Naguib Mahfouz is a novelist, yet his literary activity began with short story writing and this is a form to which he has since occasionally returned. His first collection entitled the Whisper of Madness (Hams al-Junun, 1938). Mahfouz began writing short stories influenced by Mahmud Taymur and al-Mazini and the fiction translations done by Muhammad al-Siba’i. After that he wrote stories in the spirit of self novel, And so his latest stories are closest to the genre of the “Long short story” ranging between fifty and eighty foolscap pages”, He has published many volumes of short stories. This range of his writing has not received comparable attention to that devoted to his novels. This essay seeks, then, to explicate Naguib Mahfouz as a writer of the short story.105

The short story is form that arouses the greatest dissension amongst writers. However, views differ, the short story is certainly the art of the partial, the individual and the simple, through which were lead to totalities

---

and generalities. The short story is the art of concentration, and consequently its methods often parallel those of poetry.

Short stories are capable of transmitting directly, with speed and effectiveness. This results from the fact that they could write quickly and published immediately in the newspaper because of their limited size. Therefore the short story is capable of expressing the changes and crises in society, and that is why the form flourishes in periods of anxiety, and change. The novel, however, requires a somewhat static reality, it being the art of the ‘deep breath’, of the concerns of groups of person. And because novels require much time to write and are difficult to publish, they are not capable of accompanying a society or an individual during their rapid transformations. Naguib Mahfouz has published short stories during important periods of Egypt’s modern history. His first collection, *Hams al-Junun -1938* (Whisper of Madness) were written in a painful period that saw the success of the grand conspiracy in which the Egyptian bourgeoisie engaged by making peace with British imperialism and suppressing the Revolution of 1919. This all led to the signing of the 1936 pact through which the British gained a legal presence. The stories in whisper of Madness were written during that period of angry unrest among the
Egyptian people that ended with the outbreak of World War II but exploded again in 1946 after the war was over.106

In the beginnings of the socialist transformation of the early sixties, Mahfouz returned to the short story with his second collection entitled God’s World (Dunya Allah, 1962). This appeared during a period when the short story was in apparent crisis, since the majority of its exponents in the fifties had turned their efforts towards the novel. The newspaper almost stopped publishing Stories since the new generation of writers was expressing their interest in theater, the short story seemed in a state of abandonment; the older writers had stopped producing them and the younger ones had not begun. But it was soon evident that the crisis was one of birth, not of death, for short stories appeared thereafter in such profusion as to overwhelm the facilities for publication, both public and private, a fact that constitutes a very interesting phenomenon.

For a period following the 1967, Naguib Mahfouz devoted himself totally to writing the short story. It is well known that the Egyptian short stories come to maturity after world war-1 and open the Revolution of 1919. This followed a period of the translation and open imitation of French short

106 Trevor Le Gassick, Critical Perspectives on Naguib Mahfouz, P-10.
stories. The ‘New School’ consisting of Mahmud Tahir Lashin, Hussain Fawzi, Ibrahim al-Misri and others were influenced by the Russian story. These writers also opened their minds to international fiction in general through translation of major writers, and they set about creating a genuine Egyptian short story. But this ‘school’ was essentially bankrupt by the late thirties.

It was during this period that Mahfouz began writing short stories. This fact explains why his works were initially so lacking in sophistication, both artistically and intellectually, for all their faithfulness to the Egyptian social reality and their intent to create stories truly Egyptian in flesh and blood.107

The lack of sophistication of Mahfouz’s first collection is evident from the stories’ dearth of ideas and weakness of artistic structure. Whisper of Madness, the story from which the collection lacks its title, is a simple moralistic tale that tells directly of the activities of a Madman who steals food, is violent to others, assaults girls and tears his clothing. Its long introduction about madness exceeds the needs of the short story, which demands concentration and economy.

107 Ahmad Muhammad Atiyya, Naguib Mahfouz and the Short story, P-10.
These stories do, reveal to us the beginnings of Mahfouz’s concern for the Egyptian social reality, and especially for its despairing and poverty ridden classes. Whisper of Madness features people wallowing in luxury and fine food while all around them young people are starving. The Madman takes revenge on the rice by stealing a chicken from them and giving it to the poor.

This unsophisticated expression of the social reality is clearly revealed in stories like Falseness (al-Zayf), which tells of the competition between two bourgeois women over possession of a poet. It ends unconvincingly with the surprise discovery of their mistake in confusing the poet with someone who had assumed his identity. This too is a story devoid of philosophical, social or psychological content, other perhaps than exposing the triviality and decadence of the Egyptian bourgeoisie. It relies upon artless surprises and coincidences. Similar is the story Delirium (al-Hudhyan), which relates how a husband, discovering the infidelity of his wife when delirious on her deathbed is so shocked that he commits suicide. And then there are stories like Female Wiles (Kayduhunna), Pleasure Gardens (Ruwad al-Faraj) and Letters (Rasa’il) This last depicts through an exchange of letters the infidelity of a girl towards her lover, and how his
discovery of this leads him to break off his relationship with her. This story clearly condemns the closed society of Upper Egypt. Which were the story’s two main characters deride by establishing a love relationship in denial of its taboos.\(^{108}\)

Mahfouz often filled the stories of his first collection with direct sermonizing and moral platitudes. In addition, the stories’ frameworks often extend to include a great number of extraneous events from the characters’ childhood. Sex for its own sake is similarly a dominant theme. In the story Whisper of Madness the Madman fondles the breasts of a woman in the street, following the author is lengthy and Falseness revolves around a night of sex and violence. The protagonist, as well as the central figure of The Vagrant Woman (al-Sharida) admits that he craves all women and therefore has no self-control when with any woman, regardless of her attractiveness. Here sex is called ‘sinful love’, and it is rejected with exhortation and advice. All this reveals a misunderstanding of the role of art, which clearly should exclude making speeches and sermonizing.\(^{109}\)

\(^{108}\) Trevor Le Gassick, Critical Perspective on Naguib Mahfouz, P-11.

