

## Wild Pear Trees, Patrimonial Legacies: Father-Son Relationship in Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *The Wild Pear Tree*

Coşkun Liktör, Independent Scholar

cliktör@gmail.com

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### Abstract

This article analyzes the father-son relationship in Nuri Bilge Ceylan's latest film *The Wild Pear Tree* (2018), which tells the story of a son who desires a life as unlike his father's narrow, provincial life as possible, only to find himself following in his father's footsteps almost against his will. Drawing upon Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, this article examines the film as an oedipal drama that portrays the predicament of a son who grapples with an ineffectual, humiliated father that fails to embody the paternal function. It undertakes to show how the father-son conflict eventually culminates in the father's transformation from an object of contempt into an identificatory ideal for his son, who becomes heir to a legacy of disillusionment and thwarted hopes.

**Keywords:** Nuri Bilge Ceylan; *The Wild Pear Tree*, the Boredom of Provincial Life; Psychoanalysis; Oedipus Complex; Paternal Function; Paternal Imago; Jacques Lacan.



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# Wild Pear Trees, Patrimonial Legacies: Father-Son Relationship in Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *The Wild Pear Tree*

## Coskun Liktör

### Introduction

Arguably the most renowned Turkish director in contemporary cinema,<sup>1</sup> Nuri Bilge Ceylan has garnered acclaim for his slow-paced, meditative, visually evocative films, which have received glowing reviews and numerous awards in international competitions and festival circuits. A Cannes regular, Ceylan already had major prizes under his belt including the Best Director and two Grand Prix before taking home the Palme d'Or with his seventh feature *Winter Sleep* (*Kış Uykusu*, 2014), a Chekhovian drama about the disintegrating relationship between a retired actor living in a provincial Anatolian town and his much younger wife. *The Wild Pear Tree* (*Ahlat Ağacı*, 2018), Ceylan's much anticipated follow-up to *Winter Sleep*, focuses on a father-son relationship that is fraught with feelings of resentment, guilt and hostility on both sides. "Whether we like it or not, we can't help but inherit certain defining features from our fathers, like a certain number of their weaknesses, their habits, their mannerisms and much, much more," Ceylan said about the film<sup>2</sup>. "The story of a son's unavoidable slide towards a fate resembling that of his father is told here through a series of painful experiences" (Raup 2016). Based on the real-life experiences of Ceylan's nephew, Akın Aksu,<sup>3</sup> who not only co-wrote the script along with the director and his wife Ebru Ceylan, but also appeared in a supporting role, Ceylan's latest feature recounts the story

of a son who desires a life as unlike his father's narrow, provincial life as possible, only to find himself following in the footsteps of his father almost against his will. The aim of this article is to analyze the father-son relationship in *The Wild Pear Tree* drawing upon insights from Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. It is asserted that the film can be read as an Oedipal drama that offers a view on male development where the son struggles to surmount the dilemma posed by an ineffectual and humiliated father who fails to embody the paternal function. This article undertakes to demonstrate how the film charts the protagonist's Oedipal journey which eventually culminates in his identification with his father who transforms from an object of contempt into an emulative ideal. Before delving into the specifics of the father-son conflict and its subsequent resolution, this article first examines the portrayal of the son in order to point out his affinity with the characters in Ceylan's earlier provincial dramas, then focuses on the characterization of the father in order to illustrate the ways in which he is depicted as a humiliated figure stripped of economic and social power.

### A Rural Homecoming

*The Wild Pear Tree* follows Sinan (Doğu Demirkol), a twenty-something teaching school graduate fresh out of college who returns to his family home in Çan, a small town in northwestern Turkey located near the ancient city of Troy and the Gallipoli battlefields of World War I – not far from Ceylan's own hometown, Yenice, which provided the setting for his first two

