

Death: the final  
answer? a cemetery  
symbolism analysis in  
the thief and the dogs



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Death has been a prevalent theme in literature of all cultures throughout the centuries. In *The Thief and the Dogs*, the author Naguib Mahfouz explores the realm of death and its interconnections with life. Witnessing the turmoil of the Egyptian revolutions since childhood, it is small wonder that Mahfouz creates a fictional world which mirrors the chaos of his nation with a protagonist whose role is to face the confusion of the contemporary world and revisit the cores of traditional values, one of which is the relationship between life and death. The author's use of the cemetery symbol not only elucidates the protagonist's confusion of a betraying world, but also clarifies Mahfouz's own views on death. The symbolism of the cemetery somberly embodies Said Mahran's inherent decaying psyche and his perception of the world, which convene to make a philosophical statement about death as being the final 'truth' Said had so insanely pursued.

The vast expanse of the cemetery, serving as the backdrop in which the novel unravels, is symbolic of Said Mahran's psychological decadence. While Said's death at the end of the novel may seem precipitous, that is an illusion. Mahfouz's use of the cemetery symbol suggests that at some level of consciousness, Said has always known about his imminent death. The sense of doom and despondency is revealed to readers as Nur asks after a long day of work, "How did you spend your time" and Said dejectedly replies, "between the shadows and the graves" (157). The shadows gradually make their advance, looming over Said's persona and slowly murder his sanity. Towards the end of the novel, what is left of Said when the dogs surround him is no longer a complete human being, but just a physical body devoid of spirit or emotion. The symbolism of the cemetery serves as the murderer of

his soul, as it is the consummate silence, which gradually drains Said of all humane emotion and reason. He, at one point, speaks to himself: “ The silence of the graves is more intense, but you can’t switch on the light...your eyes will get used to the dark, the way they did to prison and all those ugly faces” (95). To some extent at the subconscious level, Said stares at the murderer of his sanity—the silence of the graves—and ambiguously acknowledges the transformations going on in his mental state but is powerless to defend himself due to his blind rage of revenge. Said’s extreme hatred for his traitors effectuates an inescapable gloom over his life, a darkness that “ made a black wall across his path”. Without dispute, Said “ plunged off among the tombs into the maze path” (155). Said’s final death is not unforeseen, but an ineluctable eventuality. The ‘ phantom of death’ finally emerges from the shadows, stalking through the dark. Revenge is a plague that plunders Said’s very soul—the hatred, the growing greed to kill, foreshadows and leads to his own demise. Said is psychologically murdered numerous times by the silent loneliness of the cemetery before the shadows of hatred and paranoia finally make their advance on his physical existence.

While the cemetery symbolizes a bleak, lonely spiritual doom in Said Mahran, it also serves as a more direct symbol as the traitors are compared to the corpses in the graves. The novella revolves around characters living in the lower strata of society, such as criminals, prostitutes, and thieves. Thus, they are in a sense, already “ underground”—buried in their own graves, while a new nation, created by the Egypt 1952 Revolution, carries on above them. More importantly, the cemetery becomes a personal symbol for Said and becomes symbolic of his own perception of the world, assuming a special

quality as intense emotional animosity is directly connected to the corpses in the graveyard. Said constantly refers to the people who had betrayed him as associated with the cemetery, as if the whole world is already dead in his eyes: " So this is the real Rauf Iwan, the naked reality—a partial corpse not even decently underground" (47). The stretch of graveyard surrounding Said's temporary residence serves as a reminder that he is more alone in the world, as all who are dead and buried underground no longer have any tangible relations with him. His dead father seems to exist only in the state of dreams, far away from violent reality, and his mother is never mentioned. Thus, no emotional connections bond Said with the ones buried in the cemetery; its total silence isolates him, discouraging him from ruminating further about the Dead or the afterlife. The melancholy of the graves fails to provide Said with human companionship, and the people around him who are still alive are just as indifferent. Thus, Said views the Living as being just as useless as the dead, associating them with the buried corpses in the cemetery. The cemetery is symbolic of Said's lack of faith in both the afterworld and his present world.

