

Essay #1
Divergent Paths

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The characters of *Sugar Street*, despite spending their lives in such close proximity, represent a surprisingly wide array of ideals, creeds, careers and associations. Nowhere is this dispersion from a common origin more apparent than in the disparate paths in life taken by Kamal and Ahmad Shawkat. Both of them pursued education in the College of Arts, and both of them grew up in the same family which required of each a steadfast defense of the merits of such instruction. The two men shared a love of literature, as well as a lack of the religious conviction which seemed omnipresent in the daily lives of most other family members. What is perhaps most interesting is that certain, impactful events which occurred in Kamal's formative years were echoed to a degree in Ahmad's youth, further linking the platforms from which their outlooks on life sprang. However, despite sharing these common circumstances, the philosophies of the two quickly diverged. Each different choice or refusal to choose served to magnify all those that preceded it, the effects cascaded and in time they came to extremely different conclusions on all manner of subjects, from love to life itself.

The first comparison made between Ahmad and Kamal is that of a shared intellectual pursuit. When assaulted by criticisms of his decision to enroll in the College of Arts as his uncle had done years before, Ahmed turned to Kamal for both assistance and sympathy. In fact, so strong were the parallels being drawn between the two situations that Kamal felt personally slighted by Ibrahim's comment, "Ahmad, think how Law School has allowed al-Hamzawi's son to become an important government attorney" (Mahfouz 26). However, it is vital to notice that even this founding similarity conceals dissimilarity. Kamal was captivated by literature and learning as a result of an infatuation with truth. Ahmad's somewhat more concrete goal was what he referred to as "intellectual leadership," or "guiding thought"(Mahfouz 25). By which he of course meant using journalism as a platform for promoting his economic and social ideologies. So already Ahmed had displayed a trait that his uncle did not possess: a purpose. The significance of this point became steadily more apparent as time wore on.

Even before his entrance into the University, Ahmed's religious views were inscrutable

at best. At the beginning of the story, he was merely evasive. The first examples of his secularism took the form of mere jokes meant to provoke his brother. However, he gradually became more disillusioned with the the religion of his ancestors, owing at least in part to the magazine to which he subscribed and for which he eventually wrote: *The New Man*. In that magazine he found a semblance of companionship, sorely needed by the boy who was vilified by his brother at home who would shout at him "hush, atheist!" and "Enemy of God!". While attending the University, he grew more bold, openly mocking his brothers piety in the midst of his peers. By the time of his arrest, he had remarked that he and his wife intended to "...live according to the Marxist faith." (Mahfouz 270) rather than any religion, and referred to the latter as "a cultural artifact" and its promise of an afterlife likewise as "a distracting opiate" (Mahfouz 297).

In contrast, Kamal regarded religion with the same uncertainty as everything else, from the opening until the closing passages of the novel. Even when first questioned regarding his beliefs by Riyad Qaldas, who he could identify as a fellow philosopher (thus not one to pass judgment on philosophy), he attempted to dismiss the inquisition with a shrug. In the wake of Aïda's death, he wondered if she found herself in the company of other loved ones he had lost, yet earlier when his own father passed he still deflected his mother's attempts to instill faith in him. It seemed that any given circumstance was as likely to push him further from belief as it was to pull him closer, and so he remained stagnant. Rather than even attempting to form any conviction as to the existence of God, or lack thereof, he remained paralyzed by the fear and doubt that ceaselessly assailed his mind.

For much of his life, Kamal attributed his boundless anxiety to a lost love in his youth. Aïda, he often mused, had taken with her life's pleasures when she left Egypt. Specifically, he used the word "spurn" to describe what she had done to him. He also laments the more recent loss of his brother, Fahmy, who was a casualty of political protest.

Interestingly, Ahmad found himself in somewhat similar circumstances while studying at the College of Arts. First, he lost his cousin to childbirth, who was comparable to

a sibling in some respects - not the least of which being that as she was married to his brother, she was his sister-in-law. Ahmad did not seem to devote much time to grieving, and it certainly did not change his demeanor. He still poked fun at his brother and found time to make friends. One of whom he admired from afar for some time, hoping for more than friendship before even talking to her. After a year of friendship with the girl, Ahmad confessed his feelings to the girl, who weighed them against her lineage, beauty and education and found that the transaction did not suit her. Such a cold, calculating approach to a matter of the heart angered Ahmad greatly, but in time it merely served as a cautionary tale not to mistake friendship for love when he met his future wife, Sawsan Hammad. The experience certainly didn't taint the entire notion of a monogamous relationship in his mind for decades. In fairness, Kamal had known his love much longer, but he was also much younger, and had had much more time to recover.

In any case, it's clear that these two responded to similar situations in increasingly different ways. Of course, all of human development can not be summed up to nurture; there is also nature to consider. One might reasonably argue that there was some difference inherent in the structure of their brains from birth that allowed Ahmad to deal with his emotions in a manner unavailable to Kamal. Consider, though: on page 24 Ahmad knows what he wants to do with his life, and that's what he's doing on page 315 when he is arrested, whereas Kamal's only certainty is uncertainty until the words of Ahmad himself change his mind. Ahmad, from an early age, had decided to live according to his moral values and so when disaster struck he had a path to which he could return. Comparatively, Kamal professed to believe in nothing and thus nothing was there to comfort him when he needed comfort. Nothing made him happy because he valued nothing, save perhaps the perfect theory of a woman he used to know - not even the woman herself, only the unattainable, perfect idea of a woman held out of his reach. Ahmad valued his fellow man and his methods of ensuring equality. So even in the dark and damp of a prison more real than any that had ever held his uncle, he was able to smile at the companionship of drunks and thieves. Kamal's mistake, more than anything else,

was trying to ascribe some grand meaning to the mere act of existence. Ahmad's words to him before departing, though, caused him to think that perhaps a life governed by uncertainty was merely an attempt at "evasion of responsibility." (Mahfouz 330)

"The duty common to all human beings is perpetual revolution, and that is nothing other than an unceasing effort to further the will of life represented by its progress toward the ideal." -Ahmad Shawkat (Mahfouz 328)

Perhaps even more important than finding for himself a reason to live, these words caused Kamal to re-examine the value of his existence in terms of what it was worth to those around him. "...ask yourself how much longer you will continue wasting your life." (Mahfouz 326) he thinks as the mother, who for so long cherished the life he had considered worthless, lay dying.

The fact that Kamal was able to contemplate restructuring his life after so long indicates that in fact it was not merely in his nature to falter in the face of adversity while his nephew persevered. If that were the case, his resolution at the time of his mother's death and the incarceration of two family members would either be impossible, or a doomed endeavor. The best explanation, then is that this particular facet of *Sugar Street* serves not as a mere description of two different men, but as a prescription for the most general basis on which any life worth living must be built: care about something.

References

- [1] Naguib Mahfouz. *Sugar Street*. Anchor Books, 1957 (Translated 1992).