Hedayat; *The Blind Owl*

"In the end I took refuge in the motionless world of lines and shapes"
Hedayat, *Buf- e-Kur*, p. 16

Sadeq Hedayat (1903–51), the most prominent modern Iranian writer, creates in *Buf-e Kur* (*The Blind Owl*) a metanarrative that constantly and performatively enacts its own genesis. In this deeply hybrid work, classified by Nasrin Rahimieh as a "more experimental prose form," Hedayat constructs a mysterious space characterized by hallucinatory details and shifting contexts, resulting in displacement and disorientation.[1] Rahimieh further observes that Hedayat's drawing on not only European literatures but also Iranian folklore and Indian and Zoroastrian mythology "reflect[s] the author's longing for new art forms."[2] *The Blind Owl* has been extensively analyzed through various critical lenses, most notably as a novel rooted in psychoanalysis, existentialism, and surrealism.[3] Omid Azadibougar, categorizes

[1] Rahimieh, "A Systemic Approach to Modern Persian Prose Fiction," 16.
[2] Ibid., 16.
[3] For instance, in Ghanoonparvar, "*The Blind Owl* (Sadeq Hedayat, Iran 1941)," 798, the author reads the text from a physcological lens, stating that the narrator plays "the amateur psychologist, prescribing therapeutic writing as a possible cure." For different critical lenses, see, for example, Mohandessi, "Hedayat and Rilke"; Johnson, "*The Blind Owl*, Nerval, Kafka, Poe and the Surrealists: Affinities"; Meghdadi and Hamalian, "Oedipus and the Owl"; Bryant,

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Association for Iranian Studies.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.23 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the studies of the book into two trends: those that focus on "discovering its meaning" by decoding the text and understanding the author's intentions, and those that trace its "origins" by identifying the work's Eastern and Western influences.[4] Despite Azadibougar labeling these approaches as "old fashioned," they have enriched our understanding of the text, especially its exploration of despair, absurdity, and the search for meaning in a seemingly meaningless world. However, such readings often emphasize what the novel means rather than how it means, potentially narrowing analysis to predefined thematic and structural concerns.

In this article, in alignment with Rahimieh's assertion of Hedayat striving for a new art form, I rethink the text in terms of *récit*, a narrative form that consistently and performatively comments on and questions its own conventions, unsettling the reader's perception of reality and challenging the historical and critical contexts on which the narrative relies. The term *récit* has been translated into English as "story" or "relation" and is used to identify stylistic specificities in narratives that draw attention to themselves. Approaching *The Blind Owl* as a *récit* offers a fresh perspective that aligns more closely with the text's inherent structure and thematic preoccupations. *Récit* is concerned not with the finality of meaning but with the process of narration, the fluidity of language, and the spaces of indeterminacy that open up within the narrative. Reading the text as a *récit* shifts the focus from deciphering hidden meanings to engaging with the narrative's performative dimensions – its oscillation between life and death, reality and illusion, and its exploration of the in-between spaces that resist closure.

This approach highlights the ways in which the narrative enacts a continuous displacement, resisting stable interpretations and inviting readers to inhabit the uncertainty the text presents. This approach enriches the literary discourse surrounding the text and ensures that the text continues to be a site of dynamic and ongoing relevance. Additionally, through my reading, I introduce *récit* – a lesser-known narrative mode in Persian literature – to demonstrate its capacity to cultivate contradictions. This study helps illuminate how such narrative strategies expand our understanding of literary practices, particularly in contexts where these narrative forms are not native or are deemed unconventional.

Maurice Blanchot is, without a doubt, the pioneer of theorizing *récit*. In his early article "Encountering the Imaginary," he evokes the famous scene from *The Odyssey*, explicates the difference between "le roman" and "le récit," stating that "The narrative [*récit*] begins where the novel does not go but still leads us by its refusals and its rich negligence."[5] The way "le récit" responds to the lure is a different approach; when the novel turns away and leaves the lure behind, the *récit* exposes itself to the song and focuses on the lure itself, knowing that the song is enigmatic by nature; the song that "is powerful because of its defect."[6] The "lure" refers to the enticing, yet enigmatic aspects of a story – much like the Sirens' song in *The Odyssey*. While a novel typically moves away from such ambiguous elements, avoiding them to maintain a clear, fictional narrative, a *récit* embraces them, focusing on the mystery and uncertainty inherent in the lure itself. In a novel, there is often an expectation of a clear progression of events; the story unfolds in a controlled manner, leading towards a predetermined conclusion. The novel is based on safe navigation through potentially dangerous waters by imposing fictionality on it and taking the detours of "*histoire toute humaine*."[7] In contrast, in *récit* the author faces an obscure situation as there

"Hedayat's Psychoanalysis of a Nation"; Beard, *Hedayat's Blind Owl as a Western Novel*; Katouzian, *Sadeq Hedayat: The life and legend of an Iranian Writer*.

[4] Azadibougar, *The Persian Novel*, 108.

[5] Blanchot, "Encountering the Imaginary," 6.

[6] Ibid., 5.

[7] Given that, in French, *histoire* can mean both history and story – both a human story as well as history – it allows humans to turn away from the lure. *Récit*, in contrast, erases both story and history and, as Daniel Just mentions, "this *blanchissement* [whitening, purging] of *histoire* is what gives the *récit* its generic distinctness. All the traits

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.23 Published online by Cambridge University Press

is not any deliberate intention of reaching a predetermined destination, "any illusion to a goal or a destination must be excluded." *Récit* navigates through unpredictable events and situations that unfold by chance rather than design. This lack of a deliberate endpoint means that "le récit" operates outside the norms of everyday time and truth, presenting an exceptional event that feels real yet defies typical fictional conventions. Thus, even though the events depicted in a *récit* might seem extraordinary, they are not fictionalized; they maintain a sense of reality, rejecting the boundaries of fiction. The genre resists definition because, unlike novels, which typically drive towards a conclusive denouement, *récit* revolves around an absence or a non-event, emphasizing the instability and slipperiness of language that serves to undermine its premises.

The delicate portrayal of the paradoxical event in *récit* requires a specific narrative movement, which Blanchot identifies as "la loi secrète du récit" (the secret law of *récit*).[8] The narrative should become real, powerful, and attractive only by moving toward and fixating on the enigmatic point. The unpredictability inherent in confronting the enigmatic song necessitates frequent diversions within the text: "Diversion is its profound song. To keep changing direction, to set off as if by chance and shun any goal, by a movement of anxiety that is transformed into pleasant distraction—that was its original and surest justification."[9] Blanchot often references "un movement d'inquiétude" (a movement of anxiety) as a key feature of *récit*, emphasizing the oscillation between seemingly contradictory states: weakness and strength, illness and happiness, failure and success, ease and difficulty, and living and dying. This movement reflects the narrative's effort to uncover what lies "underneath the story."[10]

Creating such movement in the narrative involves using non-referential language. By suspending personal, temporal, and spatial deixis – expressions that rely on context for meaning, such as "I," "now," and "here" – *récit* creates a textual space that challenges conventional narratives and allows individuals who do not conform to society's norms to develop new forms of experimental writing that resist the dominant narrative. Daniel Just states that *récit* "simply stands for a type of narrative language that suspends deixis."[11] Michael Syrotinski calls this movement a "performative displacement" and elaborates on the concept, explaining that this particular narrative movement occurs when the author enacts and performs the reverse of what they are attempting to do. The inherent inability to fully articulate or resolve this "turn" becomes the focal point of the text.[12] This performative aspect of *récit* challenges the conventional understanding of narrative coherence, inviting readers to engage with the text in a way that acknowledges the limitations and complexities of language. Thus, *récit* emerges as a form that not only reflects the ambiguities and paradoxes of human experience but also actively participates in their exploration through its narrative structure and language. In my attempt to describe *récit*, I am aware of the paradoxical nature of a concept that resists being defined and the specificity of its emergence. Due to the paradox inherent in the forms that *récit* takes – by virtue of their digressions, deviations, and so on – and the specificity of the conditions out of which they emerge, *récit* can never be categorized prescriptively, only descriptively. The significance of *récit* is differential rather than comparative or categorical: it emerges from spaces of difference that know no convergence and therefore signifies in difference. In my reading of *The Blind Owl*, I focus on how the text's narrative structure and content embody the principles of

that *récit* has acquired in Blanchot's writings during these ten years – slowness, silence, austerity, exhaustion, emptiness – oppose it to *histoire*" (Just, "The Politics of the Novel and Maurice Blanchot's Theory of the *Recit*, 1954–1964," 137.) Purging the story and history clears space for new meanings to come.

