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Lesson Four

FOCUS: Characters

The central character in a work of literature is called the protagonist. The protagonist usually initiates the main action of the story and often overcomes a flaw, such as weakness or ignorance, to achieve a new understanding by the work's end. A protagonist who acts with great honor or courage may be called a hero. An antihero is a protagonist lacking these qualities. Instead of being dignified, brave, idealistic, or purposeful, the antihero may be cowardly, self-interested, or weak. The protagonist's journey is enriched by encounters with characters who hold differing beliefs. One such character type, a foil, has traits that contrast with the protagonist's and highlight important features of the main character's personality. The most important foil, the antagonist, opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

The first chapter sets up the friction between Said Mahran, the novel's protagonist, and his ex-wife Nabawiyya's new husband, Ilish Sidra. Said believes Ilish and Nabawiyya betrayed him to the police. Later, he seeks refuge with the sheikh but cannot follow the cleric's spiritual advice. When Rauf Ilwan refuses to give Said a job at the newspaper, Said loses his only hope for legitimate employment. He returns to his old friend's villa intending to rob it but is caught in the act. Only the café owner, Tarzan, and his patrons seem genuinely pleased by Said's release. Nur, a prostitute who frequents the café, loves Said and hopes his liberation will offer them both the chance at a better life. In various ways, each of the characters serves as a foil to Said—either by attempting to lead him away from trouble, by aiding his illegal activities, or by refusing to help him adjust to life outside the prison walls.

Discussion Activities

Photocopy and distribute the essay “Major Characters in the Novel” from the Reader's Guide (pp. 4–5). Divide the class into six groups. Assign each group a character (Nabawiyya, Ilish, Sheikh Ali al-Junaydi, Rauf, Nur, or Tarzan) and ask them to examine the novel's first nine chapters, looking for ways in which their character influences Said's behavior. Is the character a positive or a negative influence? Have each group present its findings to the class.

Writing Exercise

In his interview with the *Paris Review* Mahfouz stated, “A hero today would for me be one who adheres to a certain set of principles and stands by them in the face of opposition. He fights corruption, is not an opportunist, and has a strong moral foundation.” Ask your students to write a short essay considering whether or not Said Mahran is a heroic character according to Mahfouz's definition.

Homework

Read Chapters Ten, Eleven, and Twelve (pp. 89–116).