features *The Small Town* (*Kasaba*, 1997) and *Clouds of May* (*Mayıs Sıkıntısı*, 1999). Hence, *The Wild Pear Tree* treads familiar ground, inviting comparison with Ceylan's first three features known collectively as the "provincial trilogy," namely *The Small Town*, *Clouds of May* and *Distant* (*Uzak*, 2002), all of which "revolve around the same trope: real and imagined journeys of homecoming and escaping from home" (Suner 2010, 79). *The Wild Pear Tree* particularly has certain points of resemblance to Ceylan's earlier rural homecoming story, *Clouds of May*, which focuses on an aspiring artist, the filmmaker Muzaffer (Muzaffer Özdemir), who returns to his hometown with the purpose of shooting his first film – a documentary about his parents. Indeed, *The Wild Pear Tree* has been described "as an expansive and highly imaginative reworking of *Clouds of May*" (Andrew 2018, 46), not least because the protagonist, Sinan, is a struggling artist who is at pains to get his first project off the ground just like *Clouds of May*'s Muzaffer. An aspiring writer striving to find funding for his first book, which he describes as "a quirky, auto-fiction meta-novel," Sinan wanders around town as he ponders what to do with the rest of his life. In a country where there is an army of unemployed college graduates with a teaching degree,<sup>4</sup> Sinan has little job prospects. The only viable alternative to teaching seems to be joining the riot police like a fellow graduate who now makes his living by bashing in the skulls of leftist

demonstrators, as he braggingly tells Sinan. Hence, for the penniless would-be writer, the future looks glum.



*Figure 1: Sinan looking back over his shoulder at his hometown in which he feels trapped.*

*The Wild Pear Tree* recounts a series of encounters that Sinan has with various locals including, among others, the town mayor; a sand quarry owner who has an interest in books, or so Sinan is told; a moderately famous local writer; two young imams; a former love interest, Hatice (Hazar Ergüçlü), who, to Sinan's surprise, is now betrothed to a wealthy, older jeweller; as well as Hatice's jilted, embittered ex-boyfriend – Sinan's former school friend and rival. Like Saffet (M. Emin Toprak), the restless young man deeply frustrated with provincial life who is one of the leading characters in both *The Small Town* and *Clouds of May*, Sinan is a disaffected youth

depressed by the prospect of spending the rest of his life in his small hometown, which, as he tells a friend – i.e. the aforementioned riot police officer – over the phone, he would gladly nuke if he had the chance. Thus, Sinan is one of those Ceylan characters who “migrate from the small town to the big city (*Distant*) or return to their rural roots (*Clouds of May*) ... but wherever they may happen to be, wherever they chance to find themselves, they are dissatisfied, disenchanted, disillusioned, dislocated, desirous only of being where they are not” (Diken, Gilloch and Hammond 2018, 4). As a typical Ceylan character, Sinan harbors dreams of escaping to the city, as evidenced by the fact that, during his brief exchange with Hatice, he claims he has “no intention of rotting away in this town,” clearly echoing *The Small Town*’s Saffet. Thus, *The Wild Pear Tree* seems to be a logical progression from those earlier films, where “the province signifies not a particular locality ... but a mode of feeling. It is about sensing that life is elsewhere” (Suner 2010, 83). Sinan, too, seems to be afflicted with this peculiar mode of feeling, which Suner (2010), taking her cue from the Turkish literary critic Nurdan Gürbilek, calls “the boredom of provincial life” (84). Sinan is especially disheartened by the prospect of becoming a provincial schoolteacher like his father Idris (Murat Cemcir), who is counting days for retirement from teaching. An irredeemable loser who, in Sinan’s eyes, epitomizes thwarted hopes and an unrewarding provincial life, the once-respectable Idris has tumbled in the public regard after accumulating a huge debt due

to horse-race gambling. However, to Sinan's chagrin, Idris persists in his happy-go-lucky attitude, refusing to reform his ways, let alone acknowledge his gambling addiction. Fueled by the constant shortage of money and the persistent hounding of the family by Idris's creditors, the Oedipal conflicts between Sinan and Idris rise to the surface, leading to a series of confrontations which put their relationship to the test.

### The Humiliated Father

One of the most touching cinematic representations of the humiliated father appears in De Sica's *Bicycle Thieves* (*Ladri di biciclette*, 1948), where the protagonist's young son witnesses his father being knocked about and slapped in the face by an angry mob after an unsuccessful attempt at stealing a bicycle. The public humiliation of the father comes as a devastating shock to the little boy who realizes that his father in fact is a weak, flawed and vulnerable man that miserably fails to live up to the ideal, omnipotent figure he has always imagined him to be. Conversely, in classic narratives, the father is generally portrayed as a powerful patriarch that the son must rise up against in order to achieve subjecthood, as in the archetypal myth of the Titan Cronus, who castrates his father Ouranos and usurps the throne, then devours his own offspring for fear that he will be dethroned by one of his sons, but nevertheless cannot escape castration at the hand of his son Zeus (Bowlby 2007, 156). However, Ceylan's take on the father-son conflict hardly fits this classic mold, for Idris is not a traditional patriarch, but an impotent, ineffectual figure, not unlike

