# Half a Day Study Guide

## Half a Day by Naguib Mahfouz

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# Introduction

Recognized as a prominent author in his own country of Egypt, Naguib Mahfouz was not widely known in the Western world until receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988. After receiving the award, he gained international recognition as one of the more important writers of the twentieth century.

In 1989 "Half a Day" was first published in Arabic as part of a short story collection entitled *The False Dawn.* In 1991 "Half a Day" was included in an English-language collection entitled *The Time and the Place.*

"Half a Day" belongs to the later phase of Mahfouz's literary career, which is characterized by a shift from social realism to a more modern, experimental mode of writing. It is a very short (5- page) allegorical tale in which the narrator begins the day as a young boy entering school for the first time, but leaves the schoolyard an old man whose life has passed in what seemed like only "half a day." The central allegorical implications of this tale are a commentary on the human condition; an entire life span is experienced as only "half a day" in the school of life. The story also alludes to the cycle of life, whereby the narrator passes through childhood, middle age and old age in the course of one day. Critic Rasheed El-Enany, in *Naguib Mahfouz,* has called "Half a Day" a "technical *tour de force.* " El-Enany explains that "brief as it is, the story must count as the author's most powerful rendering of the dilemma of the gulf between observable time and mnemonic time."

# Author Biography

In 1911 Mahfouz was born in Cairo, Egypt, the youngest of seven children in a lower middle-class family. His father was a strict Muslim and he was raised in a strong religious atmosphere. He earned an undergraduate degree in philosophy from the University of Fuad (now Cairo University) in 1934.

Although his first short story was published in 1932, Mahfouz did not decide to become a writer until two years after graduating from college. He also maintained a career as an Egyptian bureaucrat. His first position was in the Ministry of Waqfs, the body overseeing pious Muslim foundations.

He held many bureaucratic positions—primarily in relation to the national film industry, as director of the Censorship Office, director and chairman of the Cinema Support Organization, and counselor for Cinema Affairs to the Minister of Culture. He retired from bureaucratic work in 1971, after which he has continued to publish novels, short stories, and memoirs.

Mahfouz has traveled abroad only twice in his life: once to Yugoslavia, and once to Yemen, both on government assignment. For many years, he has been part of a close social group of men who congregate in coffeehouses in Cairo, calling themselves "al Harafish" ("common people").

He has published more than thirty novels and fourteen collections of short stories. His first three novels, written between 1943 and 1945, are historical novels set in ancient Egypt. His next three novels, referred to as "The Trilogy," published between 1956 and 1957, are set in lower middleclass sections of modern Cairo. This series of novels established Mahfouz as the foremost novelist in Egypt, and attracted international recognition. In addition to novels and short stories, he has written many screenplays for the Egyptian film industry. Between 1945 and 1960, he wrote many screen adaptations of the stories of other writers. After 1960 many of his own stories were adapted to the screen by other screenwriters. In 1988 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, the first Arabic language writer to be given the prize. As a result, many of his works were translated into different languages and international interest in his work grew.

In 1994, Mahfouz was stabbed in an attack orchestrated by Islamic extremists, who had taken to heart condemnation by religious leaders based on their belief that one of his novels (first published seventeen years earlier) was blasphemous. He survived this attack, and those who orchestrated the assassination attempt were arrested and executed.

Although notoriously private about his childhood and personal life, Mahfouz published a personal memoir in 1994, entitled *Echoes of an Autobiography.* Written as a collection of vignettes, it is beautifully written and provides some insight into his life and career.

# Plot Summary

As the story opens, the narrator is a young boy walking to his first day of school. The boy is delighted with the new clothes he is wearing for the occasion, but is apprehensive about going to school. As he walks along, holding onto his father's hand, he occasionally turns to ask his father why he must go; he feels that perhaps he is being sent away from home as a punishment.

Although his father reassures him, he is not convinced that "there really was any good to be had in tearing me away from the intimacy of my home." At the gate to the school, the boy hesitates again, and must be gently pushed by his father to enter the schoolyard. Telling him to "be a man," the father explains that "today you truly begin life."

Upon stepping into the yard, the boy sees the faces of the other boys and girls, but feels "like a stranger who had lost his way." One boy approaches and asks the narrator who brought him to school; when he replies that it was his father, the other boy states that his own father is dead.

The narrator soon becomes one of the group of children, and the narrative voice changes from the first person singular "I" to alternatively speaking in the third person plural "we."

The narrator makes friends with some of the boys and falls in love with some of the girls. He describes the school day in a manner which is meant to be interpreted as an allegory for human life, with its ups and downs, trials and tribulations.

When the bell rings to announce the end of the day, the narrator steps outside the gate, but his father is not waiting there for him as promised. He encounters a familiar middle-aged man; they greet one another and shake hands before the man moves along.

The narrator finds that the street and surroundings have completely changed since the morning. These changes are meant to be understood in allegorical terms, as representing the effect of modernization and urbanization in radically changing the face of the city within the lifetime of one man. He is unable to cross the street because of heavy traffic. Finally, a "young lad" offers to help him across, addressing him as "Grandpa"—the little boy has passed an entire life time in what seemed like only half a day, and is now an old man at the end of his life.

# Detailed Summary & Analysis

## Summary

The story, which takes place in Egypt, begins with a father taking his son to his first day of school. The boy is proud to be wearing his new school uniform, but wonders whether going to school rather than staying home with his mother represents some kind of punishment. As they walk along a garden-lined street the boy's father tells him that school is not a punishment but a place where boys are transformed into useful men. "Today you truly begin life," he says.

When they reach the school, which looks like a grim fortress to the boy, they stand looking through the gate at the crowds of children already in the schoolyard. The father encourages the boy to go through the gate by himself, to face the experience cheerfully, and to be a man. The father says that when the school day is over, he will be waiting at the gate to accompany the boy home.

The boy goes through the gate, feeling lost and unknown, but then he realizes that the other children are curious about him. At last, one boy speaks to him, asking who brought him to school. When the narrator answers that his father brought him, the new acquaintance tells him his own father is dead.

When the gate closes with a screech, a bell rings to begin the school day. A woman speaks to the children, while a group of men separates them into a pattern of ranks in the yard. The woman tells the children that this is their new home, and that they will find mothers and fathers here, as well as good things related to knowledge and religion. She also encourages them to face their experiences joyfully without tears.

