

Naguib Mahfouz, Palace of Desire

1 meeting

1. In this second volume of Mahfouz's trilogy, we are introduced to several new characters who contribute to the family saga. We might want to start by clarifying their relationships to the characters we have already met and to each other.
  - Khadija's children by Ibrahim Shawkat: Ahmad, Abd al-Muni'm
  - Aisha's children by Khalil Shawkat: Muhammad, Uthman, Na'ima
  - Yassin's son by Zaynab: Ridwan
    - How does Ahmad, as a grandfather, differ from Ahmad, as a father?
  - Kamal's friends
    - Husayn and Aida Shaddad
    - Isma'il Latif
    - Hasan Salim
    - Fuad, son of Jamil al-Hamzawi
2. The action of the saga also expands into other parts of Cairo. Which characters and what significant events are associated with the following places?
  - Palace of Desire cul de sac
  - Sugar Street
    - How would you describe the family dynamics in the house on Sugar Street?
    - How do the family dynamics there differ from those in the house on Palace Walk?
  - Ezbekiya entertainment district
  - al-Abbasiya
    - Why is Kamal so attracted to the Shaddad family and mansion?
  - Houseboats on the Nile
    - For historical background and the story of their recent demolition, see <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/29/world/middleeast/egypt-nile-houseboats-demolition.html>.
    - What illicit pleasures do these houseboats afford? Why are they the chosen venues for such pleasures?
3. How have Ahmad and Amina changed in the five years since Fahmy's death? How do you account for the differences in their responses to their son's martyrdom?
4. In Palace Walk, Kamal was the innocent youngest child of Amina and Ahmad. As Palace of Desire opens, how has Kamal changed?
  - What has become of his veneration of the head of al-Husayn, grandson of the prophet Muhammad, claimed by the mosque in Cairo?
  - How do you interpret Kamal's idealistic fantasies about Aida Shaddad?
    - For an overview of the attitudes toward love in early Arabic poetry, see <https://www.britannica.com/art/Arabic-literature/Love-poetry>. For the influence of early Arabic love poetry on the European literature of courtly love, see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Courtly\\_love#:~:text=Courtly%20love%20was%20born%20in,music%20by%20troubadours%20or%20minstrels](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Courtly_love#:~:text=Courtly%20love%20was%20born%20in,music%20by%20troubadours%20or%20minstrels).

- How would you characterize Kamal's current philosophical outlook and his career ambitions, as he tries to justify them to Ahmad?
5. In stark contrast to Kamal's idealism, his father and his brothers are hopelessly entangled in each other's carnal relationships.
    - What exactly have been and are now the sexual entanglements in the neighboring houses on Palace Walk (Ahmad, Fahmy, and Yassin in one household, and Maryam and her mother in the neighboring household)?
    - What exactly have been and are now the sexual entanglements of Ahmad and Yassin with members of the female musician troupe, especially with Zanuba?
    - What techniques does Mahfouz use to give his readers Ahmad's and Yassin's perspectives on these sexual entanglements? What do father and son want and/or need from these women?
    - Does Mahfouz give the reader a window into the women's perspective on these entanglements? What do the mother, daughter, and musician/prostitute want and/or need from the father and son?
    - How do you interpret Mahfouz's representation of a father and son sharing sexual partners? How might Egyptian readers in 1957 have interpreted these sexual/familial entanglements?
  6. As Ahmad's family grows and evolves, so Egypt moves toward birthing itself as a nation.
    - What political developments, after Fahmy's death, affect the lives of these characters?
    - What aspects of modernization affect their lives? What attitudes toward these changes do the characters express?
    - What would "liberation" mean for each of these characters? Do they seek liberation in their personal lives? Would they welcome political liberation, or would they lament the loss of the patriarchal structures that have shaped their lives?
  7. As the setting of the novel's events expands beyond the houses associated with Ahmad's family, friends, and lovers—mostly located in Medieval Cairo—the reader is introduced to al-Abbasiya, a modern district of upper-class mansions and villas where the Shaddad family lives.
    - Why do Kamal's encounters with the Shaddad family and his friends occur almost exclusively in the gazebo? The other feature of the house that is emphasized is the upper story windows. Why?
    - Why is Kamal so attracted to the Shaddad family and mansion?
    - How does this new setting become a locus for expanding Kamal's vision of Egypt, of Europe, of his place in the world?
  8. Kamal regularly meets with the following friends in the gazebo:
    - Husayn Shaddad
    - Isma'il Latif
    - Hasan Salim
    - How does the introduction of these friends expand the reader's understanding of social class and internal political dissent in 1920s Cairo?

