

# **Miramar Study Guide**

## **Miramar by Naguib Mahfouz**

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# Contents

<a href="#">Miramar Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 1, Amer Wagdi.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 2, Hosny Allam.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 3, Mansour Bahy.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 4, Sarhan al-Beheiry.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Chapter 5, Amer Wagdi [2].....</a>	<a href="#">19</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">21</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">28</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">31</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">34</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">38</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">40</a>



# Plot Summary

Miramar by Naguib Mahfouz uses four narrators to tell the story, each from his own perspective of how a beautiful peasant girl, serving as maid in the Miramar Pension unintentionally turns the establishment upside down. Although victimized, she alone is a noble character.

Octogenarian Amer Wagdi, a bitter ex-journalist, moves into Mme. Mariana's Miramar Pension, hoping to live out his days in peace. This appears unlikely as he meets sexagenarian Tolba Marzuq, his ideological opposite and a fellow boarder. Both know Mariana from long ago. A beautiful and innocent young peasant woman, Zohra Salama, is hired as a maid. Younger boarders join them: Sarhan al-Beheiry, Hosny Allam, and Mansour Bahy, and they become acquainted during a party preceding the famed singer Umm Kulthum's monthly radio broadcast.

Sarhan, who has tired of Safeya Barakat, a live-in lover, covertly and successfully courts Zohra. Rumors spread among the boarders that Zohra is a prostitute and Mariana her pimp. Safeya sneaks into the pension after the final break-up with Sarhan, causes a scene, and Hosny escorts her away. Zohra begins taking reading lessons from Aleya Muhammad, an attractive teacher whose family also lives in the building. Zohra's relatives fail to force her to return home. Mahmoud Abu-Abbas, Sarhan's friend and a newspaper vendor, proposes marriage to Zohra but is refused. When Sarhan drops Zohra for the tutor, he and Mahmoud have a fist-fight. When Hosny tries to rape Zohra, he and Sarhan also have a fist-fight.

When Sarhan and Mansour, who has wooed away from her imprisoned husband an old flame, Doreya, only to tire of her and dump her, also fight, Mariana expels Sarhan. Mansour, grown psychotic, vows to kill him. After following Sarhan to a bar and watching him drink heavily, Mansour follows him into the street and believes that he kicks the unconscious man to death. Word of this spreads to the Miramar. In fact, Sarhan that night has learned that a black market scheme in which he is involved with friend Ali Bakir has fallen apart. In desperation at the thought of being arrested, Sarhan commits suicide.

Sobering in the morning, Mansour turns himself in to the police for the murder, but the autopsy proves that he is innocent. No one knows what will come of him. Mariana fires Zohra for bringing bad luck to the Miramar. Amer tenderly urges her to build on the sufferings that she has endured and make a good life for herself.



# Chapter 1, Amer Wagdi

## Chapter 1, Amer Wagdi Summary

After twenty years away, working as a journalist, 80-year old Amer Wagdi returns to his old residence in Alexandria's Miramar Pension, still owned by Mme. Mariana, an aging beauty. Amer recalls his late master, the Pasha, and all of the things that he should have recorded in memoirs. After comparing complaints about aging, Amer and Mariana plans a New Year's Eve celebration. Amer finds fellow lodger Tolba Marzuq, an embittered ideological opponent, annoying but avoids politics. Tolba and Mariana are long-ago lovers. Amer recalls him once arriving at a gala event drunk.

Amer admits beautiful Zohra when she comes asking for a job. Mariana, who is delighted to have a maid, shrugs off Amer's concern that Zohra's family may try to take her home and she proves to be a quick learner. Mariana dresses Zohra in fetching modern clothes. Amer talks with Zohra afternoons when she brings his coffee. She likes and trusts him but not the wisecracking Tolba. She has run away after being exploited by her grandfather and brother-in-law. When she assumes that Tolba's request for a massage has coarser intentions, Amer reiterates that this is no place for an innocent girl.

In short order the pension is filled by three younger boarders. Sarhan al-Beheiry is a dark, solid peasant about 30, a deputy head accountant at the Alexandria Textile Mills. Hosny Allam is slightly younger and built like a wrestler. Mansour Bahy, 25, though an introvert, is an announcer for the Alexandria Broadcasting Service. They get to know one another during the party that precedes Umm Kuthum's monthly radio concert. Mariana summarizes their backgrounds. All proclaim support for the Revolution. Mansour knows of Amer's fame as a journalist and they bond over history. Music ends the conversations. Mariana is happy with her young boarders and surprised at Tolba's distrust of them, particularly Sarhan.

After seeing Zohra and Sarhan whispering in the dark hall, ostensibly about his laundry, Amer warns her about young men's intentions and is touched by her appreciation. He wishes that one mistake had not precluded his having offspring. He reminds himself to trust God again soon. Later, when Mariana confides her suspicions about Zohra and Sarhan, Amer pleads Zohra's honesty. While dreaming about the bloody uprising of 1919, when the British invade the Azhar, Amer checks on a ruckus in the hall. Hosny is leading an irate woman away. Mariana warns that she will not tolerate such behavior and assumes that the woman is Sarhan's ex-fiancé. Zohra's role in the fight is a mystery that Amer wants not to consider.

When Mariana tells him that Zohra is beginning reading lessons with a teacher on the fifth floor, Amer congratulates her and helps her with her lessons, while others laugh behind her back. One day Amer sees Zohra studying with the attractive tutor. Afterwards Zohra confides that Sarhan sees obstacles to their marrying. When Zohra's relatives



come to take her home, Mariana defends her but afterwards, Amer wishes that conditions at home would allow her to return. He understands her situation and wishes her better fortune than he has had.

As autumn ends, newspaper vendor Mahmoud Abu al-Abbas asks Amer about Zohra before asking for her hand. When Zohra refuses, Tolba predicts a bad ending. Zohra has heard Mahmoud bragging that he will beat her daily to keep her in line. Admiring her courage, Amer asks God to protect her. Later, Tolba informs Amer that Sarhan is planning to run off with Zohra's teacher. Soon comes word of a fight between Sarhan and Mahmoud. Depressed, Amer is dreaming of his father's death when he hears shouts in the hall: Sarhan and a drunken Hosny fighting after Hosny tries to rape Zohra. Mariana is fed up with all of the young men, but still Zohra refuses to return home, saying that there are rats everywhere.

After being couped up for days, Amer visits the Trianon, where Sarhan appears, announcing his departure from the pension. Mariana says that she throws him out after he assaults Zohra and proclaims that he will marry the schoolteacher. Sarhan and Mansour then fight. Amer bristles at Tolba's suggestion that Mariana is exploiting Zohra as a whore. Zohra vows to continue her education and thanks Amer for his pledge of ongoing help. He is indifferent to Mariana's plans about New Year's Eve. Days later she brings news of Sarhan's murder on the road to the Palma. Tolba and Mariana worry about police questioning and all agree that there are plenty of suspects. In shock, Zohra has isolated herself. Amer chants the Qur'an.

## Chapter 1, Amer Wagdi Analysis

Chapter 1 introduces all of the major characters and establishes the chronology for the entire novel. Amer Wagdi moves into Mme. Mariana's Miramar Pension. Wagdi meets fellow boarder Tolba Marzuq, his ideological opposite. Beautiful young Zohra Salama is hired as a maid. Sarhan al-Beheiry, Hosny Allam, and Mansour Bahy become boarders. All become acquainted while waiting for Umm Kulthum's radio broadcast. Sarhan secretly courts Zohra. A woman sneaks into the pension, causes a scene, and Hosny escorts her away. Zohra begins taking reading lessons from a teacher who lives in the building. Zohra's relatives fail to force her to return home. Mahmoud Abu-Abbas proposes marriage to Zohra but is refused. Sarhan drops Zohra for the teacher. Sarhan and Mahmoud have a fistfight. Hosny tries to rape Zohra and he and Sarhan have a fistfight. Sarhan and Mansour have a fistfight. Sarhan is expelled from the pension. Sarhan is murdered the night before New Years' Eve.

Amer speaks first, from the perspective of the generation of Egyptians that deals with the British occupiers during and after World War I. He is given to bitter flashbacks whose context and details are often difficult to establish. In his youth, Amer belongs to the Nationalist Party. He is expelled from al-Ahram University as a youth, an event that leaves him unhappily a life-long bachelor. In the late 1960s he ends a long and distinguished career in journalism marred by the fact that his editor had marginalized him because of his old-fashioned style. He returns to Alexandria and takes a room in



Mme. Mariana's pension. A getting reacquainted chat establishes that they are old, non-sexual friends, while Tolba, 20 years his junior boast that he and Mariana long ago are lovers. It is news to Amer and adds little to his appreciation of the aristocrat who is bitter about the Revolution costing him and his class their fortunes, but not daring to say anything against the regime that is generally assumed to employ spies and informers. Mariana represents the few foreigners who remain in Egypt during World War II and the subsequent Revolution and in theory have no right to own property. Neither Tolba nor Mariana is an independent narrator.

The others who later in the novel tell their own version of the basic story are the younger generation, Hosny, Mansour, and Sarhan, all of whom are attracted to the young maid, Zohra. She represents the Egyptian peasantry striving to improve its lot. Traditional views on women - without mind or religion, improved by regular beatings, and subject to the will of male relatives - are all disclosed by following Zohra. Zohra sees the key to success in life linked with literacy. The teacher whom she hires to tutor her already dresses and behaves in a professional manner. Until she comes to the pension, Zohra wears the ankle-length gellabiya. Old-fashioned Amer warns that dressing her to show off her figure can only lead to trouble. He alone befriends the girl. The others lust for her and laugh at her behind her back. All of the young tenants assume that she is a prostitute, a thesis that old-fashioned Amer rejects. Mariana is determined that her pension, once renowned for quality, is not to be degraded by inappropriate behavior. Most of the males assume that Mariana's title of Madame is not entirely honorific.

Primarily by reflections on the political events of his long life, but sometimes in argument with reactionary Tolba, Amer brings out the major events of Egyptian history from the time of the man he calls his master, Ahmed Shafiq Pasha, Khedive of Egypt at the end of the 19th century through the Revolution of 1952. Amer claims that party differences drive him into "cold and meaningless" (pg. 11) political neutrality, specifies that he dislikes the Muslim Brotherhood, cannot understand the Communists, and sees the Revolution as somehow incorporating all earlier political currents. This is, of course, the military coup that eventually puts Gamal Abdel Nasser in power. Nasser still rules at the time that this novel is set, but is never named in the novel. Amer is more candid in relaying Mariana's chronology of gained and lost fortune and musings about the terrible sacrifices of her generation. More candid, but also more wary, is former bureaucrat, Tola, whose considerable properties have been sequestered by the Revolution. Much more could be made of it, but Amer is loath to argue. Tolba blames Saad Zaghloul for all the evils that have befallen Egypt.

As he ages, Amer is hopes to return to the Islam that he has ceased to practice. He and the other lodgers all drink alcohol and no mention is made of prayers. Amer often quotes from the Qur'an, particularly the sura (chapter) describing God as The Beneficent.

The story has two cultural centers. First, the residents all gather around the radio in the communal area of the pension, eagerly awaiting the concert that Umm Kulthum gives the first Thursday of each month. Umm Kulthum is Egypt's most famous singer. Her



concerts last for hours and the characters for the most part sing along on the choruses. Despite what they say, Umm Kulthum is at the end of her long career and her legendary voice is in decline in the late 1960s. The boarders gather over shish kebab and alcohol as they await the concert. Amer emphasizes the get-to-know-one-another nature of the evening and incorporates most of his political material in the conversations. Tolba is the odd-man-out, uncomfortable with the company. It helps create suspicions about him.