[8] Blanchot, "Encountering the Imaginary," 5.

[9] Ibid., 7.

[10] Blanchot, *Friendship*, 129.

[11] Just, "The Politics of the Novel and Maurice Blanchot's Theory of the Recit, 1954–1964," 123.

[12] Paulhan, "Introduction," x.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.23 Published online by Cambridge University Press

récit, particularly its embrace of ambiguity, digression, and the complexities of language and representation. Importantly, I do not attribute intentionality to Hedayat; instead, I examine the narrative as a way of understanding its unresolved ambiguities. While the concept of *récit* has been well developed in theory, its practical applications remain underexplored. My intervention, therefore, is to illustrate how *The Blind Owl* navigates the tension between capturing the elusive essence of reality and acknowledging the limitations of art and language to reflect that reality. Taking *récit* as a point of departure and focusing on the performative aspects of *The Blind Owl*'s narrative, this approach situates features of the text traditionally deemed surrealist or existentialist within literary theory, without resorting to "alien" definitions. In doing so, *The Blind Owl* is analyzed on its own terms, rather than through implicit comparisons with Western models.

In *The Blind Owl*, the narrative relies on illusive scenes and subjects, causing the context to constantly shift and resulting in a profound sense of confusion and unease, ultimately leading to a destabilizing and disorienting experience. The text consists of two main sections. After the initial address to his shadow, the first section begins with the obsessed narrator haunted by the beauty of a mysterious woman whom he calls an "ethereal damsel." The narrator, an artist of sorts, repeatedly paints a singular scene of a damsel resembling the ethereal damsel offering an old man a morning glory flower on pen cases. Eventually, the artist-narrator encounters the woman, who almost immediately dies. He then mutilates her body and buries her with the help of an old mocking carriage driver, who resembles the narrator's uncle and father. The driver's hollow, dry laugh ceaselessly haunts the narrator. The second section of the book, which is offset by quotation marks and italicized in the translations, is stylistically distinct from the first section in terms of characters, time, setting, and the narrator, but uses similar descriptions and language, thus causing confusion as to whether or not they are connected. The ill and sexually frustrated narrator in the second section becomes obsessed with sleeping with his wife, whom he refers to as "the whore" and believes has been unfaithful to him by sleeping with everyone except him. The narrator is convinced that she is pregnant with the child of the odds-and-ends man, who's dry, hollow laughs remain the same as he appears in different roles: an ugly and dirty butcher, a Quran reader, and, eventually, as a reflection of the narrator in the mirror. Though the narrator's family history remains obscure, he is under the care of a woman called Nane-joon, revealed to be the milk-mother of both the narrator and his wife, who has taken care of him his entire life in the absence of his biological mother.

"The object of fascination" is elusive

In *récit*, the source of inspiration, or as Daniel Just calls it, "the object of fascination," embodies a fundamental paradox: it simultaneously offers the potential for success and failure.[13] The allegory of the Sirens' song captures this paradox perfectly. The Sirens' song is alluring precisely because it is flawed – "ce chant énigmatique qui est puissant par son défaut" – meaning that its enchanting nature is inherently tied to its danger. The beauty of the Sirens' song inevitably leads to destruction for anyone who hears it. In *récit*, both the author and reader embrace this paradox, recognizing that the *défaut* (flaw or defect) is intrinsic to the experience, rather than something to be overcome. Unlike in other narrative forms where writing is a journey toward understanding or resolution, *récit* accepts the flawed nature of its subject as a condition of existence and waits for it to become a *quality*.

In *The Blind Owl*, the elusive eyes of a woman are the predominant object of fascination. The narrator, an artist, introduces himself as a visual artist singularly focused on representing the evasive eyes of a mysterious woman who oscillates between life and death,

[13] Just, "The Politics of the Novel and Maurice Blanchot's Theory of the *Récit*, 1954–1964," 11.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.23 Published online by Cambridge University Press

challenging the artist's ability to capture her in his creation. As the narrator fixates on her eyes, he begins to conflate the mysterious woman, initially referred to as "the ethereal damsel" in the first section, with his wife, whom he derogatorily calls the "whore" in the second section. In the first section, the narrator is described as an artist whose sole source of happiness stems from sitting inside the four walls of the room and painting the same picture over and over again on pen cases to pass "the time with this absurd diversion":

> I always painted a hunched-over old man that looked like a Hindu yogi, wearing a cloak with a turban wrapped around his head, squatting underneath a cypress tree, who, with an astonished look, placed the index finger of his left hand to his lips—In front of him a damsel in a long black dress, bent over, was offering him a morning glory flower—for between them there was a small stream—had I seen this scene before or did it appear before me in a dream?[14]

The image stays in the form of nature morte on the pen cases until the eyes of the ethereal damsel become a topos repeated in different forms; the narrator sees it outside the window of his closet, in the graveyard where he buries the woman, and on a vase on the outskirts of the ancient city of Ray.[15] The first time the narrator sees this image come to life outside through his closet window is on Sizda-Bedar (thirteenth day of the Persian new year).[16] The very existence of this window is called into question, as the narrator believes it did not exist before and it vanishes after he sees the scene of the damsel and old man outside the house. The narrator receives an unexpected visit from an old man who resembles the bent man on his painted pen cases. The old man introduces himself to the narrator as his uncle. Upon the arrival of his uncle, "a hunched-over old man with an Indian turban on his head, wearing a tattered yellow robe with a shawl wrapped around his face," the narrator reaches for a flask of wine dating back to his own birth, on the top shelf of his dark closet.[17] As he reaches to grab the wine, he detects, for the first time, a small window that opens to the scene he frequently draws on the pen cases. He is taken by the beauty of the woman, but the terrifying dry laugh of the old man brings him back. He grabs the wine and turns back only to find that the guest has departed. He rushes back to the closet and finds out that the window has also disappeared. After a ceaseless search, the "ethereal damsel" appears one night at his doorstep in a dark dress, looking exhausted. She follows him silently to his room and lies on his bed. In an attempt to lure her back, he pours the inherited wine he found in the closet down her throat, but notices that her body is cold and she is dead. He tries to capture her eyes in his painting but fails, as the image remains elusive and slips away from him. After his multiple failed attempts at painting, she suddenly opens her eyes for a moment, which allows the narrator to capture them in his painting, before she closes them again as if she had been dead all along. Despite this fleeting success, the narrator's artistic triumph is short-lived, as the woman closes her eyes and returns to the state of death. This moment encapsulates the elusive nature of his quest, where every moment of perceived achievement is shadowed by an underlying sense of loss and imperfection.

The state of default and quality relates to the inherent paradox within the narrative structure, where the artist's creation is both an acknowledgment of imperfection (*défaut*) and an aspiration toward capturing an elusive ideal (quality). This paradox is embodied in the suspension of the woman between life and death, which moves the artist-narrator

[14] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 5.

[15] Naveed Noori's translation. D.P. Costello and Iraj Bashiri translate the term as "ethereal girl."

[16] It is customary for Iranians to leave the city and go picnicking in the countryside on the thirteenth day of Nowruz, as there is a belief that the number thirteen is a bad omen.

[17] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 6.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.23 Published online by Cambridge University Press

between creation and destruction. Deirdre Lashgari, in "Absurdity and Creation," claims that the narrator continuously oscillates between the state of creation and destruction:

> A part of him sought to reject a life doomed to such imperfection, to draw from the searing pain of consciousness without hope. Yet, it is also through this pain of consciousness that the creative act arises. This second force, the impulse to objectify the vision of Absurdity by transforming it into art, provided for Hedayat a somewhat precarious counterbalance to the impulse of negation.[18]

For the narrator, the tension between the despair of existence (negation, or *défult*) and the drive to create something meaningful out of that despair (creation, or quality) defines his experience. The creative act becomes a precarious counterbalance to the impulse of negation, representing a struggle against the forces of darkness and absurdity. The tension between these states highlights a central theme in *récit* – the engagement with creation despite its inherent *défult*.