the humiliated father in *Bicycle Thieves*. From the outset, Idris is characterized as a “castrated” father, a loser who has gambled away his pride and good name along with the family savings. Idris’s gambling addiction has put his family into such dire financial straits that the debt-ridden family cannot even afford to pay their utility bills, which results in the power getting eventually shut off for nonpayment. Not only was the family home sold to pay off gambling debts, condemning the family to a cramped apartment in an impoverished part of the town, but Sinan’s mother Asuman (Bennu Yıldırımlar) has been forced to work as a babysitter to make ends meet. Idris’s economic and social castration is underscored time and again in the film as we see Idris complain bitterly that he no longer has any say in the family’s financial matters, which have effectively been taken over by Asuman, who has confiscated Idris’s bankcard lest he gambles away his wages. Hence, it is his mother rather than his father who gives Sinan some money so that he can travel to the nearby city of Çanakkale in order to take the Public Personnel Selection Examination (KPSS in Turkish) in the hope of securing a teaching position in a government school – along with some 300,000 candidate teachers all over Turkey. Never does Idris seem more stripped of dignity and self-respect than in the scene where he accompanies Sinan to the bus terminal with the sole aim of begging him for more money.



Persecution by Idris's creditors is another cause for concern as Sinan is made acutely aware from the minute he sets foot in the town. No sooner has Sinan stepped off the bus than he is accosted by a local jeweler who claims that Idris owes him money which he has failed to repay despite repeated entreaties. Such incriminating remarks concerning his father are a constant source of embarrassment for Sinan, who, nevertheless, refrains from speaking ill of his father in public even though he always treats him with open contempt and has nothing but harsh words for him. "You are dragging us into your swamp! How can you be so relaxed while we bear the brunt," Sinan snaps at his father when he finds him hanging out at the local betting parlor even though Idris apparently has no money to place a bet on the race. On another occasion, Sinan scolds Idris saying he cannot win back his lost honor by doing chores around the house like fixing broken doors. Notwithstanding the suffering he has caused his family, the happy-go-lucky Idris seems to have lost nothing of his good cheer, since he still finds the audacity to play practical jokes on family members and chuckle at their consternation. As Nuri Bilge Ceylan puts it, "Sinan feels very humiliated by his father's gambling, and his carefree attitude to life. He has debts he apparently doesn't care about, he always seems happy: the unbearable lightness of being!" (Andrew 2018, 48). Idris's elderly father who dwells in a nearby village also berates Idris for his irresponsible ways, particularly denouncing his long-lasting endeavor to dig a well, which he regards as a futile and frivolous undertaking. Despite derision and scorn from the villagers, Idris persists in working

on the well that he has been digging for years on his father's property in the hope of discovering water and turning the barren land green. In one memorable scene, grandfather, father and son, who have teamed up to remove a huge boulder from the bottom of the well, are framed in a three shot which shows them in the act of hauling a rope with all their might as if they are participating in some strange, patrimonial ritual. Their efforts come to naught, however, when the boulder falls back inside the well because Idris has failed to fasten it securely. The subsequent scolding Idris receives from his father for not paying heed to his advice on how to tie a knot, only serves to reinforce our opinion of Idris as a total failure. In short, "everything Sinan's father touches seems to collapse: He has somehow never won anything in all these years of gambling, and owes money left and right. The well he's trying to dig on their property is clearly doomed to failure. Thus, Sinan ... is embarrassed by what he perceives as his father's irresponsibility and lack of dignity, his odd, lackadaisical view of the world" (Ebiri 2018).



Figure 2: Idris looking down at the depths of the well that he has been digging for years.

On the whole, the characterization of Idris contrasts sharply with the feared oedipal father of Freudian theory who threatens his son with castration. In truth, Freud cultivated the idea of the strong, castrating father despite the fact that the real fathers he encountered in his clinical practice were, more often than not, weak and ineffectual figures. So, “in order to close the gap between clinical reality and his theory, Freud invented the myth of the primal father” (Verhaeghe 2000, 133). According to Freud’s mythic account, the tyrannical, castrating primal father was murdered by his sons, who were, then, so riddled with guilt that they capitulated to the dead father’s law and set up the two fundamental taboos against patricide and incest. Hence, “the dead father became stronger than the living one had been” (Freud 2001a, 143) and was elevated to the position of symbolic authority. The dead father was given conceptual status by Jacques Lacan, who coined the term the Name-of-the-Father, or the symbolic father, to refer to “the *dead* father, the father, who, after his death, returns as his Name, that is, as the embodiment of the symbolic

