



# *The Beloved:* Introducing Hafez in English



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## Who is Hafez?

Born in Shiraz, Province of Fars, Iran, circa 1321, *Shams-Oddin Mohammad* (writing under the nom de plume, Hafez, and known as *Khajeh Hafez Shirazi*), is one of the most internationally revered and popularized Iranian classical poets. *Hafez'* collection of poems, *Divan*, is the second most published book in Iran – after the Koran. Hafez lived in turbulent times when various rulers governed Fars with different attitudes toward political, social, and religious issues.

Hafez died in Shiraz circa 1392.

Hafez was educated in literature, commentary, philosophy, religions, and the Arabic language. The main ruling





dynasties who governed Shiraz during Hafez' era included *Injoo*, *Mozaffar*, and towards the last few years of his life *Taymour Gourkan* – *the Mongol ruler who had invaded and conquered Shiraz*.

Hafez is regarded as Iran's most prominent sonneteer, and one of the four summits of Persian poetry alongside *Ferdowsi*, *Saadi*, and *Rumi*. While very little information is known about Hafez' personal life, his *Divan*, and particularly his *sonnets* – or *ghazals* – offer insight into his philosophy of life, spirituality, and state.

Hafez' mastery of the *ghazal* form exhibits the most complex features of the Persian language, incorporating figurative turns of phrase, wordplay, and verbal codes that showcase not only the poet's own worldview, but give insight into the culturally-specific worldview of native Persian speakers. The content of the *ghazals* is concurrently deeply emotional and profoundly intellectual.

### **The Ghazals**

*Hafez* lived in an era when religion was a social and individual phenomenon in Iran. Not only did sovereigns use it to strengthen their grip on power and to justify their despotism, ordinary people, also exploited religiosity to create and maintain status amongst commoners or to elevate their social standing to positions of power.

*Hafez*, in his *ghazals*, courageously and vehemently criticizes all such pretenders, whether a ruler or a *Sufi* or any other religious figure and unveils the motives of their deceit. He, himself a believer in God and born into a Moslem family, did not subscribe to any religion and considered the conflicts that exist between different religions a mere ignorance of the universal truth of Love. *To Hafez, the relationship between the creator and the created was based on love, and there was no need for intermediaries or the limitations of organized religions.*

His free-spirited intellectualism was ahead of his time. It was during Europe's inquisition era that Hafez, in Shiraz, advocated freedom of thought and lifestyle, and promoted pluralism – an idea that is still non-existent in many parts of the world – and tolerance – a concept that the West woke up to only in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He valued life as a gift that should not be wasted in grief and, indeed, should be enjoyed and lived to the full.

Some people/scholars have tried to present *Hafez* as a *mystic (Sufi)*, which is to deny the *ghazals'* innumerable references in defiance of the mystics. Conversely, there are others who see him totally devoid of any mysticism and interpret in the *ghazals* the voice of a fun-loving hedonist. Such misinterpretations are due to his use of amphibolic language.





Thematically, love exists at the core of Hafez's Divan, both in the content of the *ghazals* and through their symmetrical form. The presentation of each *ghazal* in even columns together with the way in which the couplets echo a central idea in a seemingly chaotic and disparate macrostructure evokes the depth of love in its various forms.

Linguistic amphiboly is a unique trait of Hafez' *ghazals*, which has a dual effect on the possibilities of interpretation:

- On one hand, a genuine attempt at engagement with the poet's intentions for the text without historical, linguistic, and cultural conversance is impossible.
- On the other hand, the complex symbols created from imagery within the *ghazals* lend themselves to more subjective interpretations which vary according to each reader's experience and perspective.

The *fal'e Hafez* (resorting to Hafez' *ghazals* for divination purposes) is a tradition that draws from the universal symbolic potential of Hafez' poems, wherein friends and family members open the Divan to a random *ghazal* that is believed to be able to tell the future. The *ghazals* have a unique way of speaking directly to the reader. Hafez is called *the tongue of the hidden* (لسان الخيب) for this very reason.



