

rubaiyat of omar khayyam translated by edward fitzgerald

Introduction to the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam

The **Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam** is a collection of quatrains (four-line poems) attributed to the Persian mathematician, astronomer, and poet Omar Khayyam, who lived during the 11th century. However, it is the English translation by Edward FitzGerald, published in 1859, that gained worldwide acclaim and significantly shaped the Western perception of Persian literature. FitzGerald's translation is not merely a direct conversion of Khayyam's verses; it is a creative interpretation that captures the essence of Khayyam's thoughts on life, love, and the fleeting nature of existence.

Omar Khayyam: The Man Behind the Poems

Omar Khayyam was born in Nishapur, Iran, around 1048 AD. He was a polymath—his contributions spanned mathematics, astronomy, and poetry. Here are some key points about his life and work:

- **Mathematics:** Khayyam is known for his work on the classification of cubic equations and for developing a geometric method for solving them.
- **Astronomy:** He played a significant role in reforming the Persian calendar, creating a solar calendar that was more accurate than the Julian calendar used in Europe.
- **Poetry:** Despite his accomplishments in science, Khayyam's poetic genius is what has immortalized him, particularly through the Rubaiyat.

The Rubaiyat: Structure and Themes

The Rubaiyat consists of quatrains, each typically following an AABA rhyme scheme. The poems address universal themes that resonate with readers across cultures and centuries. Some prevalent themes within the Rubaiyat include:

1. **The Nature of Existence:** Khayyam contemplates the purpose of life and the inevitability of death, often reflecting on how fleeting and

unpredictable life can be.

2. **Wine and Enjoyment:** Many quatrains emphasize the joys of drinking wine and celebrating life, suggesting that one should savor the present moment.
3. **Love and Beauty:** The poems explore the beauty of love and the transient nature of beauty itself, often encouraging readers to appreciate these moments while they last.
4. **The Search for Knowledge:** Khayyam often ponders the limits of human understanding and the mysteries of the universe, questioning the value of knowledge in a world filled with uncertainties.

Edward FitzGerald: The Translator

Edward FitzGerald was an English poet and translator, born in 1809 in Suffolk, England. His journey towards translating the Rubaiyat began when he stumbled upon a collection of Persian quatrains. FitzGerald's translation is notable for several reasons:

Innovative Approach

FitzGerald did not aim for a literal translation; instead, he sought to convey the spirit and philosophy of Khayyam's poetry. His approach involved:

- **Artistic License:** He often took liberties with the text to enhance the lyrical quality of the poems, resulting in verses that resonate emotionally with readers.
- **Adaptation:** FitzGerald adapted cultural references to make them more accessible to a Western audience, which helped bridge the gap between Eastern and Western literary traditions.
- **Poetic Style:** His translation is rich in rhythm and imagery, often resembling the style of Victorian poetry, which adds a layer of beauty to the original verses.

Publication and Reception

Upon its release, the first edition of FitzGerald's Rubaiyat did not gain

immediate popularity. However, after a few years and a second edition, the work began to capture public attention. Its unique style and profound ideas resonated with readers, leading to:

- **A Cultural Phenomenon:** The Rubaiyat became a symbol of the romantic and existential movements in literature during the 19th century.
- **Influence on Other Writers:** The work had a profound impact on writers and poets like T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats, who drew inspiration from Khayyam's themes.
- **Art and Popular Culture:** The Rubaiyat has inspired countless artworks, illustrations, and adaptations in various forms, further solidifying its place in popular culture.

Key Quatrains and Their Significance

Some of the most celebrated quatrains from the Rubaiyat encapsulate its central themes. Here are a few notable examples:

Quatrain 1

> "Awake! For Morning in the Bowl of Night
> Has flung the Stone that puts the Stars to Flight:
> And Lo! The Hunter of the East has caught
> The Sultan's Turret in a Noose of Light."

This quatrain emphasizes the beauty of dawn and the fleeting nature of time, urging readers to embrace the present moment.

Quatrain 12

> "A Book of Verses underneath the Bough,
> A Jug of Wine, a Loaf of Bread—and Thou
> Beside me singing in the Wilderness—
> Oh, Wilderness were Paradise enow!"

Here, Khayyam reflects on the simple pleasures of life, suggesting that companionship and basic comforts can create a paradise.

Quatrain 26

> "The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
> Moves on; nor all your Piety nor Wit
> Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
> Nor all your Tears wash out a Word of it."

This quatrain addresses the inevitability of fate and the importance of accepting what cannot be changed, highlighting a key philosophical stance of the Rubaiyat.

Legacy of the Rubaiyat

The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam has transcended its original context, becoming a timeless piece of literature that continues to inspire and resonate with readers worldwide. Its legacy can be observed in several ways:

- **Literary Influence:** The themes and stylistic elements of the Rubaiyat have influenced numerous poets and writers in both the East and West.
- **Philosophical Impact:** Khayyam's reflections on life, love, and existence continue to spark philosophical discussions in literary and academic circles.
- **Cultural Appreciation:** The Rubaiyat has contributed to a greater appreciation of Persian literature and culture in the Western world, serving as a bridge between different literary traditions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the **Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam**, as translated by Edward FitzGerald, stands as a monumental work that has left an indelible mark on literature. Through its exploration of existential themes, beauty, and the human experience, it invites readers to reflect on their own lives and the transient nature of existence. FitzGerald's masterful translation not only preserves the spirit of Khayyam's original verses but also enriches the literary landscape, making the Rubaiyat a cherished classic for generations to come.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the 'Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam' about?

The 'Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam' is a collection of quatrains (four-line poems) attributed to the Persian poet and mathematician Omar Khayyam. The poems explore themes of love, life, fate, and the nature of existence, often reflecting a philosophical and existential perspective.

Who was Edward Fitzgerald and what was his contribution to the 'Rubaiyat'?

Edward Fitzgerald was a British poet and translator who is best known for his English translation of the 'Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam.' His version, published in 1859, popularized Khayyam's work in the English-speaking world and is celebrated for its lyrical beauty and interpretative freedom.

How does Fitzgerald's translation differ from other translations of the 'Rubaiyat'?

Fitzgerald's translation is notable for its poetic style and creative liberties, which often depart from the literal meanings of the original Persian text. His version emphasizes the emotional and philosophical essence of the poems, making them accessible and resonant for a Western audience.

What are some major themes found in Fitzgerald's 'Rubaiyat'?

Major themes in Fitzgerald's 'Rubaiyat' include the transient nature of life, the inevitability of death, the pursuit of pleasure, the importance of seizing the moment, and the questioning of fate and divine will.

Why is the 'Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam' considered a significant literary work?

The 'Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam' is considered significant due to its profound insights into human existence, its philosophical depth, and its artistic expression. Fitzgerald's translation played a crucial role in introducing Persian literature to the West and influencing both literary and cultural movements.

What impact did the 'Rubaiyat' have on literature and culture in the 19th century?

The 'Rubaiyat' had a significant impact on 19th-century literature and culture, inspiring poets, writers, and artists. It contributed to the

Romantic movement's fascination with Eastern themes and philosophies and led to a greater appreciation for Persian literature in the Western literary canon.

Is the 'Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam' still relevant today?

Yes, the 'Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam' remains relevant today as its themes of existential inquiry, the beauty of life, and the acceptance of mortality resonate with contemporary readers. Its poetic expression continues to inspire new adaptations and interpretations in various forms of art and literature.

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