Amer moves more swiftly than the other narrators through the elements of conflict centering on beautiful Zohra, and often depicts himself advising her when she delivers his afternoon coffee. This service to all the lodgers becomes a major means of advancing the story from each narrator's part of view. Each sees Zohra as uniquely appreciating himself. Only in Amer's case is this true. She confides that she does not like wisecracking Tolba, who first causes a commotion when Zohra assumes that a requested massage has more sinister intentions. Amer consistently worries that the pension is no place for the innocent girl.

Amer is rather sparse in offering detail about the younger boarders, which is justified by the fact that they will have their own say. Amer is happy not to have only elderly companions. Sarhan is a dark, solid peasant serving as deputy head accountant at the Alexandria Textile Mills. Hosny is slightly younger and built like a wrestler. Late in Amer's section is it revealed that he is the younger brother of a well-known police chief, giving Tolba a scare. Mansour, an introvert, is an announcer for the Alexandria Broadcasting Service. He knows of Amer's fame as a journalist and hopes to write a program about him. Mariana is happy with her young men and surprised at Tolba's distrust of them, Sarhan above all.

The conflicts seem always to break out in the hallway that services the individual rooms. Mariana's penchant for gossip feeds the others. Amer does not assign names to the enraged woman who assaults Sarhan and is led away. Mariana assumes that she is a jilted fiancée. He also leaves nameless the young teacher who lives upstairs with her family and gives lessons to Zohra. The other males all note that she is attractive. Rumors first have Sarhan abandoning Zohra for the teacher. The suspense builds throughout the novel, for Sarhan is the last to offer his version. The first chapter ends abruptly when Sarhan is found murdered and all of the boarders realize that they are potential suspects. Amer at the end of the book resumes the narration, tying up all of the loose ends.



## Chapter 2, Hosny Allam

### Chapter 2, Hosny Allam Summary

Bored at the Cecil Hotel, Hosny is directed to the Miramar, where at first sight he is sure that Zohra will fall in love with him. Mariana, whom he takes for an aging French madame and hopes that she is not retired, gives him a room. Watching Zohra make the bed, he finds her serious. He obsesses about being turned down for marriage. At breakfast Hosny meets and instantly finds beneath himself Amer, Tolba, and Sarhan, although he endures Sarhan in case he may prove useful some day. Hosny drives his Ford at top speed to relieve tension. He picks up a girl in the Metro Cinema and forgets her name before he gets home. He wonders whether Zohra's behavior conceals cunning or fear. Encounters with the old people increases Hosny's hatred. When Mariana introduces Mansour, Hosny finds him diffident.

Fear pervades the group that gathers to listen to Umm Kulthum, but whiskey turns them briefly familiar. Amer rambles about his heroic past and Sarhan tells endless jokes. All praise the Revolution. Hosny suspects that all are informers and knows that he must keep busy lest he do something stupid like marrying. He prefers to remain a bachelor and treat womankind as his harem. Unable to concentrate on the music, Hosny fails to embrace Zohra in the hallway and at intermission heads out, bitterly. He forces himself on a flabby, aging Maltese madame and afterwards hears her business advice: buy out a foreigner looking to flee Egypt. Next day at tea time, Zohra remains cold and Hosny mulls over having seen her and Sarhan together. He will not be left out. Tolba angers him by speaking well of Sarhan and, when Hosny suggests that they share Zohra, Sarhan insists that she is a good girl.

Hearing a commotion in the hallway, Hosny is amused to see an unknown woman assaulting Sarhan while Zohra pounds away, trying to separate them. When others gather, Hosny hustles the woman away and drives her to Mazarita. He finds her passable enough some day to make use of her sexual services. To revive himself, Hosny drives through the city at top speed, visiting his regular madams. An Italian/Syrian whore whom he takes driving worries about a storm, falling darkness, and a mechanical breakdown. This amuses him. At breakfast, Hosny learns of Zohra's intention to learn to read and feels a twinge of envy at having not been so encouraged or helped. Mariana's explanation of Zohra's past convinces Hosny that Zohra is not a prostitute and that he would quickly tire of her. He drives fast on the desert road to restore himself and picks up a girl.

That evening, Hosny sees Zohra's teacher and decides that she could be worth marrying. One rainy morning, he drives her to school and she invites him to visit her parents' flat at any time. Hosny orders his Maltese madam to gather girls for an orgy. Being stuck in-doors with the old people depresses Hosny until he hears about the stormy visit of Zohra's sister and brother-in-law. Next comes news of Mahmoud's rejected proposal confuses, which Hosny further and he informs Mahmoud that Zohra is





in love with Sarhan, whose constant praise of the Revolution disgusts him. Soon afterwards, Hosny learns that Sarhan and Mahmoud have fought.

Hosny visits the Genevoise, an up-scale brothel, and reintroduces himself to Sarhan's ex-lover, Safeya Barakat. Failing to have sex with her, Hosny returns to the pension, finds Zohra defiant, and tries to force himself on her. She fights him off fiercely, driving him berserk. Sarhan intervenes. They fight until Mariana breaks it up. Again hearing noise in the hallway, Hosny delights to find Sarhan is yelling at Zohra that it is none of his business if he marries Aleya, the schoolmistress, whose family he has been visiting. Mariana evicts him. When Zohra delivers tea, she looks pale and defeated and does not listen to Hosny's pep talk, including promises of a good job and deliverance from the wolves in the pension. Her silence angers Hosny and he drives to Safeya's for a night of alcohol and sex. She suggests that he buy the Genevoise so they can together turn it into a nightclub. He agrees to move in with her, making clear that he does not believe in love. When Hosny returns, late, to the pension, Sarhan confronts him about causing trouble with Mahmoud and they begin fighting and throwing threats.

Hosny and Safeya hold preliminary discussions with the owner of the Genevoise and Hosny is happy at the prospects of spending New Year's Eve there, away from the old people. In the morning, breakfast is silent until Tolba announces Sarhan's murder. Recalling the fight at the elevators, Hosny worries about the police, but feigns unconcern. He jumps into his car for a wild drive and a great night of partying, not caring who lives or dies.

## Chapter 2, Hosny Allam Analysis

Hosny's narration is most marked by variations on its first sentence, "Ferekeeko, don't put the blame on me" (pg. 53.) This is a common phrase in colloquial Egyptian Arabic used in any variety of circumstances. Hosny uses it in conjunction with various behaviors that he knows are inappropriate but cannot avoid. It is a rather devil-may-care approach to life for someone who claims to rely on the mercy and goodness of God. Hosny's second most consistent characteristic is driving his Ford at top speed around Alexandria to reduce stress, which presumably stems from his inability to focus on an occupation. Stress is not due to a shortage of sex, for he regularly finds partners, amateur and professional. He considers all of womankind his harem. Marriage would only slow him down. Note that he moves to Alexandria when his proposal of marriage is turned down. Snippets of bitter memory are woven into the text, as were Amer's tortured memories of lost opportunities. As with Amer's flashbacks, these are often hard to follow.

Hosny shows the relations among the denizens of the Miramar Pension to be far tenser than had Amer. He detests the old men and Mariana simply for refusing to die out and has no use for his contemporaries. For reasons never developed, he tolerates insolent and opportunistic Sarhan, whom he derides as Dream Boy, feeling that he may some day prove useful to him. Hosny depicts a higher level of fear during the Umm Kulthum gathering. He feels isolated from the others as they are captivated by the music. He fails



at a pass on Zohra, grows angry, and flees into a storm to drive his anger out. Hosny pays even more attention to the weather than Amer, who had seemed rather obsessed.

Hosny regularly offers rides to the fellow boarders whom he despises and delights in the series of disturbances to the peace which break out. He is the catalyst for several of them, thanks to remarks made in passing. He operates less on the level of gossip than Amer. Hustling away a mystery woman who fights with Sarhan introduces him to Safeya Barakat, Sarhan's jilted lover whom Amer had left unnamed. He offers to come see her again, but is kept too busy with sexual liaisons that he describes rather innocently, considering his active libido. At one point he brags that never has there been such an orgy since the time of Harun al-Rashid. Harun, whose sobriquet means upright, is the fifth Abbasid Caliph whose frequent depiction in the 1001 Nights turn him into legend. Sexuality, however, is not a major part of his legacy, concubines aside. It seems an odd reference, particularly for Hosny whose education has been neglected.

Hosny gets together with Safeya at the Genevoise, an upscale brothel that has been mentioned before, but always by innuendo. They eventually agree to go into business together, turning the bordello into a nightclub and agree to move in together. From this Hosny returns to a final fight between Sarhan and Zohra when he announces that he will marry Aleya, her tutor. Hosny makes another out-of-character literary reference to Shakespeare, speaking of "the Beheiry Romeo and the Beheiry Juliet" (pg. 80.) Hosny cannot resist another attempt at winning over beautiful Zohra, but her coldness drives him into Safeya's arms and a plan to buy the Genevoise and turn it into a nightclub. Note the rare reference to current events: the Libyans are suddenly flush with petrodollars, which they will spend in neighboring countries.

As New Year's Eve approaches, Hosny is happy to have plans away from the despised old people. His section of narration ends with the news about Sarhan's murder. Recalling the fight at the elevators the night before, Hosny is worried about the police, but feigns unconcern. He jumps in his car for a wild drive and a great night of partying, not caring who lives or dies.



## Chapter 3, Mansour Bahy

### Chapter 3, Mansour Bahy Summary

Mansour is bitter that his brother, a distinguished police officer, arranges for him to live in the Miramar Pension. He comes from Cairo, works for the Alexandria Broadcasting Service, and has no plans to marry. Mariana is friendly but inquisitive and beautiful. Zohra should be in university rather than running errands for her. Filled with melancholy, he watches Zohra make the bed and tries to be sociable. She is simple and self-assured, probably driven by sex, but unphased, surrounded by dangerous men.

While at coffee on Ramleh Square, Mansour sees for the first time in two years his old friend Fawzi. They banter about Mansour's having left the Party until it grows uncomfortable, while Mansour thinks longingly about Fawzi's wife, Doreya. At breakfast Mansour meets a weird assortment of guests whom he thinks will be good for his introversion. Amer and Tolba he dismisses as representing a dying generation; Sarhan he finds sympathetic but Hosny annoying, taciturn, and reserved, behaving like a lord. Sarhan shows an interest in broadcasting and reveals his character by saying that Hosny has a talent for pleasure.

On the night of the Umm Kulthum concert, souls are bared. Miserly Sarhan is the life of the party. Amer is fascinating and worthy of esteem. Mansour has studied his writings for his radio program. Amer is flattered and anxious to tell his life's story. Tolba is afraid to comment on the history that they discuss. Hosny tries to draw Zohra into the conversation but Mariana thwarts him. Hosny leaves before the concert is over. Whenever Zohra brings tea, Mansour offers a confection and shows her admiration and affection. She tells of running away when her grandfather tries to marry her to an old man. She does not care what anyone thinks. Mansour pities her loneliness but admires her self-confidence. Mansour wonders why Hosny drives around like a maniac. One time he thinks that he sees him with Sonya.