\(^{109}\) Ahmad Muhammad Atiyya, Nagguib Mahfouz and the Short story. P-11.
In Whisper of Madness, his first treatment of the tormented, Mahfouz states directly. “This human world of ours is intensely grin.” (p. 44) In the story Memoirs of a Young Man (Mudhakkarat Shabb), he condemns society by demonstrating that to gain a position, What is needed is not ability or success in school, but marriage, contacts and influence. Mahfouz ends his story with an eloquent sermon, the gist of which is that “… the truly happy person is one who contents himself with reality, someone who attains the means to contentment and satisfaction wherever he may be” (p. 72). It is this acceptance of reality that leads the hero of this story to a position, he does not deserve and to participation in a mission abroad and so on.

The story the Mummy’s Awakening (Yaqzatu al-Mumiya) which has genuine social and political constant, asks, “Shall Egypt’s citizens endure starvation?” P.97 The Mummy that represents Egypt in the story responds, “The aristocracies are the servants and the slaves who stole the peasant’s lands”.

This view reflects the reality of the history of land in Egypt, since today’s Pashas are descended from the palace servants of former years, whereas the today’s peasants are the rightful owners of lands stolen by the ruling classes. In the story, the Pasha’s dog eats meat, while the human who
steals a piece from the dog was punished. The story is one of direct social protest.

But even hunger is not the decisive factor for Ibrahim Hanafi in the story hunger (al-Ju’) after a machine severs his hand. It is suspicion over his wife’s infidelity that propels him towards suicide. But through chance he encounters the gambling son of the capitalist responsible for loss of his land, and that meeting resolves his crisis. The wealthy son comments: How very many families suffering like Ibrahim Hanafi could be made happy by the money such a man as loses each night at the club!”

The civil servant in the story This Century (Hadha al-Qarn) is seen as a despicable no-good because is a bureaucrat. This exchange occurs between the Pasha and the civil servant:

“What is your profession?”

“I’m a civil servant”.

“That means you are a su’luk”.

“A su’luk!”

---

110 Trevor Le Gassick, Critical Perspective on Naguib Mahfouz, p-12.
Yes, a mere clerk is incapable of honorable employment. People who print the words ‘civil servant’ on their visiting cards really mean that they are just mere clerks. Is not that a fact?"^{111}

This conversation comes after long pages of discussion about wine and drunkards, hunger, poverty marital infidelity, influence peddling, opportunism, and gaining positions through marriage, either by wedding the ugly or by exploiting the daughters of the wealthy. These are the subjects favored by Naguib Mahfouz in the stories of his collection Whisper of Madness. In addition, in terms of their form, they have introductions as if they were articles, and unnecessarily lengthy digressions, sermonizing, the use of direct hortatory moralizing speech and external description.

The view that the poet can, within the social framework, contemplate issues such as birth, death and the fact of man’s ultimate insignificance, as Stephen Spender wrote in his book “The Poet and Life, certainly expresses a mentality similar to that of Naguib Mahfouz. For following his social realist phase that lasted for ten novels, concluding with Autumn Quail (al-Suman wa al-Kharif), he returned to the short story, centering on the subtleties and realities of human life. His second short story collection, God’s World

^{111} Whisper of Madness, P-143.
(Dunya Allah, 1963) - coming after two years of nationalization and a movement towards socialism-marked the start of a new, philosophical stage where his interest was in examining the tragic actuality of man viz-a-viz existence. In this period, reality and symbolism intermixed.\footnote{Trevor Le Gassick, Critical Perspective on Naguib Mahfouz, 13.}

The heroes of Whisper of Madness were engaged in a bitter struggle for positions of employment; this was the extent of their aspirations and the source of their social scheming and opportunism. The characters of God’s World, however, do not participate in the same struggle. The basic existence of these characters is assured, but they are in revolt against the very nature of their lives. Mahfouz’ early characters, those in Whisper of Madness, experienced dissatisfaction with society, a struggle for existence. The heroes of God’s World question whether their actual lives match their aspirations. What sense is there, they ask, in a life as monotonous and limited as theirs?

In the story God’s World, Mahfouz writes, “Life stirred” in the office with an awareness of the presence of ‘Uncle’ Ibrahim, the office boy. A sequence of sketches of the nature of life there follows. As each individual office worker enters, he brings with him the cares of a common humanity rather than merely his own alone. By exploring, the daily concerns of a
group of Egyptian governmental office workers a light on the problems of humanity at large. Ahmed, environment well known to Mahfouz through his own career, he sheds the file clerk, for example, has engraved upon his fifty years old face, “an unchanging misery as though it were the skin of time itself.” And when the newspapers are raised in the air like flags, Lutfy states in commentary on the news, “The year, the world will end.” And Samir wonders, “Why do we suffer getting married and having children? It tells here of a young man who kills his father, right in front of his mother! ” Then Ahmed comments, sickness in his voice. “What’s the point of writing a prescription if the medicine isn’t available to buy?” (P.7) Human tragedy has no solution. Yet the office director can still bawl his order, “Get me file one dash there stroke thirteen of year…. ”

Everything is as usual. But the lives of everyone in the office depend upon the return of ‘Uncle’ Ibrahim with the salaries they all await the first day of the month. But this time he, who usually ensures the flow of their lives and upon whose return all depend, does not come back. Thus, larceny reveals the misery of the workers’ reality. It constitutes a single incident from which a qualitative change results. Ahmed, the neediest of all, cries

out, “worst calamity possible! “ The man could not sell his whole life for a hundred and fifty or two hundred pounds! Maybe he had an accident. This month, O Lord above, is going to seem endless!”(p. 11).