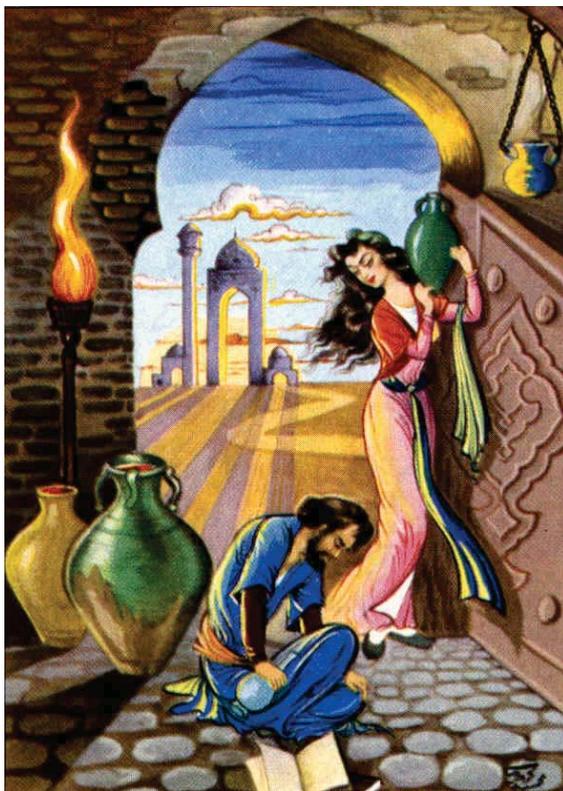
Hafez is likely to have had a profound knowledge of music. This is evidenced by the melodious cadence of the *ghazals* and the many references throughout the Divan to musical tones and frets. While historically, his *nom de plume* "Hafez" is believed to refer to his having memorized the Koran, the word "Hafez" also translates as "someone who sings poetry", a definition which is reflected in direct references in the Divan to the poet's own vocal talents. While meter is one of the key characteristics of Persian poetry, and the *ghazal* form traditionally adheres to a strict metronomic rhythm, Hafez' manipulation of sound devices renders a lyric quality that transcends the standard limits of the form.





Alliteration, assonance, and consonance are three of the most prolific poetic features in *Hafez'* poetry. The repetition and connection of sounds in his verses has a dizzying effect on the content of each *ghazal*, which enhances the reader's experience of themes like unconditional love, the clarity wine brings, and the music in the stars. Likewise, the brevity of *Hafez'* aphorisms incites wonder in the reader's mind. There are many instances where the connotations of one or two words of a couplet are so deeply couched in a complex history that they warrant extensive footnotes. *Hafez'* use of opposite-

words and repetition of homonyms, in one distich or one hemistich, to convey layers of meaning, is another astonishing characteristic of his formalism. *Hafez'* *ghazals* transcend traditional lyric themes, like the poet's personal narrative, emotions, and nature's beauty; *Hafez'* *ghazals* include these subjects, but extend also to discussions of philosophy, social issues, morality, and communication.



It is difficult to write about *Hafez* without acknowledging the magnitude of his international influence. *Hafez* has captured the minds and hearts of so many generations over the past seven centuries and has been revered to the point of idolization by non-Persian speaking readers through existing translations of his work. One famous example is *Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*, who came across a

translation of *Hafez* in his sixties and declared that he had only then known love through *Hafez'* poetry. *Goethe* later composed the *West-East Divan*, influenced by *Hafez*. Another example is *Friedrich Engels* who, in a letter to *Karl Marx*, wrote about having seen a translation of *Hafez* and being so impressed that he would love to learn Persian to be able to read *Hafez'* poetry in the original language.

The many attempts to translate *Hafez* function almost as a conversation between Orientalists and Western representations of one of the most unusual protagonists of Persian culture. The subjectivity of interpretation that is inherent in the *Divan* for readers





who are not native speakers or who do not have the historical or literary context to engage with the possibilities of the poet's intentions for the *ghazals* manifests in most of the existing translations.