When Mansour's colleagues tell him of his friends' arrest, he hurries by train to Cairo to see Doreya in the apartment that she had shared with Fawzi. She has no idea about Fawzi's whereabouts and no means of support. Mansour pleads that he had not sold them out and had tried to come back, but was rejected. She refuses to discuss this. Mansour promises to return and asks her to write if she needs help. He begins visiting often, exhausting himself with traveling. Staying home one evening, he mentions thinking of writing about the history of betrayal in Egypt. Amer laughs at the enormity of the subject and offers help. Mansour imagines urging Doreya to tell Fawzi about their relationship, while Amer talks about how Plato's writing gives Socrates immortality, about how faith and doubt are inseparable, life is an enigma, and the new generation is but an idea. Mansour grows depressed over believing in something but remaining unable to act. When Mansour and Doreya meet at the Cairo Zoo, Doreya looks like a cornered beast and Mansour is riddled with guilt. He blurts out a mutually uncomfortable confession of love.



Mansour awakens to the sounds of a fight in the hallway and emerges to see an unknown woman leave noisily. Zohra explains that this woman had followed Sarhan into the building and started a fight. Mariana thinks that she is Sarhan's fiancée. Zohra admits to Mansour that she and Sarhan are involved and will announce their engagement in good time. Mansour is angered by Sarhan's fickleness and hates him as he hates himself. Days later, he approves of Zohra's plan to learn to read and write through the tutor Aleya Muhammad. She will learn a craft or trade. Mansour soon returns to his usual depression, cursing Sarhan.

Mansour and Doreya next meet in a chilly café on the banks of the Nile. She is upset that the sentiments he has been writing to her are four years too late. He presses her to drop her false loyalty and claims that they will emerge as pure as gold. He yearns to hit bottom. At the Cairo train station Mansour runs into a journalist friend, who asks about troubling rumors and denies believing that Mansour is a spy. Riding home, Mansour wonders if death is his only answer. He avoids Hosny and Sarhan and walks the Corniche, wishing that he had something valuable to smash. Bringing him tea and telling about her relatives' failed attempt to take her home, Zohra observes that Mansour has been traveling a lot and brooding - signs of romance. Mansour says that someone who has betrayed his faith, friend, and master keeps spoiling plans. Zohra condemns such a man's love.

Mansour throws himself into his work, traveling to Cairo only when his nerves cannot stand staying away. He is overjoyed when Doreya surrenders herself, but soon sees that he is on the road to destruction. She tells him that his diffidence, past and present, gets him misunderstood, and that she had chosen Fawzi for his strength of character. Doreya does not care that they are the talk of the town and quotes Mansour's argument for gaining her freedom. Mansour changes the subject. She claims that it is not in his nature to be a traitor. Doreya's love torments Mansour.

Mariana spreads gossip about Zohra turning down Mahmoud's proposal. Mansour wishes that Sarhan would desert Zohra so that he could punish him. He is also angry at Doreya. When Zohra brings tea, Mansour jokes preferring Mahmoud to Sarhan. She reveals Mahmoud's attitude toward women and insists that she loves Sarhan. After a busy week keeps him from Cairo, Mansour responds to a phone call about loneliness, and in the Florida Hotel hopes to end the relationship by insisting on divorce. Mansour is furious at news of Hosny's attack on Zohra and wishes that Hosny and Sarhan had fought to the death. He sees no future for himself. Amer talks about old men wanting to die in their sleep after a pleasant evening. He believes in life after death - for those who publish their story.

Alexandria is always serene after being washed by a violent storm. Mansour is contemplating his destiny as the clearing comes, contrasted by loud noises in the hallway. He sees Zohra and Sarhan with Mariana between as Sarhan, bloodied and torn, shouts his intention to marry Aleya. Mansour calls him a bastard and spits in his face and they pound one another until Mariana intervenes. Distraught, Mansour goes to his studio, where he finds Doreya waiting. He has been avoiding her calls for days. She says that Fawzi has passed word through the journalist friend that she is free. When he



says nothing, Doreya recognizes that Mansour does not want her. When he tells her to reject the offer, she calls him deranged and asks if he has been playing with her all along. He says only that he hates himself and that it is dangerous to be near him. As Doreya storms out, Mansour realizes that she is his first and probably only and last love, but feels oddly at ease.

Mansour finds looking at Zohra, stripped of honor and pride, like looking at himself in the mirror. He knows that catastrophe is near. Zohra claims that she move forward, while avoiding men. Suddenly, as though by revelation, Mansour begs her to marry him, claiming that there is no other woman. She thanks him for his kindness but refuses and asks to drop the subject. Mansour feels like he is drowning. Unable to believe that he has said what he has, he wonders how to stop everything. Going out, Mansour happens upon Sarhan as he prepares to leave the pension, and, hearing him arrange by phone to meet someone at the Swan at 8 PM, heads there. When Sarhan arrives in the company of Tolba, Mansour pictures stalking Sarhan, confronting him with scissors, telling him that he cannot exist without killing Sarhan, and, feeling detached from life, stabbing him repeatedly. Mansour is frustrated by the delay. After Tolba leaves, Sarhan returns from a phone call dejected, pays up, and leaves. Mansour follows, wondering at the sudden change. When Sarhan turns into the deserted country lane leading to the Palma, Mansour sees fate at work. Sarhan stops to vomit and falls. Mansour is angry that the unconscious man will die without fear or pain. Discovering that he has forgotten the scissors, he kicks Sarhan to death. Mansour pictures Doreya, walks home, and takes a sleeping pill.

### Chapter 3, Mansour Bahy Analysis

Mansour reacts to the now-familiar chain of events at the Miramar Pension more briefly than the previous narrators because he is so often on the road to Cairo. He fully accepts that he is an introvert, which is how the others have depicted him, but goes on to demonstrate and describe a dangerous depth of self-hatred. He pities Mariana, dismisses Amer and Tolba as has-beens, initially finds Sarhan sympathetic and Hosny annoying. During the Umm Kulthum party, however, Mansour bonds with Amer over recent history, as Mansour confesses to having read his works and desiring to do a program about his era. Mansour then quotes a proverb about whoever deserts one's monastery having to put up with profane people, rather along the lines of having to lie in the bed that one makes. It sounds odd on Mansour's lips. The most striking image in Mansour's story is based on a quote from Amer, about old men wanting to die in their sleep after a pleasant evening. At the climax of the chapter, Mansour will be driven to fury at the thought that despised Hosny could thus die peacefully.

Mansour and Sarhan hold a long discussion about politics and their fellow lodgers. It provides an explication of the Revolution from the young generation's point of view - as building a New World, but also inescapable. Note that Mansour sees Sarhan's comments about Hosny's talent for pleasure as an insight into Sarhan's own character. Mansour wonders why Hosny drives around like a maniac. One time he thinks that he sees him with a certain Sonya, whose importance is not developed. Amer has called



Sarhan a Don Juan and Hosny has demonstrated that he can better Sarhan's efforts. Now Mansour makes complete the comparison: they are the same type, but Hosny is dangerously arrogant. His attitude will drive customers away if he goes into business.

The lion's share of Mansour's narration develops a different story line. He lives in the Miramar because his brother, a Cairo police officer, has gotten him out of town ahead of a raid on his former political friends. There are several interwoven plots: Mansour's leaving the Party but not being a defector, the arrest of his friends, his caring for the leader's forlorn wife, falling in love with her and pushing her to divorce her husband, and falling out of love with her and abandoning her. Doreya is a tragic figure, blown about by the winds of fate. Mansour, in his own eyes particularly, is a figure of loathing, unable to live by his beliefs, bringing disaster on himself and those around him.

This story line regularly intersects the main line, allowing Mansour to catch up on gossip and be drawn into the deepening conflicts centered on Zohra. Mansour treats Zohra kindly, more like ancient Amer than like Hosny, but he admires her bravery in standing up to her relatives than had Amer. New details of why she has fled her village come out. Mansour breaks completely with Sarhan when Sarhan deserts Zohra. He publicly calls him a bastard, spits in his face, and engages in a fist fight until Mariana breaks it up. Seeing Zohra stripped of honor and pride and having broken up irrevocably with Doreya, Mansour surprises himself and Zohra by proposing marriage. Crushed, Mansour feels like he is drowning and seeks some way of taking revenge on Sarhan.

Fate smiles on Mansour. He overhears a phone call setting up a meeting and stalks Sarhan at the Swan Hotel. He imagines his revenge in gruesome detail as he waits for Sarhan to leave alone. When he does, he has drunk so much that he falls over, vomits, and loses consciousness. Mansour feels cheated, that the man will die without knowing fear or pain. Having forgotten to pick up scissors when Mariana distracts him to talk about the New Year's Eve celebration, he resorts to kicking Sarhan to death and leaving his body in the deserted lane. It is a more blurred and emotionally-wrought account than the earlier, imagined encounter. That version shows literary structuring. In Amer's wrap-up of the story, the depth of Mansour's madness will be shown, including confessing to a murder that the forensic facts do not support. First, however, Sarhan must tell his version of the tale.



# Chapter 4, Sarhan al-Beheiry

## Chapter 4, Sarhan al-Beheiry Summary

Sarhan admires the peasant girl whom he sees shopping in the High-Life Grocery and follows her as far as the Miramar Building. He recalls cotton-picking season in the village. He next sees her buying papers at Mahmoud's kiosk and learns where she works. Sarhan's friend, Ali Bakir, and his lover, Safeya Barakat go to a movie and then eat together in Sarhan's flat. While shopping, Sarhan sees Zohra again and imagines living in her building and making her his own. When Sarhan complains to Ali about his life, Safeya calls him hard-hearted. Sarhan later confides to Ali that she is crazy and wants to get married, while he is sick of her.

Ali turns to the business at hand: their plans to hijack a truckload of yarn per week to sell on the black market. They will team with a truck driver and a guard. Ali points out how little Sarhan has benefited from working within the system. Life is passing them by but soon they will live the life of Harun al-Rashid. Although reticent, Sarhan agrees. He recalls Mahmoud's concern about how partners attract government attention. Mahmoud plans to buy Panayoti's restaurant and wants Sarhan's advice about bookkeeping. After a lecture on the black market, Sarhan is stopped by an old college friend, Rafat Amin. They talk about the old days and Socialism. Later Sarhan sees Zohra with an old Greek woman and she answers his nod with a smile. When Sarhan announces to Safeya that he must move out to protect his job, she curses him for refusing to marry. He replies that he is not designed for marriage, although he silently recalls a failed opportunity in college. He is only physically attracted to Zohra.

Mariana pries and haggles when Sarhan asks for a room and does not notice Zohra's blush when she sees Sarhan there. She is more confused as she makes up his bed, while he plays up the coincidence of their both coming from Beheira. At breakfast Sarhan meets Amer, a merry mummy, and Tolba. Amer notes that his generation by eloquence opens the way for the current generation of engineers and economists. Later, with Safeya Sarhan pretends that he is lonely and finds making love with her hard work. The first time that Zohra delivers tea to his room, Sarhan declares his love for her. Over the next few afternoons Sarhan learns her past and declares that fate has brought them together. He sees her responding and longs for marriage.

When two new guests arrive, Sarhan looks forward to making friends. Hosny is a member of the class that Sarhan hates, but appears to be generous, which could bode well. Mansour is an introvert but worth cultivating because of his policeman brother. When Sarhan steals a first kiss from Zohra she struggles free but does not flee and, filled with desire, Sarhan asks her to visit that night to talk and make love. She does not trust him. Although he would rather listen to Umm Kulthum's concert with Ali or Rafat, Sarhan stays at the pension, where his stories lay a ground for the sudden fortune that he expects. Hosny provides the alcohol and is the life of the party until he disappears at midnight. Sarhan takes little interest in the songs but concentrates on Zohra.