Moving rapidly from one scene to the next, Mahfouz shows the reactions of the office workers. The director, who at first despairs, soon adopts a bureaucratic response, but later sees a solution for himself through gambling, Mustafa resorts to a loan shark. Lutfy contemplates a trick to get money from his wealthy wife. The ‘soldier’ decides to seek help from his father.

*Samir* knows the value of taking a bribe. But since there would be no solution for the file clerk. *Ahmed*, ‘Uncle’ *Ibrahim* has already taken his money to his home. When ‘Uncle’ *Ibrahim’s* house is searched, all that is found is one simple tunic with a small amount of *hashish*. That is all he possesses. The tunic was there for a change in the wealth, and the *hashish* was to alleviate his constant worries. We learn that ‘Uncle’ *Ibrahim’s* life has changed in recent months; he has fallen madly in love and is determined to find happiness and to help *Jasmine*, the lottery ticket girl, escape from her life as a vagrant. And so, when they run away to the paradise of which he had so long dreamed, to the sea near Alexandria ‘Uncle’ *Ibrahim’s* eyes lit
up with a look of anticipation and amazement, as though he were meeting the world for the first time and with a child-like innocence. He seemed to have been released from chains of care, and to be “… floating high in a dream, enjoying soulful melodies of love emanating from the depths of his ecstasy.” He is determined to enjoy the happiness he well knows will end when his money runs out or they are found. However, he dismisses all his apprehensions and begins enjoying every minute of his life, reveling in the beauty of nature, inspired by his passion. He forgets completely his blind wife, bare room and children who had moved away and abandoned him in lonely poverty. His young lover tells him: “I have no one but you.” But his happiness cannot last, for Jesmine viciously bites his land and tries to steal from him. He, however, is forgiving; he gives her most of his remaining money, gathers her belongings and takes her to the train station.\textsuperscript{114}

Now left alone to his human tragedy ‘Uncle’ Ibrahim wanders away, careless of those in pursuit. He complains to God, “But my fate surely can’t please you! How can’t please you for a girl to be young, beautiful and wicked? And where are my children? Can that please You? Though I am among millions, I feel terrible loneliness; does that please You?

\textsuperscript{114} Trevor Le Gassick, Critical Perspective on Naguib Mahfouz, p-14.
When he falls into the hands of his pursuers, and they ask what made him do it, he replies, sighing, with one word: “God.”

God’s World, demonstrates for the first time, an interest in the metaphysical joined with that in the social, It is in this collection that Mahfouz, after his wide-ranging artistic voyage, releases himself from his wordiness, padding direct moralizing and sermonizing; now his art begins to combine criticism of life with the posing of genuine human dilemmas.

In the story God’s World, ‘Uncle’ Ibrahim is suffering social and spiritual deprivation following fifty years of labour and broken dreams. The same is true of Abd al-Azim, hero of the story Closeness to God (Jiwar Allah), despite his wife, five children and blameless life. But the deprivation in this story is of quite different type form that in God’s World. All the characters in this story suffer a deprivation and disillusionment like that of ‘Abd al-Azim’, the story’s hero. His sister is an unmarried woman in her fifties; his aunt, in her eighties, is also unmarried and lives alone, though in her family’s own neighborhood, in a little room set above the roof of the house she owns. When the news of his aunt’s death - bed illness reaches ‘Abd al-Azim, his mind fills with dreams of her fortune for which he had

---

115 Sukut Hamdi, Naguib Mahfouz’s Short stories, pp. 114-125.
long been writing. These thoughts smoulder and fire his mind with the avidity of a man who had never experienced any ownership. Here was a man who had remained in the lowly fifty grade of the civil service, his back bent with the weight of his duties. His father had bequeathed him only his sister Tafida. Therefore, “Abd al-Azim buries alive his memories of childhood in his new dreams of the windfall now close to him through the approach of death to his wealthy aunt. He has a sense of the feelings of the petit bougeois, of a man in a poor quarter newly distinguished above his impoverished neighbors by his acquisition of secure employment in the bureaucracy and by his suit and his sister’s coat on which he had recently paid the final installment. At the deathbed itself, his need for money overwhelms his sense of religious reverence, and he wonders where her money is hidden. For, despite his petit bourgeois arrogance, he knows that all he has to last him till the end of the month is the cash he needs for cigarettes and travel to work.” (p. 35)

For all his security of work and family and dreams of sudden wealth, Abd al-Azim suffers anxiety, fear and powerlessness. In his aunt’s illness, he perceives a calamity that will ultimately destroy the entire family. And in her death he discovers an affliction to plague all humanity. Had his father and
grandfather not died from the same disease? His grandfather had passed away in his eighties, the same age as his aunt. But his father had died in his sixties. So there was no order or principle to it; this fatal disease could strike him down at any time. But Hajj Mustafa, the broker, once again feeds his dreams of inheritance and of an end to his lack of ownership. In this story, the broker represents one distinctive face of humanity. For years the death of ‘Abd al-Azim’s aunt had figured in his calculations. Everything has been waiting for her death.116

During the lengthy mourning period, ‘Abd al-Azim a man poor all his life, enjoys nothing so much as contemplating his share of the inheritance. His thoughts have a practical, business-like quality: “Probably it would amount at least to a couple of months’ salary. Maybe he would be able to buy himself an overcoat! It was not right for him to suffer each winter without a coat, at his age. Maybe he could provide his family decent fruit from time to time or perhaps some fowl to eat, even if only once a month. Life would certainly be better than heretofore.” (p. 49)

These, then, are poor people striving for basic needs and longing for ownership and enjoyment of some luxury after a long, hard life. Having

worked much more than they have rested, their toil has only earned then a daily crust of bread.