The boy narrating the story describes the school day as a period of submitting to facts, with the act of submission bringing a kind of happiness. The school day involves forming relationships, playing games, and learning music. There are introductions to language, geography, and mathematics, and the children are taught about the Creator of the universe. They eat, take a nap, and awake from the nap to continue their activities of love, friendship, playing, and learning.

As the day wears on, however, it is not always happy or sweet. There are unpleasant winds and unexpected accidents to experience. Rivalries and fighting among friends bring pain. The woman who seemed so benign when she first spoke to the children at the beginning of the day also becomes angry and scolds them. She even resorts to physical punishment on an increasingly frequent basis.

The boy comes to realize that there is no chance of going back to the way he was that morning before he left home to go to school. He now sees life as a period of struggle and perseverance different from the close and intimate life he had known with his mother at home. He notes that some students are able to take advantage of

opportunities for success and happiness that present themselves throughout the day, despite periods of worry and concern.

When the bell rings to announce the end of the school day, the children run toward the open schoolyard gate. The boy says goodbye to his friends and goes outside to look for his father. He does not find him waiting there as he had promised. After waiting for a long time, the boy decides to return home on his own. As he begins his walk, a middle-aged man passes him and they recognize one another. The man remarks that it has been a long time since they had seen each other. When the boy asks the man how he is, the man replies, "As you can see, not all that good, the Almighty be praised!" They shake hands, and the man moves off as the boy realizes that the world outside the school has changed since he went in.

Instead of the garden-lined street and the crop fields beyond, he sees crowds of people, tall buildings, streams of traffic, piles of garbage, and the air is filled with noise. There are conjurers and clowns, a band announcing a circus, and a line of trucks filled with security troops. A taxi driver, passenger and the passenger's wife are fighting in the street. In short, the world has changed in just half a day. The boy thinks to himself that he will find the answer to his confusion at home with his father, but he does not know where his home is. He knows he must cross Abu Khoda to reach his house, but the traffic is so intense he does not know how he will get across the road. While the fire engine's siren continues to screech, the narrator stands waiting to cross the road. At last, a young man coming from one of the shops on the street to help him says, "Grandpa, let me take you across."

## Analysis

The author uses the allegory form to comment on the brief nature of human life and the changes that occur from childhood to old age. The story begins as a simple tale of a boy going to school for the first time, but by the end, the reader has been led on a symbolic journey through a man's life, and the narrator has become an old man.

The boy is taken to school by his father to learn to be a man. The lessons taught at the school are lessons learned through life: forming relationships, taking advantage of opportunities, reacting to unforeseen circumstances, persevering in the face of obstacles.

The boy's realization that he has been changed by his experiences foreshadows what he will find when he exits through the gate at the end of the school day.

The author uses events and characters as symbols for universal concepts. The story can be divided into two halves, using the encounter with the middle-aged man as the dividing point. Until that encounter, the reader and narrator are still at the first day of school; after that encounter, both narrator and reader realize the world and the story have changed. The middle-aged man may represent the narrator confronting himself in middle age.

Instead of gardens and fields, the narrator sees a world crowded with people, traffic, and noise. There are counterparts in the second part of the story to events and characters in the first part. The crowds of children in the schoolyard become the hoarders of people in the street, the rivalries and fights between children are represented by the fight between the taxi driver and his passenger in the street; the screech of the schoolyard gate becomes the shriek of the fire engine's siren. The men who formed the children into ranks in the schoolyard become the central security troops.

As the narrator attempts to understand what has happened, he thinks that his father at home will have the answers to his questions. However, he no longer knows where his home is. He feels a stranger in the new world he has found, just as he felt a stranger among the crowds of children in the schoolyard at the beginning of the day. Waiting on the side of the road for a break in the traffic so he can cross over, he watches the fire engine slowly making its way in the stream of cars. He thinks to himself, "Let the fire take its pleasure in what it consumes." The point of this statement is that life must take pleasure in its own passing, that the all-too-brief nature of life must be acknowledged for its own sake.

Finally, a young man comes along to help the narrator across the road, addressing him as "Grandpa." In the beginning of the story, a young boy is helped along the way by his father, an older man. At the end, an old man is helped along by a young boy. The use of the word "grandpa" is the final shock for the reader, who now knows beyond doubt that the young boy has become an old man, and that the story is much more than a tale about a half a day.

# Characters

## The Father

It is the young boy's father who, "clutching" his hand, takes the boy to school. When the boy asks if he is being sent away from home for being a bother, his father assures him that school is not a punishment, but a "factory" which turns boys into men. As he enters the school the boy hesitates, but his father gently pushes him and tells him to "be a man."

The boy's father is an important character in both a literal and a symbolic sense. As a coming-ofage story, "Half a Day" concerns themes of fatherhood and the different stages of human life. The boy's father is seen to represent the narrator himself, at a different stage of life.

He may also symbolize God, who ushers each human being both into and out of life.

## The Middle-aged Man

When the narrator leaves the school, he encounters a familiar middle-aged man. This man approaches the narrator, greeting him and shaking his hand. When the narrator— now an old man— asks how he is doing, the middle-aged man replies, "As you can see, not all that good, the Almighty be praised!" The man then shakes the narrator's hand again and continues along his way.

## The Mother

The image of the boy's mother appears only once, at the beginning of the story. As he sets out for his first day of school, his mother stands at the window "watching our progress." The boy occasionally turns to look back at his mother, "as though appealing for help."

The mother is a significant part of the comingof- age process. The father initiates this process by taking his son out of the home and away from his mother, "tearing me away from the intimacy of my home." Although he occasionally looks to his mother for comfort, the boy must separate from his mother in order to become an adult. (It is interesting to note that Mahfouz lived with his own mother until the mature age of forty-three, when he married for the first time.)

## The Narrator

As the story opens, the narrator is a young boy going to his first day of school. Apprehensive about being away from home, he soon begins to fit in and enjoy his time as a member of the class.

When the bell rings to announce the end of the day, the narrator steps outside the gate. His father is not waiting there for him, and he starts to walk home by himself. He finds that the street and surroundings have completely changed, a sight that leaves him overwhelmed and disoriented.

He attempts to cross the street, but the traffic is heavy and he hesitates. Finally, a "young lad," offers to help him across, addressing him as "Grandpa"— the little boy has passed an entire life time in what seemed like only half a day, and is now an old man at the end of his life.

## The Other Children

Although he at first feels like a "stranger," the narrator soon becomes a member of the class. His identification with the other children is indicated in the narrative by the fluctuation between first-person singular narrative voice ("I"), and first-person plural ("We"). The children represent humanity, and their experiences are meant to be interpreted as symbolic of the human experience of life.