Encountering Tolba on the street, Sarhan finds him different and somehow familiar. Over coffee they discuss the cost of living and Sarhan's desire for a side business. Tolba points to real poverty in the Soviet Bloc and praises Egypt's non-alignment. Sarhan longs to leave Safeya but finds that with Zohra his worries fade away. She worries about the others figuring out that they are together, but he is unconcerned. She does not feel that he accepts her as an equal human being, despite his declarations of love.

Sarhan wants to get in on Hosny's business plan, as a hedge against Ali's plot, but Hosny is a daydreamer, easily distracted, and wants to have fun on the eve of Doomsday. In Mahmoud's presence, Sarhan and Safeya have a terrible fight, she follows them back to the Miramar, fights her way in, and gets into a slapping and screaming fight with Zohra until Hosny leads Safeya away. To preserve his reputation, Sarhan claims that Safeya is an ex-fiancée, but tells Zohra that Safeya is a loose woman from his distant past. When Sarhan asks Zohra to go away with him but warns that marriage causes problems, she balks. She rejects his call for an ancient Muslim marriage, with no witnesses but God. Sarhan cannot live without Zorha, but he also cannot reconcile himself to marrying without social and economic gain.

One afternoon Sarhan is surprised to see Zohra studying a primer. He sincerely praises her and sees that he may have been taking her feelings too lightly. She reveals that her relatives want her to come home and she has agreed to go next month. That will solve their problems. When he first sees Zohra's tutor, Sarhan wishes that Zohra could be such a professional. Aleya gives him a flattering glance, but is too plain to be his type - until he learns about her family's real estate holdings. Mahmoud confides to Sarhan that he is about to propose to Zohra. He asks about her fight with her family and laughs that he knows how to handle her stubbornness. Sarhan is pleased when Zohra turns him down and begs her again to go away with him. Her refusal seals the deal with Aleya. Sarhan has lunch with her father and dinner with the family, where he convinces himself to tell the truth about his situation and let the Muhammads decide how to respond. When Sarhan next passes Mahmoud's stand, Mahmoud attacks him for concealing that he is Zohra's lover. Mahmoud then buys Pastoroudis' and surprisingly welcomes Sarhan, apologizing, and revealing the Hosny had lied to him.

Meeting Aleya at the Palma, Sarhan begs her not to let Zohra know about them. He has been putting off announcing their engagement on the pretext of needing his family's presence. He burns with remorse for what he is doing to Zohra and would still choose her if she would only give in. One night, Sarhan awakens to Zohra's voice fighting off Hosny. When Sarhan tries to calm him, Hosny punches him and they fall to fighting. A few nights later, Sarhan drinks with Ali and Rafat and, seeing Hosny and Safeya leaving the Genevoise together, assumes that they are a couple. Ali whispers that they will move soon. Returning late to the pension, Sarhan visits Mansour, who is amused at the drunken prattle and comments on Sarhan's many conquests.

When Zohra next brings tea, she angrily tells Sarhan about seeing him and Aleya together, calls him a liar and her a whore and man-hunter. Zohra has confronted Aleya in front of her parents and Aleya admits everything. Shattered, Sarhan again begs her to leave with him. When she spits in his face, he goes into a rage. She slaps him and he





beats her savagely, until Mariana breaks them up. He threatens publicly to marry Zohra. Mansour takes Sarhan to his room for an impudent lecture whose details Sarhan does not recall and, needing a scapegoat, Mariana throws Sarhan out. He wanders the streets until meeting Ali, who says they start the heist at dawn. Impatient, Sarhan leaves work early and wanders about, passing Mansour and a pretty girl (who makes him think of Zohra), getting a cold reception from Aleya's family, lunches at Mahmoud's Panayotis, and finds no one home at Ali's.

Running home, frantic for news, he is packing when Ali phones to say all is well and asks to meet at the Swan at 8 PM. Sarhan resumes his wandering, while drinking heavily to drown his pain. He goes into the Swan to share a drink with Tolba, who is considering going to Kuwait to visit his rich daughter. When Ali fails to show up, Sarhan phones him but gets no answer. Ali phones the restaurant to say that all is lost; the driver has betrayed them. Sarhan staggers away, pays his bill, obtains a used razor, and leaves.

## Chapter 4, Sarhan al-Beheiry Analysis

Sarhan, who is at the center of the events depicted in this novel has the final word, which the reader realizes must come to a sudden end with his death. Thus, Amer's epilogue in Chapter 5 is a natural addition. Sarhan begins his narration weeks earlier than the others, back when he lives with Safeya Barakat, who is said explicitly to be working as a prostitute. She is depicted as a mental case, intent on getting married, which is something Sarhan contends she has always known is impossible. He claims that God has made him incompatible with marriage. The first half of the chapter depicts the slow, painful manner in which Sarhan abandons Safeya, leading to Sarhan's moving into the Miramar Pension and culminating in the loud and violent confrontation in the hallway.

Later in the narration, Sarhan tries the same not-built-for-marriage line on Zohra and, when this does not work, modifies it to claim that ancient Muslims used to marry with only God as a witness rather than publicly in a mosque. Zohra is unimpressed with his logic and sees the danger to succumbing to him. She could end up abandoned like Safeya. Seeing Zohra's desire to become literate and train for a good job as proof of her quality, Sarhan switches from a natural argument about being unable to marry anyone - to endure what he calls the corporate aspects of the institution - to unspoken concerns that he can marry only someone who will improve his social and financial situation and help him provide his family the support that they have lacked since his father dies. This shift is rather jolting, coming out of nowhere. At any rate, Zohra's tutor and her family fit the bill, but Sarhan cannot get beloved Zohra out of his mind. When the two women talk and Zohra oversteps her place as a menial servant and dares defend her cause before Zohra's parents, this prospect collapses and Sarhan is left distraught.

Sarhan's description of seeing the beautiful peasant girl while shopping in the High-Life Grocery fills in details from Amer's narration, about her enduring laughter for purchasing alcohol for the residents. Sarhan is far more than an occasional customer at Mahmoud's



kiosk. They are personal friends and Sarhan arranges for Safeya to tutor him in bookkeeping in preparation for his buying Panayotis' Restaurant. They, of course, fall out over jealousy but later good-heartedly reconcile. This again seems unlikely. Sarhan also introduces an old friend, Ali Bakir, as the organizer of a black market scheme to which he has enlisted Sarhan. The story of the plot's progress is interwoven into that of his break-up with Safeya and attempts at wooing Zohra. He has lived in the system but failed to prosper economically. His Socialist conscience is weak. He would like to find a legitimate second job and get out of the deal with Ali, but the opportunity never comes, for Hosni is too scattered a personality to found a business. Sarhan's talks with Ali and another old friend, Rafat Amin, provide a better picture of life in Egypt in the late 1960s than the earlier narrators, but with the same need to speak discretely. Another reference is made to the Caliph Harun al-Rashid, Ali claiming that they will live as splendidly as he. Sarhan agrees reluctantly and worries about leaks.

His worries are, of course, well-founded. He and Ali are betrayed by the driver of the hijacked truck. Earlier, Sarhan had laughed when Ali naively suggests that the conspirators swear on the Qur'an, but it seems that pure trust is as laughable. In general, Sarhan talks more about God - and people's disbelief in his existence and/or power - than the earlier narrators. Amer, recall, had merely quoted text memorized in his youth. Tolba at one point declares that God's wisdom rather than Egypt's policy of non-alignment saves lives. This occurs at a café, away from the other characters' ears. Sarhan also claims that the moralistic government apparatus requires that he move out of the flat he has shared, undetected, for a year and a half with Safeya. Throughout the breakup he reveals himself to be the opportunist that the earlier narrators have claimed him to be, without knowing any of these particulars. He reveals that, to preserve his reputation, he lies to Mariana about Safeya being an ex-fiancée and tells Zohra that Safeya is a loose woman from his distant past.

The last day of Sarhan's life is a disaster, narrated in an ever-accelerating staccato. He drinks heavily to numb his fear about the heist as it goes down, continues longing for Zohra, and being given a cold reception by Aleya's family. He reveals that the phone call that he receives as he is preparing to leave the Miramar is from Ali, who claims that all is well. Mansour, recall, overhears this and proceeds ahead of Sarhan to the Swan for an 8 PM. rendezvous. He drinks even more prodigiously. While sharing a drink with Tolba, Sarhan learns that he might go to Kuwait and offers some advice: make peace with the Revolution, for Communism and the Muslim Brotherhood are the only alternatives. The phone call that Mansour observes Sarhan taking and walking away from in a daze, is from Ali, announcing that the plot has been broken up. Sarhan takes Ali's resolution to do what the devil tells him to mean suicide. He obtains from the bartender for a razor and leaves with it. He cannot, of course, record the confrontation with Mansour, who, recall, claims that he is unconscious before he kicks him to death.



## Chapter 5, Amer Wagdi [2]

### Chapter 5, Amer Wagdi [2] Summary

Amer laments that the peace he had hoped for at the end of his life has been destroyed. Zohra and Mansour are in their rooms, Hosny has gone out, Mariana is hysterical, and Tolba is irritable. They wonder what evil awaits them in the New Year. When he emerges, Mansour is shown the newspaper he stares blankly, and then confesses to the murder and leaves to turn himself in to the police. Only Tolba believes it possible and suggests that the motive is a hidden love of Zohra. Amer cuts off further discussion, putting it in the hands of Providence. {Qur'an 24} Mariana decides that Zohra, even if innocent, must go. She has brought bad luck. Hosny returns and announces that he is moving out. He seems surprised by the news about Mansour. The original trio is happy to be alone again and suddenly bubble with energy. Mariana dresses up, applies makeup, and heads to the hairdresser, where Tolba will pick her up for a party. Alone, Amer talks with Zohra, who looks sad and broken, almost shrunken. Amer weeps for the first time in years. She listens silently to his mistakes in life and times of despair, his pleading to leave everything to time, and to think of her future. Zohra's plans are unchanged. She will not go home or marry Mahmoud. She will find work. He does not understand her response to his contention that she will find a man worthy of her. Zohra returns to her room and Amer falls asleep in his chair. He awakens at 2 AM, when a drunken Mariana and Tolba stagger in drunk and singing and head up to his room. At breakfast Tolba confesses to Amer what a fiasco their lovemaking had been. He announces that he will go to Kuwait, as Sarhan had advised. Tolba says that there is a fourth alternative to how Egypt is run: let the U.S. do it through a moderate right wing. Amer has had enough of Tolba's foolish dreams.

The newspapers cover the crime. Mansour's confession to killing Sarhan because he deserved it and had been chosen by chance. Mansour sounds deranged, but could be pretending. The autopsy states that the cause of death is a slashed wrist, not a beating. Revelation of the yarn heist confirms the verdict of suicide. The residents of the Miramar wonder what Mansour's fate will be. Amer hopes that he gets treatment. Mariana refuses Amer's pleas to keep Zohra, who believes that she is going to a better place. She says that she will never forget Amer, for which he thanks her and reminds her that all she has experienced at the Miramar will help her find what is good for her. Amer turns his full heart to reciting the Sura of the Beneficent, which dares creatures to say in what ways the Lord has failed to favor them.