The disappearance of the woman's eyes, the source of the narrator's inspiration, leaves him grappling with the void, as he attempts to recreate them from memory. This act of creation from darkness is a challenge to the negation and absence. As described by Lashgari: "creation, however tentative, constitutes a challenge to the forces of darkness."[19] The narrator describes the process of his creation out of that darkness, saying,

> I would now have to start thinking and imagine it (meaning that illusive part of her face that left an impression on me) in my brain, throw a glance at her, then close my eyes and place on paper the lines of her face that I chose so that, with my mind, I might find an opiate for my tortured soul—In the end I took refuge in the motionless world of lines and shapes.[20]

He conjures the motionless lines and shapes of the women's eyes in the form of both drawing and writing, with the hope of restoring the lost image. Simultaneously he understands that the images come from his flawed memory and are imbued with death, and that is the reason he refers to himself as "painter of the dead."[21] Seemingly, any act of "capturing" an image this way means deadening it and the life part of the eyes forever beyond capture through art.

The narrator's art evolves into a symbol of the living dead, as it encapsulates the paradox of existence and non-existence. Through his attempts to capture and immortalize the woman's eyes, the narrator's creations become a manifestation of his own struggle between life and death in his artistic quest. In one instance, the narrator encounters the woman's eyes again before he buries her. He captures the essence of her eyes on a piece of paper inside his room before he mutilates her body; he next puts her body in a suitcase and takes her to a cemetery with the help of a "hunched-over old man" carriage driver, whom the narrator found outside of his home sitting underneath a cypress tree. In the graveyard, as the carriage driver digs a hole the size of the suitcase, he finds "a jug, a Ragheh flower vase, from the ancient city of Ray."[22] A second appearance of the eyes occurs after the painter places

[18] Lashgari, "Absurdity and Creation in the Work of Sadeq Hedayat," 31.

[19] Ibid., 16.

[20] Lashgari, "Absurdity and Creation in the Work of Sadeq Hedayat," 16. The word "illusive" is used in the translation to emphasize the eyes being deceptive and illusory. Throughout the chapter, I also use the word elusive to underscore the difficulty of capturing a clear picture of the eyes.

[21] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 16.

[22] Ibid., 20.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.23 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the suitcase in the grave. Opening it for the last time, he sees two large black eyes staring at him without expression; his life is drowned in the depths of these eyes.[23] Even though he buries the woman's body, her eyes appear again on the flower vase of the ancient city of Ray that the carriage driver gives him on their way back.

Upon his return, the narrator notices an uncanny resemblance between the eyes on the vase and those he had drawn. The narrator muses:

> It was as if they were mirror images of each other–both were one and essentially the work of a single person, the work of a single hapless painter of pen case covers–maybe the soul of the jug's painter had transmigrated into me during the act of painting and my hand had come under his command. They could not be told apart, only mine was on paper, whilst the painting on the jug had a faded, pellucid glaze that had given the image a mystical soul, a strange, unnatural soul, and the spark of this mischievous soul shone from the depths of her eyes–No, it was not believable, those same large, heedless eyes, that same composed expression, yet unrestrained at the same time![24]

By creating the eternal circle of reappearance of the image of the woman's eyes, ancient and present times are juxtaposed and approximate one another through similarities. The narrator (as an artist) not only seeks to get close to the essence of the eyes through his art but also seeks immortality through the production of art. His act thrives on ambiguity and the tension between what can be depicted and what remains beyond the reach of representation. Moreover, the desire for immortality through art reflects the *récit*'s tension between creation and destruction, as the narrator attempts to transcend the temporal limits of life, aiming to preserve a moment or essence beyond death. The narrator even describes himself as an immortal painter and storyteller who can defy death through art, but can portray only a shadow image of reality at best. On the one hand, creating art can be seen as achieving a kind of immortality when one's art lives on for people in the far future. On the other hand, this kind of immortality drags with it a kind of death for the artist, because they remove themselves and their subjects from the actual living world. In both cases, the artist is caught between the two worlds of the living and the dead, and his art becomes the symbol of the living dead.

The cycle of existing between worlds is vividly represented through various images and symbols, notably the cypress tree, which stands as a powerful symbol of both life and death. This tree appears in the pen case painting and later in the graveyard, serving as a reminder of immortality and hope. In my reading of the text, the cypress tree painted on the pen cases functions as an overdetermined metaphor for a grave. Just as the cypress protects the dead body in the grave, the tree on the pen cases protects the pen, serving as a symbolic dead body that can come alive and write. Through this lens, the pen, likened to a dead body, can come alive through the act of writing, embodying the paradox of the living dead – a central motif in *récit* (the narrative).

Inhabiting the liminal

In *récit*, the in-between space is not merely a backdrop for the story – it is the story. This space is embedded within the narrative form itself, rather than being part of a broader narrative structure. The narrative exists within this liminal zone, where boundaries are perpetually destabilized. Unlike more conventional narrative, where in-between spaces often serve as ambiguous zones for characters to navigate complex identities, temporalities, or

[23] Ibid., 21.
[24] Ibid., 24.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.23 Published online by Cambridge University Press

realities, leading to some form of resolution, in *récit*, this in-between space is where the narrative itself resides. In *The Blind Owl*, the exploration of the liminal space between life and death occurs in a room where the narrator writes to his shadow on the wall, resembling a bent-over owl, who carefully reads his writing:

> It is for [my shadow] that I wish to carry out an experiment: to see if we can come to know each other better—because, from the time that I cut myself off from others, I have wanted to know myself better.[25]

The narrator writes to his shadow as if it were a distinct entity capable of reading and understanding his thoughts. Despite knowing that the secret cannot be revealed or may be mocked – as suggested by the frequent dry laugh of an old man in the text – he feels an "agitation" and "excitement" in his "compulsory duty" to write.

Writing typically allows the addressee (in this case, the shadow) to know the writer (the narrator), but here, writing becomes the narrator's way of introducing himself to his silent shadow in order to know both the shadow and himself. This quest – attempting to understand himself by communicating with his shadow – illustrates how Hedayat's narrative disrupts conventional understanding. The narrator promises to reveal the secret of something incomprehensible, stating, "In life there are wounds that, like leprosy, silently scrape at and consume the soul, in solitude. This agony cannot be revealed to anyone because they generally tend to group this incomprehensible suffering with strange and otherwise rare events."[26] For him, this suffering is distinct from "strange and otherwise rare events" and should be perceived as such. The remainder of the book is the narrator's attempt to reveal one of these events, which he claims is based on his own life-changing experience. He attempts to tell his story, yet repeatedly acknowledges the futility of his efforts. The act of writing, therefore, enacts its own failure to convey the ineffable. He poses the question, "Will there be a day when someone discovers the secrets of these supernatural events, that reflection of the shadow of the soul that manifests itself between awakening and sleep, in a state of purgatory and unconsciousness?"[27] The word "purgatory" in this translation deviates from the text's original use of *barzakh*. In Persian, *barzakh* refers to a state of waiting between two worlds, where souls await the day of judgment to learn whether they will experience pain or joy based on their previous lives. The narrator understands that the shadow of the soul manifests only in this state of *barzakh* and in-betweenness.

The narrator emphasizes the confinement and privacy of the room by stating: "The entire day my life used to and continues to pass between the four walls of my room–my entire life has passed between four walls."[28] According to Oktay Turan, the motif of "the confines of four walls" is used metaphorically to denote isolation, encompassing both physical and psychological realms.[29] The narrator's existence within the confines of his room encapsulates his entire situation, where other occurrences are scarcely perceivable beyond this phenomenon and without the possibility of their becoming real.[30] However, drawing on the Persian meaning of "four walls," I would extend Turan's concept of the room as a stifling and isolating space. In Persian, the phrase "four walls" echoes a sense of privacy more than isolation, where one enjoys complete authority and freedom, often synonymous with being "at home." Thus, while the space may be portrayed as isolating, it actually affords the narrator absolute freedom, allowing him to engage in a process of exploration to uncover

[25] Ibid., 4.
[26] Ibid., 3.
[27] Ibid., 3.
[28] Ibid., 4.
[29] Turan, "Spaces of Suicide," 193.
[30] Ibid., 193.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.23 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the secrets of the supernatural events he evokes and which remain mysteries to him. This privacy enables the narrator to write freely to himself, though he is aware that ultimately the privacy symbolized by the four walls will be breached by readers, reversing the text's intended promise.