### Translating Hafez

*Hafez* has immensely impacted orientalists and scholars who have endeavoured to translate his poetry. *Parvin Loloï* identifies four different categories of *Hafez* translations:<sup>1</sup>

1. The first category of translators, elect to present the *ghazals* as prose, translated verbatim, with no attempts to elicit the poetics of the original and under the assumption that a translation in verse would be to impose English language poetry conventions onto Oriental poetry and rendering an inaccurate representation therein. *Wilberforce Clarke* (1840-1905) whose particularly problematic translation *Loloï* describes as “a highly *Sufistic* interpretation, heavily interpolated with notes within the body of the literally-translated text, it offers a mass of unassimilated information, which obfuscates all the poetic qualities of its original,” as well as *Samuel Robinson* (1794-1884), *Justin Huntly McCarthy* (1860-1936), and the very first known translation of *Hafez* by *Sir William Jones* in 1771 who were proponents of the prose style of translation.
2. The second category is translations of *Hafez* in verse, including: versions that try to imitate the rhyme and meter of the original (often at the cost of faithfulness to the meaning of the original); versions that have presented the *ghazals* in English poetic form; and versions that embody free verse.
3. The third category *Loloï* identifies, and the one which has garnered perhaps the most popularity amongst English language speakers, are *Hafez* imitations or “creative translations” in which writers present their own poetry inspired by *Hafez* as translations. *Reynold Alleyne Nicholson* (1868-1945), *Elizabeth Bridges* (1887-1877), *Basil Bunting* (1900-85), and *Daniel Ladinsky's The Gift* (1999) are four such examples.
4. The fourth category is the scholar-translator whose interpretations of *Hafez* are the basis for the renderings.

*Loloï* also points out that the recent preoccupation with *Sufism* in West has inspired translations that paint *Hafez* as a *Sufi mystic* – notably the translations of *Michael Boylan*,

1- *Loloï*, P. (2002). “Hafez x. Translations of Hafez in English.” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, online edition, <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/hafez-x#article-tags-overlay> (accessed 22 November 2020)





Elizabeth T. Gray, and Reza Sabery.

According to *Loloi*:

“With only a few exceptions, the English translations generally lack any great poetic merit, and they have rarely managed to allow the English reader even a glimpse of the rich clarity and vigorous beauty of a great medieval Persian poet.”<sup>2</sup>

This broad criticism points to two major problems with existing English translations of Hafez: **firstly**, a lack of poetic merit; **secondly**, a lack of insight into the vision of the poet.

Several issues of both qualification and circumstance arise for translators of poetry which contribute to the problems *Loloi* describes:

- **Firstly**, poetry, by nature, is brief. The brevity is compensated by familiar tropes and references. All the historical, literary, cultural, mythological, and religious references, for example, are likely to be lost in translation – especially in cases where the translator is from a different cultural and linguistic background.
- **Secondly**, many translators render their own impression of the poetry rather than being faithful to the poet’s language, that is to say, they choose *free translation* to make their job less difficult. *Free translation* is usually influenced by the translator’s own cultural background resulting in a mixed message that does not necessarily convey the original meaning.
- **Thirdly**, *rhythm and rhyme* cannot be reproduced identically in the translation. The translator, in trying to, at least, reflect the rhyme for example, moves further away from the original work.
- **Lastly**, *the form*, especially in *Hafez’ poetry*, is often compromised in the translation due to either the translator’s inability to realize the fine points of formalism or inability to render it in the translation because of linguistic differences.