### Chapter 5, Amer Wagdi [2] Analysis

Chapter 5 is a brief epilogue to the novel, disclosing that Sarhan dies of a self-inflicted razor slash, inspired by his part in the failed heist. Mansour, however, confesses kicking Sarhan to death and how the authorities will deal with this psychotic claim is left hanging in the air. Mariana and Tolba, long-ago lovers, party on New Year's Eve and humiliate



themselves trying to make love afterwards. Tolba describes vividly and with a sense of humor the effects of age on sexual performance. Zorha is fired but keeps her head up. Amer touchingly assures her that what she has suffered will prepare her for the life she wants. The novel concludes with Amer again quoting from the Qur'an, the Sura of the Beneficent, which he had earlier recited at length in the context of the many sufferings of his life.



# Characters

## Amer Wagdi

The first and last narrator, Amer is an octogenarian, a former Wafdist or nationalist and journalist who returns to his beloved native Alexandria upon his retirement. He takes up residence in the fondly-remembered Miramar Pension still owned by Mme. Mariana. Amer complains of dimming eyes, a stooped body, colitis, and prostate troubles. He has never married and claims that Mariana is his only friend. Each is surprised that they have never made love. Amer is sometimes called Amer Bey, using the honorific Turkish title that by the 1960s is long outmoded, but more often is addressed in the French fashion as monsieur.

Amer comes from a religious family. His father is keeper of the mosque of Siddi Abu al-Abbas al-Morsy and Amer is once a student in al-Azhar University. His expulsion over trivialities destroys his chances for a good marriage. In old age he remains bitter about this but hopes before he dies to return to his faith. As it is, Amer often quotes from the Qur'an, particularly the surah describing God as The Beneficent. Amer turns to journalism, and his florid writing is admired by his late master, Ahmed Shafiq Pasha. Amer also works for Egyptian independence and is loved by the friends for whom he does favors and feared by enemies. Amer frequently flashes back to these happier days. When his editor demands writing that a jet-age reader can understand, Amer retires and is bitter that there is no farewell party. He returns to Alexandria. Amer talks about old men wanting to die in their sleep after a pleasant evening.

The younger boarders in the Miramar generally regard Amer as a relic and avoid him. Shy broadcaster Mansour Bahy takes an interest in Amer's life and career, which in turn inspires Amer to tell stories. Regretting that he has put off writing his memoirs until it is too late, Amer encourages Mansour to write a book, for there is life after death - for those who publish their story. He cites Plato's writings as the reason for Socrates being remembered.

Amer alone stands up for Zohra when Mariana is determined to fire her for bringing bad luck into the Miramar. Looking worn out, Zohra would not want to remain. She is sure that she will make it in life and thanks Amer for his encouragement and support. She vows never to forget him.

## Zohra Salama

A beautiful peasant girl or fallaha from the region of Beheira near Alexandria, Zohra leaves her village of Zayadiyya for the big city, where she is hired as a maid by Mme. Mariana, a Greek entrepreneur who is rumored to be a pimp. All of the narrators agree that Zohra has a pretty, suntanned face and a fully, graceful figure. She makes them feel instantly better than they have in years. Her later, devoted father had brought her often



to Alexandria selling farm products but when he dies she abandons the land. She also abandons the ankle-length gallabiya for outfits that show off her figure. She has callused fingers and large peasant feet. She trusts elderly Amer Wagdi but dislikes slightly younger Tolba Marzuq, who she says acts like a pasha. She causes a scene when he requests a massage that she assumes is to be something more.

Zohra unintentionally inflames the passions of boarders Sarhan al-Beheiry and Hosni Allam and their mistreatment of her eventually inspires the quiet but troubled boarder Mansour Bahy to murder Sarhan. The men all enjoy having Zohra serve them afternoon tea or coffee and stay while they drink it, holding conversations that are mostly flirtatious on their parts. Zohra has a strong independent streak - best shown when she refuses to return home with the relatives who come to fetch her and in her refusal to marry the newspaper seller Mahmoud Abu al-Abbas, when she overhears him bragging about how he will control her by daily lashings. She stands up to the tutor when she learns that Sarhan has shifted his affections to her and shocks the woman's rich family by not knowing her social place.

Seeing that she cannot better herself without learning to read and write and then to learn a profession, Zohra uses her meager earnings to hire a tutor. The men generally laugh at this while offering verbal support. Amer is sincere in his support and helps her study. When everything falls apart and she is fired for bringing bad luck on the Miramar, Zohra maintains to Amer that she will continue her education, but avoid men. He begs her to consider her trials as means of finding the right path, which he is sure includes finding a husband worthy of her.

## **Sarhan al-Beheiry**

The fourth narrator, Sarhan is the third boarder to take a room at Mme. Mariana's Miramar Pension. He is a dark, solid peasant some 30 years old, with piercing eyes. He speaks with an irritating rural accent. He works as deputy head accountant at the Alexandria Textile Mills and has lived lived for over a year with Safeya Barakat in a flat in Sharia Lido in Mazarita before becoming mesmerized by Zohra Salama, a beautiful peasant woman whom he often sees shopping in the High-Life Grocery and at his friend Mahmoud Abu al-Abbas' newsstand. Sarhan has visions of winning her over and enjoying virginal love with her. He has a penchant for sweating peasant women performing manual labor. He lies to Safeya, who is badgering him to marry, about having to move out, lest his career be jeopardized by morals charges. He happily moves into the Miramar and begins flirting with Zohra, while continuing for a while his visits to Safeya, pretending to be miserable without her.

When eventually he calls it quits there is a great fight that continues inside the Miramar. He lies to Mariana, claiming that Safeya is an ex-fiancée and to Zohra that she is a prostitute from whom he has long since severed ties. Sarhan frustrates Zohra by claiming that he lacks the disposition to marry when, in fact, he will only marry someone who can advance his social and financial status. Seeing a candidate in Zohra's tutor, he



loses Zohra - and eventually is also dropped by the tutor, Aleya Muhammad, as an opportunist.

Although Sarhan is deeply frustrated by the state of his love life, he is ruined by joining a plot to hijack truckloads of yarn to sell on the black market, this despite his claimed passion for land reforms and the working class. He is a former member of the Liberation Organization and the National Union, and currently serves on the Committee of Twenty and as a staff representative on the company board of directors. He had become political when the Revolution succeeds, but later claims to dislike politics. His co-conspirator, plays on Sarhan's frustrations at not prospering financially while working inside the system. He longs to restore his family's finances and enjoy life, which he defines as owning a car, a villa, and a woman. The plot falls through and, in despair, Sarhan commits suicide. A fellow boarder, Mansour Bahy, who hates the way that Sarhan mistreats Zohra, follows Sarhan on the fatal night and believes that he kicks him to death in the street. All of the boarders realize that they have ample excuse to kill Sarhan.

## **Mahmoud Abu al-Abbas**

A newspaper vendor on Ramleh Square in Alexandria, Egypt, Mahmoud is a friend of narrator Sarhan al-Beheiry. He has ambitions to buy Panayoti's Restaurant and to marry beautiful Zohra Salama, the maid at the Miramar Pension who buys papers from him daily. He asks advice from the oldest boarder, Amer Wagdi, and deals with the proprietor of the Miramar, Mme. Mariana, in place of Zohra's absent relatives for Zohra's hand. Zohra adamantly refuses, having overheard Mahmoud bragging that he will beat her daily to keep her in line. Women have no brains or religion in Mahmoud's opinion.

## **Hosny Allam**

The second narrator, Hosny is the fourth of five boarders to take a room at Mme. Mariana's Miramar Pension. He is younger than the third, Sarhan al-Beheiry, putting him around 30, but is powerfully built, like a wrestler. He hails from an old country family in Tanta, where he owns 100 feddans of land, which he has let out. He is smug about his background where his brother is a consul in Italy and his sister married to the Egyptian ambassador to Ethiopia but defensive about his own meager accomplishments. He deeply resents having been denied a good education and the opportunity to marry blue-eyed Mervat. The Revolution, which he too vocally supports, has not touched him, but his relatives consider him a rebel.

Hosny moves to Alexandria to start a business of some sort. Out of habit from past visits and pride, he settles into the fancy Cecil Hotel before growing bored and moving into the cheaper and more interesting Miramar. He hopes that Mariana is a true madam and at first sight is sure that beautiful Zohra will fall in love with him instantly. Hosny despises from their first meeting two fellow boarders, Amer Wagy and Sarhan al-



Beheiry. He has a sharp wit and tongue and is endlessly judgmental, although he claims to be glad to be free in every way, trusting in God's mercy and compassion.

He quickly turns out to be the novel's true Don Juan, picking up women and hiring prostitutes as he cruises around the city in his Ford. He seduces Sarhan's ex-lover, arranges to go into the nightclub business with her, and moves in with her with the understanding that he is incapable of love while also considering marrying Zohra. He is a catalyst for fighting among Zohra's would-be suitors. He leaves the Miramar after Sarhan's murder and Mansour's bogus confession.

## Rafat Amin

An old college friend of narrator Sarhan al-Beheiry, Rafat meets him again at the Socialist Union hall. Rafat is a member of the Base Unit at Amalgamated Metallurgies. Walking along the Corniche, they recall life as Wafdist student committee members and Rafat challenges the sincerity of Sarhan's attachment to Socialism and the Revolution. Rafat loves to talk about the Wafd, particularly when drunk. Annoyed, Sarhan asks how he cannot see that it is dead. Rafat replies that when the Wafd died, so did the Egyptian masses.

## Mansour Bahy

The third narrator, Mansour is the fifth and final boarder to take a room at Mme. Mariana's Miramar Pension. He is a handsome 25-year-old with delicate features that are childish and almost feminine. He is also severely introverted and yet works as an announcer for the Alexandria Broadcasting Service. Mansour is the quietest of the boarders, but is sometimes capable of outbursts of laughter. He believes that the Revolution has been too lenient with its enemies.

The boarders find no explanation for Mansour's timidity, but he himself reveals that he pathologically hates himself. He sees himself as a figure of loathing who cannot live by his beliefs and brings disaster on himself and those around him. He lives in the Miramar because his brother, a Cairo police officer, has gotten him out of town just ahead of a raid on his former political friends, principally Fawzi. Mansour had been in love with Fawzi's wife, Doreya, before their marriage and that love for a while rekindles. He convinces Doreya to divorce Fawzi, but then refuses to marry her, claiming that he is not the marrying kind. At the same time he is falling in love with the Miramar maid, Zohra Salama, whom he treats kindly and admires for her bravery. Sarhan also loves her but deserts her, causing a fatal rift between Mansour and him.

Mansour and Sarhan fight publicly and Mansour vows to kill him, as his only means of regaining sanity. He follows Sarhan to the Swan Hotel and goes over in his mind how he will stab him with scissors. When finally Sarhan goes out into the street, Mansour finds that he has forgotten the scissors and kicks him to death. He then confesses to a murder, but forensic facts do not support his version. Sarhan has committed suicide and Mansour's fate as person manifestly psychologically disturbed is left hanging.





## Ali Bakir

An engineer, Ali Bakir is a friend of bookkeeper Sarhan al-Bekheiry. Ali initiates a scheme to hijack truckloads of wool from the factory in which they both work, to sell on the black market. He enlists Sarhan as bookkeeper, arguing that they are wasting their lives trying to live honestly. Ali knows nothing about politics. When they are betrayed by the truck driver who is in on the deal, Ali tells Sarhan that he will do whatever the devil tells him to do, which Sarhan interprets as suicide and follows suit.

