Poet Biography

Ahmad Shawqi was one of the most famous Arab poets of the modern era. He was born in Cairo, Egypt, 1869, of mixed Arab, Kurdish, Turkish, Greek and Circassian descent. He grew up in a privileged, aristocratic household, raised partially by his maternal grandmother who was Greek and who worked in the khedive's court. He was a bright student, who memorized parts of the Quran while young, and became an avid reader of poetry from an early age. By the time he completed high school in 1885, he was already fluent in Arabic, Turkish and French. He then enrolled in law school, where he furthered his literary interests and knowledge. After graduation, he spent four years pursuing further legal studies France (sponsored by the khedive), during which time he visited Belgium and Britain. Upon returning to Egypt in 1892, he became the official poet to the Khedive's royal court. Following the Ottoman alliance with the Germans in the early stages of World War I, the British deposed the Khedive, and Shawqi was exiled to Spain, where he lived for five years before being able to return to Egypt in 1920. In time, his renown as a poet spread through the Arab world, and his contemporaries gave him the title, “The Prince of Poets.” He died in 1932, and was elegized by many poets.

Although Shawqi is most famous for his poetry, he also wrote historical fiction, as well as plays, and is a pioneer of modern Arabic verse drama. Shawqi lived at the cusp of the emergence of the modern movement in Arabic poetry, and his poetry is entirely conventional in terms of conformance to the traditional metrical patterns. He also wrote extensively in conventional genres, such as elegy, love and descriptive poetry. Nevertheless he did not hesitate to use poetry as a vehicle for contemporary social and political commentary. He also wrote fabulistic poems were perhaps partly influenced by French poets such as de la Fontaine.

1 ‘Khedive’ was the title granted by the Ottoman sultan to Ismail Pasha (1830-1895), and it continued to be used by his successors until 1914.
3 Fabulistic literature is a genre of story-telling that utilizes anthropomorphizations (human-like, speaking animals or objects) and mythical characters to convey a moral lesson. See:
https://www.britannica.com/art/fable
Overview of the Poem

Egyptian poet Ahmad Shawqi presented one of his most famous poems at an event at the Higher Teacher’s College club in Cairo, at a significant historical juncture. The Egyptian Revolution, soon after World War I, led to the Egypt’s independence from Britain in 1922, and a parliamentary representative system, that allowed for balancing of powers, was adopted by the 1923 Constitution. Independent Egypt’s new parliament opened on 15 March 1924, a day Shawqi refers to in the poem as “the Great Saturday.” It was a euphoric day, with widespread celebration, and Shawqi recited his poem in a gathering that took place on the cusp of this momentous event.

The Arabic poem⁴, 68 lines long, extols knowledge and teachers, laments the current state to which learning has devolved in his land, and describes the herculean responsibility of teachers to inculcate knowledge as well as values in the next generation. The content of the poem can be conveniently discussed by dividing it into six distinct sections as follows (line numbers refer to those of the English translation).

I. The Revered Status of Knowledge (l. 1-14)
Shawqi opens the poem by explaining the spiritual dimension and importance of knowledge.

II. Lamentation of the Decline of True Scholarship (l. 15-42)
Shawqi laments the disappearance of those who were dedicated not only to learning but also to its moral demands, a development that he sees reflected in the sorry state of his country. He identifies two causes for this moral decay of principled scholarship: hedonism, and the desire to appease corrupt rulers. He laments the disappearance of the type of scruples shown by the famous Athenian philosopher Socrates’ willingness to die rather than abandon his ethical stance. Shawqi affirms that there are still people of learning (the knowledge itself has not disappeared), but the scholars of today have lost themselves in the pursuit of this-worldly fancies, and as a result are not fulfilling the role expected of them in society: to be the stalwart guardians of ethics and morals without fearing reprisals of criticism from the masses nor from the rulers. Jesus is cited as another example of one persecuted for his adherence the truth.

III. Knowledge is Life (l. 43-62)
Shawqi calls for principled and dedicated teachers to rise to the task of rearing the next generation, to bring them out of the darkness of the ignorance and lack of development plaguing Egypt. Shawqi likens ignorance to death, and sees proper education (which includes moral integrity, as he mentions later in the poem) as the only antidote. He points out the dangers of dishonorable teachers and of an ignorant and unprincipled populace.

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⁴ The Arabic poem is published within Shawqi’s anthology Shawqiyyat, which has been published in several editions. An online version of the Arabic poem is available at:
http://www.khayma.com/salehzayadneh/poets/shawqi.htm
IV. Praise for Egypt’s Selfless Teachers (l. 63-72)
Shawqi praises the efforts of Egyptian teachers and educators, and declares that the primary credit, for whatever advances the country has seen in recent decades, goes to these untiring individuals and not to the repressive colonial educational policies.