*The translators of this small selection of ghazals (the first 5 ghazals in the Divan) are a mother-daughter team – Pari Azarmvand Mokhtari, a lifelong Hafez scholar, native Persian speaker, and professional translator, alongside her daughter, Dr. Tara Mokhtari who is a published poet in the English language and creative writing craft and pedagogy expert – whose intent it is to render translations of Hafez’ ghazals that are truly faithful to the original Persian, and retain the essence of the musical cadence Hafez is known for.*

2- Ibid





ألا يا أَيُّهَا السَّاقِي أَدِرْ كَأْساً و ناولها      كه عشق آسان نمود اول ولی افتاد مشكلها

Behold! O Wine-bearer, circulate the challis and deliver it<sup>1</sup>

For love at first seemed facile, but obstacles did unfurl

Hoping the zephyr blows open at last the musk pod from that ringlet

O, how hearts bleed at the twist of her musk-scented curl

How can pleasure sustain at house of the beloved? Since every moment

The caravan bell bellows: fasten the camel-litters

Colour the prayer rug with wine, if the guru of the Magi<sup>2</sup> so utters

A wayfarer himself, he is not ignorant of the journey's mores and ways

A dark night and fear of eddying whirlpools and waves

How would they understand our plight, the disencumbered on the shores?

All my deeds resulted in infamy for my hedonistic revelry

When would the secret told in circles remain behind closed doors?

O Hafez, if you wish the presence<sup>3</sup>, become not absent<sup>4</sup> from the beloved

When you see the one you love, farewell the world and forsake it

صلاح کار کجا و من خراب کجا      بین تفاوت ره کز کجاست تا به کجا

Ruined me here and my best interests there

See how disparately the two paths bear

Heart-rending is the cloister and cloak of hypocrisy

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1. Arabic hemistich

2. *Guru of the Magi*: is the translation of پیرمغان (pire Moghan) – the spiritual leader of the Magi, which is used frequently in Hafez' poetry. It signifies an **imaginary** spiritual leader/mentor to whom Hafez refers for guidance in life.

3. "Presence": is a mystic term signifying the presence of God in Sufi's heart to the exclusion of any other desires/things.

4. "Absence" is a mystic term signifying the absence of God in the Sufi's heart because of being occupied by worldly affairs.





Where is the Zoroastrian temple?<sup>1</sup> The pure wine, where?  
What connections to Rendhood<sup>2</sup> have prudence and piety?  
The rebec's song here, the sound of sermon there  
What can the enemy's heart apprehend from the friend's face?  
The candle of the sun here, a snuffed lantern there  
Since the kohl of our eye is the dust at your threshold,  
Where shall we go from this portico, tell us, where?  
Beware the well ahead, resist seduction by the apple-shaped chin<sup>3</sup>  
Where are you going, O my heart, in such haste? Where?  
The union epoch ended, may we remember it fondly!  
Where did that coquetry go? And, the reproach where?  
O friend, do not expect repose and slumber from Hafez,  
What is repose? What is forbearance? And where is slumber?

اگر آن ترک شیرازی به دست آرد دل ما را      به خال هندویش بخشم سمرقند و بخارا را  
If the Shirazi Turk<sup>1</sup> wishes to touch my heart  
I'd give up Samarqand<sup>2</sup> and Bokhara<sup>2</sup> for her black beauty mark  
O wine-bearer, pour the rest of the wine, in paradise you will not find  
The riverside of Aabè Roknabad<sup>3</sup> and the Mosalla Promenade<sup>4</sup>  
Alas! These sharp and charming, city-upturning gipsies  
Robbed the heart's patience as the Turks robbed the King's feast<sup>5</sup>

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1. Zoroastrian temple is the translation of دیر مغان (*daire Moghan*). Hafez uses this term symbolically signifying a place where he can seek refuge from hypocrites and pretenders, and be true to himself.

2. "Rendhood" is the translation of رندی (*rendi*); it is used frequently in Hafez' poetry indicating freedom of spirit.

3. "Apple-shaped chin" is a literary term used in Persian Poetry referring to the dimple of the beloved's chin.





