

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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CEVDET BEY AND HIS SONS / CEVDET BEY VE OĞULLARI (1982)

Orhan Pamuk

OVERVIEW

Winner of the 2006 Nobel Prize in Literature, Orhan Pamuk is Turkey's most prominent novelist. He has received widespread critical acclaim both in Europe and North America as his books have sold over thirteen million copies in sixty-three languages. In his stories, Pamuk has situated his alienated characters within the larger framework of Turkey to reflect and analyse the country's tug-of-war between its Eastern roots and Western ambitions. His characters suffer from existential crises fuelled by Turkey's pursuit of modernity, struggle for identity, creating a poetic and philosophical imprint of the fractured land they come from. His debut novel, *Cevdet Bey and His Sons*, won the prestigious Orhan Kemal Novel Prize in his native Turkey, though it still remains untranslated in English. What put Pamuk on the map was his post-modern novel *My Name is Red*, which won the 2002 Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger, 2002 Premio Grinzane Cavour and 2003 International Dublin Literary awards. Pamuk has so far published 11 novels including several masterpieces such as *The Black Book*, *Snow*, *The Museum of Innocence*, along with several non-fiction titles like his popular memoir, *Istanbul: Memories and the City*. His latest novel, *Nights of Plague*, tells the story of a pandemic in a small island part of the Ottoman Empire.

LITERARY/HISTORICAL NOTES

Orhan Pamuk entered and won the Novel Contest organized by the *Milliyet* newspaper with *Cevdet Bey and His Sons* in 1978. Back then, the title of his book was *Darkness and Light*. As part of the contest, Pamuk's novel was supposed to be published; however, due to Turkey's political and financial hardship at the time, the Karacan Press did not go through their promise. It didn't help that the novel was 600-page long and written by the then-unknown 26-year-young Orhan Pamuk. Pamuk had to wait for four years for his debut to get published in 1982 and it consequently won the highly prestigious Orhan Kemal Novel Prize, named after one of Turkey's most prominent novelists and intellectuals. Unlike his later works, *Cevdet Bey and His Sons* was written in the traditional/realist register with each chapter dedicated to a main character's interiority. The Prologue and Epilogue, set in 1905 and 1970 respectively, provide a useful political and social framework with which to read characters' journeys and that of Turkey. Even though the novel was translated into many languages (including French, German, Spanish, Arabic and Chinese), Orhan Pamuk refuses to let his first novel be translated into English.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Cevdet "Bey" Işıkçı	Patriarch of the Işıkçı family
Nigan "Hanım" Işıkçı	Cevdet Bey's wife
Osman Işıkçı	Oldest son of Cevdet and Nigan Işıkçı
Refik Işıkçı	Youngest son of Cevdet and Nigan Işıkçı
Ayşe Işıkçı	Only daughter and the youngest child of Cevdet and Nigan Işıkçı
Ahmet Işıkçı	Son of Refik and Perihan Işıkçı, a painter
Muhittin Nişancı	Refik and Ömer's friend, an engineer and a poet
Ömer	Refik and Muhittin's friend, an engineer who wants to be rich

SYNOPSIS

Told in three parts, *Cevdet Bey and The Sons* tells the story of the wealthy Işıkçı family against the backdrop of Turkey's transformation from an empire to a republic. From the perspectives of many different characters, the book problematizes the social, political, and psychological impact of the dissolution of Ottoman Empire on the denizens of this new country. Their struggle for identity, existential crises, and changing dynamics of Turkish society constitute the backbone of the novel, asking compelling questions about the progress and modernity rather than providing clichéd answers.

PLOT

Prologue: Cevdet Bey. The prologue, which covers one day in 1905, follows Cevdet as he conducts his business in İstanbul. He's trying to establish himself as one of the first Muslim traders among the Jewish, Armenian and Greek businessmen of the late Ottoman Empire. After spending his afternoon with the Pasha, whose daughter he will soon marry, Cevdet pays a visit to see his sick brother, Nusret. A physician himself, Nusret spent some time in Paris with the Jon Turks and therefore supports a revolution to bring down the emperor. On his death bed, Nusret wants Cevdet to promise to look after his son after his death. Cevdet agrees. The day ends with Cevdet thinking that the only important thing in life is to have a happy family and make money.