## The Teachers

The primary teacher introduces the children to some of the wonders of life; she is also a harsh disciplinarian who frequently "would resort to physical punishment." On an allegorical level, the teacher is not an individual person, but life itself, which offers many wonders and many punishments.

## The Young Lad

# Themes

## Life/The Human Condition

"Half a Day" can only be fully understood if interpreted as an allegorical tale, in which each element is symbolic of some greater meaning. The central allegorical motif of "Half a Day" is that a morning spent in school is symbolic of an entire lifetime spent in the school of life.

Everything that occurs in the story represents common experiences of the human condition: birth, childhood, old age, death, the afterlife, religion, love, friendship, pain, fear, joy, learning, memory, and nostalgia, as well as the cycle of life from generation to generation.

## Coming-of-Age

"Half a Day" is a "coming-of-age" story, meaning that one of its central themes is the transition from childhood to adulthood.

The narrator, a young boy, is at first reluctant to be "torn" away from "the intimacy of my home." As his father leads him by the hand toward school, he looks back "as though appealing for help" to his mother, who stands in the window, "watching our progress." This scenario suggests the early stages of life.

As he matures and moves farther away from the security and intimacy of home and family, however, he symbolically looks to his mother for comfort and reassurance. When the young boy protests that he does not want to be sent away from home, his father describes the school as a place in which boys become men. At the gates of the schoolyard, the boy is still reluctant to take the first step in the transition from childhood into adulthood, but his father instructs him to "be a man," telling him "Today you truly begin life."

## Time, Memory, and Old Age

The title "Half a Day," indicates the story's central concern with the human experience of time and memory. The narrator emerges from the gates of the school unaware that his entire life has passed, and that he is now no longer a young boy but an old man.

He is confused and disoriented as his surroundings are barely recognizable. It is not until a "young lad" addresses him as "Grandpa" that the narrator, as well as the reader, becomes aware that he is now an old man. In fact, the entire story can be understood as a memory of a life from the perspective of an old man.

# The Cycle of Life

At an allegorical level, "Half a Day" is concerned with three stages of life: childhood to middle age to old age. It is also concerned with the cycle of life from generation to generation.

Each of the male characters encountered by the narrator can be interpreted as images of him at various stages in the life cycle. The first child he encounters in the school asks: "Who brought you?" Symbolically, this question is not about the person who brought him to the school, but gave him life— his father.

The boy then responds that his own father is dead. This exchange symbolizes the condition of every boy in relation to his father (or child in relation to both of her or his parents): that it is the parents who bring the child into the world; and that everyone's parents must eventually die. When the narrator emerges from the gates to the schoolyard, his father is indeed not there to take him home. The implication is that his father has died. The narrator does, however, see a middle-aged man whom he recognizes. This man is an image of both the narrator's father and the narrator himself in the middle stage of life.

# Style

## Allegory

An allegory is a story with events and characters not meant to be interpreted at a literal level but at a symbolic one. Menahem Milson, in his book *Naguib Mahfouz: The Novelist-Philosopher of Cairo,* maintains that in the work of Mahfouz, "allegory is an extremely important literary mode." "Half a Day" is an allegory for life and the human condition. The story is clearly not meant to be interpreted literally, since the use of time in the narrative is completely unrealistic. The narrator enters the schoolyard a young boy and leaves it "half a day" later, only to discover that the world outside has been completely transformed and he is now the age of a grandfather. The "half a day" spent in school is thus an allegory for the way in which an entire lifetime can seem to last only "half a day."

The school represents what one might call the "school of life," as all of the events that take place there are allegorical for the human condition and the human experience of life. Because the story is an allegory, none of the characters, including the main character, are given names; they are meant to represent humanity in general, and their experiences are that of the human condition, rather than of individuals. The meaning in this story is thus derived from re-examining it in terms of its allegorical, rather than literal, implications.

## Setting

As is the case in many allegorical stories, the setting of "Half a Day" is general. Mahfouz has lived in Cairo, Egypt, all of his life—and nearly all of his stories take place there—so it can be assumed that the story is set in Cairo. Yet it is told in such a way that it could take place in almost any schoolyard in any city over the course of the twentieth century. The setting, however, is more important in terms of its allegorical meaning. The schoolyard refers to the "school of life." The events that occur there represent the experiences of an entire human life span. The gate to the schoolyard thus represents an important stage of transition in the life of the narrator. He first passes through the gate in order to make the transition from early childhood into manhood and adulthood. As the narrator's father tells him while gently pushing him through the gate, "today you truly being life."

Stepping out of the gate at the end of the "half a day" spent in school, the narrator, now and old man, is once again making the transition to the ending of his life, on his way to "home," which signifies death and the afterlife.

# Narrative voice

The narrative voice of a story refers to who tells the story. In "Half a Day," the narrative voice is that of the main character, who, at the beginning, is a young boy; by the end, the narrator is an old man. In the beginning, the story is told in the "first person singular," meaning that the narrator speaks from the perspective of an individual "I." However, this voice alters once he has entered the schoolyard, at which point it slides into a first person *plural* voice from a group perspective of "We." The narrator thus describes school as a group experience, whereby he speaks from the perspective of the common experience of all of the children.

This change in perspective is significant to the allegorical implications of the story. The story describes the experience of the human condition; therefore, the narrator's experiences in school are meant to be understood in terms of the ways in which "we," all humans, experience life, time and memory.

# Historical Context

## Egypt in the Twentieth Century

Mahfouz has been a witness to all of the major events in Egyptian history during his lifetime. Many of these events have had a profound effect on the subject matter, style, and political implications of his stories and novels.

In 1922 Egypt gained independence from British rule. With the establishment of Israel as a sovereign nation in 1948, Egypt, and much of the Arab world, became engaged in a series of conflicts with Israel. As soon as the Israeli state had been formed, the surrounding Arab nations of Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Jordan attacked the new nation—a conflict that ended with Israel's victory over the four nations.

In 1952 a military coup overthrew the Egyptian monarchy. In June 1967, Egypt again suffered a loss to Israel in the Six-Day War. This defeat wounded the national pride of the people of Egypt. In 1973, under the new regime of Anwar Sadat, Egypt and Syria attacked Israel in the Yom Kippur War (launched during the Jewish high holiday); although they could not claim a victory, Egypt did regain some national pride.