Our imperfect love bears not on the beloved's grace  
No need for colour and kohl, that beautiful face  
I knew, from the lure Joseph<sup>6</sup> had that intensified daily,  
Love would reveal Zoleikha<sup>7</sup> from a veil of chastity  
Should you swear or curse, I'll still pray  
A bitter reply suits the sweet ruby-coloured lips  
Heed guidance, O darling, for more than life  
The blissful youth care for the counsel of the sage  
Tell of musicians and wine, quest less for the world's mystery  
For no-one has solved, nor will solve, this riddle through philosophy  
You scripted sonnets and pierced pearls, O Hafez, come sing cheerfully  
Heaven scatters the starry necklace of Pleiad over your verse

صبا به لطف بگو آن غزال رعنا را      که سر به کوه و بیابان تو داده ای ما را

O zephyr, kindly tell that graceful gazelle:  
It was you who made us alp and desert vagrants  
Why is the sugar-merchant – may he live long –  
Compassionless for the sugar-grazing parrot?

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1. Shirazi Turk: a member of an Asian ethnic group; in Hafez' poetry it is always a reference to the beautiful beloved.

2. Samarqand and Bokhara: two important cities, which are today in Uzbekistan.

3. Aabè Roknabad: a famous small river near Shiraz – a river most loved by Hafez.

4. Mosalla Promenade: a promenade in Shiraz.

5. An olden days' custom amongst one of the Turk tribes: they were permitted to plunder whatever was left in the public feast given by the King once all guests had had their meal.

6. Joseph (Yusof): a very good-looking son of Prophet Jacob (Yaaqub); because of his father's extreme affection, his brothers felt jealous and threw him in a well; he was rescued by a caravan and sold in Egypt. After going through a great deal of hardship, he eventually became Egypt's ruler.

7. Zoleikha: wife of the Egypt's ruler, Potiphar, who fell in love with Joseph. The story of her love for Joseph has been used in the Persian poetry signifying the power of love over anything else in the world.





O flower, your vanity forbade you from  
Asking after the love-sick nightingale  
The clear-sighted are captivated by warmth and kindness  
A wise bird won't be snared nor trapped  
I know not why the colour of friendship fails  
The slender black-eyed beauties  
As you recline with the beloved, imbibing wine  
Remember her wasted admirers lost to the wind  
It cannot be said there is fault in your beauty, except  
A beautiful face lacks affection and loyalty  
In the heavens, it's not strange if the poems of Hafez,  
Sung by Venus<sup>1</sup>, make the messiah dance

دل می رود ز دستم صاحب‌دلان خدا را      دردا که راز پنهان خواهد شد آشکارا

I am losing heart, O men of heart, in God's name,  
What pain, the veiled secret will show.  
We are ship-wrecked, O friendly gust, blow!  
So I may see the beloved's face once more  
The firmament's ten-day love is just a spell and story  
O friend, take chances to be kind to friends  
In the circle of roses and wine, sang beautifully the nightingale last night  
Deliver the morning wine, O drunkards, arise!<sup>1</sup>  
O generous one, as an expression of gratitude for your benediction  
Show care, someday, to the dervish of destitution  
Peace in the two worlds lay in the reading of these two mottos:  
Compassion for friends, tolerance for foes  
They banned us from the good reputation territory





If you don't like it, rewrite our destiny  
That bitter wine the Sufi labelled mother of all viciousness  
To us, is more desired and sweeter than maidens' kiss<sup>1</sup>  
At the time of destitution, try a life of drunkenness and pleasure  
As the elixir of life makes a vagabond a Korah<sup>2</sup>  
Don't go rogue, as the beloved, in whose hand granite is but wax,  
She will burn you with a candle-like wrath  
Alexander's mirror<sup>3</sup> is a chalice, see!  
So that it can show you the state of Dara's sovereignty  
Persian-speaking beauties give verve  
O wine-bearer, give to the ascetic rends<sup>4</sup> the good word  
Hafez did not wear this wine-stained cloak of his own volition  
O clean-cloaked sheikh, accept our justification!

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1. Arabic hemistich

2. Korah: a very rich man contemporary with Moses.

3. Alexander's mirror: a mirror made by Aristotle for Alexander, and set on the Alexandria minaret, to see the movements of ships and thus be informed of events in other countries.

4. Rends: the free-spirited; Hafez repeatedly calls himself a rend.