- With their different personalities, how does each of these friends serve as a foil for Kamal?
    - Wikipedia: “A foil is a character who . . . typically . . . contrasts with the protagonist, in order to better highlight or differentiate certain qualities of the protagonist.”
  - Why is male friendship so important to Kamal?
9. How do you interpret Husayn’s fantasy that Kamal will one day write a story that brings the future lives of Husayn, Aida, Ism’ail, Hasan, and Kamal together within the covers of a book?
- All these young men (who are between 17 and 21 years old) and Husayn’s sister Aida are on the cusp of moving into adult life. What future does each envision for him/herself?
  - How do the futures they envision for themselves relate to the larger, evolving future of Egypt as a nation?
  - What aspects of the modern, more secular world does Kamal encounter through his relations to the Shaddad family and his other friends?
    - How does he react to these cultural and technological innovations?
    - Have any aspects of the modern, more secular world penetrated Ahmad’s family?
10. We learn about the character of Aida from the outside—from descriptions of her visits to the gazebo, from narration of her conversations with Kamal, and from what Hasan and Isma’il tell Kamal about her.
- How do you understand her motivations, in her relations with Hasan and Kamal? Can we trust what Hasan and Isma’il say about her?
  - With her freedom of movement, cropped hair, western clothes, and up-bringing in Paris, is she the one “modern woman” in the novel?
  - How would you compare Aida to other young, marriageable women in the novel: Khadija, Aisha, Maryam, and Zanuba?
  - Why do you think that Mahfouz does not provide an interiority for Aida, as he does for Amina and, to a lesser degree, for Khadija?
11. Mahfouz shows the reader how the quest for marriage dominates the lives of all the young women in the novel. But how does he portray their married life once these women achieve their goal? Does he hint at the married life that awaits the as-yet unmarried?
- What kind of wife is Khadija? Aisha? What trials do they face? As wives, how do they compare to their mother?
  - What kind of wife is Maryam? What trials does she face? How does she compare to her mother?
  - Given what we see of married life, why is Zanuba so determined to get married? What kind of wife might she become?
  - What kind of married life awaits Aida, who becomes engaged to Hasan?
12. Of course, Ahmad’s out-sized desires finally clash with the realities of passing time.
- Does he learn anything about himself from his confrontation with Zanuba’s “infidelity”?
  - Does he learn anything about Yasin from this experience?

- Does he learn anything from the stroke he has while trying to revive the joys of his manhood at his friend's houseboat?
  - Are the repentance and prayers for forgiveness, which he offers when visiting the mosque after his illness, sincere?
  - What psychological/spiritual resources does he have for confronting the family tragedies previewed at the end of the novel?
13. Of course, Kamal's excessive idealism finally crashes against the reality of human imperfection.
- How does Aida's engagement to Hasan shake Kamal's ideal vision of a perfect beloved, whom one could love disinterestedly, without hope of recompense? Why does the thought of Aida's pregnancy shake his ideal of female perfection?
  - How does what he learns from Yasin about their father's double life shake Kamal's view of the family, the state, the divine?
  - How does Sa'd Zaghlul's attempts to form a coalition with his former political rivals shake Kamal's political ideals?
  - At twenty, does he turn to alcohol and prostitutes as a natural stage of young adult experimentation, as a consolation for his losses, or as part of a radical philosophical shift from idealism to materialism and hedonism?
  - How does Kamal's trajectory from religious reverence for the prophet's grandson's head (claimed by the Al-Hussein mosque) to the scientific materialism of Darwin parallel the spread of European secular thought in the first half of the twentieth century?
  - Has Kamal totally lost his idealism? Is there anything comical about his predicament?
14. Of course, Yasin's dissipation finally clashes with the exigencies of work/money, fatherhood, family responsibilities, and sickness.
- Do you note any maturation in Yasin, or will he remain a "mule," as Ahmad once calls him?
  - Why does he continue to visit his family, and why do they continue to accept him?
  - What kind of brother does he become to Kamal? What kind of stepson to Amina? What kind of husband to Zanuba?
15. Do you find humor in any parts of these shocks to Mahfouz's characters' world views and/or their domestic woes? If so, how would you describe Mahfouz's humor? If not, what prevents these reversals from being funny?
16. The novel begins with Jalila, Zubayda, and Zanuba pursuing the same profession—entertainer and courtesan. With the passage of time and social change, what choices are available to them?
- How do their paths diverge?
  - How do their situations resemble or differ from that of Ayusha-Rose, Kamal's favored prostitute?
17. The political backdrop to Palace Walk is the Egyptian fight for independence from British control. In Palace of Desire the struggle has shifted to internal problems confronting the nascent nation: (a) controversial negotiations with the British to form an alliance, not a

protectorate; (b) continued social unrest and violence; (c) wrangling between rival political parties, the Wafd vs the Liberal Constitutionalists. (For a summary of Sa'd Zaghlul's role in these struggles, see <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saad-Zaghloul>.)

- Where do Kamal's loyalties lie in these conflicts?
- Where does Ahmad locate himself and his family in Egypt's struggle to transform itself into a democracy?
- What does the death of Zaghlul (coming on the heels of the typhoid outbreak that afflicts Aisha's family) signify in this family saga?
- Why do both Palace Walk and Palace of Desire end with momentous political events coupled with family crises?