Although the cemetery exemplifies Said's dismal perception of the world and spiritual loneliness, the symbolism also serves as an antithesis by ironically becoming Said's source of strength. Indeed, Said feels minimal emotional attachment to the ones buried underground, but he does believe deeply in the cemetery's ethereal quality and its melancholic authority. Said's faith in the unknown power of the cemetery is greater than his faith in the Sheikh himself. Instead of obtaining spiritual support from the Sheikh, it is at the graves where Said seeks for spiritual power, as he believes the cemetery

radiates “ some force stronger than death itself” (101). Ironically, it is also at the graves where Said will eventually be buried. He thus returns to the very place that gave him strength. Death assumes a mystical nature as Said considers “ all those things lying out there in the graveyard below the window will help [him]” (114). The dead corpses buried underground, silently breathing in all its wholeness, gains a solemn authority in Said’s soul and the twisted silence feeds his insanity, giving him the power to continue pursuing his revenge. Death, in all its entirety and solemnity, seems to mock the trivial conflicts that trouble the ones who are still alive. Here, it is suggested that death is surreal; it is a perennial mystery since the Dead cannot tell its story to the Living. Just like the philosophy discussed behind Socrates Allegory of the Cave, as told by Plato, those who seek the final truth, the final revelation, will have forever crossed to the ‘ other side’ of reality. Said Mahran believes death is the final revelation and the final reality, and it is his belief in this final peace that allows him to face death with ready acceptance. Mahfouz describes the cemetery with a tone of respectful submission: “ What a lot of graves there are, laid out as far as the eye can see. Their headstones are like hands raised in surrender...A city of silence and truth, where murder and victim come together, where thieves and policemen lie side by side in peace for the first and last time” (89). The cemetery carries the overlapping theme, the overall ambience of the novella that the ‘ final peace’ is always harmony. Described as a city with complete opposites residing in harmony, the cemetery symbolic of final peace; death ends all hatred existing in the world of the Living.

Said was lost in confusion trying to grasp the abstract idea of death and the afterlife, and eventually resolves to attribute the conundrum of the afterlife to the mysterious pull of the cemetery, the bigger force above us all. He then proceeds to say, “ as for the rest, I’ll leave it to Sheik Ali to solve the riddle” (114). In exploring the meaning of death and the afterworld, Said gives up on figuring out the impossible, and instead shifts his focus to his present life. At the moment when Said gives up his pursuit of the unsolvable puzzle of truth, he suddenly gains an insight into the “ truth” he was in search for, and feels spiritually fulfilled. Said finds this spiritual gratification as he confesses to Nur, “ being with you, after being out there with the bullets, is like being in Paradise” (128). True fulfillment lies not in the Sheikh’s mosque or the Afterlife of the cemetery, but in his own control. The revelation, albeit arriving a little too late, gives him true happiness for the last moments of his life as appreciation dawns on him—nirvana is not sought in revenge or the Dead, but in his present life. Many, like the protagonist Said Mahran, will travel full circle and eventually come to the conclusion that death is a force greater than humankind’s scope of understanding.

Every known civilization has myths, theories, and literature on the subject of death, and each has their unique viewpoint since the search on the meaning of life and death is a never-ending journey. The symbolism of the cemetery depicts not only Said’s cynicism for the world and his decaying persona, but also served to transcend Mahfouz’s commentary on his understanding of death. With the esoteric nature of the cemetery, it is evinced that what comes after Death is unfathomable. It is the present world, apparently, which can provide the most immediate utopia. After all, in the words of Jewish-

Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza, “ what everyone wants from life is continuous and genuine happiness”. The double-sided symbolism of the cemetery, however, allows readers to develop their own interpretations on the relationship between life and death.