The New Republic It is 1936. The empire had been dissolved to make way for the Republic of Turkey some twenty years prior. A young and passionate Ömer arrives from Europe to start executing his plans to become rich. He visits the Işıkçı family house to celebrate their Bayram [?], and meets his engineer friend, Refik. Cevdet Bey is content with the life and family he has built over the years.

Friends. Three friends—Ömer, Refik, Muhittin—have a discussion about their plans. Ömer wants to conquer this young country by taking advantage of its resources and the opportunities it offers instead of being a “lousy Turk.” He settles down in the east of the country to work on a railroad project. Refik is not happy about his married life but doesn't know what to do about it, either. Muhittin keeps working on his plan to become a poet.

The new order Ziya, Nusret's son, visits his uncle Cevdet Bey and asks for money as part of his late father's share in the family's wealth. A few days later, Cevdet Bey dies of a heart attack. The eldest son Osman takes over the family business. His brother, Refik, stops going to work because his dissatisfaction has turned to depression. Muhittin has finally published his book but is displeased with the lukewarm reception. He angrily tells Refik to find something else to focus on. Refik abandons his family and travels east to live with Ömer.

The three men. Ömer gets engaged to an MP's daughter, hoping that this arrangement will help him politically and financially. After months of intellectual discussions and arguments with Ömer, Refik decides to initiate a government program that helps spread reforms. He talks to representatives and ministers, but is left disappointed by their lack of enthusiasm. Muhittin, now aged 28, who has promised to kill himself if he didn't make it as a poet by the age of 30, commits himself to the Turkish nationalism cause.

Return to İstanbul Ömer completes the railroad project and returns to İstanbul to start his marriage arrangements. Refik also returns to the Işıkçı family house and finds himself eased into the life routine. Muhittin disagrees with a group of nationalists and breaks away from them to set up a new journal with a fresh focus. While in İstanbul, Ömer realizes that he hates the hypocrisy of the city and its people. The three friends meet up after a long time, but they end up insulting one another over their life choices.

Unravelling. While trying to gather support for his new journal, Muhittin meets with an influential nationalist who accuses him of being a self-obsessed fraud. Muhittin realizes that he's been cast out by the movement, which sends him into depression. He sends Refik a suicide letter, but doesn't go through with his plan. Ömer moves back to the east and buys land there after breaking off his engagement. Refik and his wife, Perihan, move out of the family house and settle in an apartment. Perihan is expecting a second child and Refik is full of hope.

Epilogue: Ahmet. It's now 1970. Refik has died of cancer five years after Perihan divorced him. The epilogue follows their son, Ahmet, as he negotiates one day, in parallel with his grandfather from the prologue. Ahmet is told by Ziya that the army is about to stage a coup, which unnerves Ahmet. He starts questioning his life as a painter after a long discussion with his girlfriend, who he learns is trying to go abroad for graduate study. Hopeless and anxious, he visits his grandmother, Nigan Hanım, now living in an apartment building constructed in place of the family house. Nigan Hanım dies during his visit. By the end of day, Ahmet goes out to the balcony and watches the city, itching to get back to work.

THEMES

SOCIETY (Religion, Progress, Identity)

Religion The book makes references to the tension between Muslims and non-Muslims as they relate to class in the Ottoman Empire. The tradesman of the Empire consisted predominantly of non-Muslims, a conflict that defines Cevdet Bey's early conundrum in establishing his own business. Religion is also part of the nationalist cause that tries to create a synthesis between Islam and Turkish identity. During a discussion between Ömer and Muhittin, Muhittin accuses Ömer of becoming "Christian" when the latter criticizes Turkish people as backward.

