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Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Novels trace the development of characters who encounter a series of challenges. Most characters contain a complex balance of virtues and vices. Internal and external forces require characters to question themselves, overcome fears, or reconsider dreams. The protagonist may undergo profound change. A close study of character development maps, in each character, the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief. The tension between a character's strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next and the protagonist's eventual success or failure.

Said Mahran is motivated not just by a need for revenge, but also by his own skewed internal code of conduct. He repeatedly seeks Sheikh Ali al-Junaydi's spiritual counsel but is ultimately only able to follow his own moral voice, the one telling him he must try to right all the wrongs that have been perpetrated upon him, even if he loses his life in the process.

Discussion Activities

Ask your students to create a timeline of the novel's turning points on a blackboard or on large sheets of paper. They will also use this timeline for the next lesson.

Use the timeline to examine Said's mental deterioration. What clues does Mahfouz provide that Said is becoming increasingly unstable? Ask students to give us specific examples of symbols, actions, images, or dialogue that foreshadow the novel's end. How does this foreshadowing affect the level of suspense?

Writing Exercise

Though Nur is not living a "moral" life by most societal standards, she is portrayed as a good woman whose love for Said is genuine. Ask your students to write a three-paragraph character summary of Nur citing specific examples from the book. Does Nur's character develop and change during the course of the story? What do they believe happened to her at the novel's end?

Homework

Ask students to reflect on the ways Mahfouz constructed the plot to reach its dramatic conclusion. In their journals, have them note one instance each where a symbol, an action, imagery, and dialogue foreshadow the novel's conclusion.