The wait for death is, however, long and ‘Abd al-Azim’ lives in a torment he believes to be the work of some unknown, awesome force. He wonders, “What hidden force was it that so toyed with them, so tortured them? Had life not been bearable, for all its difficulties? What had propelled them to this trail?”

When death suddenly arrives, and ‘Abd al-Azim’ sees his family in the sepulcher, everything within himself dies. He sees no value or sense in anything, and he is confronted by humanity’s persistent questionings. “How could the answer be awarded to one man, alone in the shadow of the grave? Now he finds all his life embodied in his children, and he resolves to strive for a cure for his son’s ill health, to help him gain weight to avoid sickness and death.”

Only the broker seems calm. Everything is concluded as he had arranged it. For ‘Abd al- Azim’ however, the broker’s hand offered in consolation makes him merely like one of the thousands of tombstone there.

Finally, he says, “It is now our time to go.” (p.60) This is a double entendre, implying that all roads lead to death.

The Sheikh ‘Abd Rabbihi’ the Imam of the mosque and hero of the story, The Mosque down the Lane (al-Jaim fi al-Drab), recognizes an opportunity to increase salaries and retirement benefits when he is invited with other Imams to pray for the king from the pulpit. This creates a dilemma, however, between doing, what his conscience forbids and the people despise in order to continue in his official position, or refusing and facing dismissal, and so experiencing hunger and poverty. Ultimately, he rebels against his conscience and says prayers for the ruler. He is parishioners raise havoc, and the mosque becomes a hunting ground for the police. When the prostitute Samara goes to her chamber where hangs a picture of Saad Zaghloul, the late national hero, she comments, sighing, “Lucky him! By speaking a couple of words, he could earn gold, while we are not worth a dime for all the swat of our whole body! Her male customer sneers in response, “Yes, there’s lots of so-called respectable man who are no different at all from you. But who is it who has the guts to say so openly?”(p.73)
Naguib Mahfouz himself certainly has found the courage to express it openly. The preacher’s hypocrisy has alienated the only person who regularly listens to his sermons. But when the bombs fall (World War - II) all the inhabitants of that sin-ridden neighborhood flock to the mosque. Ironically, when Sheikh ‘Abd Rabbihi runs outside he is killed, while the mosque protects the rest of those unfortunate souls. Her death comes as a punishment for mean’s behavior.

The stories of God’s World, then, are variations on the theme of man’s existential crisis, in which the characters’ societal burdens and individuality are subsumed by the author’s spiritual concerns. Consider, for example, the happy husband in Appointment (Maw’id). Although he is highly successful at work and blissful happy at home with his wife and wonderful little family, he too is discontented and asks disturbing and different questions. He expresses boredom even with foreign travel and we read that, “His thought ranged crazily afar, disturbed by imponderables like the dissolution of matter, the eradication of light, the scattering of ashes, the dispersal of air. And though he tells his wife there is no cause for anxiety, drinks wine to excess and becomes engrossed in strange books about the unknown, with titles like, “The Edge of the world,” “The Sixth Sense” and
“The World of the Spirits.” He feels that nothing has meaning or permanence, not even love or matrimony. The sad songs on the radio seem to him to mourn the end of all life. His thoughts lead him into total isolation and despair and he envisions only death. Man’s trial must be for all time and every place. And when he is certain that he must die, he seeks out his brother who dies as well.¹¹⁸

In the collection House of Ill Repute (Bayt Sayi’ al-Sum’a) Naguib Mahfouz returns to his societal enquiry. Which a ‘sublime fate’ controls his characters and toys with them all, they also suffer from differences in social status. In just Before Leaving (Qubayla al-Rahil), here Barakat spends four years observing the prostitute Dunya (meaning “this world”), as opposed to the “afterlife”, the name here having obvious significance without her arousing his interest. Suddenly, however, when he has to move to Assiut from Alexandria, he becomes very interested in her. But as soon as he has paid her fee and lies in her arms, his disinterest returns. When she gives him back his money, stating that the lovemaking itself has been reward enough, he is elated and begins to sing. He now fights her battles for her. But “Laughing, she told him that his voice was not meant to sing. He replied that

happiness alone mattered, and made everything sing. He then spoke with fine eloquence about love” (p. 15). Ultimately, she reveals that she had deceived him by pretending to return his fee, and Barakat’s sweet dream evaporates.

In Midnight Dream (Hilm nisf al-Layl), ‘Abbas kills his mother’s Husband because “Our lord al-Khidr” (a legendary prophet-like figure, ed.) revealed to him in a dream that no other man should take his father’s place. In Rainbow (Qaws Quzah) the father’s methods of dealing with his family change from fair-mindedness to a frightful tyranny, which he justifies by saying “This is the soul of sanity”. In punishment for his rebellion against his father’s authority, the man’s youngest son goes mad. In silence (al-Samt), the comedian Saqr becomes amazed at how he can devote his life to making others laugh, regardless of tragedy. When he himself suffers the trauma of his wife’s dangerous delivery, he finds no one to talk to in his pain. He reminds us of Chekhov’s charge driver who has no one but his horse to complain to when his only son dies. In House of Ill Repute, Mr. Ahmed tries unsuccessfully to being the past back. Thirty years before he had fallen in love with a girl from a family, this allowed liberal social contacts, but had refused to become openly attached to her. Because he
viewed her as coming from a “house of ill-repute.” Now fifty, he tries unsuccessfully to renew his past friendship with her; and ironically, he now allows his own family the open social contacts he had formerly criticized in her “house of ill-repute.”