Progress Both Cevdet Bey and Osman are highly committed businessmen who are motivated by material growth and progress. Cevdet Bey, building his successful timber business, amasses wealth by exploiting war-time conditions while his elder son fulfills his father's dream of owning a factory of their own. Ömer and Refik, too, are progress-minded characters with the former focusing more on his own individual status and wealth while the latter leans more toward social progress.

Identity The country is going through an enormous sociological and political upheaval after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire and founding of the Republic of Turkey, which creates a deep identity crisis. Characters constantly ask themselves and others the same question: "What are we now? What are we doing? Where are we going?" As the political and military elites try to steer Turkey away from its religious roots towards a more secular and modern future, the clash between rural and urban, traditional and modern, fundamentalism and secularism becomes inevitable.

PSYCHOLOGY (Alienation, Loss)

Alienation As the friction between two different social forces increases, characters find themselves alienated either from their own identities or society at large. Ömer, while trying to 'conquer' the country by becoming rich and advancing his social status, feels more and more alienated from his friends as well as the İstanbul society he thought he belonged to. Similarly, Muhittin falls into a deep depression after failing to make it as a poet. His alienation with his own identity pushes him to the brink of suicide. All this points to deep psychological and sociological problems arising from the monumental change Turkey is going through in the novel.

Loss Aside from death, loss is also highlighted as part of Turkey's pursuit of modernity. Older characters grieve over disappearing traditions and family values, forcing them to find solace in a nostalgic past. Nigan Hanım's mourning over her dead husband doubles as resentment over the loss of the old ways. Younger characters experience loss in their own "new" ways: identity, individuality, art and politics. The grandson Ahmet, for example, finds himself in the middle of an impending coup, feeling lost and confused as he realizes his art and paintings do nothing to improve the life in his country. The modern Turk is built upon the idea of loss.

QUEST (Explore)

Explore All the male characters are dreamers. They explore the world and themselves either to possess wealth or to develop understanding of this new era. The intensity of the materialist explorers (Cevdet, Osman and Ömer) leads them to success but with mixed results. While Cevdet dies rich and happy, Osman and Ömer find that their happiness is not correlated with their wealth. The spiritualist explorers (Refik, Muhittin and Ahmet) suffer from existential problems, their futures seemingly tied to that of their country. In the end, they all look for something new in the old, a sentiment shared by the very country they belong to.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

REFİK İŞİKÇİ (open) Refik joins his brother in managing the family business and marries a beautiful woman, Perihan. His quest to replicate his father's and his elder brother's success fails because he struggles with his identity, seeking something else. The reader is aware of his pointless pursuit of satisfaction and gallantry, much like Don Quixote and Jay Gatsby. Like them, he chases after a dream that he cannot attain, a fact that is only clear to those who watch and observe him.

Parallels Refik emerges as a tormented figure, less idealist than tragic. At every point of the story is the reader aware of his pointless pursuit of satisfaction and gallantry, indeed one of the modern incarnations of *Don Quixote*. Jay Gatsby, the titular character of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, offers another window into Refik's fractured soul. He chases after a dream that he cannot attain, a fact that is only clear to those who watch and observe him.

Dissatisfied Refik cannot pinpoint what is wrong with his life. His dissatisfaction is not appreciated because he is *supposed* to be happy: he has financial security, a beautiful and a devoted wife, and a sweet daughter. Yet, he is missing that very ingredient that will make him, and he wants to find it. "I wish I could be like Muhittin or Ömer. I don't have ambitions! No passion! No trouble! Happiness creates an itch," he moans as he desperately tries to locate the very essence of himself.

Optimist "I believe that there are things we can do," Refik tells Ömer during a heated discussion about the reforms that the republic has brought in. This is his life's mission now: to ensure that reforms reach everywhere in Turkey, especially in rural areas. "You're wrong," he shouts to the doubtful Ömer. "We can find the light in this darkness... Everybody is freer. People who introduced those reforms are still in power." Though he fails to convince Ömer, Refik keeps working on his project to spread reforms and help villagers reach enlightenment.