Law/Prohibition” (Zizek 2000, 316). Thus, Lacan establishes a distinction between the real, biological father and his symbolic function, also called the paternal function, which consists in imposing the Law – the primordial Law being the prohibition against incest. As Lacan puts it, “it is in the *name of the father* that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law” (Lacan 2001a, 50). The symbolic father, which encapsulates an amalgamation of prohibitive, legislative and protective functions, not only facilitates the child’s entry into the Symbolic order, i.e. the realm of culture and language,<sup>5</sup> but also initiates the formation of two psychic agencies: the *superego*, the agency of repression and the *ego ideal*, the identificatory model that the ego strives to emulate. “Though there always remains a distance between the actual flesh-and-blood father and the symbolic father, the actual father stands in for the latter, attempting to embody symbolic authority” (McGowan 2004, 41). *The Wild Pear Tree* presents us with a family constellation where the father, Idris, fails to embody symbolic authority, thus offering no effective way of guaranteeing the paternal function.

### The Decline of Paternal Authority

Throughout the film, Sinan laments the failure of his father to live up to the standards of a traditional authority figure, even going so far as to claim that he would have preferred a violent,

abusive father over the weak, humiliated Idris. On one occasion when Sinan's mother, Asuman, defends her husband saying Idris is a very gentle and loving father who has never laid a hand on Sinan, the latter replies that he would rather his father gave him a beating than continually lie about his gambling habit. Sinan's desire for strong paternal authority resonates with what Freud calls "the longing for the father," an archetypal need that Freud traces back to the child's feeling of helplessness in the early phases of his or her life: "I cannot think of any need in childhood as strong as the need for a father's protection" (Freud 2001b, 72). According to Freud, the longing for the father furnishes the basis of the religious feeling that lies at the root of the idea of God: "God was the exalted father, and the longing for the father was the root of the need for religion" (Freud 2001c, 22). One of the best-known cinematic representations of the longing for the father is to be found in Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), which centers on a troubled youth, Jim Stark (James Dean), whose rebellious attitude stems from his resentment towards his humiliated father, a henpecked man dominated by his wife and thus unable to provide his son with a clear role model embodying phallic masculinity. In *Rebel Without a Cause*, "there is also a 'palpable desire' for paternal authority," so Sinan is not fundamentally unlike Jim, whose ultimate desire is to "put the emasculated father back into a position of authority" (Lebeau 1995, 84).

Lacan, too, stresses "this need for the real, creative and powerful father" (Lacan 1991, 60), asserting that when the real father fails to live up to his symbolic function, the stage is set for

psychopathologies ranging from neuroses to psychoses and perversions. “The kernel of the greatest number of neuroses,” Lacan claims, is to be found in “the personality of the father” which is “always in some way deficient – absent, humiliated, divided or false” (Lacan 1995, 200). In his 1938 article “Family Complexes in the Formation of the Individual,” Lacan contends that beginning with the nineteenth century, there has been a social decline in the paternal function leading to a psychological crisis, a “great contemporary neurosis,” which stems from the structure of the modern nuclear family, or in Lacan’s words, “the dialectic of the conjugal family” (Lacan 1995, 200). As Slavoj Žižek (2000) explains, “in the modern bourgeois nuclear family, the two functions of the father which were previously separated, that is embodied in different people,” namely the “Ego Ideal, the point of ideal identification” and the “superego, the agent of cruel prohibition ... are united in one and the same person” (313). It is this unification of the prohibitive and identificatory functions of the father in the same person that “sowed the seeds of the subsequent crisis of Oedipus” (Žižek 2000, 313). In other words, the modern father fails to guarantee the paternal function due to the fact that he simultaneously occupies the dual position of an emulative ideal and an agent of repression, as a result of which the child can neither form a proper superego nor identify with the ego ideal.