The notion of "four walls" also evokes the concept of the fourth wall in theater, where actors behave as if they cannot see through the wall, thereby ignoring the audience and fully engaging in their dramatic world. Considering this theatrical convention, despite the narrator's assertion that "it absolutely does not matter to me if others believe it or not, my only fear is that I will die tomorrow and still not know myself," he remains conscious of the fourth wall.[31] We, the readers, are the audience of this theatrical event in which the narrator endeavors to "discover the secrets of these supernatural events, that reflection of the shadow of the soul" within the private confines of his room, yet in reality, this narrative opens to the public. Consequently, as the narrator oscillates between private introspection and public revelation through his writing, the fourth wall breaks. The narrator realizes that exposing the paradoxical nature of being in this in-between space is the only way to approach the subject – the shadow and the self. He oscillates between word and thing, living and dying, and thought and expression at temporal, thematic, and spatial levels. Although the narrative may have failed to provide definitive answers, it ultimately becomes a space of refuge, change, and transformation. It compels both the reader and the author to embody the unknowing and embrace this fluid state, recognizing that revealing this difficulty is the only path to a potential understanding of the subject. Furthermore, the text transcends mere empathy with its context to involve the reader in the struggle of articulating the experience itself.

In a larger scope, this pattern reflects the narrator's model of the world and his social, political, and historical relations within it. Jason Mohaghegh, in his book *Silence in Middle Eastern and Western Thoughts*, explains how subversive the literary space that Hedayat creates has been perceived, as a result of which the text "has been systematically forbidden by one regime-type after another since its publication in the middle of the twentieth century."[32] Though the political landscape has changed since *The Blind Owl* was published, it has faced censorship at different moments since its publication.[33] Hedayat released fifty copies of the mimeographed, handwritten manuscript in 1936 while studying in Bombay. Because his works were banned in Iran during the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi, he wrote on the first page: "Printing and sale in Iran are forbidden."[34] The restriction was lifted after Reza Shah's abdication and his replacement by his son, Mohammad Reza Shah. However, the novel faced censorship again after the 1979 revolution, leading to the appearance of bowdlerized versions. It is worth noting that with a serial version published in Iran in the 1940s, and other unofficial copies constantly available on the black market and more or less sold openly, the book has been read widely in Iran.

The enduring censorship under various regimes highlights the broad range of subjects the book covers and the diverse interpretations it has received. Wanberg states, "*The Blind Owl* creates an aesthetic disjuncture that unsettles its readers' perception of reality and shatters the historical and critical mechanisms they rely upon."[35] This unsettling

[31] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 4.

[32] Mohaghegh, *Silence in Middle Eastern and Western Thought*, 37.

[33] Ibid., 37. This "masterpiece of world literature," as Michael Beard calls it, was originally written in Persian in 1936. It was then translated into French by Roger Lescot in 1953 under the title *La chouette aveugle*, and into English by D. P. Costello under the title *The Blind Owl* four years later; eventually, it was translated into more than fifteen languages.

[34] "Apart from the 1940-1 in the *Music Magazine*, Hedayat ceased to publish any of his works after 1934. This included *The Blind Owl*, a number of short stories which were later published in the collection Sag-e Velgard, and his translation of the Pahlavi texts" (Katouzian, *The Life and Legend of an Iranian Writer*, 88).

[35] Wanberg, "Disorientation and Horror in Sadeq Hedayat's *The Blind Owl*," 96.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.23 Published online by Cambridge University Press

effect is amplified by the novel's depiction of grotesque, sick, and diseased characters and their actions. These disturbing elements serve as a powerful critique of the society that produces such individuals. The aesthetic disjuncture Wanberg describes disrupts the reader's ability to rely on conventional frameworks for understanding reality, forcing them to confront the darker, more disturbing aspects of human nature and societal flaws. By portraying these grotesque elements, Hedayat not only unsettles readers but also compels them to reflect on the underlying conditions and values of society that lead to such a conundrum. This approach creates a dual impact: it shatters the reader's preconceived notions and critical mechanisms while simultaneously holding up a mirror to the societal issues that give rise to the grotesque and diseased. The destructive power of the text, therefore, lies in its ability to both disturb and provoke critical reflection on the society it depicts, making the readers aware of the deep-seated problems that may otherwise remain unexamined.

This feature is precisely the reason why Iranian regimes have had their own reason for banning the book, as they perceive Hedayat's text as socially destabilizing. Hedayat's suicide in 1951 in Paris was one of the reasons that both the Pahlavi monarchy and the Islamic Republic perceived the book as potentially dangerous for the reader.

"Resonances of uncertainty"

Hedayat's narrative appears to aim at providing a coherent depiction of reality and societal critique, but in doing so, it actually destabilizes and deconstructs the mechanisms readers use to understand and interpret such depictions. Thus, the grotesque and diseased elements in the novel, while serving as a mirror to societal issues, also performatively displace the reader's expectations and perceptions. This narrative technique deepens the impact of the critique by not only presenting societal flaws but also making the reader grapple with the instability and fragmentation these flaws cause. In this way, Wanberg's observation about the unsettling aesthetic disjuncture complements Syrotinski's concept of performative displacement, illustrating how Hedayat's narrative enacts and embodies the contradictions it seeks to explore.[36] The text focuses on its own inability to fully explain the displacement it performs. By structuring itself this way, the text is not merely discussing displacement or reversal, it is performing it. The reader experiences the reversal and resulting confusion, mirroring the themes of displacement and reversal within the narrative.

Hedayat replicates this structure thematically and structurally by producing a non-referential, temporal type of language. He continuously suspends points of reference through the suspension of deixis – whether personal, spatial, or temporal – where the semantic meaning is fixed but the denotational meaning varies depending on time, place, or person. For instance, when the narrator refers to the old man, the similarity of the male characters leaves the reader uncertain about which character is being referred to: his father, his uncle, the old odds-and-ends man, the butcher, the Quarn reader, or his reflection in the mirror. It could be any or all of these. The use of "indexical expressions," also known as "shifters" (Roman Jakobson) or "indicators" (Émile Benveniste), draws readers into a state of disquietude and claustrophobia, where ambiguity is fundamental and the ground always seems uncertain.[37] Deictic expressions, relying on context, bring fluidity to the text and invite readers to participate in meaning-making. Moreover, since each deixis implies multiple possible connotations, it allows for the proliferation of meanings, transforming and extending the narration by opening a space for wandering within the

[36] Wanberg, "Disorientation and Horror in Sadeq Hedayat's *The Blind Owl*."

[37] Jakobson, *Shifters, Verbal Categories, and the Russian Verb*; Wanberg, "Disorientation and Horror in Sadeq Hedayat's *The Blind Owl*," 101.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.23 Published online by Cambridge University Press

system of logocentrism and etymology. I will explore examples of temporal, spatial, and personal deixis from the text to show how this non-referential language creates a narrative movement that forms an echo chamber where various voices blend and blur into one another.