Stubborn After experiencing the harsh living conditions of Turkish villagers, Refik decides to put his intellect and knowledge to good use in order to uplift rural Turkey. His satisfaction is now tied to society's betterment, which turns him into an idealist (though he wears a tragic suit). He believes, sincerely, that a well-designed program can help enhance the lives of villagers, for whom the reforms were intended. He writes a detailed book about his reform program and pleads with several congressmen, ministers, and statesmen about its implementation (to no avail). Despite everyone telling him to drop this, he fights for what he believes.

Discussion questions

What does Refik's dissatisfaction tell us about the Turkish intelligentsia in the formative years of the New Republic?

Why does his wife leave him in the end?

MUHİTTİN NİŞANCI (emotional) Muhittin's lifelong ambition to become a poet gets shattered when he becomes a poet. He realizes nobody is interested in his poems. Now anchorless and aimless, he devotes himself to the cause of Turkish nationalism, becoming a hard-nosed fascist. A callous hedonist like Dorian in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, he finds out that his righteous cause is only a product of his own vanity.

Parallels Even though they are not of the same cloth, Yevgeny Bazarov from *Fathers and Sons* by Ivan Turgenev is an apt comparison to offer. Bazarov's destructive nihilism that emerges as a product of self-hatred here manifests itself in Muhittin as destructive fury that becomes a self-portrait. Again, Dorian from Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* provides a seductive parallel. A callous hedonist Dorian, after witnessing all the evil he has caused, decides to live righteously only to realize that even his sacrifice is a product of his own vanity. Muhittin, too, decides to devote his valuable time to a good cause only to later realize that his motives were always self-referential.

Depressed The juxtaposition of Muhittin's creativity as a poet and with his analytical nature as an engineer seems to create a psychological chasm in his mind. One moment, he feels happy that he

hasn't settled down like Refik, and another moment, he feels distraught at the thought of his death. "Why have I become like this?" he asks himself. "Death and fear of death are all over my poems." Not being able to go through with his promise of killing himself depresses him as much as the thought of suicide. Pamuk writes of him: "He is thinking that he will never be able to kill himself, that he is a hypocrite, and that he is a bad poet."

Angry Muhittin is almost always agitated when he talks to his friends. Refik's dissatisfaction and depression offends Muhittin so much that he even goes so far as to blame Refik for his shortcomings. "You have no right to be unhappy," he says while trying to contain his angry bubbling up inside. "You're seeking depth that you are not prepared to pay the price of." He wants to punish Refik for his weakness. "Look, Refik. You're bored. Find something else other than reading books. I don't know, collect stamps, play chess ... go to games." It's the same with Ömer. When three friends meet long after their last gathering, Muhittin turns antagonistic, attacking Ömer and his plan of becoming rich. "You're nothing... I never thought you'd turn your innocence into ugliness."

Serious Muhittin decides to become a Turkish nationalist and fight for the cause only because he doesn't want to kill himself. But, at least, he is serious about his new purpose. In fact, he takes the matter so seriously that he can't even stand his friends' taunts when they meet up. "Don't you ever," he says, threatening to leave if they try to mock him. It is easy to recognize his insecurity in his zeal, but he does end up working for the cause systematically. Later, after clashing with his comrades, he establishes a new journal and enters the Grand Assembly as a politician.

Discussion questions

Why does Muhittin commit himself to a cause that he has never believed in before?

How should we analyse his promise to kill himself before he turns 30 if he hasn't made it as a poet and how is Turkish nationalism related to this promise?

ÖMER (conscientious) Ömer wants to conquer the new Republic. He plans, he devises, he schemes—all to dominate and control, which causes his insecurity to surface. He is, in part, similar to Raskolnikov from *Crime and Punishment* in the sense that he considers himself as an "exceptional" individual who is above the society he belongs to. His pragmatism and pride eventually place him in the only place he can conquer: the past.