These characters are seen to suffer societal persecution from a tyrannical fate bringing eternal suffering. In the Empty Cafe (al-Qahwat al-Khaliya) we witness the empty life of old Muhammad al-Rashidi following his wife’s death. He has no friends or companions, and his son lives with his wife far away. He himself resides alone in a small room even his peace and quiet was spoiled by the grandson who mistreats him.

Some stories of this collection have a different viewpoint. We find Characters who have accomplished all their life’s dreams, with happy marriages, secure employment, sons and grandchildren; but they too though all seems near perfect, can suffer barren and empty lives. The children and grandchildren ultimately follow their separate paths, leaving the parents without companionship. Before them stretches the prospect of only loneliness and death. Fu’ad Abu Kabir, is hero of the story. A Word in Secret (Kalimah Fi al-Sirr) tries to dispel the pain of his loneliness and to

---

119 Ahmad Muhammad Atiyya, Naguib Mahfouz and the Short story. P-17.
arrest his decline. He establishes a sexual relationship, and marries. But
death now approaches faster than before, while he remains perplexed and
worries, “I just cannot decide whether I am miserable or happy!” Similarly,
Alam Yusry, hero of the story The Ending (al-Khitam), lives a life of great
success at work and home. Ultimately, his aroused conscience torments him,
and death comes as his sole salvation from his predicament.

“What point is there in living?” This then, is the question posed in the
stories of the collection the house of Ill Repute. The question is put directly
in the story Ashes (al-Ramad). And the answer is an apple! The story of
Adam’s apple and its implications are well known.

These stories are all traditional in form. The plot progression in
logical and the story in narrated. Occasionally there is a glimpse of flashback
or internal monologue. Indeed, we find no differentiation in the artistic
techniques of Mahfouz between his novels and his short stories. This is
because their scope is broad enough for the events of a novel. All this
exemplifies Mahfouz’s statement of the influence the novel has had upon his
short stories.\(^{120}\)

\(^{120}\) Trevor Le Gassick, Critical Perspective on Naguib Mahfouz, 21.
In the collection *Khamarat al-Qitt wa al-Aswad* (The Black Cat Tavern), Mahfouz continues his metaphysical journey. Whereas in his prior collection he had offered a mixture of issues relating to social reality and those concerning man and his existence, in this collection, this fourth, he abandons his social concerns. Here he flies in purely metaphysical skies, his issues being death, life existence, the father, and the mother.

A major theme is the search for death. On the other hand, is it an attempt to kill death, the all time murderer? For example, in *A Word Misunderstood* (*Kalima ghayra Mafhuma*) by which is meant the word ‘death’ we meet Handas, a man of power, controlling himself and his underlings, But he is troubled by a strange vision of death at the hands of the son of his rival. He begins an intensive search for that rival threatening to destroy him. Yet eventually, though sure that he has found his enemy and that he has him in his grapes, secure in the company of his own strong man, right there amidst every evidence of his own power, Handas is killed. His men “had never before experienced such a degrading sense of weakness. They had not so much as raised a club, unsheathed a dagger or thrown a stone; the man has been taken right as they talked to him. And where was the killer? In place of the house, they found the tomb of a holy man in a
wasteland, with two candles burning beside an alcove. Not one of them had sensed the killer coming, nor when he had slipped away. He had made no sound and they found no trace of him.” Death, them, is a real but unpredictable danger threatening every human being, an enemy that can intrude without obstacle.121

In the story (al-Sada) The Echo, a man cries out for his forgotten “super-mother”; all indications suggest that the mother is not real, but a symbolic figure. Its hero, ‘Abd al-Halim, has been trying to return to the cradle where there had been sympathy, dreams, and an absence of troubles and cares. But when he returns to his mother in his sixties, he finds her deaf and blind. He weeps and seeks sympathy, but all he had been invoking was solitude, pain and death. In our world, there is only the bullet, blood and death: “We are not the first bloody group, nor will we be the last.” And: “As the writer-wheel turns, all it brings up from within the earth is bitter colocynth. Our sons will not be rewarded better than us. But it is out of the question to raise an objection. Today they frown and exchange angry glances, and tomorrow the bullets will fly. While here, I am seeing the future through the bloody eyes of the past. Today a family picture unites them, just

121 “The Tavern of the Black Cat.” Tr. Saad El-Gabalawy In Modern Egyptian Short stories, pp. 29-34.
as a picture once joined us. But what of tomorrow?” Yes indeed; what of tomorrow! Will there be some release from the trial of blood and death, or is all that man has predetermined fate?

The characters in this collection have an allegorical quality, the events could occur anywhere on earth and the concerns are absolute and universal. Take the character Sharshara, a man in the story The Wasteland (al-Khala) who has spent twenty years dreaming and planning revenge on the rival who forced him to abandon his bride on their wedding day. For twenty years, he thought only of revenge. Finally, having become powerful, he finds that death has beaten him to his opponent. Thereafter his life has no meaning, and he retreats to a wasteland.

