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Lesson Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the center of the novel. Studying these contexts and appreciating intricate details of the time and place help readers understand the motivations of the characters.

Though fascinated by the pyramids, pharaohs, and riches of ancient Egyptian civilization, many of us know little of modern Egyptian culture or history. The country was part of the British Empire when Naguib Mahfouz was born in 1911. The British government purchased Egypt's share of the Suez Canal in 1875 hoping to secure control of this strategic passage for shipping between the United Kingdom and India. This led to outright British occupation by 1882.

The uprising that young Mahfouz witnessed in 1919 was a result of a nationalist movement against British rule. In 1922, the British agreed to Egypt's immediate independence but insisted troops remain in the country to protect imperial interests. Anti-British sentiment ran high. Many Egyptian citizens viewed their king as merely a British puppet. In 1952, a group of officers including Gamal Abdel Nasser seized power in a bloodless coup that became known as the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, or what many Egyptians call the Second Revolution.

Discussion Activities

Read and discuss the Reader's Guide essay "The Egyptian Revolution of 1952" (pp. 8–9) in class. *The Thief and the Dogs* was published in 1961, less than a decade after the Revolution of 1952, and in many ways is Mahfouz's examination of its successes and failures. The story begins with Said Mahran's release from prison. Read the first three paragraphs of the novel aloud in class. Ask students to consider how the political turmoil of his country might have influenced how Mahfouz opens the novel.

Writing Exercise

In their journals, ask your students to write three paragraphs considering why Mahfouz chose to begin the novel with Said's first hours of freedom. How is freedom described? What, if any, parallels can be drawn between Said's experience and the 1952 revolution?

Homework

Photocopy and distribute Handout One: The Stream of Consciousness Technique. Have students read the handout and Chapters Three, Four, and Five (pp. 34–62). Ask students to pay close attention to the way Mahfouz uses interior monologue to allow the reader access to Said's private thoughts. If they become confused while reading, ask them to mark those places to discuss during the next class period.