## Safeya Barakat

The name used by Sarhan al-Beheiry's jilted lover, Safeya works in an upscale brothel, the Genevoise, dancing an authentic belly dance, replete with obscenity, and also entertains male guests. She does not at first remember Hosny Allam, the resident of Miramar Pension who drives her home to Sharia Lido in Mazarita on the evening that she makes a large disturbance, assaulting Sarhan. Safeya is a little fat and has a professional look about her face. Hosny's first attempt to have sex with her is a failure because she is menstruating. To save his reputation, Sarhan claims that Safeya is his ex-fiancée but to new love interest, Zohra Salama, claims that she is a prostitute whom he had known and dropped long ago.

## Doreya and Fawzi

Friends of narrator Mansour Bahy during his years at the University of Cairo, Doreya and Fawzi (surname never mentioned) along with their political allies for several years consider Mansour a traitor when he drops out of politics for the sake of his career. Fawzi shows up in Alexandria from Cairo, finds Mansour, and chides him about his decision. Seeing Fawzi brings back memories of Mansour's love for Doreya, to whom he races on learning of Fawzi's arrest. With only a bachelor of arts in the classics, Doreya has few job prospects and is in dire economic straights. Mansour offers to help her. In the course of several meetings, their love is re-ignited and Mansour presses her to ask Fawzi to set her free. Rumors reaches Fawzi and he complies, but by this point, Mansour has tired of Doreya and has moved on to the maid at the Miramar Pension, Zohra Salama. Doreya is devastated.

## Muhammad Kamel

A Nubian waiter at the Cecil Hotel in Alexandria, Egypt, Kamel procures boarders for Mme. Mariana's Miramar Pension in Alexandria. Kamel assumes that Hosny Allem's boredom in the Cecil is primarily sexual.



## Mme. Mariana

A Greek woman born in Alexandria, Mariana owns and runs the Miramar Pension, which occupies the fourth floor of the massive building of the same name. In her mid-sixties she is described alternately as a faded beauty and a living mummy. She has blue eyes set in a white face, hair dyed golden, and a tall, thin figure that is beginning to slump in the shoulders. Kidney disorders have caused her to stop drinking alcohol. None of the four narrators is so uncouth as to call Mariana a procurer for prostitution, but each hints at it in his own way.

Mariana is most often portrayed lounging on a couch in the lobby of her pension, beneath a small bronze statue of the Virgin Mary, which is used to identify her as a Christian... She speaks halting Egyptian Arabic, which turns to gibberish when she grows emotional. She listens to Greek music on the radio and broadcasts of European dance music, allowing Arabic music only on the first Thursday of each month when the diva Umm Kulthum broadcasts her lengthy concerts.

Mariana has married twice. Her first husband, a captain, is killed in the first revolution of 1919. Her second husband is a rich grocery owner of Ibrahimiyah Palace. He kills himself when he goes bankrupt and Mariana opens her boarding house in 1925. She stays in Alexandria during World War II and makes a fortune off British officers, but loses it in the second revolution, when her fellow Greeks largely flee Egypt. Mariana recalls fondly days when she had lived a life of luxury. Mansour Bahy sees Mariana as "a tragicomic image of the irrepressible desire to live" (pg. 102.)

## Tolba Marzuq

A lodger in Mme. Mariana's Miramar Pension, Tolba is a Jesuit-trained former Undersecretary of State for the Ministry of Mortmain Endowments, one of the deposed King Farouk's henchmen, and an enemy of the now-banned nationalist Wafd. Tolba has had his considerable properties that are sequestered and lives on a modest allowance. He has a married daughter in Kuwait and is suspected of wanting to smuggle money out of Egypt. He still shows signs of having suffered a stroke. He is pudgy, dark-skinned, and blue-eyed. He nearly avoids moving into the Miramar when he learns that Amer Wagdi, his political opposite, lives there, but decides that in his '80s Amer is probably not a government spy. Tolba enjoys conversation and cannot abide living in the country. Beautiful young maid Zohra Salama dislikes Tolba from their first meeting and causes a scene when called to give him a massage. He afterwards contends that she is a wildcat and savage in innocent disguise.

## Aleya Muhammad

An attractive young school teacher, snub-nosed and a bit pinched in the shoulders, Aleya lives with her parents on the fifth floor of the building in which Mme. Mariana's Miramar Pension occupies the fourth. Aleya agrees to tutor Miramar maid Zohra Salama



in basic reading and writing in her spare time and sometimes gives lessons in the common area when her parents have guests. Aleya is employed regularly in the Moharrem Bey area of Alexandria, to where she normally takes the bus. Boarder Hosny Allam, whose lust for Zohra shifts to Aleya after first seeing her, offers on a rainy day to drive her to work. He becomes a regular visitor to the family's flat and decides to marry her, to advance his social standing and finances. Finding out about Sarhan's relations with Zohra, the Muhammads reject him. Aleya's brother works in Saudi Arabia.

## Umm Kulthum

An historical character often mentioned in the novel, Umm Kulthum is an Egyptian singer, the most famous voice in the Middle East at the time of this novel. She broadcasts a lengthy concert on the evening of the first Thursday of every month, which no one wants to miss. At the Miramar Pension all gather around the radio, eating and drinking lavishly in anticipation of the event and then quieting to enjoy the music. Some sing along with the choruses. Umm Kulthum's voice in the late 1960s is beginning to fade, but elderly Amer Wagdi declares that her voice is "the only thing today for which the past can provide no equal" (pg. 96.)

## Saad Zaghloul

An historical character often mentioned in the novel, Zaghloul is a World War I-era politician, head of the Wafd or Nationalist Party in Egypt. He is blamed by aristocrat Tolba Marzuq for introducing the concept of social classes, which Tolba sees as the key to all of Egypt's subsequent evils. Tolba claims that people have forgotten how Zaghloul impudently argued with the King and courted the masses. Older former journalist Amer Wagdi finds this preposterous. Amer recalls Zaghloul soliciting advice from old men but the doing as the young suggest. When talking philosophically about the horror of being unable to act on one's faith, Amer alludes to Zaghloul in old age, defying banishment and death. A prominent square in Alexandria named for Zaghloul is frequently mentioned in the novel.



## Objects/Places

### Alexandria, Egypt

Egypt's chief port, Alexandria provides the primary setting for the novel *Miramar*. Coming home to it after a long career in Cairo, retired journalist Amer Wagdi nostalgically calls it "Lady of the Dew" (pg. 1.) Alexandria is a three-hour drive from Cairo and trains run regularly between the cities. Both means of transportation are pictured. Alexandria has a Mediterranean climate. Winters, when this novel is primarily set, are mild and rainy and intervals of bright sunshine are appreciated. The streets and squares are deserted at night. Driving rain storms are depicted to set off particularly dramatic events, and there are occasional patches of fog for atmosphere.

Along the Corniche, the promenade that runs along the coastline, it is colder and windier than in less exposed portions of the city. The famous boardwalk section features upscale restaurants, including the often-mentioned Atheneos, various shops, and the Genevoise, an up-scale brothel. Hosny Allam enjoys driving his Ford at top speed along the Corniche highway, passing through "Mazarita, Chatby, Ibrahimiya, and beyond" (pg. 59.) Also mentioned in the novel are the famed Café Trianon, located on Saad Zaghloul Square near the sea; Pastoudi's, a moderately-priced restaurant located near the Miramar Building; and the Antoniadis. Other hotels, whose lobbies and gaming rooms various characters frequent include the Cecil, the Windsor, the Swan and the Palma. The Palma is located on the Mahmoudiya Canal, which brings the muddy waters of the Nile to Alexandria. Maid Zohra Salama buys alcohol for the residents at the High-Life Grocery.

### Abu Qir, Egypt

A coastal village in the Nile Delta region, Abu Qir is where Hosny Allam drives an Italian and Syrian prostitute in his beloved car and stops during a driving rain storm to have sex with her.

### Anfushi, Egypt

A suburb of Alexandria, Anfushi is frequently mentioned in the novel in relationship to its smell of fisheries and the particular way in which its women laugh.

### Arab Socialist Union (ASU)

The only legal political party in Egypt at the time this novel is set, the ASU is the party of Gamal Abdel Nasser, who leads the country from shortly after the Revolution of 1952. The Revolution is synonymous with the ASU. By the late 1960s, the ASU has nationalized agriculture and industry, banned the nationalist Wafd Party and the Muslim



Brotherhood and subsumed the Communists. Elderly former journalist Amer Wagdi contends that the ASU absorbs what is best in the other conflicting parties. Boarder Mansour Bahy is a member of the ASU Base Unit, being a member of the board of directors of the Alexandria Textile Mills. His political convictions date from the victory of the Revolution. He declares that they are building a New World.

## Beheira, Egypt

The large coastal region of Egypt, extending inland from the Mediterranean Sea, from which both Sarhan al-Beheiry and Zohra Salama hail, he claiming to be from the village of Farquasa but actually being from Tanta, and she from Zayadiyya. Hosny Allam derides Beheira as a land of onions and onion-pickers and, after Zohra and her relatives battle about her returning home, insists that people of this region are cowards. Lusty Sarhan cherishes memories of shapely peasant women picking cotton.

## Cairo, Egypt

The capital of Egypt, Cairo is home to narrator Mansour Bahy. He is forced by his brother, a prominent policeman (unnamed), to move to Alexandria just prior to a raid that arrests his former Party friends. Until he can find a way to break it off with her, Mansour wears himself out taking the railway to Cairo to visit beautiful Doreya in the apartment that she had shared with her arrested husband Fawzy. They also meet at the Cairo Zoo, which she finds less uncomfortable. It is located near the University that they had all attended and is filled with memories. They also meet in an outdoor café beside the Nile River and in the Florida Hotel. Embittered Tolba Marzuq considers Cairo a place of constant humiliation and so returns to Alexandria and the Miramar Pension owned by his former lover.

## Genevoise

An upscale brothel fronting on the Corniche in Alexandria but entered from a side street, the Genevoise is alluded to often enough with titters before narrator Hosny Allam describes its interior as "a jinni's hideout" (pg. 78) done up in dirty red with a stage and dance floor. His rival, Sarhan al-Beheiry's jilted lover, Safeya Barakat, works there. Frustrated by Zohra Salama's coldness towards him, Hosny returns to Safeya and agrees to her proposal to purchase the Genevoise, turn it into a nightclub, and run it together. She comments on its current profitability and is sure that it will earn even better, thanks to Libyans' petro-dollars.

## Mazarita, Egypt

A suburb of Alexandria, Mazarita is where Sarhan al-Beheiry lives with Safeya Barakat on Sharia Lido before moving into the Miramar Pension. They go to the movies at the Metro Theater in Mazarita before their nasty breakup. Safeya continues to live there



while working at the Genevoise, an up-scale brothel. Narrator Hosny Allam also visits the Metro to pick up a girl for casual sex while trolling in his car. The High-Life Grocery, which sells exotic foods and alcohol, is located near the Metro and Sarhan's flat. It is there that he first sees and becomes obsessed over beautiful Zohra Salama.