Then there is the strange story (al-Barman) the Bartender, its hero referred to in the title. He is a wise man, “… Possessed of an amazing Knowledge of he was a ‘professor’, in the full meaning of the term.” Everyone hopes that the bartender Vasiliadis will rule the world, so that love and harmony can prevail. “And his eyes gleamed with the power of quartz crystals, unmanageable by any blow. From where did his constantly renewing power stem?” All these are superhuman qualities. At times, he is described as the voice of the Saints, at others as being the very symbol of
love and trust. The most important dictum of the Gnostic bartender is, Death only comes once, and when it arrives it is followed by enormous happiness”. For new life will always stir. As for living, it must continue despite problems of love, work, family or old age. Life must continue right up until its cessation and fate alone is the determining force, for the bartender Vasiliadis himself suddenly dies.\textsuperscript{122}

Man is always on trail. Like ‘Aly Musa, hero of the story (\textit{al-Muttaham}) the Accused whose boredom places him under false accusation. He retreats to a wasteland, where no one cares what has might become of him. “And there was an unseeing, indefinable force that comforted him, apparently unconsciously. He had much to be blamed for, but it was foolish to try to connect threads of chaos by threads of logic.” (p. 68)

It is this unseeing force, which motivates the lives of the characters of this collection. Even the children in (\textit{Jannat al-Atfal}) Children’s Paradise, question the wisdom of the different religions. The characters in this collection ceaselessly pose anguished questions. In just such a vein is the mystery about the black cat that had been a god in ancient times. Eventually

the god’s secret was revealed and it was transformed in to a cat. Typically elusive are the question people pose in the Black Cat Tavern itself. Someone there asks, “Tell me, who is it who told you where we are?”(p. 167) Bare philosophical enquiry, then, pervades Mahfouz’s fourth short-story collection.

Naguib Mahfouz was asked why his works fail to reflect the Arab-Israeli conflict, despite its being a cause of critical importance to every Arab wherever he might be, he replied as follows! “I do examine this issue at an abstract level, as I did in Beneath the Shelter (Tahta al-Mazalla). But to treat it with realism is difficult because we do not have full knowledge of the facts.”

The stories in the collection that includes “Beneath the Shelter” and bears it as its title were written after the disastrous war of June 1967, between October and December of that year. They represent a new departure for Mahfouz in terms both of form and of content. In the title story, we confront a scene that is obtuse and surrealistic; it suggests that everything is very complex and that the truth has somehow been lost. A theft occurs that soon results in a series of acts of violence; nude people engage in sex in the

123 A Man and a Shadow, Tr. Amr Affat in Flights of Fantasy, pp. 47-52.
street; various characters, unidentified, address the crowd in speeches. Meanwhile, people beneath a bus shelter observe these events in amazement; at a loss what to do, they are not sure whether they are witnessing acting or reality. Suddenly a head rolls by and blood flows. This ends their confusion, since it is clearly all, reality. Their only hope for ending the violence is a nearly policeman. Instead of curtailing the violence, he levels his rifle at them standing there under the shelter and kills them all.

This story, for all its spare symbolism, takes its points of departure directly from the reality of the defeat in the war. It was written during that period of extreme bitter self-criticism that had overwhelmed Arab society and gives strong expression to its deep anxiety and instability. Naguib Mahfouz, by moving beyond the reality into surrealism, is giving true expression to that period just as the initial surrealists had done before. The feelings of violent disintegration that the World War had caused, as Wallace Fowled observed in his book The Age of Surrealism, by which I mean that sense of defeat that prevailed even before the armistice of 1910, largely if
not completely paralleled the agony of young people in the post-war world expressed in their sense of purposelessness and protest.\textsuperscript{124}

It is therefore, considered that the stories of this collection to be a quantum leap in Mahfouz’s fictional art. Here all specialties of time, logic, place and character is abandoned, and all is intermixed in ways that are suggestive and acute. Mahfouz has ceased dealing with contemplation and description of an external nature; he has given up the traditional narrative tale and devoted himself to the mystical, to anxiety and to confused visions.

Mahfouz’s short stories in his previous four collections were traditional in from and, in my opinion, lagged far behind the achievements of other Arabic writers of this form. By contrast, if one compares these stories with his novels, one can conclude with confidence that Mahfouz as a novelist ranks with the best writers in the world today. His novels are distinguished by being modern and even contemporary, and Mahfouz must therefore be considered the true father of the Arabic Novel.

But when writing the short story he employees techniques long out of date. In his novels, it has been found the stream of consciousness evocative

\textsuperscript{124} Trevor Le Gassick, Critical Perspective on Naguib Mahfouz, P-20.
reminiscence and the flashback, the internal monologue and multiple visions. In his earlier short stories, however, traditional plot development and narration dominate.

Such has been his lofty status and his skills as a novelist, that Mahfouz is accused of being an obstacle to progress of the Arabic novel towards newly creative forms of expression, whereas the same charge has not been leveled against him regarding the short story, a form in which he is not dominate. Perhaps it is his very eminence that explains why the extremely avant-garde novels of such writers as Fat-hi Ghanim, al-Tayyib Salih, Ghassan Kanafani and San’ Allah Ibrahim have not received wider attention, whereas a host of short story writers, especially from amongst today’s younger generation, have attained prominence.

Even if Mahfouz’s early writing stories were awkward and unsophisticated in form and idea, he must not be denigrated as an artist. James Joyce, after all, also began his literary career with short story collection entitled The Dubliners that he wrote in 1904. These stories pale in comparison with his great novels, which constituted a vital development in the world history of the form.
In any case, Naguib Mahfouz himself did undergo a fundamental transformation after the 1967 war, perhaps because for a period thereafter he wrote short stories exclusively. The stories in *Beneath the Shelter* may be considered as continuous with those of his novels that are advanced in technique and ideas, while they seem almost disconnected from his earlier, traditional stories.\(^{125}\)

In the story (*al-Nawm*) *The Sleep*, a crime is committed against a part-Egyptian girl while the hero is asleep, exhausted from his constant efforts to discover ‘the truth’. Even though she has called out to him he has remained dozing; she has been murdered right there before him, without his knowledge. Following this murder, his interests change, leading him to tell his colleague, a history teacher, “I have no more desire for metaphysical discussions.” (p. 28) this comment, it is clearly expresses Mahfouz’s own viewpoint as well. He gave up metaphysical concerns for an interest in surrealism. Sleep’s hero abandons his investigations into the spirit world when he is shocked by the reality of the vicious murder committed while he

---

\(^{125}\) Trevor Le Gassick, *Critical Perspective on Naguib Mahfouz*, P-21.
was asleep and immersed in dreams. Now he experiences a boundless wretchedness.  