The breakdown of paternal authority is in fact a key theme running through Ceylan's oeuvre, where, more often than not, paternal inadequacy is presented as a source of frustration for the sons. In *Three Monkeys* (*Üç Maymun*, 2008), for instance, the son commits a violent crime in an attempt to compensate for his father's failure to take action in the face of a family crisis that is ripping the family apart. What prompts İsmail (Ahmet Rıfat Sungar) in *Three Monkeys* to murder his mother's lover Servet (Ercan Kesal), who is at the same time his father's boss, is the weight of his cuckolded father Eyüp's (Yavuz Bingöl) shame which is intensified by Eyüp's failure to openly confront either his wife or Servet about this betrayal. Another frustrated son burdened with his father's shameful legacy – albeit to a much lesser extent – is *The Small Town*'s Saffet, who is fed up with hearing his late father referred to as a good-for-nothing so much so that during a family gathering he can't help exclaiming: "Why am I the only one in the family who is supposed to bear the shame of my father?" The motif of the ineffectual father also occupies a central position in *Clouds of May*, where the protagonist's elderly father Emin (Emin Ceylan) is engaged in a losing fight with the authorities, writing petition after petition to prevent the confiscation of the small plot of woodland that he has cultivated near his property even though it is apparent from the start that his attempt to save the woodland is a hopeless and futile quest just like Idris's efforts to dig a well. In *The Wild Pear Tree*, even Sinan's somewhat senile maternal grandfather, who is a retired *imam*, is faced with the threat of humiliation when asked to recite the call to prayer to fill in for a younger

imam. Indeed, Sinan's grandmother gets extremely worried lest he bungle up the prayer and become an object of ridicule in the village. The prominence given to the motif of the humiliated father in Ceylan's strikingly male-centered oeuvre, seems to be in keeping with today's much talked-about oedipal crisis, which has resulted in the loss of faith in father figures and figures of authority in general. It is generally held that, as a result of this oedipal crisis, contemporary sons have great difficulties in regarding their fathers as representatives of ancient patriarchal authority. As a consequence, the security and protection associated with that authority has disappeared, resulting in ever-increasing levels of anxiety and thus aggression in the sons. The absence of the possibility of identifying with the symbolic function itself condemns the contemporary male to staying at the level of the immature boy and son (Verhaeghe 2000, 138).

Sinan, too, is characterized as an immature boy constantly engaged in oedipal struggles with authority figures whom he treats as paternal surrogates. Sinan's confrontation with the older, relatively famous local writer Süleyman (Serkan Keskin), whom he spots in a bookstore is a case in point. Adopting an openly hostile attitude from the start, Sinan tries to engage Süleyman in conversation with the aim of challenging his authority at the same time as seeking his recognition. He besieges the older man with questions until Sinan's provocative remarks prove too much for Süleyman, who loses his temper and cuts him short saying: "I was patient and polite despite your



sarcasm and insinuations. But it's time you let me go home!" However, even this sharp rebuke does not prevent Sinan from unashamedly requesting Süleyman to read his unpublished manuscript and provide him with feedback. Sinan's relating to the older writer as if he were a paternal surrogate also accords with Harold Bloom's psychoanalytically inflected theory of literary criticism which states that the young poet is inevitably involved in an oedipal struggle with literary predecessors. According to Bloom's theory of "the anxiety of influence," young poets "wrestle with their strong precursors, even to the death" in order to find their own voice and create original poetry (Bloom 1997, 5).<sup>6</sup> The rather bizarre sequence that follows Sinan's confrontation with Süleyman, depicting Sinan in flight from angry townspeople for vandalizing a public statue, which later turns out to be a dream, can be interpreted as evidence that Sinan is haunted by fear of punishment stemming from his antagonistic feelings towards his father which he temporarily projected onto the older writer.

### From Aggression to Identification

"Normally, the conquest of the Oedipal realization," Lacan claims, "is carried out by way of an aggressive relationship. In other words, it's by way of an imaginary conflict that symbolic integration takes place" (Lacan 1997, 212). Accordingly, although it never threatens to break into open violence, the relation between Sinan and Idris is suffused with hostility and aggression which reaches its peak when some of the money that Sinan has been saving to self-publish his book –

300 Turkish Liras out of the total 700 to be exact – is stolen from the pocket of his coat hanging by the door in the hallway. Sinan immediately suspects his father of stealing the money to finance his gambling addiction, although the culprit could easily be Sinan’s sister, or one of the workmen who, just before the incident, knocked on the family’s door to ask them to lend a hand with the furniture they were carrying upstairs. This incident serves to cast aspersions on Idris, giving rise to the suspicion that the father who is supposed to be the guarantor of the Law is actually a contemptible thief. The visuals are engineered in such a way as to create a sense of mystery as the camera lingers over the frosted glass door that obstructs our view of the hallway, concealing the identity of the thief. This can be interpreted as a deliberate attempt, on the part of the director, to ensure that Idris comes across as an opaque and enigmatic figure whose exact nature is difficult to pinpoint: We never find out whether it was Idris who actually stole the money, just as we can never positively determine whether or not Idris secretly indulges in gambling as Sinan suspects he does despite Idris’s claims to the contrary. Hence, Idris occupies an ambivalent position, making it difficult for the spectator to decide whether he is a despicable rogue or a well-intentioned loser invested with a pathetic charm.