## Miramar Building

A massive old building in Alexandria, Egypt, the Miramar sits on a strip of land that sticks out into the Mediterranean Sea. It is surrounded by palm and acacia trees. Mme. Mariana's pension (akin to the American bed and breakfast) occupies the fourth floor. Its outer door has a small judas (security window) that can be opened to identify who is coming to call. Inside is a common area dominated by a small statue of the Virgin Mary, an ebony settee, a radio, an ornamental glass bookcase, and paintings of Mariana's late husbands. Guest rooms extend along the sides, the seaside rooms being the more desired. Mariana's winter rates are lower than the summer ones, and she prefers not to rent to students. She recalls when the Miramar had been home to quality people. The touches of elegance that Amer Wagdi remembers from 20 years before are gone, but the ceilings are still adorned with cherubs. On the fifth floor lives the Muhammad family. Daughter Aleya tutors Zohra Salama in reading and writing. On the ground floor is the Café Miramar, whose owner is looking to sell.

## Muslim Brotherhood

The conservative political party that is formed after World War I to promote traditional Islamic forms of law over the secular values espoused by other parties, the Muslim Brotherhood is, in the time of this novel, an underground movement, officially banned for an attempt on the life of Pres. Gamal Abdel Nasser in the 1950s. Sarhan al-Beheiry suggests that it, the Communist Party, and Nasser's Revolution are the only political options in Egypt.

## Tanta, Egypt

A city located north of Cairo in the Nile Delta, Tanta is home to Hosny Allam, one of the younger boarders in Mme. Mariana's Miramar Pension in Alexandria. Tanta's old families appears to enjoy some degree of esteem in Alexandria. Hosny vows never to return to Tanta, except to collect rents or to sell land.

## Wafd Party

The liberal, nationalist political party in Egypt following World War I, the Wafd Party is headed by Saad Zaghloul, whose memory narrator Amer Wagdi several times invokes. It seeks to end the British Protectorate over Egypt, but is banned after the post-World War II Revolution led by the Arab Socialist Union (ASU) that rules at the time of the novel.



# Themes

## Sex

Sex permeates Naguib Mahfouz's novel *Miramar*. The five residents of the Miramar Pension and the owner of a news kiosk all fixate to one degree or another on beautiful and shapely Zohra Salama, whom the aged owner of the pension, Mme. Mariana, hires as a maid to lighten her own work. Mariana is herself a faded beauty, once a lover of sexagenarian Tolba Marzuq who returns to the pension. Her title of Madame appears to be regarded in Alexandria as more than a polite French title.

One resident, Hosny Allam, when renting a room, certainly hopes that this is the case, particularly after getting a view of Zohra. Hosny is a catalyst for violence among the men who lust for Zohra and wonder why he constantly drives his car around town. They do not suspect the sex-obsessed life to which he confesses to the reader in his own chapter. Hosny picks up women in theaters and after sex forgets their names by the time he drives home. He depends heavily on prostitutes, maintaining arrangements with madams who offer a variety of women. The most famous brothel is the upscale Genevoise, where Sarhan al-Beheiry's ex-lover, Safeya Barakat, continues working after their break-up. Mansour also falls in love with Zohra as he tires of an old love whom he has seduced away from her imprisoned husband. His feelings for Zohra drive him to plot Sarhan's death.

Sarhan is Zohra's most ardent suitor, followed by the newspaper seller, Mahmoud Abu al-Abbas, who proposes marriage after selling her papers on a daily basis. She rejects him because she has heard his plans to keep her in line with daily beatings. Zohra's relatives try to force her to return to the village to marry an elderly man who actually needs a nurse. Sarhan wins Zohra's heart but cannot bring himself to marry below his station. When he jilts Safeya and she follows him into the pension, it leads to a major battle that solidifies his reputation as a Don Juan. Safeya had pushed for marriage. Zohra does not push. She merely refuses to become a common law wife who might suffer the same fate as Safeya. She quotes Sarhan's facile line that there is a difference between love and marriage. When tutor Aleya Muhammad shows interest, Safeya throws over Zohra in hopes of making a marriage that would improve his social and economic status. Her parents eventually see through him.

The sexually most explicit scene in the novel comes at the end when elderly Tolba confesses to trying to make love with Mariana after a drunken New Year's Eve party. Without using the phrase, it is clear that they fight erectile dysfunction before she suffers a kidney attack from the alcohol. This helps provide a bittersweet ending.



## Politics

Politics is a topic of discussion in Naguib Mahfouz's novel *Miramar*, among the five residents of the Miramar Pension and its foreign owner, Mme. Mariana, and with several friends of one resident, Sarhan al-Beheiry. All profess loyalty to the Revolution that in the previous decade is brought about by the Arab Socialist Union or ASU. The ASU is the only legal political party in Egypt in the late 1960s, but its famous head, Gamal Abdel Nasser, is never mentioned. All of the characters assume that the ASU has spies and informers among them.

By the late 1960s, the ASU has nationalized agriculture and industry, banned the nationalist Wafd Party, for which Amer Wagdi had labored greatly decades earlier, and the Muslim Brotherhood, and, in Amer's opinion, has absorbed what is best in the other conflicting parties, including the Communists. Boarder Mansour Bahy is a member of the ASU Base Unit. His political convictions date only from the victory of the Revolution. He declares that they are building a New World.

On the opposite end of the political spectrum is Tolba Marzuq, a former Undersecretary of State for the Ministry of Mortmain Endowments, one of the deposed King Farouk's henchmen, and an enemy of the Wafd. Tolba has had his considerable properties sequestered by the ASU and lives, bitterly, on a modest allowance. He balks at moving into the Miramar when he learns that Amer, the Wafdist, lives there, but decides that in his 80s Amer is probably not a government spy. Tolba is the most paranoid of the residents. Mariana, too, complains of the policies that after World War II effectively drive out her fellow Greeks, but refuses to leave. Several characters talk about keeping private business deals low-key to avoid attracting government attention.

## Religion

Religion is understated but everywhere in Naguib Mahfouz's novel *Miramar*. The owner of the Miramar Pension is an Egyptian-born Greek Christian. Mme. Mariana is regularly shown lounging beneath a statue of the Virgin Mary in the public area of her hotel and no one seems bothered by this religious display. She otherwise shows no markings of faith. At one point, the beautiful peasant girl, Zohra Salama, whom Mariana hires as a maid, remarks that everyone in the building seems by his actions to deny the existence of God. Nevertheless, there is ample talk about the power and providence of God.

The opening narrator, Amer Wagdi, comes from a religious family. His father is keeper of the mosque of Siddi Abu al-Abbas al-Morsy and Amer is once a student in al-Azhar University. His expulsion over trivialities destroys his chances for a good marriage. In old age he remains bitter about this and has obviously stopped practicing Islam. He hopes, however, before he dies to return to his faith. As it is, Amer often quotes from the Qur'an, particularly the surah describing God as The Beneficent. Amer, who takes a fatherly interest in Zohra, worries when she abandons the ankle-length gallabiya for outfits that show off her figure. He no less than any of the other characters is concerned about Islam's prohibition of drinking alcohol. It is stocked in the local epicurean market





and consumed heartily both in the social setting of the pension and by individual characters in a variety of bars. The sexual conservatism of Islam is openly flaunted, although at one point, trying to avoid entering into a legal marriage with Zohra, Sarhan al-Beheiry claims that in early Islam marriage had been solemnized by the spouses with God alone as witness. Already wary of Sarhan's machinations, Zohra is not convinced. Oddly, none of the characters' dialog employs the pious ejaculations and phrases that are commonplace in Muslim society and Mahfouz's other works of fiction.



# Style

## Point of View

Naguib Mahfouz's novel *Miramar* uses four first-person versions to provide a complex and detailed vision of a single chain of events. Each of the narrators, Amer Wagdi, Hosny Allam, Mansour Bahy, and Sarhan al-Beheiry tells his own independent version, reflecting unique perspectives created by age, social standing, and occupation. Two discuss side issues that simultaneously complicate and clarify the main narrative. Each comments on all of the other personalities and the central events, particularly the soirée held on the occasion of singer Umm Kulthum's radio concert. They all agree that politics are an unavoidable subject but everyone shies away from speaking too clearly, for fear of spies.

The younger narrators universally dismiss octogenarian Amer Wagdi and the somewhat less ancient Tolba Marzuq, whose views and attitudes are seen only through others' eyes. When given a chance by the history-oriented Mansour, Amer is an attractive character. Amer and Sarhan are willing to give everyone a chance and each is sooner or later disappointed. Hosny has a bad attitude about everyone from the start, and Mansour is painfully introverted. The rest wonder what makes him tick and only he can say in his own narrative. He hates himself pathologically and sees no hope.

Everyone's focus is on the beautiful maid, Zohra Salama, whom the aged Mme. Mariana hires to lighten her own work. This frees her to sit and gossip, which is a major means of advancing the story for each of the narrators. Amer perceives himself as Zohra's protector in an evil world, giving her advice that she rarely takes and urging her to look out for herself. Hosny is a catalyst for violence among the men lusting for Zohra. The other narrators are puzzled by his frequent driving of his car around the city but do not suspect the sex-obsessed life to which he confesses to the reader. Mansour falls in love with Zohra as he falls out of love with an old love whom he has seduced from her imprisoned husband. This collateral theme is unknown to his fellow boarders but helps explain the behavior that they observe. His feelings for Zohra drive him to plot Sarhan's death.

Sarhan's narrative, the last covering the core material, clarifies the mysteries that have built up. He takes up the story a bit earlier than the others and describes in often lurid detail how he leaves a lover when he falls for Zohra and then falls for Zohra's tutor when she offers better prospects. Without calling himself opportunistic as the others have characterized him, Sarhan shows that they are right. He does not spare himself at all telling of his machinations and constant shifting of his feelings. A side theme, his involvement in a black market operation, leads to his suicide. Amer resumes the narration to provide a brief epilogue, tying up all of the threads.



## Setting

Naguib Mahfouz's novel *Miramar* is set in the late 1960s in Egypt, primarily in the port city of Alexandria on the Mediterranean coast. Several of the characters have lived in Alexandria decades before the novel begins and even in the *Miramar Pension* to which they happily return. Others take a step down to move there from more expensive but less interesting establishments. Many venues in the city are mentioned in passing. Only the *Miramar* is described in detail. Many scenes take place along the *Corniche*, the promenade that runs along the coastline. Its famous boardwalk section features upscale restaurants, including the often-mentioned *Atheneos*, various shops, and the *Genevoise*, an upscale brothel. Hosny Allam enjoys driving his Ford at top speed along the *Corniche* highway, passing through "Mazarita, Chatby, Ibrahimiya, and beyond" (pg. 59.) Also mentioned in the novel are the famed *Café Trianon*, located on Saad Zaghloul Square near the sea; *Pastoudi's*, a moderately-priced restaurant located near the *Miramar Building*; and the *Antoniadis*. Other hotels, whose lobbies and gaming rooms various characters frequent include the *Cecil*, the *Windsor*, the *Swan* and the *Palma*. The *Palma* is located on the *Mahmoudiya Canal*, which brings the muddy waters of the Nile to Alexandria. Maid Zohra Salama buys alcohol for the residents at the *High-Life Grocery*. Several suburbs of Alexandria are mentioned.

Cairo, a three-hour drive south of Alexandria, figures prominently in Mansour Bahy's narrative. He has been forced to move to Alexandria just prior to a police raid that arrests his former Party friends. He makes many railway trips back and forth to visit a woman, Doreya, whom he had once wanted to marry. They meet in the apartment that she has shared with her imprisoned husband Fawzy, at the Cairo Zoo, in an outdoor café beside the Nile River, and in the Florida Hotel. None of these locales is described in more than passing detail. Mention is also made of *Beheira* and *Tanta*, but with little description.