In 1978, Sadat met at Camp David, Maryland, with Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and United States President Jimmy Carter. This historic meeting resulted in a peace treaty between Egypt and Israel.

## Arabic literature

Arabic literature includes any literature written in an Arabic language, regardless of the nationality of the author. Thus, Arabic writers have included a broad compass of nationalities, such as Egypt, India, Iran, Persia, Spain, and Syria.

The work of Mahfouz, an Egyptian, can thus be understood in the context of Arabic literary history. The classic era of Arabic literature, mainly proverbs and poetry, was first communicated in the oral tradition and later written down in text form. Classic Arabic literature dates from the sixth century to the sixteenth century. Although this classic literature was not necessarily religious, it is categorized into two distinct periods: first before the advent of Islam in the early seventh century, and the second after the advent of Islam.

Arabic literature was virtually eliminated in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as most of the Arab-speaking world was conquered by other cultures.

The modern era of Arabic literature emerged in the nineteenth century, in part through contact with Western culture and literary traditions. Whereas the European short story and the modern novel had its roots in the eighteenth century, the Arabic world did not begin to develop these literary forms until the late nineteenth century.

According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online,* Egypt "became the center of the renaissance" in Arabic literature. Highly influenced by translations of French literature, the first generation of Arabic writers of the realistic short story and novel did not emerge until after World War I. Naguib Mahfouz was one of the first to master the literary form.

## The Arabic Language

The Arabic language is written and spoken in many nations and encompasses many regional and national dialects. Moreover, there have always been two distinct forms of Arabic: the written and the spoken. In developing the modern form of the realistic story, however, fiction writers in Arabic have been faced with a difficult dilemma: when and if to continue to write in classic written Arabic, and when and if to write in the spoken dialect that would realistically be used by the story's characters in their conversation.

# Critical Overview

Since winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1988, Naguib Mahfouz has become internationally acclaimed as Egypt's foremost literary figure and recognized as one of the most accomplished novelists of the twentieth century. He is also celebrated as the first Arabic language writer to receive a Nobel Prize.

While a renowned writer in the Arabic world, Mahfouz's work was unknown in the West until receiving the prize. Since then, however, over half of his books have been translated into English, for the first time making his work available to readers in the English-speaking world.

Mahfouz's body of work is generally categorized into three distinct phases: the historical/romantic, the social realist, and the modern/experimental. His first three novels, written between 1943 and 1945, represent his historical romance phase.

They are set in ancient Egypt, but function as allegories for modern Egyptian politics and society. His most celebrated novels, however, are those set in modern-day Cairo and written in a social realist style. Among these works are Midaq Alley, published in 1947. A series known as "The Trilogy," established his reputation as the foremost Egyptian novelist, while for the first time earning him recognition in literary circles outside of Egypt. These novels trace three generations of an Egyptian family from just after World War I to the end of World War II. They have been translated into English in the 1990s as *Palace Walk: Cairo Trilogy I, Palace of Desire: Cairo Trilogy II,* and *Sugar Street: Cairo Trilogy III.* In his depiction of the struggles of lower middle-class Egyptians, Mahfouz has been compared to Charles Dickens and Fyodor Dostoyevski.

The third phase of Mahfouz's literary output, sometimes referred to as his modern or experimental phase, began in the 1960s when Mahfouz turned away from the realist style that had won him such critical acclaim. The watershed work which ushered in this new style was *The Thief and the Dogs,* published in 1961.

In this and later novels and stories, Mahfouz turned to the use of symbolism, experimented with such narrative techniques as stream-of-consciousness writing, and used film-style dialogue to tell his stories. He also began to explore existentialist themes, which became a central concern of much of his later work.

Rasheed El-Enany described the general response to this change in literary style in his book *Naguib Mahfouz: The Pursuit of Meaning:* "Mahfouz's sudden headlong dive into surrealist and absurdist modes of expression left his critics reeling from the impact of the surprise." Expecting a realist style of narrative that reflected the modern conditions of life in Cairo, they were not prepared for "the artistic reality badly distorted to reflect the disintegration of the society is sought to comment upon."

It was in this later period that the majority of his short story collections were published. Among his later novels of note is *Arabian Nights and Days* (1982), clearly a reference to *Arabian Nights,* a traditional Egyptian story familiar to Western readers.

Although known primarily for his achievements as a novelist, Mahfouz has also mastered the form of the short story, publishing fourteen collections of stories. As El-Enany has noted, "If Mahfouz had not written any of his novels, he would still have merited a place of high prominence in the history of modern Arabic letters on account of his short stories alone. . . ."

His first collection of short stories, *The Whisper of Madness* (1947) is generally considered unremarkable. His second collection, *God's World,* did not appear until 1963. Twelve more collections of stories followed.

Included in his collection *The Time and the Place,* "Half a Day" concerns Mahfouz's recurring existential themes of life, death, and time, as the entire life of the main character seems to last only half of one day spent in school. El-Enany has called the five-page story a *"tour de force."* He goes on to state: "Brief as it is, the story must count as the author's most powerful rendering of the dilemma of the gulf between observable time and mnemonic time."

# Criticism

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# Critical Essay #1

*Brent has a Ph.D. in American Culture, specializing in cinema studies, from The University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses in American cinema. In the following essay, she discusses the use of descriptive and figurative language in "Half a Day."*

Mahfouz makes skillful use of language in this concise, economic story. Describing the narrator's journey from home to the gates of the schoolyard, Mahfouz takes advantage of both descriptive and figurative language to convey the anxiety of the young boy on his first day of school.

Rich, descriptive language is used to describe the positive elements of the little boy's experience on this momentous day. His new clothes are described with a child's attention to color: "All my clothes were new: the black shoes, the green uniform, the red tarboosh."

When he first sets out with his father, his surroundings are described as if they were a lush and abundant paradise: "We walked along a street lined with gardens; on both sides were extensive fields planted with crops, prickly pears, henna trees, and a few date palms."

By contrast, the little boy's apprehension about being taken to school is conveyed through language that evokes images of punishment, confinement, military discipline, and industrial labor. The first indication of his anxiety is expressed through a description of the first day of school as "the day on which I was to be cast into school for the first time." The phrasing to "cast" something away is more often used to describe the shedding or throwing out of something undesirable. The narrator thus feels that his parents are treating him as an undesirable person whom they wish to "cast" into the school in order to rid themselves of him.