V. Moral Pedagogy (l. 73-98)
Shawqi highlights the importance of imparting proper education to the youth, since tomorrow they will be tomorrow’s citizens. Girls and women should also be educated, and neglect of this half of the population has left the arena open for others to mobilize and exploit them. He observes that meaningful education cannot be effectively imparted if the teachers themselves are morally impoverished, and also that parents have an important role in their children’s moral development.

VI. Conclusion (l. 99-136)
Shawqi congratulates his countrymen, telling them the fruits of their struggle for liberty and democracy are now in reach. They should thank all those who made this possible: those still living, as well as those who gave their lives for the new liberty. Parliament has a responsibility to help further education, while the populace has a duty to elect only trustworthy and educated people to parliament. At the same time, the teachers must continue to serve sincerely and selflessly (as “Unknown Soldiers”) if the newly-found liberty is to produce meaningful results. He praises the youth who were instrumental to the 1919 revolution and the parliamentary and constitutional advances that resulted from it, then calls upon those youths to rise to the responsibilities before them: to lead the country with fatherly concern infused with the vibrance of youth. The path ahead, he cautions, is a long one, but they should persevere and be hopeful that God will produce fruition from their efforts.
Translation of the Poem

What follows is a literary translation of the full Arabic poem in pentametric blank verse, with each hemistich of the Arabic corresponding (approximately) to one line in English. I have inserted a blank line to mark the start of a new section (based on my own division of the poem into six sections as explained above).

Stand for the teacher, give him full respect
The teacher’s rank is close to the prophet. Can there be any person nobler than
The one who builds and nurtures souls and minds?
Glory to You God, O best instructor,
With the pen You taught the folk of yore.
You brought this mind forth from its darknesses,
And guided it a way of lucid light.
The teacher’s hand a crucible you made,
Its products ingots rusted or burnished.
Moses as a guide You sent with Torah,
So too the Virgin’s son, who taught Injil.
Muhammad’s fluent fount You caused to gush,
So human souls he quenched with scripture’s words.

You taught the Greeks and Egypt, who’ve declined
Displaced by suns that fain would not depart.
Yore’s giants now returned to infancy
In knowledge, learning now at deadened pace.
From eastern realms of earth the suns arose,
How is it now the western lands prevail?
The moment that the teacher fell, dear land,
He veiled your eastern sky from every sun.

This simile, comparing the teacher to a messenger of God (i.e. Prophet), is within the acceptable boundaries of figurative language, and has not been theologically problematic to Muslim scholars. See a fatwa addressing this at: https://islamqa.info/ar/249355
The guardians of true knowledge are now gone,
Who'd gladly forfeit life or limb for truth.
Today the shackled masses live enslaved
To Self, the individual paramount.
The despot's world has thrown them to the ground,
As heads are cowed when dazzled by the sun.
When Socrates the cup of death was passed,
His lips did greet it with the kiss of love.
He deigned to flee, to live dishon' rably,
Preferring rather death with dignity.
The brave of heart remain still plentiful,
Brave intellects, though, are a rarity.
God who created truth a bitter pill,
Has left no era barren of truth's men.
Yet idle fancies may have slain truth's folk
Oh perish, whims, how plenteous is your toll!
Shall every frank defender of the truth,
Meet malice and reprisal from the crowds?
Had Jesus actually been crucified,
His crucifixion too would serve my point.

O teachers of the vale, and guides for youths!
O ye who'll cast the ideal mold for youth!
O ye who will, when summoned to instruct,
Shoulder duty's trustful laden burden!
No more Muhammadic, nor Ishmaelic
Our intellects with languished steps now traipse
Our feet began slow progress on the path,
Then Dunlop-blisters flared to edema.

6 Famous Greek philosopher, died 399 BCE.
7 Shawqi, being a Muslim, believes in the Quranic declaration (Quran, 4:157) that Jesus was not crucified. There are various opinions among Muslim scholars as to what exactly did happen.
8 This is the first of two brief but scathing remarks Shawqi makes about “Dunlop,” and he is not referring to the tire company. Douglas Dunlop, a Scottish lawyer, educator and missionary, was (around 1890) appointed by the British Consul-General to be in charge of the Egyptian education system. He was not popular among Egyptians, probably largely due to his own contempt for the locals and for the Arabic language, and his inflexibility.
So much that Egypt we today behold
An inch advanced while nations progress miles.
Those villages – stuffed with illiteracy
No candle have beheld since Cheops’ times.\(^9\)
We find those whose forebears built obelisks\(^{10}\)
A needle now they scarcely can produce.
Such people that when despots coddle them
Are easily indulged like docile sheep.
When they recite to them their base desires,
The most smooth-spoken of them wins the day.
No nation can be born from ignorance.
A reaper grim\(^{11}\); at his hands seek you life?