Parallels Ömer can appear in any Dostoevsky or Tolstoy novel, and nobody would complain. He is, in part, Raskolnikov from *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoevsky in the sense that he considers himself as an "exceptional" individual who is above the society he belongs to. Therefore, his pride justifies everything he does to pursue his goals. Of course, Pamuk doesn't offer a redemption for Ömer in the same way Dostoevsky does for Raskolnikov.

Determined On his way back to Turkey from Europe, Ömer meets a family on the train and discusses with them his plans of becoming rich. He wants to conquer this new country. It's got resources unlike Europe that "has already been conquered, its resources claimed and shared." He tells the wide-eyed family: "Turkey is my own yard... I want to own everything." The family is so impressed that they call him "Rastignac," a character in Balzac's *Le Père Goriot*, which Ömer considers as validation of his ambitions, as though Turkey has approved his forward thinking. He leaves his friends, Refik and Muhittin, to live in this rural town for years, amassing his wealth through railroad construction.

Self-involved Ömer's ambition is one giant mirror. He looks at his new country and sees opportunity; he looks at his fiancé (whose father is an MP) and sees useful connections; he argues with his friends not for intellectual and emotional resonance, but to elevate his position among them. He is justified in thinking this way because he "is not an ordinary person." He tells his friends that he wants to be the master. He is a conqueror. Reforms in Turkey have not been made to advance the society, but to provide him with a chance to advance his status. He eventually becomes a conqueror, albeit a small one, by returning to the village and becoming a feudal lord.

Cynical Ömer provides a perfect foil for Refik. As they spend almost a year together, they constantly

discuss and argue about Refik's plans to elevate the lives of Turkish villagers. According to Ömer, villagers are not free and will never accept the reforms. They were slaves to their masters, and they will stay that way no matter how much Refik works to change things. To Ömer, the cities are not that different. Once he is back in İstanbul, he feels disgusted by the hypocrisy. "In Turkey, nobody can use their reasoning to believe in something," he tells Refik. It's not just the rural or the urban; he doesn't believe in Turkey, full stop. He wants to cry when he thinks of the country.

Discussion questions

What does Ömer's ambition to become a conqueror represent within the context of Turkey's emerging upper class?

Considering his plans to become a conqueror, would you regard his being a landlord in a small village a success or a failure?

Others

Cevdet "Bey" Işıkçı The patriarch Cevdet Bey establishes himself as the Muslim trader within the privileged class exclusively comprised of Armenian, Jewish and Greek tradesmen. His rise coincides with the dissolution of the Empire and founding of the new Republic. His only ambition in life is to become rich and build a happy family, which he eventually achieves. He is the quintessential member of the early Turkish-Muslim upper class that was budding out in the new country.

Nigan "Hanım" Işıkçı She is the daughter of a once-respectable Pasha and becomes the wife of Cevdet Bey at a very young age. Nigan Hanım values and cherishes her large family as she tries to bring them all together on special occasions, more so after her husband's death. As her sons, daughters and grandchildren seek for more individual space and turn more inward, she struggles to keep her family intact. She finds hope and happiness in the past.

Osman Işıkçı The family business grows under his management. As a patriarch, though, he is not as influential as his father once was because the family slowly grows apart in his leadership. He's not the husband his father was, either, as both Osman and his wife have extramarital affairs. Despite his mother's objections, he finally gets the old family mansion taken down for a new apartment building, which marks the final moment of Osman's departure from his father: He is a modern man.

Ahmet Işıkçı Ahmet lives in one of the apartment in the family building. He studied art in Paris and is now a struggling painter, trying to find purpose as an artist. He learns that the Turkish army is about to stage a coup to get the country back on track, which unnerves Ahmet as he doesn't see his painting contributing anything to the life in his country. By the end of the story, we find Ahmet disillusioned and isolated in his apartment, waiting for the coup—a stark contrast to his grandfather in the Prologue who was on his way to wealth and happiness.