Even when his father protests that school is not a "punishment," he describes it in terms that sound equally undesirable: "It's a factory that makes useful men out of boys." This image suggests still more negative connotations; if school is a "factory," then the boy himself is being treated as no more than a mass of raw material to be "processed" into manhood through methods of industrial labor, hardly an appealing image of the process of growing up.

The narrator's description of what is being done to him accumulates still more negative connotations: "I did not believe there was really any good to be had in tearing me away from the intimacy of my home and throwing me into this building that stood at the end of the road like some huge, highwalled fortress, exceedingly stern and grim."

He describes the process of leaving home as "tearing" him away from it, a word that suggests violence and rupture. Furthermore, he perceives that he is being "thrown" into the school building, an image which picks up on the term "cast," used earlier, to

describe the experience as if he were an undesirable object being violently "thrown" away by his parents.

The school is then described as "some huge, high-walled fortress." The image of a fortress suggests a warlike atmosphere, and evokes images of a building that is heavily guarded against anyone who wishes to escape from it. This image further builds on the child's fear that he is being "punished," for the fortress sounds something like a guarded prison. When they arrive at the gate to the courtyard, the little boy perceives that it is "vast and crammed full of boys and girls." The word "cram" implies both that they have been violently shoved together and that they occupy a physically uncomfortable space.

Once he enters the schoolyard, the child's sense of disorientation and confusion at his new surroundings are expressed through figurative language, for he first feels "like a stranger who had lost my way." The first child who speaks to him only confirms the narrator's sense that school is an ominous place; "my father's dead," the boy tells him. This line has strong implications for the rest of the story. First, the fact that this child's father is literally dead functions as an external expression of the narrator's feeling that his father has abandoned him completely, as if he were dead.

Furthermore, the death of the narrator's father is foreshadowed. When, at the end of the allegorical "half day"—meaning the end of the narrator's life—he leaves the gates of the schoolyard, his father is not there. By this point in the story, the narrator is an old man and it can be assumed that his father is not there to help him across the street because his father has indeed been long dead.

The mention of death also functions as a foreshadowing of his death. By the end of the "day," the narrator is an old man, and very close to the end of his life. In allegorical terms, when this story is read as a description of life and the human condition, it is a reminder that death is already lurking. Everyone who is born must eventually die. The narrator's sense of distress at been "pushed" into the schoolyard and abandoned by his father is further expressed through use of descriptive language.

He mentions that "the gate was closed, letting out a pitiable screech." The "pitiable screech" of the gate sounds like a description of a child crying. Indeed, "some of the children burst into tears."

The earlier description of the school as a "fortress" is echoed in the military style by which the children are organized, as "the men began sorting us into ranks." This military imagery evokes associations of discipline, strict authority, violence and an unshakable structure of power.

The child's sense that he is at the bottom of a hierarchical structure and that he stands under the eye of an all-knowing and unforgiving authority is expressed through his description of the architecture of the school itself, as well as the physical location of the children in that architecture: "We were formed into an intricate pattern in the great courtyard surrounded on three sides by high buildings of several floors; from each floor we were overlooked by a long balcony roofed in wood."

The key term in this description is "overlooked"; although the narrator does not indicate actual people in the balconies who overlook the children, the implication is that authority lurks in every nook and cranny of the school, whether it is seen or not. A feeling of being overlooked by unseen eyes carries ominous undertones, for the threat of discipline and punishment hangs upon the vision of absolute authority.

Finally, the children give in to their powerlessness over their situation: "We submitted to the facts, and this submission brought a sort of contentment."

The use of the word "submission" con- firms the previous implications that this is a place where one has no free will over the powers that be, and that the only way to achieve "a sort of contentment" is to "submit to the facts," to give in to the will of the authorities.

Once the narrator has overcome his initial anxiety, the language that evokes images of punishment, discipline, and imprisonment disappears. He describes a rich variety of experiences in the school that culminate in the line: "We ate delicious food, took a little nap, and woke up to go on with friendship and love, play and learning." However, these positive experiences inside the school are tempered by negative ones. The "lady," who is the schoolteacher often resorts to physical punishment. So the child's initial apprehension that school is a place of punishment is in part confirmed by his actual experience.

Furthermore, the sense of being stuck in the school remains since "the time for changing one's mind was over and gone." Here, the opening imagery describing the neighborhood of the boy's family as a paradise is echoed once again: "there was no question of ever returning to the paradise of home." The use of the term "cast" to describe the boy's experience of being forced to leave his home is given greater depth, as the children have all been cast out of the paradise of their own homes.

Here the story's allegorical implications become more apparent, for Mahfouz suggests that the experience of life, the human condition, is that of being cast out of a paradise of early childhood into a harsh world of struggle and pain, tempered by moments of love and joy. "Nothing lay ahead of us but exertion, struggle, and perseverance. Those who were able took advantage of the opportunities for success and happiness that presented themselves amid the worries."

The implication is that, like the children who "submit" to their imprisonment in the school, human beings must "submit" to the conditions of life, and make the best of it "amid the worries." Source: Liz Brent, for *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2000.

# Critical Essay #2

*Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses the perception of time and the changes that the passage of time brings in "Half a Day."*

"Half a Day," included in his 1989 collection of short fiction *The False Dawn,* is one of Naguib Mahfouz's final works. It was written toward the end of his long and successful writing career, which spanned much of the twentieth century. In his fiction, both novels and short stories, Mahfouz chronicled the significant political, social, and cultural changes Egypt had experienced during his lifetime, such as the rebellion against the British colonizers and the loosening of restrictions on women. Mahfouz's work often concerns itself with overarching moral and spiritual themes told through the experiences of very real people. His short stories differ from his novels in their immediate impact on the reader. As Mahfouz once said, he extensively researched his novels, but his "short stories come straight from the heart."

In "Half a Day"—which derives its style from the "sudden fiction," or short short stories, that a younger generation of Egyptian writers began producing in the 1970s—Mahfouz encompasses a vast span of time. He is able to do so by using the literary device of a young boy attending school for the first time who emerges at the end of the school day an old man. The half day, from sunup to sunset, represents almost an entire lifetime. The narrator in the story conflates mnemonic time—time pertaining to the memory—and spatial time, blending the passage of his life into one brief period. While the story demonstrates how quickly time can pass, it also functions on a larger level, focusing on Egypt as a place of transition instead of on only the aging of one man. Ahmad Muhammad 'Atiyya writes in his article "Naguib Mahfouz and the Short Story" that "the short story is certainly the art of the partial, the individual and the simple, through which we are led to totalities and generalities." In "Half a Day", with only a few carefully chosen words, Mahfouz evokes the changes that Egypt has undergone throughout the course of the twentieth century.