By God! Were it not for some tongues and brains -
Those who in raiment fine decked our youths’ minds,
Those souls who’ve been engaged for forty years\(^{12}\)
In fighting ‘gainst despair, in planting hope,
Who in that arid ground, persistently,
Like clouds and steady streams provide succor,
Who on our land confer nobility,
And yet requital of fine praise decline -
If not for them, then Dunlop and his scheme
Would not have helped, in hour of need, one jot.\(^{13}\)

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\(^9\) Cheops, also known as Khufu, was a king of Ancient Egypt in the 25\(^{th}\) century BCE.
\(^{10}\) An obelisk was a tapered stone pillar often used as a type of religious monument in Ancient Egypt at least as far back as 2500 BCE.
\(^{11}\) A common personification of death in English.
\(^{12}\) Shawqi is commending Higher Teachers’ College, which by the time of the poem had for just over forty years (it was established in 1888) been training historians, geographers, politicians and others. In 1925, the year after Shawqi’s recital of this poem at the club of the Higher Teachers’ College, a state-run Egyptian university opened that was greatly indebted to the College.
\(^{13}\) Education in Egypt may well have stagnated under Dunlop's mandate, but it was during the same period that Egypt underwent significant modernization. It is perhaps due to the latter point that Shawqi felt the need to point out that whatever strides were made by Egypt during this time are due to the untiring efforts of the Egyptian educators themselves, and that Dunlop and his policies deserve little if any credit.
On fairness bring up well the country’s youth,
That they be vaults of ethics in their prime.
Yea, the teacher nurtures upright natures,
And he it is who raises virtuous souls.
Who straightens out each logic that’s askew,
And leads its thinker on to reason pure.
When the teacher himself shows not justice
Then justice ’mongst the youth shall be weak-souled.
When acumen the teacher himself lacks,
Then he will rear folk who will see cross-eyed
When fancy is the source of his advice,
Or pride, you may as well call it deceit.
When a people's wound is in their morals,
Then give them their last rites, and wail for them.
I seek excuses for you! I think that
Your load’s a weighty one for men to bear.
Your helpers, others seized, left you deprived,
In Egypt, of majestic mothers’ help
When women-folk are raised illiterate,
Their suckled babes grow ignorant and dull.
The orphan is not he whose parents ceased
The toils of life, left him in abjectness,
But he then found a substitute for them:
The world and time their wisdom teaching him.
The orphan is the one whose parents are
Alive and yet repulse him and neglect.

Of Egypt should appraise its past, it will
Find no day that can match Great Saturday:
The gallery of parliament shall cast
A welcome shade upon the happy vale!
When education calls to them for help,
We hope they won’t be stingy to their land!
O tell the youth: this day your sowing’s blessed!
The fruits hang low, suspended for to pluck!
Greet every martyr who has died and left,
And on their gravestones go and place a wreath!
Your gratitude abundantly bestow
Upon those who still live, and those who died.
The constitution won't reach its spirit
Until as Unknown Soldiers\textsuperscript{14} you all toil.
I urge you, while the martyrs' blood's still fresh,
Elect no ignorants to parliament!
For of the seats it one day shall be asked:
Did they bear heavyweights, or mere dead weights?
From actors insufficiently apprised,
Incompetent performance will result
Invite to it trustworthy folk, and give
Priority to those with wise insight.
A man who slacks might for the better change
But doltish ignorants will never change.
False criticism often is dispensed,
But will be voided by the pass of time.
Your honor and your yearning brought triumph
To many who before had no succor.
Yes, honor and restraint are frequent still
In our youth's character and attitudes.
Arise to take the reins of fatherhood;
Let youth's dear, welcome voice be raised aloft!
Yes, give a salutation to the throne,
And laud the one true God with joyous praise.
How far indeed the goals! And yet I trust
Persistence shall suffice you 'pon this path.
Entrust success to God and persevere.
Enough is God as trusted guarantor!

\textsuperscript{14} According to Encylopaedia Britannica, “The movement to set aside special tombs for unknown soldiers originated with World War I, a war in which soldiers died in unprecedented numbers,” with England, France and United States erecting such memorials. The practice was adopted later for other wars, and by other countries.