IRANIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE
STUDY GUIDE
PERSIAN POETRY THROUGH THE AGES
For Secondary Level Students
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Persian poetry has been one of the primary arts forms in Iranian culture for the past three thousand years. Iranians have always delighted in telling tales and giving moral lessons through poetry. Many people, even people with little formal education, memorize huge amounts of poetry and enjoy reciting it at family gatherings or for their friends. The poems may be enjoyed by themselves or they may be used to illustrate events in people’s daily lives. Poets are so revered that in all the larger cities, some streets have been named after famous poets, such as Ferdowsi or Saadi.

The Persian that is spoken in Iran today began to be spoken after the Arab conquest in the 7th century A.D. This language is called Modern Persian. During these times poets often lived in the courts of the kings where their job was to tell stories, glorify the kings, and give lessons and advice to the kings, princes, and other powerful people about how to be good and just. The earliest remaining examples of poetry in Modern Persian come from the ninth century. One of these early poets was Rudaki, who wrote:

Young or old we die
for every neck a noose
though the rope be long for some,

struggle or calm
broke or a king
life’s but wind
and a dream
perhaps describing
some other thing

and with the end
all will be the same again
and all will be well.1

One of the greatest and best-known Persian poets was a man named Abolqasem Ferdowsi, who lived about 1000 A.D. He put into verse the old legends of Iranians before the Arab conquest and conversion to Islam. Ferdowsi’s monumental work is an epic poem called the Shahname, or Book of Kings. It is 50,000 couplets long (a couplet is poetic unit of two lines, rhyming at the end). The poem includes stories from the old Persian legends in which kings and heroes dressed in animal skins and fought with demons, dragons, and all kinds of real and mythical beasts. The poetic story continues on up to historical times and ends with the Arab conquest of Iran.

One of the most famous of the stories in the Shahname concerns two legendary heroes, Rostam and Sohrab, both enormously strong, courageous fighters. Rostam is Sohrab’s father, but the two have never met—they have never even seen pictures of one another.
I've spun these threads for him, he drives me wild!
You take the threads and I'll take him away--
Don't argue now, I haven't got all day!"
The merchant laughed and said: "Come on, old girl,
It's not for you to purchase such a pearl--
His value's reckoned up on gold and Jewels;
He can't be sold for threads to ancient fools!"
"Oh, I knew that before," the old crone said;
"I knew you wouldn't sell him for my thread--
But it's enough that everyone will say
'She bid for Joseph on that splendid day'."
The heart that does not strive can never gain
The endless kingdom's gates and lives in vain;
It was pure aspiration made a king
Set fire to all he owned--everything--
And when his goods had vanished without trace
A thousand kingdoms sprang up in their place.
When noble aspiration seized his mind,
He left the world's corrupted wealth behind--
Can one who craves the sun be satisfied,
With petty ignorance? Is this his guide? 3

Another collection of moral tales that is very popular with Iranians down to the present day is the Golestan of Saadi, a poet who lived in the city of Shiraz in the thirteenth century. Golestan means "rose garden" and the title means that the collection of short poems and rhymed prose is like a bouquet of sweet-smelling flowers. The tales celebrate virtues we all recognize and respect--honesty, justice, generosity, and quick wit. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote a preface to the first American English translation of Saadi's Golestan, and some of his pithy stories even found their way into Benjamin Franklin's Poor Richard's Almanac. Here is one rose for you to smell:

An unjust king once asked a dervish, "What kind of worship is best?"
"For you, sleep," the dervish replied, "so the people may have some rest from your tyranny."

I saw a tyrant once, who slept for half the day.
"Sleep on!" I said, "so your evil may doze as well."
He was a better ruler asleep than awake!
Such kings should seek their rest beneath the earth. 4

Persian poets wrote poems on the themes and topics discussed so far until the 1800s. Then, as Iranians became familiar with Western literatures, they began to use prose as well as poetry to express their ideas in writing. By the twentieth century Iranian writers had begun to write novels, short stories, plays, and essays, as well as poetry. Now, in addition to some of the traditional poetic themes, writers of poetry and prose discuss the struggle for greater freedom, social justice, and women's rights.

One of the most famous twentieth century poets was a woman, Forough Farrokhzad (1935-1967). Her poems discuss how she felt about being a girl and a woman in Persian society, and many poems are critical of that society. Many people were outraged at the frankness with which she talked about her feelings in these poems, other people regarded the poems as revolutionary. Unfortunately, Farrokhzad died in an automobile crash when she was only 32 years old.
4. In the passage from *Mantiq ut-Tayr* quoted here, which lines are humorous? What is the moral of the story?

5. In the poem by Farrokhzad, she compares people and a bird. Why is she apparently envious of the bird?

**Bibliography:**


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