



## Iconographic Analysis of the Concepts of Good and Evil in the Shahnameh of Tahmasp: A Case Study of the Illustration Depicting the Killing of Kay Khosrow, Afrasiab, and Garsivaz

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### Abstract

**Introduction:** Most of the events in Ferdowsi's Shahnameh revolve around monarchs, warriors, demons, and dragons—each representing, in various ways, the dual forces of Good and Evil or the Ahuric and Ahrimanic powers. The structure of these narratives is primarily centered on defending the sacred Ahuric land of Iran against irrational and demonic enemies, particularly those from Turan. Ferdowsi, drawing on literary and religious traditions, skillfully embedded the struggle between Good and Evil within the framework of epic storytelling. This theme attracted the attention of scholars and rulers throughout Iranian history, and over time, the Shahnameh became a source of inspiration for illustrated manuscripts. During the Safavid era, the rulers—motivated by a desire to revive the grandeur of ancient Iran, especially the Sassanid Empire, and to promote a unified Shi'a religious state—encouraged the visual representation of Shahnameh scenes. One of the most evocative illustrations is the depiction of Kay Khosrow slaying Afrasiyab and Garsivaz in the Shahnameh of Shah Tahmasp. This scene has been selected for analysis in this article, as it portrays the final defeat of Afrasiyab's demonic forces and the ultimate triumph of Good over Evil—symbolically marking the end of the mythological third millennium.

**Methodology:** Given that Persian miniature artists followed structured iconographic traditions, this study employs the iconographic method, a branch of art historical analysis. This approach involves identifying and interpreting the symbolic elements within an artwork based on literary and historical sources. By decoding these visual motifs, researchers aim to uncover the narrative and symbolic meanings embedded in the illustration.

**Results:** The iconographic analysis reveals that several motifs in the painting serve as symbolic representations of good and Evil. For instance:

- Symbols of Good include Kay Khosrow's sword of justice, the presence of the virtuous man, shabrang (the noble horse), Rostam in his tiger-striped attire, Gorz-e Gavsar (the ox-headed mace), and the image of the Simorgh.

- Symbols of Evil are represented by the semi-naked figures of Afrasiyab and Garsivaz, their submissive and defeated postures, and their visual isolation within the composition.

**Conclusion:** The illustration conveys complex meanings that are subtly encoded through layered visual motifs. Within the context of the article's central theme—the conceptualization of Good and Evil—these motifs function as semiotic indicators. The researchers' analysis has uncovered underlying truths and symbolic functions previously overlooked. Ultimately, the study demonstrates how mythical characters in the Shahnameh are deeply intertwined with the cosmic struggle between Good and Evil, both textually and visually.

**Keywords:** Good and Evil, Iconography, Illustration, Persian Miniature, Shahnameh of Shah Tahmasp