

rubaiyat of omar khayyam by edward fitzgerald

Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam by Edward Fitzgerald is an enduring literary masterpiece that has captivated readers since its first publication in the mid-19th century. This collection of quatrains, originally penned by the Persian mathematician and poet Omar Khayyam in the 11th century, was translated and popularized by the English poet Edward Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald's adaptation not only introduced the beauty of Khayyam's work to the English-speaking world but also redefined the art of translation itself. This article delves into the history, themes, and significance of the Rubaiyat, exploring why it continues to resonate with audiences today.

Historical Context

Omar Khayyam: Life and Background

Omar Khayyam was born in 1048 in Nishapur, Persia (modern-day Iran). His contributions to mathematics, astronomy, and philosophy are well-documented, but it is his poetry that has secured his place in literary history. Khayyam lived during the Seljuk Empire, a time marked by cultural flourishing. His poetry often reflects the philosophical inquiries of his time, blending themes of existentialism, love, and the transient nature of life.

Edward Fitzgerald: The Translator

Edward Fitzgerald was born in 1809 in Suffolk, England. A poet and translator, he is best known for his interpretation of the Rubaiyat. Fitzgerald was introduced to Khayyam's work through a French translation by the scholar Antoine Galland. Captivated by the beauty and depth of the quatrains, Fitzgerald set out to create his own version, which he published in 1859. His translation was highly imaginative, often straying from the original text, yet it captured the essence of Khayyam's philosophy and poetic style.

Structure and Style of the Rubaiyat

The Rubaiyat consists of quatrains (four-line stanzas), traditionally written in a specific metrical form. Fitzgerald's translation features a consistent rhythmic quality, which adds to the lyrical nature of the poems. The style is characterized by:

- Imagery: Vivid descriptions of nature, wine, and love create a rich tapestry that engages the reader's senses.
- Philosophical Depth: The poems often ponder existential themes, such as the meaning of life, the inevitability of death, and the pursuit of happiness.

- Playfulness: Despite the serious themes, there is a light-heartedness in many of the quatrains, reflecting Khayyam's perspective on life's absurdities.

Themes Explored in the Rubaiyat

The Rubaiyat is renowned for its exploration of several profound themes that resonate across cultures and time periods.

Existentialism and the Nature of Life

One of the most prominent themes in the Rubaiyat is the contemplation of existence and the fleeting nature of life. Khayyam famously muses about the brevity of life, urging readers to seize the moment:

- "A loaf of bread, a flask of wine, a book of verse—and thou beside me singing in the wilderness."

This line encapsulates the philosophy of *carpe diem*, encouraging individuals to embrace simple pleasures in the face of life's transience.

Love and Desire

Another central theme is the exploration of love and desire. Khayyam's quatrains celebrate the beauty of romantic love but also acknowledge its impermanence. His poems often reflect a yearning for connection, intertwined with the understanding that love, like life, is ephemeral.

- "In the market-place of the world, I have seen a woman who was beautiful, but fleeting."

This duality of beauty and transience is a hallmark of Khayyam's poetry, resonating with readers' own experiences of love.

The Nature of Fate and Free Will

Fate is a recurring motif in the Rubaiyat, with Khayyam frequently questioning the role of destiny in human life. He grapples with the tension between fate and free will, suggesting that while humans may strive for control, ultimately, they are subject to forces beyond their comprehension.

- "The moving finger writes; and, having writ, moves on."

This famous line reflects the inevitability of fate and the notion that individuals must accept their circumstances and live fully in the moment.

Impact and Legacy

The impact of Fitzgerald's Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam has been profound, influencing literature, art, and philosophy across the globe.

Literary Influence

Fitzgerald's translation sparked a renewed interest in Persian literature and opened the door for future translations of Eastern works. It has been credited with introducing the quatrain form to Western poetry, inspiring poets such as W.B. Yeats and Robert Frost. The Rubaiyat has been referenced in numerous literary works, showcasing its enduring relevance.

Art and Popular Culture

The visual arts have also been influenced by the Rubaiyat. Artists like Edmund Dulac created illustrations that captured the ethereal quality of Khayyam's poetry. The work has been adapted into various forms, including music, theater, and film. Its themes of love, beauty, and existential inquiry continue to resonate in popular culture, demonstrating the timelessness of Khayyam's thoughts.

Philosophical Reception

Philosophically, the Rubaiyat has been embraced by various schools of thought. Its existential musings align with the ideas of existentialist philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, who explored the absurdity of life and the quest for meaning. The themes of hedonism and the pursuit of pleasure also intersect with modern philosophical discussions about the nature of happiness.

Conclusion

The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam by Edward Fitzgerald remains a literary treasure that transcends cultural and temporal boundaries. Through Fitzgerald's masterful translation, Khayyam's contemplative verses invite readers to reflect on the fundamental questions of existence, love, and the passage of time. The work's lyrical beauty, coupled with its profound philosophical insights, ensures its place in the pantheon of world literature. As we navigate the complexities of modern life, the wisdom contained within the Rubaiyat continues to inspire and provoke thought, reminding us to appreciate the fleeting moments of beauty and joy that life has to offer.

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 mathematician and poet Omar Khayyam. The themes often revolve around the nature of life, the passage of time, love, and the pursuit of pleasure.

Who translated the 'Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam' into English?

The 'Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam' was famously translated into English by Edward FitzGerald in the mid-19th century, and his version popularized Khayyam's work in the Western world.

What makes Edward FitzGerald's translation unique?

FitzGerald's translation is unique because it is not a direct translation; instead, he took creative liberties to convey the essence and spirit of the original poems, often reinterpreting the themes and language for a Victorian audience.

When was the first edition of FitzGerald's 'Rubaiyat' published?

The first edition of Edward FitzGerald's 'Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam' was published in 1859.

How did the 'Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam' influence literature and culture?

The 'Rubaiyat' has had a profound influence on literature and culture, inspiring poets, writers, and artists. Its themes of existentialism and hedonism resonated during the Victorian era and continue to be relevant today.

What are some key themes in the 'Rubaiyat'?

Key themes include the transience of life, the inevitability of death, the celebration of life's pleasures, and the importance of living in the moment.

How is the 'Rubaiyat' structured?

The 'Rubaiyat' is structured in quatrains or rubaiyat, each consisting of four lines. The poems often feature a rhyme scheme of AABA.

Why is Omar Khayyam considered an important figure in Persian literature?

Omar Khayyam is considered an important figure in Persian literature due to his contributions as both a mathematician and a poet. His philosophical insights and mastery of the quatrain form have left a lasting legacy in poetry.

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