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F. Scott Fitzgerald's Tender is the Night (1934): The Lost Generation of America in the Aftermath of the First World War [1]

F. Scott Fitzgerald'ın Müşfikti Gece (1934) Romanı: Birinci Dünya Savaşı Sonrası Amerika'nın Kayıp Nesli

Doç. Dr. Filiz BARIN AKMAN

Abstract: This article offers a critical reading of the American author F. Scott Fitzgerald's last novel titled *Tender Is the Night* (1934) by looking at the impact of the First World War on the lives of the Lost Generation of the Americans in the context of the Roaring Twenties. As the novel comments on the times by focusing on the dissipation and final demise of its protagonist Dick Diver, an American expat in France, this paper, focusing on this very theme, aims to draw attention to the trauma of the Great War as reflected on a lost generation represented by Dick Diver as well as a shell-shock and war veteran Abe North. While working on this issue of the traumating effect of the war on the individual, this study, to better grasp the historical context of the novel, also provides a succinct historical overview explaining such concepts as the Lost Generation and the Roaring Twenties as well as the U.S government's entry into WWI in 1917. One conclusion that this reading arrives at is that despite a tenuous mention of the First World War in the narrative, *Tender is the Night* is an era novel which sheds light on the post-war period of the Roaring Twenties in America by highlighting the disillusionments of a nation traumatized by the bleak realities of the Great War, through the example of Dick Diver as a broken individual.

Keywords: Literature, F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Tender is the Night*, the first world war, the lost generation, the roaring twenties in America, Dick Diver.

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Öz: Bu makale, Amerikalı yazar F. Scott Fitzgerald'ın *Müşfikti Gece* (1934) adlı son romanının, Birinci Dünya Savaşı'nın, savaş sonrası Amerika'da ortaya çıkan Kayıp Neslin yaşamları üzerindeki etkisini Kükreyen Yirmiler tarihi bağlamında inceleyen, eleştirel bir okumasını sunar. Bu makale, romanın temalarından olan, Fransa'da Amerikalı bir gurbetçi olarak yaşayan kahramanı Dick Diver'ın sefahatına ve nihai çöküşüne odaklanıp savaş sonrası zamanı yorumlarken, hem Dick Diver hem de bir savaş gazisi ve malulü olan Abe North tarafından temsil edilen bir Kayıp Nesli etkileyen Büyük Savaş travmasına dikkat çekmeyi de amaçlamaktadır. Bu çalışma, savaşın birey üzerindeki yıkıcılığını odak noktası yaparken, aynı zamanda tarihi altyapının daha iyi kavranabilmesi için, Kayıp Nesil, Kükreyen Yirmiler gibi kavramlar ile, ABD hükümetinin 1917'de Birinci Dünya Savaşı'na girişini de açıklayan kısa ve öz tarihsel bir bilgiler de sunmaktadır. Bu okumanın ulaştığı sonuç ise romanının anlatısında her ne kadar Birinci Dünya Savaşı odak noktası olarak konumlandırılmasa da, *Müşfikti Gece*'nin Büyük Savaş'ın kasvetli ve yıkıcı gerçekleri nedeniyle travmaya uğramış bir ulusun hayal kırıklıklarını vurgulayan —dağılmış ve yitik bir birey olan Dick Diver örneği üzerinden—ve Amerika'da savaş sonrası ortaya çıkan Kükreyen Yirmiler dönemine de ışık tutan bir dönem romanı olduğudur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Edebiyat, F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Müşfikti Gece*, birinci dünya savaşı, kayıp nesil, Amerika'da kükreyen yirmiler dönemi, Dick Diver.