Temporal deixis: the a-temporality of récit

The structure of the book echoes uncertainty and confusion, as there is no clear indication of chronological time, the characters, and places. As Lasghari comments on the lack of lucidity:

> Outlines are blurred, as in a fog. The characters grope about in a half-light which seems to reveal things that are not there and distorts the things that are … In this suffocating fog, all roads seem to lead equally to death, or, what is worse, a living death.[38]

This fogginess infects readers' minds and places them in states similar to the narrator; in a dream-like state when one is neither asleep nor awake, in the artistic *barzakh* between death and resurrection. Interestingly, the dream-like state between sleep and awake is one of the most creative states for a person, while in the religious *barzakh* of purgatory, conversely, it seems that one is past the ability to create or recreate the self – one must wait to find out their destiny based on what they already did. However, the *barzakh* of art opens up space for transformation in the ephemeral presence of the text. Blanchot uses the analogy of dream to explain this *barzakh* of transformation in *récit*. In the "Ease of Dying," he notes that the discrete movement of narrating is similar to the feeling of revelation in a dream:

> Where everything is manifest except for the lack which makes the dream possible, ensures it, functions within it, and, as soon as one claims to discover it, dissipates it in shifting reflections. If everything is a *récit*, then everything would also be a dream in Jean Paulhan's writing, until one is awoken by darkness, in the same way that writing is like a dream so precise, so prompt in revealing itself, in solving the enigma, that it never stops reinscribing the enigma into the dream and, consequently, revealing itself as enigmatic.[39]

The enigma of the dream reinscribes itself repeatedly to the extent that it not only reveals the dream as an enigma but also continually restages it in an endless cycle. Questioning any certainty and authority within this framework carries an aura of uneasiness, hesitation, and anxiety. In Hedayat's narrative, every event remains an enigma, and the narrative does not aim to resolve these mysteries, but rather continuously reinterprets and replays them. This perspective echoes Ann Smock's understanding of *récit*, as she suggests that "*Récit* … is a name for a language that you can't really allow yourself to understand accurately if you want to avoid a terrible mistake. Or, at least *récits* are literary forms wherein this worrisome paradox practically shows."[40] Essentially, she argues that the language of *récit* resists clear understanding, warning that fully grasping it might lead to a "terrible mistake." Her view underscores how *The Blind Owl* deliberately maintains an ambiguous, dream-like state, refusing to resolve its mysteries. The narrative is designed to keep the reader in a state of uncertainty, where attempts at definitive interpretation are continuously thwarted. This dream-like ambiguity permeates *The Blind Owl*, immersing both narrator and reader in

[38] Lashgari, "Absurdity and Creation in the Work of Sadeq Hedayat," 33.
[39] Blanchot, *Friendship*, 7.
[40] Smock, *What Is There to Say?*, 133.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.23 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a realm where understanding is elusive and revelation and enigma coexist in perpetual flux.

The narrator's obsession with killing his wife in the second section, whom he refers to as "the whore," serves as a critical point of disjunction, raising questions about the relationship between the two sections of the narrative. He swears not to reveal her real name to the reader, even if he, at some point, tells the reader that he calls her by her real name. Though the real intention of his obsession is not clear, he informs the reader that "the whore" manufactured a scene on her mother's deathbed in which he is caught returning her kiss and is therefore forced to marry her to protect her honor. Different temporal indices, characters, settings, spaces, and the similarities they have with one another lead to significant speculation about whether the two sections of the book, characters, and settings are connected. For instance, it is not clear that the pen case artist/narrator of the first section is the same as the misogynist-murderer narrator in the second, even though some researchers try to make temporal and textual connections. For instance, Michael Cisco states:

> The "second" narrator could be considered to be the first narrator in a former life, as this would seem to describe a reversion through childhood back to the moment of prenatal mystery, and then yet further back. Neither narrator's reality can be affirmed as the actual as opposed to dream.[41]

His reading accentuates the idea that the former life always bleeds into the present and future. Moreover, though the text never makes a direct connection between the anonymous woman in the first section – referred to as the "ethereal damsel," the "damsel," the "celestial angel," and the "tortured angel" – and "the whore" in the second section, there are hints that both women might be the same: the woman has big black eyes and wears a black dress.[42] One of the common readings of this conflation is that the buried ethereal woman in the first section decomposes into "the whore" in the second section, after her experience of death and revelation. This brings a complex interconnection between the past and present, allowing for the examination of any relation. In his description in the second section when looking at "the whore," even the narrator casts doubt on whether they are the same, asking in amazement: "Was this the same graceful creature, was this the slim, ethereal damsel who, in a black pleated dress, had played hide-and-seek with me on the banks of the Suran?"[43] Was it the author's intention to make the reader see her as the same person, even if she is not? What if the answer to the former question is "no," and these two women are not the same, and the two sections of the book are not retelling the same story?

Previous studies – such as those by Lashgari and Yavari – underline these connections in their readings. Yavari sees the two sections of the book as mirror images of one another, as the "'twos' [two parts, two women, two flies, etc.] in *The Blind Owl* only speak of similarity and sameness."[44] Yavari discerns that the book's two sections are retelling the same stories: the first section is Iran's glamorous past and the second section is its present. Others, such as Kamshad, Bashiri, and Wanberg, see a lack of cohesion between the two sections, with Wanberg stating:

> The doubles in the text are basically irreconcilable. For example, the two narrators are not the same, but remain equivocal reflections of each other, just as both are reflected

[41] Cisco, "Eternal Recurrence in 'The Blind Owl,'" 472.
[42] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 51.
[43] Ibid., 54.
[44] Yavari, "The Blind Owl," 51.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.23 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> in the reclusive writer, who is, in turn, reflected in his shadow, and the owl into which his shadow transforms.[45]

Clearly, the answer is far from obvious, and my intention is not to find textual evidence to prove one over the another. Refusing to do so is this paper's intent, just as the story deliberately refuses to be pinned down to one meaning or time. Rather, the sections are less about retelling the same story than about recalling the narrator's experience of trying to understand something incomprehensible through different art forms. Yet, regardless of the narrator utilizing numerous approaches, he ultimately fails to achieve his intent and the medium to help him get closer to the essence of what he desires to know. His attempt highlights the dissatisfaction and chasm he never can close.

This perpetual failure and dissatisfaction emphasize the narrative's focus on maintaining enigma and ambiguity rather than seeking resolution. The a-temporality of *The Blind Owl* – its refusal to adhere to a clear chronological structure – mirrors this narrative structure, emphasizing the narrator's inability to grasp the elusive truth he seeks. In this way, the novel embodies the central theme of *récit:* the pursuit of understanding within a framework that inherently resists closure.

Spatial deixis: living death in transformative spaces

Spatial deixis refers to the linguistic and narrative markers that indicate the location or positioning of objects, people, or places in relation to the speaker or observer. In the context of *récit*, spatial deixis plays a crucial role in creating a fluid and ambiguous narrative space, where boundaries between the physical and emotional, the real and imagined, often dissolve and create a dynamic space of uncertainty and transformation within the narrative itself. The aesthetic nature of the spaces in *The Blind Owl* is profoundly tied to their role in shaping and reflecting the narrator's inner turmoil and artistic struggle. Different spaces, such as the room, the closet, and the pen cases, are initially presented as distinct and bounded from other objects and environments. However, these spatial distinctions and boundaries dissolve in relation to the external world, creating a disorienting effect. This shifting spatiality is not confined to physical dimensions alone but extends to emotional states and existential conditions arising from or giving way to these spaces. The spaces in the narrative thus serve as more than mere settings; they become dynamic environments with one thing in common. They contain something that is neither completely dead nor alive, a "living death," a concept that underpins the aesthetic transformation and contributes to the narrator's artistic inspiration. The metaphor of the grave recurs in various spaces, such as the house, the room, the closet, and the pen case; however, rather than simply symbolizing death, these spaces harbor a "living death." For instance, the unusual position of the house in the first section of the book evokes the image of a grave; the borders of the house, like the borders of a grave, are sharply defined, with the city beginning only on the other side of a ditch:

> As luck would have it, my house is located outside the city, in a quiet and peaceful place, far from the commotion and clamor of people's lives—its borders are completely distinct and it is surrounded by ruins. Only from the other side of the ditch do the dilapidated mud houses appear and the city begin—I do not know what tasteless or mad man from time immemorial built this house; when I close my eyes I not only see

[45] Wanberg, "Disorientation and Horror in Sadeq Hedayat's *The Blind Owl*," 106. Also see Kamshad, *Modern Persian Prose Literature*.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.23 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> all of its nooks and crannies, but I also feel their entire weight upon my shoulders—a house that could only have been painted on ancient pen cases.[46]

Although the house, situated outside the city and surrounded by ruins, might conjure images of ancient Iranian cities full of mud-brick houses, it also evokes any ruined city devoid of specific historical traces. Yet, the city, as described, seems to exist solely on ancient pen cases. The narrator, as the painter of these pen cases, feels the weight of the house as a burden upon his shoulders, symbolizing the circularity of space, time, and existence. The house, located amid ruins, paradoxically offers living space for the narrator, his art, and the ethereal woman, suggesting that "the tasteless or mad man from time immemorial" who built the house may indeed be the narrator himself.

