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## Lesson Six

### FOCUS: Symbols

Symbols are persons, places, or things in a narrative that have significance beyond a literal understanding. The craft of storytelling depends on symbols to present ideas and point toward new meanings. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to refer to (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal, or figurative, meaning attached to the object. Symbols are often found in the book's title, at the beginning and end of the story, within a profound action, or in the name or personality of a character. The life of a novel is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and reinterpreting the main symbols. By identifying and understanding symbols, readers can reveal new interpretations of the novel.

Sometimes writers create symbols deliberately. At other times, they are unaware of the associations they are creating. In this lesson, examine instances when Mahfouz intentionally uses symbolism and an instance where the association between a character and a larger concept was purely subconscious.



### Discussion Activities

Photocopy and distribute “An Interview with Naguib Mahfouz” from the Reader’s Guide (pp. 10–11). Read the interview aloud in class. Ask students to pay close attention to what Mahfouz says about his female heroines. Keeping in mind the politics of the time period in which the novel is set, discuss how Nur’s character can be read as a symbol of Egypt. Are your students surprised to discover that Mahfouz did not consciously create this association?

Read the following passage from Chapter Fifteen aloud in class:

Whoever kills me will be killing the millions. I am the hope and the dream, the redemption of cowards; I am good principles, consolation, the tears that recall the weeper to humility (p. 133).

Here, Said declares himself to be a symbolic representation of the Egyptian people. Ask your students to identify principles Said might share with the average law-abiding citizen. How might Said’s frustrations reflect those of the era? In what ways would Said fail to represent the average person?



### Writing Exercise

Ask students to write a short essay in their journal exploring the symbolic value of one of the following: dogs, the cemetery, or books. Ask them to cite at least three references from the text where the object they chose acts as a symbol.



### Homework

Finish reading the novel. Have students identify three major turning points and note them in their journals.