Introduction

Even though, *Tender is the Night* by the American author F. Scott Fitzgerald may not necessarily be classified as a war novel—as it does not describe combat scenes and battle conditions—unlike *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) written by his contemporary and also a friend Ernest Hemmingway— this final novel of Fitzgerald offers a dramatic rendering of the traumatizing effects of the First World War on the Lost Generation of the Roaring Twenties, who either directly or indirectly suffered the consequences of the war. As such *Tender*, through the examples of American expats in Europe, offers a poignant panorama of a slice of the American society which was populated by dissipated, disoriented and disillusioned individuals struggling to survive in a post-war world. Gertrude Stein aptly referred to all these "young people who served in the war" as "the lost generation" who as a consequence became the victims of the trauma and destruction triggered by the Great War while Hemingway, in agreement, used her term as an epigraph illsutrating the major theme of his novel *The Sun Also Rises* written in 1926: "You are all a lost generation"(Stein, 1937: 52; Hemingway, 1996: i). As such,

reflective of Stein's apt terminology as well, many characters in Fitzgerald's *Tender*, primarily Dick Diver and Abe North, can be read illustrative but tragic examples to this lost generation of young people in the Roaring Twenties of the 1920s and 1930s.

Although references to WWI in *Tender* are minimal and not overtly emphasized, many characters in the novel, specifically Dick Diver and Abe North, as the implicit and direct victims of the war relatively, can be read as the embodiments of this lost generation whose experiences of death and destruction on such a large scale—more than twenty million people were killed— became catalyst in bringing about the dissipation of the individuals and failure of the society alike. In this article therefore, in the historical context of the Roaring Twenties in the aftermath of WWI, I will try to explain how the novel fictively comments on the suffering and destruction occasioned by the Great War, both on individial and societal levels, by providing a detailed analysis of characters such as Dick Diver and Abe North as well as an explication of the processes leading to their tragic dissipation.

The Americans' Involvement in the First World War

Before offering a reading of the novel which is set to detail the war's destructive ramifications on individuals, namely American expats in Europe, it would be helpful to include a brief sketch of historical information explaining the entrance of the U.S government to a war which had started thousand of miles away over the Atlantic ocean in Europe. Centuries-old rivalries and animosity among the European counties such as France, England, Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia eventually led to a world war in 1914. Simmering imperialistic ambitions of European powers were the real cause behind the breakout of this Great War because "countries anxious to seize more territory were acting in a greedy and dangerous way for orderly civilization" (Gregory, 1971:8). Ignited by the fateful murder of the Austrian heir to throne by a Serbian marksman in the heart of the Balkans, formerly a part of the declining Ottoman Empire, WWI divided Europe and the Middle East into two opposing alliances. The alliances were being formed based on religious affiliations and ethnic differences as well as political interests. Germany, being a late comer to the nineteenth-century project of the West's imperial expansion and the colonization of the world, had the intentions of asserting its political and military dominance against other major European countries. As such, Germans sided with Austria-Hungary against the Allies composed of France, England and Russia; eventually, Germany in an attempt to redirect frontiers outside Europe succeeded in drawing the reluctant Turks into a war that would culminate in the Ottoman Empire's demise.

Like the Turks, the Americans initially opposed to their country's entry into a war which had started thousands of miles away from home; however, the American President Woodrow Wilson had to declare war in 1917 after Germany, in order to

block the transatlantic supply chain of weapons and goods to its enemies, sunk an American ocean liner carrying cargo to support the British. Wilson made the announcement that would change the course of the war and also the American lives with the following words: "The world must be made safe for democracy" (Wilson, 1917). On this historic declaration, the American army began a speedy recruitment policy, enlisting millions of young American men to fight overseas. Also, already as residents and tourists in Europe in the 1910s—supported by the emerging economic wealth of the U.S at the beginning of the twentieth century— there existed a cohort of an expat community of Americans specifically located in France. To their utter surprise, when the American President declared war, they suddenly found themselves in the middle of a war. What Ross Gregory writes is helpful to understand the view of these expat Americans in Europe when the war broke out:

> Americans who first felt the influence of the world the War were not soldiers, shippers, or government officials but ordinary citizens who happened to be traveling in Europe when the shooting started. They had come for various reasons, business perhaps; a good many were there to partake European beauty and culture, such as quaint places as the cafes on the Champs Elysees, Westminster Abbey, or Vienna with its nineteenth century grace and charm. Prepared to see the best features of European civilization, they now had to face some of the Old Continent's worst. The War started with remarkable speed, and to say that these people experienced bewilderment, worry and shock would be a great understatement. (1971:26)

With the accompaniment of volunteers, the first U.S. infantry troops arrived in France in June 1917. As such, despite the common opposition in the American public, the U.S government had officially become involved in the old world's, Europe's imperial carnage. In other words, "in going to the War, it [America] had itself been captured by the ancient tyrannies of the old world: nationalism, patriotism, militarism" (Callahan, 1972: 118).

Recognized as the bloodiest and deadliest conflict the world has ever seen, WWI ended in 1918 with the victory of the Allies, leaving over 20 million people dead, million others maimed, displaced and homeless. The brutal realities of the war— young men dying on top of each other in the rat-infested trenches in the western fronts, bodies blown to pieces by bombs, painful and gruesome deaths caused by chemical weapons, also poetically described in Wilfred Owen's poem "Dulce et Decorum Est,"— caused the traumatizing disintegration of the self, society and idealism for the majority of young Americans. In the end, the war became a meaningless notion and an absurd idea because "for every thousand people who shuddered at the horrors of battlefield, only a handful felt the horror of the slum, for the thousands who cheered the efficient

machinery of the War, only a few recognized the wasteful bedlam of peace" (Tipple, 1968: 413).

This unprecedented devastation and human suffering caused by WWI, ultimately led to the emergence of a lost generation in Europe and America alike, consisting of disoriented young people who were disillusioned with the lofty ideas of patriotism, traditional values and customs as well as meaning of life and death. As such, in the aftermath of the war, suitably named as the Roaring Twenties—although Fitzgerald chose the Jazz Age instead—many chose to lead a life of decadence and hedonism, using drugs and alcohol while throwing lavish parties like the ones we see in Fitzgerald's other novel, *The Great Gatsby*. Precipitated by the crash of the stock markets in 1929 in America, this generation also witnessed the failure of the American dream, which inculcated the idea that through hard work and determination any individual can move upward in society. *Tender*, written in such gloomy and troubling post-war years, then reflects the sensibilities of its times, specifically through the demise of its protagonist Dick Diver.

Dick Diver as the Representative of Broken Individuals of the Lost Generation

Tender is the Night is an era novel which sheds light on the post-war period of the Roaring Twenties in America by highlighting the disillusionments of a nation traumatized by the bleak realities of the Great War. As John F. Callahan writes in *Illusions of the War*, "the novel anatomizes the disintegration and metamorphoses of personality and consciousness in a fragmenting western world order from 1917-1930" (1972: 63). The protagonist of the novel, Dick Diver, an idealist and romantic who desires to uphold the mores of the past, is unable to adapt to the realities of a cruel post-world Western society which had long abandoned his cherished values. Unable to transform his life and society, Dick Diver ultimately sinks into despair, wasting away his life and ideals to alcoholism and decadence. At the end of the novel like his close friend, shellshock Abe North—who also serves as his doppelganger in the novel—"beaten to death in a speakeasy in New York," after his addiction problems have destroyed his music career, Dick Diver meets his own tragic demise, when he, failing both in marriage and profession, returns to America as a broken and beaten man (Fitzgerald, 1996: 311). Unable to have a stable life "in one town or another," another tragic hero of Fitzgerald, like Jay Gatsby, Dick Diver fades into a life of oblivion and defeat (311).