## Language and Meaning

*Miramar* is narrated in the first person present tense in only slightly halting English. The original is, of course, written in modern Egyptian Arabic and one of the characters, Hosny Allam's narration is riddled with variations on its first sentence, "Ferekeeko, don't put the blame on me" (pg. 53.) This is a common colloquial phrase used in any variety of circumstances. Hosny uses it in conjunction with various behaviors that he knows are inappropriate but cannot avoid. The translator and editors allow the reader to struggle with who or what *Ferekeeko* might be. A footnote would certainly have been welcome.

The editorial team also assumes that oblique references to Egypt's stormy history throughout the twentieth century is clear to readers of English. Some of the references might be obscure even for Egyptians reading some fifty years after the events described. The warring political parties, *Wafd* (Nationalists), *Muslim Brotherhood*, and *Arab Socialist Union* or *ASU*, the only legal political party in Egypt at the time this novel is set, are discussed rather ephemerally but constantly and the characters are afraid to



speak their real minds for fear of being reported by spies. Gamal Abdel Nasser, who leads the country from shortly after the Revolution of 1952, is never named but sets the tone for life in the country. Everyone praises the Revolution, as is expected. Mansour Bahy alone shows much interest or pride in building a New World.

Western readers may find it odd that God is regularly mentioned but often as the object of disbelief or at least skepticism. There is no evidence of Muslim fundamentalism. Muslims regularly drink alcohol purchased in public stores. There is virtually none of the routine pious phrases that usually fill Arabic conversation. Amer Wagdi, an octogenarian from a religious family frequently quotes from the Qur'an, particularly the sura describing God as The Beneficent. Amer hopes to return to the faith before he dies. Other characters speak of God's providence and one calls for the group of black marketeers to swear loyalty to one another on the Qur'an. His co-conspirator laughs at the absurdity and impiety.

There are rather few allusions to history and literature. The exception is Harun al-Rashid. Harun, the fifth Abbasid Caliph whose frequent depiction in the 1001 Nights turns him into legend. He is associated here with sexuality and choice living.

## Structure

Miramar by Naguib Mahfouz consists of five numbered chapters, each titled after its narrator. The first four tell the same story from the unique perspective of its narrator: Amer Wagdi, Hosny Allam, Mansour Bahy, and Sarhan al-Beheiry. In the fifth chapter, Amer returns to provide an epilogue, describing the aftermaths of the murder of Sarhan, which is the climax of the individual chapters including, by anticipation, Sarhan's own telling.

Octogenarian Amer Wagdi leads off, telling the basic story of five men renting rooms in the Miramar Pension from an aging Greek woman, Mme. Mariana. A beautiful peasant woman, Zohra Salama, serves as the housemaid. Among her chores are shopping for the guests and serving them afternoon tea or coffee in their rooms. The company gathers for a monthly radio broadcast by the famed Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum and during the party that proceeds the program they eat, drink, and talk mostly about politics. Zohra innocently inflames the passions of Sarhan and Hosni. Her relatives try but fail to make her return home to her village and she rejects a marriage proposal from the newspaper seller Mahmoud Abu al-Abbas. She hires a tutor to learn to read and write and Sarhan shifts his affections to the tutor, causing a scene. On the morning of New Year's Eve, to which the characters have been looking forward, Sarhan is found dead in the street and the newspapers suspect murder. Everyone is shocked and worried about an investigation, for all have to some extent hated him. Amer writes with a profound sense of nostalgia for the distant past and bitterness over how his career comes to an end. He has lived most of his life separated from his religion and hopes to return to it before he dies. He tries to see the good in his companions, even when they annoy him.



Hosny Allam's telling differs considerably in tone, for he is an angry, hate-filled man. He has a sharp wit and tongue and is endlessly judgmental. He deeply resents having been denied a good education and the opportunity to marry and is sexually obsessed. Much of his chapter is devoted to descriptions of high-speed drives around Alexandria to release tension and liaisons with various women whom he picks up or whose services he hires. No one knows of these activities and Amer had given Sarhan the title of the pension's Don Juan. Hosny is a catalyst for fighting among Zohra's would-be suitors.

Mansour Bahy has in Amer's version a reputation for severe, inexplicable introversion, which he reveals is based in pathological self-hatred. He depicts himself as a figure of loathing who cannot live by his beliefs and who brings disaster on himself and those around him. He develops a side-story of falling in love with an old sweetheart, the wife of his friend who has been arrested for political crimes. After convincing Doreya to obtain a divorce, he refuses to marry her and breaks off the relationship. He also develops the reason and aftermath of his public fight with Sarhan, following him to a bar intending to kill him and believing that he has kicked him to death on an isolated street.

The final version of the tale belongs to Sarhan al-Beheiry. He reveals the pre-history of his relations with Safeya Barakat, the mystery woman who fights with Zohra and whom he claims is a jilted lover. Mesmerized by Zohra at first glance, he maneuvers to drop Safeya and move into the Miramar. He charms Zorha but cannot lower himself to marry her. Seeing a marriage candidate in Zohra's tutor, he loses Zohra and eventually is also dropped by the tutor. Sarhan proves that Amer and other characters are right in their judgment that he is nothing but as an opportunist. Sarhan also has a side story: out of economic desperation he joins in a black market operation. He is unaware that he has angered Mansour to the point of murder and tells from his own perspective the dramatic scene in the bar, which Mansour believes leads to murder. In fact, Sarhan's plot has unraveled and the police are probably on his trail. In despair, he begs a bartender for a razor and goes out into the street.

Amer's epilogue shows Mansour confessing his guilt to the police, who do not know what to do with him when the autopsy reveals that Sarhan in fact commits suicide. Elderly Tolba Marzuq, whom none of the narrators like, celebrates New Year's Eve with elderly Mariana. Their attempt at a sex is frustrated by age. This provides one of the novel's few light moments. The epilogue concludes with Amer giving Zohra a somewhat mawkish pep talk about how tragedy prepares one for eventual successes in life and a recitation of the Qur'an sura on God as The Beneficent, the same portion that he quotes in his first narration.



## Quotes

"A few days had brought us nearer to one another. The sense of companionship had gotten the better of the old political differences as well as the deeply rooted aversion of two opposed temperaments, though occasionally the buried differences would drift up to the surface, reawakening an ugly antagonism" (Chapter 1, Amer Wagdi, pg. 16-17.)

"His body was found on the road to the Palma."

Tolba Marzuq came in nervously clutching a paper. 'This is really dreadful news. It may cause a lot of trouble.'

We looked at each other and thought of all the probabilities - his first fiancée, Hosny Allam, Mansour Bahy, Mahmoud Abu al-Abbas - until Mariana said, 'Why, the murderer may be someone we've never heard of.'

'Why not?' I agreed. 'We know hardly anything about the young man'" (Chapter 1, Amer Wagdi, pg. 50-51.)

"I drive fast along the Corniche - Mazarita, Chatby, Ibrahimiya, and beyond. My nerves have been racked and they respond gratefully to the car's speed as it slashes through the cold refreshing air under a cloudy sky. The blue-sea-edged Corniche is sharp, clear-cut, scrubbed clean of the clamor and smell of summer vacationers" (Chapter 2, Hosny Allam, pg. 59.)

"The whiskey draws us together in a sort of familiarity, but I know it won't last, that there will never be any real friendship between me and Sarhan and Mansour; at most a transitory intimacy that will soon evaporate, just like the girl I picked up at the Metro" (Chapter 2, Hosny Allam, pg. 63.)

"I ought to clear my head, with a wild drive from one end of Alexandria to the other. White clouds sail slowly above my head, almost within reach, drenched with colors; the air is light and sharp. This is the last day of the old year and my lust for a hectic roaring time goes up a thousand percent. Let them live or die, who cares? I know what I'm going to do. And as I put my car in gear, I tell my reflection in the mirror, 'Ferekkeko, don't blame me'" (Chapter 2, Hosny Allam, pg. 86.)

"What counts is what you do, not what you think,' I answered impatiently. 'And therefore I'm no more than an idea.'

'Do? Think? What's all this about?' Madame smiled in bemusement.

The old man smiled too. 'Sometimes a tired thinker may come to the conclusion that the best things in the world are a good meal and a pretty woman'" (Chapter 3, Mansour Bahy, pg. 102-103.)

"I stood there looking after her, watching her loved and familiar figure as she walked away; and even then, even at such an absurd moment, it was clear to me that this broken creature I watched disappearing into oblivion was my first and probably my last and only love. With that disappearance I felt the beginning of my own downhill slide.



And in spite of my suffering, a curious ease came over me" (Chapter 3, Mansour Bahy, pg. 121-122.)

"Now I'm the superintendent. You're responsible for the accounts and books. The truck driver is safe and so is the guard. Nothing is left but for the four of us to get together and swear on the Koran.'

I laughed out loud. He looked at me, surprised, then realized how ridiculous what he'd just said was" (Chapter 4, Sarhan al-Beheiry, pg. 133.)

"I watch her teach Zohra and I find myself comparing the two of them, simplicity and ignorance, beauty and poverty on the one hand, with education, elegance, and a career on the other. If only Zohra could have found herself in this other girl's world, with all its potentialities" (Chapter 4, Sarhan al-Beheiry, pg. 156.)

"Zohra, what's the matter?' I ask with concern.

'If I didn't know that God's wisdom was above everything, I'd lose my faith.'

'What's wrong? Is it some new trouble?'

'I saw the two of you with my own eyes.' She spits the words out contemptuously" (Chapter 4, Sarhan al-Beheiry, pg. 164-165.)

"He hesitates a little, but when he sees the look on my face he calls a waiter, who comes back from somewhere with a used blade. 'Thanks.' I put it in my pocket. Now I'm turning away from the bar and walking out toward the front door. I'm reeling. Not from drunkenness. From desperation. Haste. I'm crossing the road, and I wish I had the strength left in me to run.

'I have no hope. No hope'" (Chapter 4, Sarhan al-Beheiry, pg. 170.)

"My peace had been destroyed by all these incidents. I had taken asylum in Mariana's pension hoping to live quietly in my old age and to find consolation in my memories for the unbearably cruel disappointment of the last years of my career. It had not occurred to me that it would turn into an arena of brutal conflict, ending with violence and even murder" (Chapter 5, Amer Wagdi [2], pg. 171.)



## Topics for Discussion

What do the various male characters' comments suggest about the status of women in Egypt in the late 1960s? From her reactions, how do you think Zohra Salama fits and/or defies their views?

How is alcohol consumption dealt with in the novel? Does it surprise you, in light of the subsequent Islamic fundamentalism, that Muslims behave in this way?

How does Umm Kulthum's broadcast help establish the various characters' personalities?

How do you understand from the novel Egypt's political and economic situation in the late 1960s?

How is sex portrayed in the novel? Does it surprise you, in light of the subsequent Islamic fundamentalism, that Muslims behave in this way?

How is the Greek Christian Mme. Mariana portrayed? How does her life's story contribute to the tale? What does her character say about Egyptian attitudes towards the elderly in the late 1960s?

What is the significance of Hosny Allam's mysterious driving around Alexandria in his beloved Ford? How does it tie into his oft-repeated phrase, "Ferekeeko, don't put the blame on me?"