The grave-like house contains a room where the damsel, whose elusive eyes inspire the narrator, resides. This room becomes a metaphorical grave when the woman visits the narrator, lies on his bed, and dies. Her "living-dead" eyes inspire the artist to manifest his art in both painting and writing. In the dark closet of this room, the narrator discovers an old flask of wine while searching for something to offer an old man who introduces himself as his uncle:

> Suddenly my gaze turned to the top shelf—perhaps it was a revelation. I saw that a flask of old wine that I had inherited—maybe they made this wine for the commemoration of my birth—was on the top shelf. Never had I entertained such a notion; I had completely forgotten that there was such a thing in the house.[47]

The wine, like the elusive eyes of the woman, symbolizes transformation, changing from fresh grapes into something extraordinary. The wine, however, is poisoned. Even though it provides a temporary cure for what the narrator calls the "disease" of existence, "after a while only adds to the intensity of the pain."[48] Additionally, his dark closet has a temporary window that opens to the scene of the painting on the pen cases that forever changes his life. The pen case, an overdetermined metaphor for the grave, contains a pen that has the potential to come to life and create something. These elements suggest that the "living deaths" within these spaces become mediums of transformation and sources of aesthetic inspiration for the narrator, connecting him to a different world. However, these sources of creative inspiration are temporary and can vanish at any moment, leaving the artist without a point of reference. Thus, even when the narrator comes close to a moment of realization, that window can close at any time, rendering the process of creating art an unfinished and ongoing oscillation between creation and destruction, between living and dying.

The inclusion of Hedayat's drawings at the beginning and end of the book further underscores the narrative's embrace of incompleteness and ambiguity. These drawings, much like the spaces described in the text, are emblematic of an unfinished artistic endeavor that refuses to offer closure or definitive meaning. On the first page of the book, Hedayat included his own drawing of a flowerpot with a figure of a woman on it (Figure 1).[49] The flower pot is not complete, as if the body of the woman becomes a part of the vase. Similarly, the vase is not complete at the top and bottom, which shows the incompleteness of the painting and writing. The woman on the flowerpot has big, sick-looking eyes with black circles around them, harkening the image of the owl. The woman's fragmented form, blending into the incomplete vase, captures the narrator's essence of inspiration and, yet, also

[46] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 5.
[47] Ibid., 6.
[48] Ibid., 3.
[49] Ibid., 3.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.23 Published online by Cambridge University Press

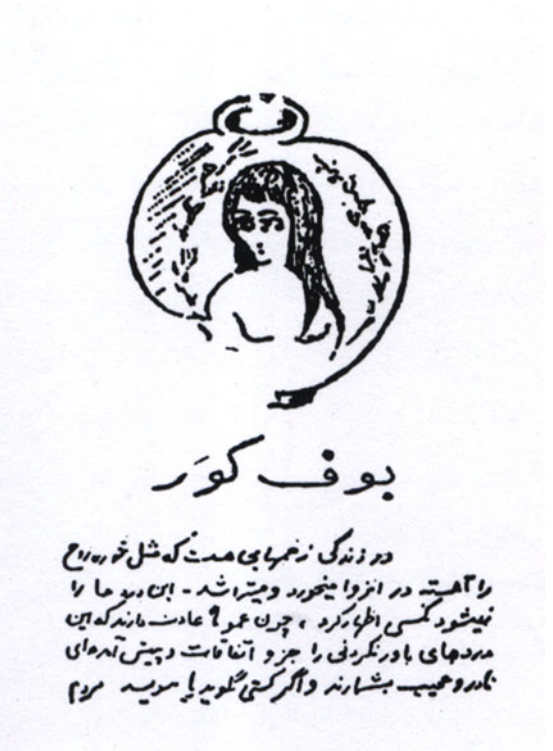


Figure 1. Hedayat starts his book with the drawing of a figure of a woman on a flowerpot.

becomes a site of tension between creation and failure, and the narrator's ongoing oscillation between artistic expression and its inherent limitations. The temporal structure of the owl (Figure 2), drawn in a single stroke with no clear beginning or end, reflects the nonlinear progression of the narrative itself, reinforcing the *récit*'s rejection of conventional storytelling.[50] The owl's incomplete form, much like the spaces in the narrative, serves as a reminder that the act of creation is always in flux, never fully realized or contained, an ongoing process that defies finality. The conjunction of failure and success in both the drawings and narrative highlights the *récit*'s focus on the performative nature of storytelling, where the attempt to convey meaning is as important as the meaning itself, even if elusive. Hedayat's use of spatial deixis emphasizes fluidity, ambiguity, and transformation, symbolized by the element of "living death" in all the spaces. The narrator seeks refuge not only within the four walls of his house – walls that break and re-form – but also in the motionless world of lines and shapes in his drawing and writing. These spaces do not remain static; they come to life, create motion and meaning, and then return to a state of death, initiating the cycle anew. These dynamic and liminal spaces foster a continuous interplay between the material and ethereal, mirroring the narrator's internal struggle and the text's refusal to offer finality or resolution.

Personal deixis: metamorphosis and anonymity in the narrative

Personal deixis are concerned with the way personal references are established and understood in a narrative context. In *récit*, personal deixis are fluid, as the text often subverts traditional identity markers and blurs personal distinctions. *The Blind Owl*'s approach to personal deixis intensifies its sense of mystery by withholding names and distinct personal

[50] Ibid., 124.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.23 Published online by Cambridge University Press

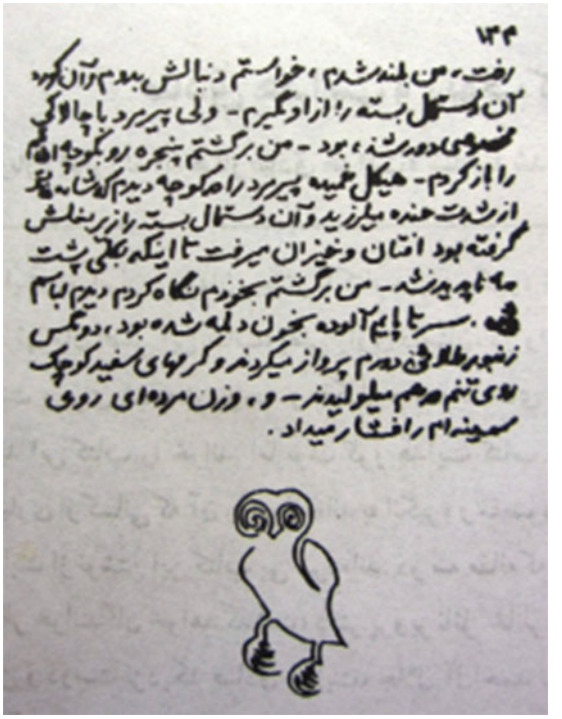


Figure 2. The book ends with a single-stroke drawing of an owl by Hedayat.

histories from its characters, creating an atmosphere of anonymity. Besides the narrator, the characters in the text are refused names or distinct personal histories, echoing one another but still remaining separate. Houra Yavari elaborates on this feature: "Rather than being identified by name, *Buf-e-kur*'s characters are described by an adjective or an attribute that both defines and obscures their individuality at the same time."[51] Nanny (Nane-joon) is the closest the narrator comes to naming a character. Yet, she remains obscure, as the narrator reveals his convoluted filial relationship with her. Nane-joon, who appears in the second section of the book, is the only one who cared for the narrator in childhood in the permanent absence of his biological mother, who was a Lingam temple dancer. Nane-joon's caregiving continues into his adulthood, as he suffers from a disease (which is never known to the reader). Nane-joon breastfeeds the narrator and her own daughter (who later becomes the narrator's wife) at the same time, decentralizing the notion of motherhood as a physical attachment. If we assume that the narrator sets the story in an Islamic context, breastfeeding by a non-biological mother establishes a milk kinship and a familial relationship, such that a man may not marry his milk-mother or his milk-sister. The ambiguous relationships between the characters create an impersonal language that, on one hand, establishes uncertainty and mystery and, on the other, creates a sense of security and protection, where the narrator neither reveals nor fully understands his identity as a distinct and autonomous being.