Although Sinan is convinced of Idris’s guilt, he cannot bring himself to outright accuse his father, who, nevertheless, is quite aware of Sinan’s suspicions and openly mocks him by calling

him Detective Columbo: “I see you are suspicious, Columbo. If it was the workman, he would have taken the whole lot, why would he only take 300TL?” In fact, Sinan’s selling Idris’s beloved dog behind his back is as much a ruthless retaliation against his father as a practical means of scraping together enough money to self-publish his book. The loss of his dog comes as a great blow to Idris, who, Asuman claims, cherished the dog even more than the family members, regarding it as the only creature in the whole world that loved him unconditionally, without judging him. Sinan is only too well aware how much the dog means to his father as evident from his conversation, early on in the film, with one of Idris’s creditors, i.e. the aforementioned jeweler, who asked for Idris’s dog in reparation for the money Idris owed him, whereupon Sinan replied that his father would never agree to part with his beloved dog. Hence, Sinan’s selling the dog amounts to no less than a deliberate act of filial betrayal, if not a form of metaphorical castration in that Sinan deprives Idris of his most prized love object. When Asuman tells Sinan about Idris’s inconsolable grief over the loss of his dog which causes him to weep at nights – “he was whimpering like I’ve never heard before” – we can tell from Sinan’s reaction that he feels both guilt and joy at having caused his father so much pain. In this respect, Sinan’s reaction is suggestive of what Freud calls “the primordial ambivalence of feeling towards the father” (Freud 2001b, 132), an ambivalence stemming from the interplay between fear and admiration, love and hate that colors the son’s relationship to the father.



*Figure 3: Idris lying prostrate on the ground underneath a wild pear tree as if he is dead.*

Sinan's ambivalent feelings toward his father are also manifested in a key scene that hints at Sinan's patricidal impulse: When, from a distance, Sinan sees Idris lying prostrate on the ground underneath a wild pear tree with a piece of rope dangling from an overhanging branch, he mistakenly assumes that his father has committed suicide. Sinan's initial reaction is to flee in guilt and fear, almost as if he is the one responsible for his father's death. In all likelihood, what induces Sinan to run away is nothing other than Oedipal guilt stemming from the mistaken assumption that his death wish against his father has come true. However, on second thought, Sinan retraces his

steps and braces himself to face the facts, whereupon it turns out that his father is not dead after all; he has merely fallen asleep under the tree. Another key scene towards the end of the film reveals that Sinan's death wish against his father is reciprocated by Idris's death wish against his son. This time we see Sinan's dead body dangling from a rope inside the well, leading us to assume that Sinan has committed suicide by hanging. Before long, however, the camera cuts to Idris who has just awakened from a nap; thus, Sinan's suicide is revealed to be Idris's dream, and "in every dream an instinctual wish [is] represented as fulfilled" (Freud 2001d, 18). Taken together, the two correlative scenes bear witness to the fact that Oedipal relations are marked not just by patricidal, but also filicidal impulses;<sup>7</sup> indeed, as Zepf et. al. (2017, 28-31) point out, *Oedipus Rex* is as much a tragedy about filicide as it is about patricide since what sets the drama in motion is not actually Oedipus's wish to eliminate his father, but on the contrary, Laius's wish to eliminate his son.

