World Literature

Mapping the Journey: Zaabalawi

1. Read the introduction to and the story of “Zaabalawi” by Naguib Mahfouz (pages 2881-2893).

The story has both social and religious significance. The elusive, otherworldly figure of Zaabalawi exists in a materialistic society of ambitious bureaucrats, dilapidated houses, street vendors, policemen, and bars. Zaabalawi’s house still exists, although it is no longer inhabited: “time had so eaten at the building that nothing was left of it save an antiquated façade and a courtyard that... was being used as a rubbish dump” (p. 2887). The narrator’s illness, likewise, has a dual interpretation. On the one hand, it is introduced as a physical ailment, a serious condition following a series of minor illnesses that were successfully treated. Some of you will associate this “illness for which no one possesses a remedy” with cancer, and you would find it quite comprehensible that the narrator seeks alternate treatment when medical science cannot help. Many cultures have traditions in which someone who is ill seeks out a “holy” man or woman to heal intractable illnesses. On the other hand, there are also intimations that the narrator’s illness cannot be described just through physical definition. There is an ambiguity to the pain that afflicts the narrator in mid-life (a mid-life crisis?); the repeated sense that only God (p. 2889) or Zaabalawi will be able to cure him, the various hints that “suffering is part of the cure” (p. 2890), and that Zaabalawi cures those who love him (p. 2893) all imply a larger explanation that has to do with a spiritual crisis.

Reinforcing this shift from the physical to the transcendental plane is the narrator’s progression from interviewing materialistic characters who have completely lost touch with Zaabalawi to others with different values who are closer to the saint. Here Mahfouz employs a sequence of representative figures—lawyer, bureaucrat, artist, and musician—like those in traditional allegories of the human condition. If the narrator’s quest can be read as the search of the soul for God, it also suggests a contemporary Egyptian society that is gradually losing touch with the faith of its ancestors. Some people remember Zaabalawi but don’t know where to find him; many don’t even know his name; and still others assert that the saint is a charlatan and advise the narrator to turn to modern science to cure his malady (p. 2887).

2. Your job is to map the narrator’s quest to find Zaabalawi and the result of that quest. You may make a map or a more traditional timeline, but this needs to be illustrated—either your own drawings or pictures from the Internet or other sources (don’t forget to credit your sources!) You should have at least ten entries, and these may be people, places, or any combination. Don’t forget the beginning and the end! Please make sure that your “map” is neat and could be “displayed” in our classroom!

3. This is due on April 24th.