In Beneath the Shelter, passivity destroys the onlookers. Likewise, in Sleep, it is the man’s absorption in metaphysical study and in sleeping that allow the murder of the young woman, here the symbol for the mother figure. Again, is Shadows (al-Zallam), it is a commitment to safety and good reputation that result in cowardice. That is why all die without offering resistance.  

In the story (al-Wajh al-Akhir) the Other Face, Mahfouz glorifies the rebellious and the revolutionary. “A man who destroys a city is better than one who protects an ancient wall,” he tells us. And in the Conjurer Made off with the Dish (al-Hawi Khatafa al-Tabaq). The every path closed to return to his mother.

Mahfouz’s extensive use of symbolism recurs in such stories as Lovers’ Lane (Harat al-Ishaq). Ambergris Pearl (Anbar Lu’lu), The Heart Doctor’s Soul (Ruh Tabib al-Qulub). Farewell Stop (Mawqif Wida) and Cup of Tea (Finjan Shay). In the first of these, ostensibly the story of a man’s

---

126 Sleep, an Anthology of short stories by Najib Mahfuz Tr. Akef Abadir & Roger Allen, pp 240.
suspicion of his wife, the general conversation is evidently symbolic. Indeed, we can disregard it as a story about marital relation and treat it as one dealing with public affairs. *Abd Allah*, the story’s hero asserts the important connection between the public well-being and personal relationship: “For friendship’s sake, tell me frankly, do you have any desire to serve the public good?” *Abd Allah* then questions all kinds of men to obtain truth, peace of mind and a solution to his own pressing crisis. He tries the life of the heart and of faith as the Imam, the Sheikh Marwan, who allows him entry to his Sufi Mystic circle and his lessons in religion, advises him. He then explores the intellectual and philosophical life under the direction of ‘Antar, a teacher who opens his library to him and who tells him, “Do not forget I am here to bring you out of the defeat.” The bitterness of the defeat, however, still agonizes him. Finally, he receives a visit from Murad, the ‘official’ sheikh of the neighborhood, and the police informer who has arrested both the man of faith and the man intellect. He asks, “Is nothing certain?” For man could be half-right and half wrong, and so ‘Abd Allah accepts life as it is, with equal parts of doubt and conviction; nothing deserves complete faith. This ultimate confusion represents Mahfouz’s concerns about the reality to public affairs.
The most important characteristic that distinguishes Mahfouz as an artist is his seriousness and his conviction that the purpose of art is to serve life. He is a committed writer whose courage and clarity of vision are dedicated to the expression of his people’s concerns. Every line of his recent stories gives evidence of this, a fact it is believe that account for all the attention accorded to him by critics and authors alike. He is a political writer who asserts his positions either directly or through symbol or suggestion. The issues to which he has devoted his study and expression in his short stories are of an urgency and importance that only a serious and committed writer could approach. The Ambergris Peal (‘Anbar Lu’lu) demonstrates this well. The pearl represents man’s fondest dream, his ‘city of virtue’, a place of loving, fun and beauty. An old man, having spent twenty-five years jailed for revolutionary activities, is introduced to a young orphaned woman. Deprived of love and always condemned to a life of hardship, she is old before her time. A friend has told her that her misery was a general problem, though it seemed personal, and could not be solved by individual action. “We must,” she had said, “basically alter our thinking to achieve comprehensive, all-encompassing change.” (p. 251) The orphan girl defines her problem in specifics by replying, ‘I no longer believe in the past. I
inherited my misery from the past. And therefore I hate everything with any connection to it.” (p. 256)

The problem is general backwardness at all levels. The revolutionary has spent twenty five years in jail but emerges to discover only loneliness and poverty. The girl suffers in her menial labour merely to ensure continuation in a life of toil and poverty. And as it the case always in the lives of Arabs today, all discussions eventually turn to the subject of the war. The following dialogue occurs between the girl and the old revolutionary:

“Will the war start up again?”

“Who knows?”

“Talk of it never ends.”

“It does end, where it began.”

“Do you think a lot about that?”

“It is our shadow and our destiny.” (p. 284)

A young man who has returned directly from a visit to the front and to the refugee camps enters the scene. He has gone to the top of the Cairo Tower and sprayed bullets in all directions, aiming for no one in particular.
He despises the life that is kept isolated and protected from the fighting as if by barbed wire. The old revolutionary finds an exemplar in the image of new revolutionary wildly firing his gun: this seems the only way to reach the ambergris colored pearl’, even though it is a method abandoned and disavowed by his erstwhile jail companions. The bullets must be directed all over the old life to achieve that ideal of all times, that ‘city of virtue.’ The girl compares the ‘old’ lifestyle to an ancient religious trust bequest building, dilapidated and governed by decrees made by the dead. The old man himself defines the path for the future, saying, “He will send bullets in all directions and they shall dance, sing and enjoy.”(p. 284)

In the stories the soul of the Heart Doctor and Farewell Stop, Mahfouz carries the symbol further. In the first of these, he introduces an innocent, trusting girl, alone and knowing nothing of her father or mother and living in a waste plot during summer and beneath an arcade in winter; she has neither obligations nor traditions. But when she finds a treasure her life becomes more complicated, for she needs a shelter. Aspirations and desires press upon her from all sides. Experience teaches her that there are robbers after the treasure, such as a merchant, a policeman, an ascetic, and a guardian of the mausoleum. No one can protect her but one young man formerly blind,
whose eyes open to the world for the first time when he begins searching for a cure to the cares of humanity.\textsuperscript{128}