As the film nears its end, a marked change comes about in the way Sinan views his father, who rises in his son's estimation – and by implication the spectator's – until he is elevated to the status of an identificatory ideal. In fact, notwithstanding his harsh condemnation of Idris, Sinan has always felt a certain ambivalence towards him, as evident from the fact that he has always defended Idris in public, even going so far as to justify his gambling habit as a "rebellion against the absurdity of life" during a discussion with a conservative young imam. Evidently, like the spectator, Sinan cannot exactly decide whether Idris is a fraud, or a misfit branded as a loser

because he does not conform to social norms. These two contradictory views of the father, it may well be argued, correspond to a devalued paternal imago and an idealized paternal imago respectively. The paternal imago, or what Lacan calls *the imaginary father*, is “the composite of all the imaginary constructs that the subject builds up in fantasy around the figure of the father ... The imaginary father can be construed as an ideal father, or the opposite” (Evans 1996, 63). Ostensibly, for Sinan, the imago of the father as a contemptible gambler simultaneously coexists with the idealized imago of the father as a nonconformist whose gambling habit is a way of rebelling against dominant values and established norms.

Asuman – the self-sacrificing mother who remains devoted to her husband despite all his vices – also reinforces the idealized imago of Idris when she says: “He had such an incredible way with words. When everyone else was talking about money, he spoke of the smell of the earth, of lambs and the color of the fields ... If we were to turn back the clock, and I was allowed to have a choice again, knowing what I know now, I’m sure I would do the same thing. I mean, I would marry your dad again.” Thus, Asuman elevates Idris to the status of a romantic idealist who does not attach any significance to wealth or social status. Besides, Asuman’s declaration that if she were given a second chance, she would have married Idris anyway posits Idris as the unshakable focus of the mother’s desire, thus reinforcing Idris’s position as the possessor of the *phallus*. In

Lacanian terminology, phallus does not refer to the biological organ, but to an unknown, “imaginary object” (Lacan 2001b, 241) that the child assumes satisfies the mother’s desire; it is imaginary in the sense that it exists in fantasy rather than in reality.<sup>8</sup> When the child sees that his mother’s desire is directed towards the father, he becomes convinced that the father possesses the phallus: “The father ... represents the vehicle, the holder of the phallus. The father, as father, has the phallus” (Lacan 1997, 319). This realization paves the way for the son’s identification with the father in the hope that one day he, too, will have the phallus like his father.<sup>9</sup> Although Sinan criticizes his mother for being overly sentimental and speaking so fondly of Idris, Asuman’s words also carry a reassuring message, implying that like his father, Sinan, too, can have the phallus and become the focus of female desire despite his lack of economic and social power.

### Taking Up the Father’s Task

Having completed his military service – which is glossed over by a single shot showing Sinan walking through a snow-covered terrain in slow motion with gun in hand – Sinan returns home to find that his father has retreated to the village after his retirement. On his way to the village, Sinan is haunted by the apparition of a dog that closely resembles his father’s – an apparent token of his filial betrayal and the ensuing Oedipal guilt. Failing to find Idris in the rat-infested, run-down shack where he has taken residence, Sinan takes advantage of his father’s absence to rummage through Idris’s wallet and is virtually moved to tears when he comes across a newspaper clipping about the publication of his book. Later on, Sinan is even more astonished to learn that Idris has actually read his book, something that neither his mother nor his sister has bothered to do. So, Idris turns out to be the only family member – indeed the only person on earth – to appreciate Sinan’s achievement and provide him with the recognition that he seeks, which helps redeem Idris in Sinan’s eyes and reinstitute him within the familial matrix as a good father rather than a fraud. The crux of the film comes towards the very end when father and son sit side by side, engaged in an intimate conversation for the first time. It is then that we learn it was originally Idris

who provided inspiration for Sinan’s book, also entitled “The Wild Pear Tree,” by drawing his attention to a wild pear tree across the school when Sinan was a primary school student in his father’s class:

SINAN: Did you read “The Wild Pear Tree” chapter? I got that from what you told us at primary school.

IDRIS: I’m glad to have been of some use.

...

SINAN: There was a wild pear tree opposite the school. You showed it to us.

IDRIS: There’s one here.

SINAN: You know, sometimes things I see in you, in myself and even in granddad remind me of a wild pear tree. I don’t know. We’re all misfits, solitary, misshapen.

IDRIS: Everyone has their own temperament. The thing is being able to accept it and like it.