The story is told from the point of view of a young boy who takes "delight" in his surroundings but is fearful of being "cast into" his first day of school. The physical scene that the narrator describes is idyllic; his clothes are new and colorful, and he walks hand in hand with his father "along a street lined with gardens." The street is surrounded by fields filled with growing crops, themselves symbolic of the regeneration and vitality of life. The prickly pears and henna trees appeal to the senses as well, and contribute to the completeness of the boy's experience growing up in this pleasant suburb of Cairo.

The boy, however, does not want to go to school. He unfavorably compares the "intimacy" of home, where his mother watches for him at the window, with the "building that stood at the end of the road like some huge, high-walled fortress, exceedingly stern and grim." The boy's father understands the magnitude of this day, though his son does not; he knows that this is the first step made by his son toward becoming a productive citizen, as he enters the "'factory that makes useful men out of boys."' More

optimistically, the father also tells his son, "'Today you truly begin life,'" for the boy is about to begin to learn about the world.

The boy soon comes to embrace his schooling and the intellectual, social, and spiritual growth that comes with it. Indeed, the next paragraphs reveal the development of the boy into an adult. He experiences friendship and love, and learns how to play and how to think. His transition from innocent and naive child, one who enjoys "delicious food" and "first songs," into a more knowledgeable adolescent takes place. The boy learns to be "watchful, at the ready, and very patient." More importantly, he comes to understand that life "was not all a matter of playing and fooling around." He also discovers that life can bring hardship and discomfort, as epitomized by the teacher's scolding and more frequent reliance on physical punishment. He is undergoing the process of maturation, learning to work and wait for what he wants, but accepting the difficulties and the setbacks that come with life.

Further evidence of the boy's ascent to adulthood is his understanding that "there was no question of ever returning to the paradise of home." The grown boy now has responsibilities, which preclude the utter bliss and carefreeness of youth. The narrator does not long for the comforts of childhood, but sets himself to the challenges of adulthood, realizing that "[N]othing lay ahead of us but exertion, struggle, and perseverance." The narrator knows that some of his contemporaries manage to build contented lives for themselves, for they "took advantage of the opportunities for success and happiness," but whether or not he achieves happiness with his own life is not clear.

The ringing of the bell "announcing the passing of the day and the end of work" symbolizes the transformation of the narrator into an old man. Instead of tolling the end of the day at school, the bell signifies the end of the narrator's participation in the world of adult work. It is at this moment that the narrator re-enters the outside world—that is, the world not consumed by the duties required of productive citizens, whether it is school or employment; he experiences a great shock. He sees the change that has overtaken the landscape of Cairo. The streets are lined with automobiles and trash, and land that once was fields is now "taken over" with skyscrapers. The narrator also finds the street filled with "hordes of humanity" instead of individuals. Among those who inhabit the world of Cairo are conjurers, tricksters, and clowns. The negative slant with which the narrator views his surroundings is apparent as he clearly evokes a chaotic street scene, filled with sirens wailing, "disturbing noises," and angry people. The narrator's disgust with what he sees is further evidenced by his words when he sees a fire engine attempting to reach a blazing fire: "'Let the fire take its pleasure in what it consumes.'"

The final paragraph of the story indicates the changes that Cairo has undergone. The beginning of the story certainly takes place prior to the 1950s (and probably earlier), which was when Egypt achieved complete freedom from British domination. This time period is indicated by the reference to the red tarboosh that the boy wears, a hat that was banned by the government of the new republic. By the end of the story, many decades have passed, during which time Egypt, and particularly Cairo as its largest urban center, underwent enormous change. Egypt became industrialized and

experienced all of the problems that go along with industrialization, such as overcrowding in the cities and pollution. Mahfouz saw firsthand the effects—both positive and negative—of the move toward modernization. At the age of 12, Mahfouz moved to a suburb of Cairo known as Abbasiyya, which he later described as "lush with greenery and had few building.

Houses were small, consisting only of one storey and each surrounded by a garden, while open fields stretched as far as the horizon. . . and the silence was deep.'" In "Half a Day," Mahfouz expresses his nostalgia for the old quarters of Cairo, in the days before industrialization. A comparison of Mahfouz's perception of the Abbasiyya of the 1920s with his representation of the neighborhood of the narrator's youth in "Half a Day" shows remarkable similarities between the two; and Abbasiyya certainly compares favorably to the chaos that comes to inhabit the area.

As the location transforms, so does the narrator, but the full extent of his aging is not revealed until the last line of the story. Unable to get across the busy street, the narrator waits a long time. Finally, a boy comes up to him and offers his arm along with these words: "'Grandpa, let me take you across.'" With this gesture, the narration makes clear the unrelentless quality of life, which forces people and places to change. This narrative twist also returns the text full circle: the story begins with a young boy clutching tight his father's hand, about to be taken to a new and unknown place where he is not eager to go; the story ends with the old man about to grab hold of a young lad's arm so the boy can take him to what has become a strange place—modern Cairo.

Against this cyclical nature of life, the young lad can also be seen as symbolic of death-as the being that will usher the old man to the next stage of existence. The young lad, like the boy's father, is taking the narrator to a new place against his will. The narrator's death is foreshadowed in the two encounters he has with other male figures. One is the boy he meets at school whose father is dead. Then, upon leaving school, the narrator encounters an acquaintance, a middle-aged man who is instantly recognizable to the narrator. The man answers the question of how he is doing with the words, "'not all that good.'" In this response, the narrator's death is symbolically foretold. The aging of the man's corporeal body is also reflected in the run-down state in which he finds the streets of Cairo. While the narrator's eventual death is a foregone conclusion, these elements further reinforce the inevitable cycle of birth and death—the cycle of change.

**Source:** Rena Korb, for *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2000.

# Critical Essay #3

*Carol Dell'Amico teaches English at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, where she is currently working on a dissertation. The essay which follows presents "Half a Day" as a story in which there are two allegories. One allegory is argued to have universal significance and the second to refer specifically to Egyptian history.*

"Half a Day" is an allegory in which a child's experiences at school symbolize a typical person's experiences of coming of age and maturation. This allegory is achieved through a multiplication and overlapping of "times." That is, the boy's narration suggests more than one unit of time (some obvious units or concepts of measure are: one minute, childhood, one light year, an average human life-span, a millennium, and so forth).