In Farewell Stop, two characters charged with a secret mission visit a club where a dancer gives them pleasure. Then enemies who are also street robbers attack them, and they are left in a waste plot naked and devoid even of memory. Eventually their discussion reveals them agents on a mission for a clandestine organization. But they know nothing of its nature, the details being in a sealed envelope stolen along with their personal belongings. One of them disputes carrying out work dictated to them, insisting that everything should have been discussed and understood; As he says that of his leaders, “Fine words! But reality is that they monopolize power while it is we who are exposed to death at every hour. Days pass with our keeping our hopes high of some promotion that never occurs.” He later comments: “But is not it the “unknown leader” who originates the suggestion? Fine and good, And is not it he who, using his mown brain, suggests the mission? Fine, But why do we imagine that his intellect is superior to all? Even, that is, if we concede the weakness of our own?”(p. 174)

\textsuperscript{128} The Heart Doctor’s Ghost, An Anthology of short stories by Naguib Mahfouz, Tr. Akef Abadir & Roger Allen. pp- 245.
When they have an opportunity to escape from the wasteland and from their nakedness, one of them returns to their group, knowing he will be interrogated and punished, while the other refuses choosing the path to the east, not to the north. Clearly, this story contains implications of reality, even though it seems steeped in abstraction.

One of the most original of Mahfouz’s stories is that entitled A Cup of tea. It is a montage-type story, featuring the rapid sequences of movies and changes of scenario often used in movies. Mahfouz had earlier experimented with the montage technique, as in the novel New Cairo. (al-Qahira al-Zadida), which presented various modes of political behavior in Egypt at the close of the nineteen-thirties.\(^{129}\)

_A Cup of Tea_ introduces a man lying in bed with his wife who is insisting that they discuss matters retailing to their children. But the man demands that this discussion be delayed so that he can enjoy a cup of tea and read his newspaper. The man undoubtedly represents Egypt. From certain events that occur in the room. We may assume that the room represents the world, with Egypt (the man) contemplating the world as it wakes up. From behind a moveable curtain, the symbolic visions emerge. The first of these is

---

\(^{129}\) Ahmad Muhammad Atiyya, Naguib Mahfouz and the Short Story. P-24.
a government official, a man wearing a black suit who is optimistic, declaring that everything is fine, better then it was, as he puts it. The second vision is that of a girl, beautiful and naked, who is advertising her new film entitled “Back Doors” which is for both entertainment and instruction. The black-suited man comments, “Bare bodies will be exposed to you and we shall be upon you if you succumb to one of the desires of the flesh!” The third vision then appears, of an American soldier and a Vietnamese. The American sees the entire world as his, while the Vietnamese accuses him of shooting in all directions. A Cuban woman follows who has given birth to six sets of twins, all of whom are in fine health. Then come a Frenchman and a German, two salesman, one toting religious books, the other whiskey. Two spacemen also appear an American and a Russian. The American has seen God to be American, while the Russian did not find him at all. The man in bed demands whiskey, but the black-suited man wants ‘hard currency’ one father appears calling for his runaway son, while another, from Upper Egypt, kills his daughter for the sake of honor. An opera singer and a folk singer, a student and a policeman, also appear. The student senses a suffocating dust and searches for fresh air; he sees the night as having descended, though the sun is still in the sky. The man in bed repeatedly tries to interrupt, but the
black-suited man prevents him. Next, appear a Negro and an armed Arab. The Negro is persecuted in America because of his being in a minority there, while in Africa he is prosecuted because he is in a majority. A white man present exploits this prosecution and engages in it wherever he can, but the Arab teaches him that the only solution is conflict, saying. “There is room for only two types of man: he who does battle with a heart filled with evil and he who fights with a heart filled with goodness.” Only those who resist can exist. The Arab understands this very well since the highway robbers have stolen his homeland in its entirety.\textsuperscript{130}

When the man in the bed asks for weapons, the black-suited man tells him to have patience. Their dialogue reads,

“I want arms!”

“But you’re sick leave is not over yet.”

“I want arms!”

“Have patience!”

“Did not you hear what was said?”

\textsuperscript{130}Ma’à Najib Mahfuz, by Ahmad Muhammad Atiyya, pp. 171-272.
“I did hear and was convinced, but you’re sick leave has not finished yet.” (p. 104)

As their conversation progresses it becomes apparent that each mistrusts the motives of the other. When the man in bed fails to obtain weapons, he demands whiskey, and the man in the black suit charges him with irresponsibility.

The last vision is a journalist who claims to respect both himself and everyone else, as he puts it but he has bogged downed in preliminaries and covers up with vague responses. When gunfire from the war is heard and danger is imminent, all the visions disappear, while the man in the bed resolves to initiate discussion of the urgent problems.

Through this clear and direct story, then, Mahfouz makes alveolus his views on the Arab-Israeli conflict. He is, in fact, a committed political writer whose posture of neutrality ended with his novel Miramar. He presents obvious political views, yet without disregarding the demands of his art. Of course, his political opinions have not always been expressed with the directness evident in this last story, which is consider an open call for
revolutionary action and armed conflict against the enemy, and an expression of his absolute contempt for American imperialism.

Mahfouz thus expressed accurately the feelings of Egyptian masses that were in a mood of crisis following the 1967 war; and he joined them in looking forward to renewed battle, since no alternative was possible. This is why it was so important for Mahfouz to concentrate his efforts during that period in the short story, since that is the literary form most suited to times of crisis, anxiety and conflict.