The non-referential, impersonal language allows the narrator to bring a certain specificity to events and characters, only to obscure them by avoiding making them too specific, thus reversing upon itself. Paulhan comments on this reversal, which occurs in various forms in *récit*, suggesting that it might prepare us to acknowledge more profound metamorphoses – those that "cannot even be spoken."[52] Paulhan's observations about

[51] Yavari, "The Blind Owl," 51.
[52] Paulhan, "Introduction," 320.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.23 Published online by Cambridge University Press

reversal and metamorphosis in *récit* suggest a deeper process at work in the narrative; one in which the text continuously shifts back and forth between revealing and obscuring as it prepares the reader for more profound transformations within the story. He believes this oscillation leads to the "transformation of a failing into a quality."[53] This idea points to how *récit* turns what might initially seem like narrative shortcomings – such as ambiguity, diversion, or disjunctions – into strengths. Instead of these elements detracting from the story, they become essential to its structure and impact, enriching the narrative by engaging the reader in a deeper, more complex experience. This transformation highlights how *récit* can take traditional narrative limitations and convert them into opportunities for a richer exploration of the limits of expression.

The narrative's employment of indexicality extends beyond mere descriptions or the blurring of familial ties; it also manifests through the transformation of characters into one another. The most striking instance of this metamorphosis occurs with the ambiguous figure of the old man. Throughout the story, nearly all male characters, except for the brother-in-law, morph into or resemble the hunched-over odds-and-ends man at different points. This transformation is most evident in the various incarnations of the old man, who appears as a painting, a vision through the closet window, and figures such as the uncle, the hearse driver, the peddler, the butcher, the Quran reader, and, ultimately, the narrator himself.

The narrator's horrific realization comes when, after evidently murdering his wife with a knife given to him by Nane-joon, he sees his reflection in the mirror as the old odds-and-ends man. This metamorphosis is marked by a hollow laugh as the old man flees with a painted vase featuring the image of a woman. As the narrator sits in "this room that, like a grave, was getting darker and smaller by the moment," he comes to a chilling understanding:

> My shadow was cast on the wall with much more intensity and accuracy than my real body, my shadow had become more real than my being.–Perhaps the old peddler, the butcher, Nane-joon and that whore of a wife were all shadows of mine, shadows in the midst of which I was imprisoned. All this time I had become akin to an owl, but my wailing had become stuck in my throat and I spat them out in the form of blood clots, perhaps owls also have a disease whereby they think like me–My shadow on the wall had become just like an owl and, bent over, he carefully read my writings, surely he understood well, only he could understand. When I looked at my shadow from the corner of my eye, I would become scared.[54]

The narrator's realization that his shadow has become more real than his physical self reflects a profound suspension of personal deixis. The shadow, representing a part of his identity, becomes detached from the self and assumes a life of its own, further complicating the already blurred distinctions between the characters. This suspension of personal deixis, where identities and roles are interchangeable, underscores the narrative's eerie atmosphere and aligns with Paulhan's idea of the transformation of a failing into a quality. The seeming flaws – the lack of clear, stable identities – become the very qualities that give the narrative its depth, transforming it into an exploration of the complexities of existence. Having distinct identities that anchor the story provides a sense of security and order. In *The Blind Owl*, however, this clarity is intentionally undermined as the characters morph into one another, overlap, and blur, creating a disorienting effect that challenges the

[53] Ibid., 20; Yavari, "The Blind Owl."
[54] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 75.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.23 Published online by Cambridge University Press

reader's expectations. By refusing to fix characters in a single, unchanging role, the narrative reflects the instability of identity itself and the narrator's pervasive uncertainty that defines his experience of the world.

The slippage of characters into one another, the way boundaries between characters, images, and scenes constantly dissolve, and the repetition of elements with slight variations all contribute to the text's uncanny atmosphere and evoke a sense of déjà vu. For instance, the recurring images on the pen case, the old man with his "grating laugh that made the hairs on one's body stand on end," and the description of the wine as "the wine that I had inherited from my father" are repeated throughout the narrative, each time with subtle alterations.[55] These slight changes create a reverberation that confuses the reader, adding to the mystery and uncanniness of the text. Sina Mansouri-Zeyni, in "Haunting Language-Game: Baudrillardian Metamorphoses in Sadeq Hedayat's *The Blind Owl*," examines these slight changes in the old man's description, suggesting that they contribute to his transformation into a simulacrum.[56] As characters gradually acquire the old man's characteristics, they become part of a disorienting familial network. As the repeated descriptions accumulate, the reader encounters familiar sentences and images that reappear in different contexts with minor changes, contributing to the novel's unsettling effect. This repetition creates a sense that the reader, like the narrator, is succumbing to a contagious "disease" within the text and "one is getting exposed to it in the process of reading."[57] The reader slowly enters a state of reverie, unable to distinguish between original images and their altered versions. This disorienting effect draws the reader into the same state of mental turmoil experienced by the narrator, echoing the opening lines of the novel: "In life there are wounds that, like leprosy, silently scrape at and consume the soul, in solitude... because man has still found no cure for this."[58] The narrator suggests that temporary relief can be found in wine or the artificial sleep induced by opium, yet these only deepen the pain when their effects wear off. Similarly, the novel's content and structure create a sensation akin to being under the influence of opium, plunging the reader into a liminal, dream-like state of artistic *barzakh.*

In the process of artistic creation, the artist must dare to face the silence and darkness of death, transforming these voids into art. This transformation occurs in the space of in-betweenness, or *barzakh*, as the narrator digs into his memory, seeking the source of his creation in the depths of death. The theme of silence, particularly in literature, has been extensively discussed in relation to poetry, notably by Mallarmé. Blanchot extends this idea to *récit*, showing that *récit* can achieve a narrative equivalent to poetry's method of emptying words of their referentiality, engaging not only with words but also with syntax. Through this process, *récit*s create impersonal language that participates in the experience it seeks to understand. Blanchot, in his essay "The Myth of Mallarmé," states: "the word has meaning only if it rids us of the object it names; it must spare us its presence or concrete reminder."[59] He further argues that language does not merely talk in the absence of things, as if words tried to represent absent objects. Instead, the word itself manages to eliminate the object and talk in its absence. In this framework, words do not attempt to express objects but rather their absence, much like in poetry, where words become material emblems of silence, replacing the object with what Mallarmé calls "disparition vibratoire."[60]

[55] Ibid., 8, 12, 15–16, 28.

[56] Mansouri-Zeyni, "Haunting Language-Game." According to Baudrillard, the simulacrum copies either had no original or no longer had an original, as a simulacrum signifies something it is not, and therefore leaves the original unable to be located. In other words, a simulacrum is something that does away with a point of reference, an image with no originality.

[57] Wanberg, "Disorientation and Horror in Sadeq Hedayat's *The Blind Owl*," 105.

[58] Hedayat, *The Blind Owl*, 3.

[59] Blanchot, "The Myth of Mallarmé," 30.

[60] Mallarmé, *Divagations*, 16.

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.23 Published online by Cambridge University Press

This term refers to the idea that when a word is spoken or written, the object it refers to disappears, leaving behind only the vibration or resonance of the word itself. This "vibratory disappearance" emphasizes the emptiness of language: words no longer represent tangible objects but instead evoke their absence. The focus shifts from the object to the word's own materiality and ability to suggest meaning through absence. The purpose of poetry, then, is not to kill the object to which the word supposedly refers but to bring forth the emptiness of the word itself. Once a word is spoken, the object is lost, an idea that Blanchot revisits in *récit*s, extending a concept once reserved for poetry to the broader narrative form. *The Blind Owl*'s narrative structure, by blurring temporal, spatial, and personal boundaries, transforms narrative elements into a form that emphasizes the absence rather than presence of meaning. By making absence and uncertainty central to the artistic experience, the text creates a dream-like, almost hallucinatory experience that echoes the emptiness and resonance of poetry.