The narration about the school day engages four different times. First, it is understood to cover a school day, that is, almost the whole of the titular "half a day." Second, it can be taken to encompass a youth's entire scholastic experience and, therefore, a temporal unit of roughly twelve years (the boy's description of his school day is presented in grammatical tenses that convey the passing of many years' observations, many of which specifically pertain to a person's combined years at school). Third, since the narrator meets a "middle-aged" friend upon leaving the school that day, his description also encompasses the "time" of childhood to full maturity or middle-age, which is a temporal unit of roughly forty years. Fourth, insofar as most everybody on this earth comes of age and then matures, this tale encompasses universal time (i.e. the time of global humankind). It is everybody's story. Thus, the progress of a human being from youth to middle-age is conveyed through a skillful rendering of (almost) half a day, in which (at least) four different "times" are cleverly overlapped and interwoven.

Yet, there is also that part of "Half a Day" that occurs after the boy leaves the school. In this "after school" portion of the story, the middle-aged man becomes a "Grandpa" whom a young man "gallantly" offers to escort across a busy street. Coming of age and maturation correspond to the time spent at school, and this second part of the story covers aging or growing old. This latter section also purveys the following idea: that when the boy was in school (for those forty years), a seemingly rural and rather bucolic world of "gardens," "extensive fields planted with crops" and other flora, mutated into a strange, mechanized, foreign world. This new world causes the now middle-aged narrator to come "to a startled halt" outside of the gates of the school:

Good Lord! Where was the street lined with gardens? Where had it disappeared to? When did all these vehicles invade it? And when did all these hordes of humanity come to rest upon its surface? How did these hills of refuse come to cover its sides? And where were the fields that bordered it? High buildings had taken over, the street surged with children, and disturbing noises shook the air.

The "disturbing" nature of this new world is perhaps best symbolized in the man's alarmed focusing on the fire engine's wail, which to him is like a shriek: "The siren of a

fire engine shrieked," the reader is informed; and then again: "The fire engine's siren was shrieking at full pitch as it moved at a snail's pace. . .".

This second part of "Half a Day" adds some complexity to this allegory of life and maturation. Clearly, there is at least one additional level of meaning to take into account; namely, that the maturation of this character coincides with the urbanization and industrialization of his surroundings. While this boy has been growing up, his surroundings have moved from being largely rural ("gardens" and "fields"), to being those of a typical late-twentieth-century big city ("vehicles," "refuse," "hordes of humanity," and so on).

One thing to be said about this is that it adds a possible autobiographical dimension to the story. While Egypt may have begun to accommodate the technologies of heavy industry in the nineteenth century like most other nations, significant levels of industrialization did not occur in this country until the mid to late twentieth-century. As Naguib Mahfouz came of age and matured, so Egyptian metropolitan centers industrialized. Mahfouz is from Cairo; Cairo is Egypt's most urbanized area; Mahfouz's lifespan coincides with Egypt's urbanization and industrialization.

An easy conclusion to come to, with the above in mind (but a far too hasty and incorrect conclusion), would be that the story recounts Egypt's "coming of age," or its belated "modernization" on the heels of its already more industrially technologized global neighbors. The problem with such a conclusion is that it leaves a number of narrative details unaccounted for. For instance, why does this process of urbanization occur as a separate history? In other words, why is this process of mechanization depicted as occurring entirely separate from the story of the boy's coming of age and to maturity? Why does it occur in the second part of the story, in the "after school" and "growing old" portion? There is no mistaking, after all, the effect of having the character stop short in shock, upon leaving the school's gates, at the sight of the noisy and crowded scene before him. "Half a Day," in no uncertain terms, is cleaved into two separate parts.

In a story whose first part is a bravura meshing of disparate "times" (four, no less), why not the interweaving of one more, the time or history of industrialization? Yet, this process is very carefully set apart from the phase of maturation and is instead intertwined with the time of the man growing older. Clearly, urbanization in "Half a Day" does not pertain to coming of age or maturation, but, rather, to aging or becoming older.

A reasonable interpretation of this distinction follows from deciding that while the boy-becoming- adult in the first part of the story stands in for all of humanity, the old man in the second part stands in only for Egypt. In this light, the story has two parts so as to separate Egyptian time from global, universal time. There are, therefore, two allegories to consider: one of significance to humans in general, and another which pertains to industrialization and societies in which the particular society in question is Egypt. What this leads one to realize is that the meeting of old and young at the story's end is, in an allegorical nutshell, the story's model for Egypt in terms of its long history and its metropolitan centers in their newly urbanized guise.

The man in the second part of the story is old already, and growing older. If one considers the long stretch of Egyptian history, industrialization would not signify, as it is tends to mean in the west, the latest major signpost on a road of continuous progress over time. It would present itself, rather, as the latest culture in a long history of different cultures, or the latest way of organizing life in a long series of different regimes and societies. The territory now hosting the United Arab Republic of Egypt, already had, as far back as 3500 B.C., a society and culture as complexly organized and bureaucratically networked as any today. Moreover, after the age of the pharaohs, a number of other cultures and empires flourished on the very same soil—Mesopotamian, Roman, and Greek cultures, for example. In terms of different civilizations, cultures, or ways of life, Egypt is terribly old indeed.

And, so, the old man sniffs in tired disdain, feeling, merely, "[e]xtremely irritated": "Let the fire take its pleasure in what it consumes." Far from being bowled over by the advent of vehicles and other such inventions, the old man tends to notice how this machine of speed and efficiency can only proceed at a "snail's pace" in the clogged city space. The noise and smoke that accompany urbanization and industrialization could not possibly connote, the story pointedly makes clear, coming of age or absolute progress within the context of Egyptian history. It entails, rather, the inventions and ways of life of the new cultural kid on the block-old man (Egypt) meets young (heavy industry, urbanization).

"Half a Day," in this way, reflects Mahfouz's most recent stance toward societal changes in Egypt. Whereas he long has been known as one to embrace all varieties of change, by the time of the writing of this story, he has begun to express selective reservations about certain types of change.

By now, six possible timescapes have been entertained: a school day; a scholastic tenure; maturation; universal time; twentieth-century metropolitan Egyptian history; and, lastly, deep Egyptian time. There are at least two more "times" worth considering in this story, and they are especially felt upon reading the story's final sentence: "Grandpa, let me take you across." With this, the reader is suddenly imbued with a sense of the terrible brevity of a human being's life-span. The protagonist has not simply aged, his life seems almost to be over! This, when but a few hundred words before this enfeebled old creature was a fresh little boy! The surprise of this final line makes the reader feel that the human life-span is an abbreviated and paltry thing. This last frame of time is that of the vast cosmos itself. And in this timescape, the life of human beings and the march of different civilizations seem petty, brief little events indeed.