*Figure 4: Father and son sit side by side engaged in an intimate conversation.*



In this key scene, Sinan associates his father, his (paternal) grandfather and himself with the gnarled and misshapen wild pear tree to stress that they are all misfits who stand in stark contrast to the “small-minded, bigoted” townspeople whom, early on in the film, Sinan had likened to “peas in a pod.” Consequently, the wild pear tree emerges as the symbol of a vital essence that is transmitted from father to son. This vital essence incarnated in the wild pear tree is the idealized paternal imago that is construed as a heroic rebel who refuses to be a “pea in the pod” by rejecting established values of a small town. “At the moment of the dissolution of the Oedipus complex,” Lacan claims, “something happens which we call *introjection*” (Lacan 1991, 168), for it is by means of the introjection, or internalization, of the paternal imago that the son’s identification with the father is ultimately achieved. Consequently, the paternal imago is internalized as the ego ideal, which will determine the son’s orientation within the Symbolic order by providing him with a model to emulate. As Lacan puts it, the Oedipus complex involves “the transmission of the ego ideal ... from the father to the son,” which, he claims, is what accounts for why particular tendencies and attributes tend to run in certain families (Lacan 1995, 199). Sinan’s identification with his father coincides with his realization that he will never manage to escape from the constraints of the provincial life in which he is trapped. Not even one copy of Sinan’s self-published book has been sold and his dreams of attaining social recognition, literary success and material wealth are hopelessly out of reach. At this point, Sinan is only aware all too well of his

affinity with his father, who also had high hopes in his youth which he failed to fulfill due to socio-economic restrictions. Idris abandons his last hope when he quits working on the well and accepts defeat: “The villagers were right. I didn’t find water,” he tells Sinan with a rueful smile.

It is very fitting therefore that the closing shot of the film, a POV shot that represents the optical vantage point of Idris, finds Sinan digging the well, which signifies his taking up his father’s unfinished task. Thus, the film ends on a note stressing that Sinan will follow in the footsteps of his father by adopting his utopian dream of turning the barren land green, which, however, is a doomed undertaking from the start. The sound of Sinan’s pickaxe striking the rocks at the bottom of the well continues to echo even after the camera fades to black and the end credits begin to roll. This is far from a “happy ending,” however, for it suggests that Sinan has ultimately resigned himself to the narrow, provincial life that he once desperately hoped to escape. Like a wild pear tree, he will remain firmly rooted in the soil of his provincial homeland, heir to a patrimonial legacy of failure, disillusionment and thwarted hopes.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> In *The Routledge Dictionary of Turkish Cinema* Dönmez-Colin (2014, 91) describes Nuri Bilge Ceylan as “the most celebrated contemporary Turkish film-maker internationally.”

<sup>2</sup> Previous studies of fathers in Ceylan's cinema have been discussed from different perspectives in Atam (2014), Daldal (2017) and Kara & Eşitti, (2017)[Editor's Note].

<sup>3</sup> Akın Aksu's debut novel *Bir Taşra Köpeği* (A Provincial Dog), which includes material that provided inspiration for *The Wild Pear Tree*, was published in January 2019.

<sup>4</sup> In 2019, the number of unemployed college graduates with a teaching degree awaiting appointment is said to be around 376.000. It is estimated that by 2023 the number will rise to one million. See, for instance <https://www.dw.com/tr/2023te-atanamayan-%C3%B6%C4%9Fretmen-say%C4%B1s%C4%B1-1-milyona-%C3%A7%C4%B1kacak/av-49726450>.

<sup>5</sup> The Symbolic order is one of the three registers of experience postulated by Lacan along with the Imaginary – the realm of imagination and deceptive images – and the Real, which lies beyond symbolization. The Name-of-the-Father initiates the child's passage from the Imaginary to the Symbolic by intervening into the dual relationship between mother and child.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of how Bloom's male-oriented theory fails to apply to female writers, see the chapter titled “The Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship” in Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's book *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979).

<sup>7</sup> Patricide and filicide are also the main themes running through the Nobel laureate Turkish author Orhan Pamuk's latest novel *The Red-Haired Woman* (*Kırmızı Saçlı Kadın*, 2016), which is described by its first-person narrator as a story about “the enigma of fathers and sons.” Indeed, there are several points of similarity between *The Wild Pear Tree* and *The Red-Haired Woman*, which also deals with father-son conflict and

even includes the motif of well-digging. Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* and the classical tale of Rostam and Sohrab (about a father who unwittingly murders his son) recounted in the Persian poet Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings) are invoked throughout Pamuk's novel as literary reference points for patricide and filicide respectively.

<sup>8</sup> The definition given here is that of the imaginary phallus. The symbolic phallus, on the other hand, is defined as the signifier of lack, which, according to Lacan, is what causes desire.

<sup>9</sup> This is the Oedipal scenario for the male child. The oedipal scenario for the female child and her relation to the phallus is a different matter.