In addition to the book's title, the passage mentioned above (page 75 of the book) is the only instance in which the narrator directly compares his shadow to an owl. The symbol of the owl navigates binaries of creativity/destruction and sight/blindness across various cultures. In Iranian culture, the bird carries various connotations, ranging from a symbol of mystery and intelligence to a harbinger of death. There are two words for "owl" in Persian: *buf* and *joghd. Buf*, the older term, is used throughout the novel, referring to a species of owl that is larger and has a more piercing call. This bird, with its acute vision, is traditionally seen as a bird of prey. However, the *buf* in Hedayat's novel is blind (*kur* in Persian) and has lost its voice – a sound that is otherwise easy to imitate. The mystery and eeriness of the title, *Buf-e-Kur*, link the *buf* to the narrator, who remains silent for much of his life. When he finally chooses to tell his story, he creates an *enigma* that reflects his limitations in perceiving and articulating his experience. The blind and voiceless owl, serving as the narrator's emblem, epitomizes this concept: an entity defined not by what it sees or says but by what it cannot see or say. This choice underscores the idea that true wisdom or understanding may not come from clear vision or eloquent speech but from grappling with the unknown and unspeakable. This quality compels the reader to engage more deeply with the text, to question what is hidden or obscured, and to find meaning in what is left incomplete.

The "whore" dies, apparently murdered, yet the narrative offers no definitive evidence to confirm this. Whether her death is indeed a murder remains open to interpretation, but what truly matters is that the narrator flees with her eyes in his hand – eyes that embody a "living death," ever on the verge of returning to life. The narrator's struggle to reveal the supernatural event mirrors his effort to preserve the delicate space between life and death, acknowledging that any art he creates is itself a form of living death. This tension is reflected in the narrative structure, which captures the chasm between the artist and the vision or message he wishes to convey. The narrator's failed attempts to grasp the supernatural, articulate his vision, and capture the essence of his inspiration underscore the inherent struggle in the creative process. The eyes he holds – symbols of a living death – represent the impossibility of fully capturing life in art, acknowledging that every artistic creation is both an act of bringing to life and a form of entombment. The blindness and voicelessness of the owl, initially perceived as flaws, become crucial to understanding this chasm. Just as the owl's incapacities deepen the exploration of existential voids, so too does the narrative's refusal to offer clear answers or fixed identities. The narrative thrives in ambiguity, and the perpetual tension between creation and destruction, sight and blindness, voice and silence. In this way, the reader is not merely a passive observer but a participant in the narrative's unfinished art, caught in the tension between worlds: past and present, wakefulness and dreaming, criminality and art, and shadow and writing. The reader's "object of fascination" becomes the pursuit of meaning within the text, yet, like the narrator's elusive quest, this meaning continually slips out of reach. As readers delve deeper, they may feel on the verge of understanding, only to realize that the meaning they

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.23 Published online by Cambridge University Press

seek cannot be fully captured. The text's elusiveness forces them into a perpetual cycle of interpretation, where each attempt to grasp the meaning leads back to uncertainty, forcing them to start anew.

Bibliography

Azadibougar, O. *The Persian Novel: ideology, Fiction and Form in the Periphery*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014.

Beard, M. "Review of *Hedayat's Ivory Tower: structural Analysis of the Blind Owl*, by Iraj Bashiri." *Iranian Studies* 9, no. 1 (1976): 80–84.

Beard, M. "The Hierarchy of the Arts in *Buf-E Kur*." *Iranian Studies* 15, no. 1/4 (1982): 53–67.

Beard, M. *Hedayat's Blind Owl as a Western Novel*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400861323.

Benveniste, E. "Subjectivity in Language." *Problems in General Linguistics* 1 (1971): 223–230.

Blanchot, M. *The Gaze of Orpheus, and Other Literary Essays*. Edited by Sitney, P Adams. Translated by Davis, Lydia. Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1981.

Blanchot, M. *The Infinite Conversation*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

Blanchot, M. *Friendship*. Translated by Elizabeth Rottenberg. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997.

Blanchot, M. "Encountering the Imaginary." In *The Book to Come*, 2003, 3–10. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Blanchot, M. "Literature and the Right to Death." In *The Work of Fire*. edited by Werner Hamacher and David E. Wellbery, translated by Charlotte Mandell, 300–346. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022.

Blanchot, M. "The Myth of Mallarmé." In *The Work of Fire* edited by Werner Hamacher and David E. Wellbery, translated by Charlotte, Mandell, 27–42. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022.

Carter, B., "Hedayat's Psychoanalysis of a Nation." In *Hedāyat's "The Blind Owl"* Forty Years After edited by Michael C. Hillmann, 153–167. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1978.

Cisco, M. "Eternal Recurrence in 'The Blind Owl.'" *Iranian Studies* 43, no. 4 (2010): 471–488.

Hedayat, S. *The Blind Owl*. Translated by Naveed Noori. 75th anniversary ed. Iran Open Publishing Group, 2012.

Jakobson, R. *Shifters, Verbal Categories, and the Russian Verb*. Cambridge, MA: Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, Harvard University, 1957.

Johnson, J.S. "The Blind Owl, Nerval, Kafka, Poe and the Surrealists: affinities." In *Hedāyat's "The Blind Owl" Forty Years*, edited by Michael C. Hillmann *After*, 125–141. Austin, TX: University of Texas press, 1978.

Just, D. "The Politics of the Novel and Maurice Blanchot's Theory of the Recit, 1954–1964." *French Forum* 33 (2008): 121–139.

Kamshad, H. *Modern Persian Prose Literature*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1966.

Katouzian, H., ed. *Sadeq Hedayat: his Work and His Wondrous World*. London, UK: Routledge, 2007.

Katouzian, H. *Sadeq Hedayat: the Life and Legend of an Iranian Writer*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2022.

Lashgari, D. "Absurdity and Creation in the Work of Sadeq Hedayat." *Iranian Studies* 15, no. 1 (1982): 31–52.

Mallarmé, S. *Divagations*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2009.

Mansouri-Zeyni, S. "Haunting Language-Game: Baudrillardian Metamorphoses in Sadeq Hedayat's 'The Blind Owl.'" *Iranian Studies* 46, no. 4 (2013): 553–568.

Meghdadi, B., and L. Hamalian. "Oedipus and the Owl." In *Hedāyat's "The Blind Owl" Forty Years After*, edited by Michael C. Hillmann, 142–151. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1978.

Mohaghegh, J. *Silence in Middle Eastern and Western Thought: the Radical Unspoken*. London: Routledge, 2013.

Mohandessi, M. "Hedayat and Rilke." *Comparative Literature* 23, no. 3 (1971): 209–216. https://doi.org/10.2307/1769316.

Rahimieh, N. "A Systemic Approach to Modern Persian Prose Fiction." *World Literature Today* 63, no. 1 (1989): 15–19. https://doi.org/10.2307/40145040.

Smock, A. *What Is There to Say?* Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2003.

Syrotinski, Michael. "Introduction." In *Progress in Love on the Slow Side*, by Jean Paulhan, trans. Christine Moneera Laennec and Michael Syrotinski, vii–xxii. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1994.

Turan, O. "Spaces of Suicide: architectural Metaphors and Leitmotifs in Sadeq Hedayat's *Blind Owl*." *The Journal of Architecture* 12, no. 2 (April 2007): 193–198. https://doi.org/10.1080/13602360701363536.

Wanberg, Kyle. "Disorientation and Horror in Sadeq Hedayat's The Blind Owl." In *Maps of Empire: A Topography of World Literature*, 94–124. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2020.

Yavari, H. "The Blind Owl: present in the Past or the Story of a Dream." In *Sadeq Hedayat: His Work and His Wondrous World*, edited by Homa, Katouzian, 56–70. London, UK: Routledge, 2007.

Cite this article: Kameli, M. "*Récit*: Narrative Movement in Sadeq Hedayat's *Buf-e- Kur* (*The Blind Owl*)." *Iranian Studies* 58, no. 4 (October 2025): 928–947. https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.23

https://doi.org/10.1017/irn.2025.23 Published online by Cambridge University Press