And, finally, this story's amazing compression of time passing can be understood to be a representation of the way in which human psychology experiences the passage of time. Mahfouz, certainly, was greatly impressed, during his years of literary apprenticeship, by various writers and thinkers who were exploring the vagaries of memory and temporality. Why is it, they ask, that some moments seem like an age, but sitting down and trying to remember one's childhood makes one feel as if the years lasted no more than a few minutes? The regularly ticking time of clock and calendar means very little in respect to human psychology and emotion, they aver. Or, some propose, is not the

passage of time more fully felt—and the past even recaptured—if one's memory of it is vast and faithful? One of the most famous books that explores memory, and which influenced Mahfouz, was written by a Frenchman named Marcel Proust. Its title, once translated from the French, tends to be either *The Past Recaptured* or else *Remembrance of Things Past.* It is a hugely long book, in three volumes, in which the main character remembers his whole life and society in great and minute detail. In this light, Mahfouz's tale of accelerated time signifies how most people feel about time passing. That is, unless one makes a prodigious effort to re-live and remember the past, one will feel, on the whole, that "time flies."

**Source:** Carol Dell'Amico, for *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2000.

# Adaptations

Mahfouz has written numerous screenplays for the Egyptian cinema. Many of his stories have been adapted to the screen, including sixteen of his novels. These films are not readily available in the United States.

# Topics for Further Study

Mahfouz's life has spanned much of the twentieth century, and his work has been greatly influenced by the social and political upheaval in Egypt. Research the history of Egypt in the twentieth century. How have these events influenced specific themes and concerns of Mahfouz's stories?

Recurring themes in the stories of Mahfouz include death, time, God, and the human condition. These concerns were influenced in part by his religious upbringing in an Islamic family. What are the fundamental beliefs of the religion of Islam? Which countries in the world are predominantly Islamic? How has Mahfouz's Islamic upbringing impacted the central themes and concerns of his stories?

Westerners are generally familiar with the ancient history of Egypt. Yet what artistic and cultural styles are relevant to modern Egypt? Find out more about modern Egyptian art, music, or theater. What social and political factors have influenced modern artistic and cultural trends in Egypt?

Mahfouz has been criticized for the portrayal of women in his stories. Learn more about the status of women in modern Egypt. How has the role of women changed over the course of the twentieth century? How is the status of women in Egypt different from the status of women in the West?

Mahfouz's involvement in the film industry ranged from holding a bureaucratic position in the national film censorship office, writing screenplays based on the stories of other authors, and seeing his own stories made into films. Find out more about the Egyptian film industry and Mahfouz's involvement in it. In what ways has Mahfouz influenced the Egyptian film industry? Did his experience with film impact his writing style?

Receiving the Swedish Academy's Nobel Prize for literature in 1988 catapulted Mahfouz into the international limelight. Investigate the history of the Swedish Academy and the Nobel Prize. What is the criterion for determining the winners? When was the first prize awarded? What other writers have received Nobel Prizes?

# Compare and Contrast

**1989:** When Mahfouz's short story "Half a Day" was first published in Arabic in 1989, he had recently been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, earning him instant international recognition. By this point, however, most of his novels and short story collections were not yet available in English translation.

**Today:** In the decade since he received the Nobel Prize for literature, more than half of Mahfouz's body of work has been published in English translation.

**1922:** Egypt gains independence from British rule. Today: Egypt, despite many social and political upheavals, remains a sovereign state and a United States ally.

**1948:** Israel is established as an independent state, ushering in a tumultuous period of con- flicts between Egypt and Israel.

**1978:** The signing of a peace treaty between Israel and Egypt initiated a new era in the relationship between the two nations.

**Today:** The relationship between Israel and Egypt is improved, but still problematic.

# What Do I Read Next?

*The Palace Walk: Cairo Trilogy I,* (1956) by Naguib Mahfouz, is the first novel of the acclaimed trilogy, which follows three generations of an Egyptian family. The other two novels, *Palace of Desire: Cairo Trilogy II* (1956) and Sugar Street: Cairo Trilogy III, (1957) complete the trilogy.

Mahfouz's *Echoes of an Autobiography* (1994) is a memoir written as a loose collection of vignettes from the author's personal experience.

*The Early Novels of Naguib Mahfouz* (1994), by Matti Moosa, introduces the Western reader to the most noted novels of Mahfouz. The study also places his stories in social, political and religious context of modern Egypt.

*The Arabic Novel in Egypt, 1914-1970* (1973), written by Fatma Moussa-Mahmoud, is a concise, easy-to-read history of the Arabic novel. It provides brief overviews of the careers and work of key Arab writers.

*The History of Egypt from Muhammed Ali to Mubarek* (1985), by P. J. Vatikiotis, is a comprehensive, authoritative history of Egypt.

Menahem Milson's *Naguib Mahfouz: The Novelist- Philosopher of Cairo* (1988) provides close readings of the works of Mahfouz based on an analysis of their linguistic and literary sources.

*Naguib Mahfouz: From Regional Fame to Global Recognition* (1993), edited by Michael Beard and Adnan Haydar, is a collection of articles that addresses the work of Mahfouz from the perspective of both his regional importance as an Arabic writer and his international significance.

# Further Study

El-Enany, Rasheed. *Naguib Mahfouz: The Pursuit of Meaning,* London: Routledge, 1993.

A reassessment of the writings of Mahfouz, updating earlier criticism of the writer. Discusses the need to categorize the stylistic phases of his literary output.

Gordon, Haim. *Naguib Mahfouz's Egypt: Existential Themes in His Writings,* New York: Greenwood Press, 1990.

Discusses the novels of Mahfouz in terms of existential issues facing modern Egyptians. Examines his work in the cultural, political, social, and religious context of modern Egypt.

Le Gassick, Trevor, ed. *Critical Perspectives on Naguib Mahfouz,* Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1991.

A collection of essays on the work of Mahfouz. Provides an overview of the subjects and themes of his work, and determines his contribution to Arabic literature.

Mehrez, Samia. *Egyptian Writers between History and Fiction: Essays on Mahfouz, Sonallah Ibrahim, and Gamal al- Ghitani,* Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1994.

Analysis of three of the most prominent Egyptian writers of the twentieth century.

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**Introduction**

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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