Some scholars such as James Ellis analyzed Dick's despair and eventual disintegration from a psychoanalytical perspective. In his article titled "Fitzgerald's Fragmented Hero: Dick Diver" for instance, Ellis provides a psychological investigation into Dick's dissipation, overviewing the character's life from early childhood years to his promising days as a young doctor ambitious to become a successful psychiatrist to

his doomed marriage to Nicole, a patient of him, serving as a catalyst in bringing about his demise (1969: 127-137). This is a very valuable reading; however, supporting another scholar John Callahan's conclusion that, "Diver's paralyzing division of self is triggered by a historical event far more rending (World War I) than any personal tragedy", in this article I will mainly focus on the effects of the War leading to Dick's dissipation as well as Abe North's struggles in the chaotic post-war western societies (1972: 76).

In *Tender*, juxtaposing two characters Dick Diver, a non-combatant who did not fight in the Great War, and Abe North, a failed musician and a former soldier suffering from the trauma of the battlefields, Fitzgerald makes a silent commentary on the extent and prevalence of the trauma caused by war. Both characters fail tragically in the novel as they transform into broken individuals whose slow descend into despair, decadence pay the way for their ultimate ruin: "Tell me about your experiences in the war? Are you changed like the rest?" (Fitzgerald, 1996: 127). This is a question asked by Franz, the representative of the common sense as well as healthy realism and idealism in the novel, to Dick; although Dick was able to avoid fighting, the impact of war on Dick's life becomes tenable when he confesses that: "You must have gathered that [transformation] from my letters" (127). In Franz's description the chaos of the war is sure to be experienced by every individual, may it be somebody who heard the bombings only miles away or another who only read about the War in the newspapers.

In an episode from the novel which depicts Dick, Abe and Rosemary's visit to the trenches in the western frontiers, we are provided with an emotionally exhausted Dick who exclaims in regret: "All my beautiful lovely safe world blew itself up here with a great gust of high explosive love" (Fitzgerald, 1996: 69). Obviously the war itself marked a turning point in Dick Diver's life. The following observations of him about the brutality of WWI for Rosemary that: "This land here cost twenty lives a foot that summer," as well as "See that little stream--we could walk to it in two minutes. It took the British a month to walk to it--a whole empire walking very slowly, dying in front and pushing forward behind. And another empire walked very slowly backward a few inches a day, leaving the dead like a million bloody rugs" can be seen as poignant critiques of the romanticized idea of war imposed on the middle class young men as a heroic action. Then Dick ends his view of war with the following: "Why, this was a love battle--there was a century of middle-class love spent here. This was the last love battle" (68). Also, during the same visit, horrified by the horrors of the War, Dick Diver notes the invention of trench warfare as "mass butchery," and hopes that "no Europeans will ever do that again in this generation"—which in itself can be read as a reflection of the anti-war stance of Fitzgerald himself (69).

In this epiphanic visit to the trenches, where the same group engages in an uncanny re-enactment of "play war," throwing grenades and hiding in trenches, the war

veteran Abe North's despondent remark that "[t]here are lots of people dead since and we'll all be dead soon," describes the mind-set of the Lost Generation who lacks meaning and direction in life. Likewise, Dick Diver, as a broken individual, not only laments the destruction and disorientation caused by the War but also painfully regrets his inability to reverse the tide: "The silver cord is cut and the golden bowl is broken and all that, but an old romantic like me can't do anything about it" (Fitzgerald, 1996: 69). In fact, it is this immutability of the dire realities of the post-war era which leads to the failure of Dick Diver's romantic idealism.

As the novel progresses, Dick Diver begins to resemble his doppelganger Abe North whose tragic fall prefigures and foreshadows that of Dick Diver. After a drunken Abe North's involvement in a criminal incident, Nicole and Dick ponder what may have caused "so many smart men go to pieces nowadays." Nicole specifically wonders "Why is it just Americans who dissipate?" (Fitzgerald, 1996: 108). It is indeed a question purposefully left unanswered in the novel. Because from the very beginning of the novel, Dick Diver is associated with Abe North, Nicole's treatment of Abe at the train station—a nuisance to get rid of with—is a foreshadowing element that she will treat Dick likewise when he becomes useless and dissipated like him. The association of Dick and Abe is further strengthened when the narrator comments on Dick's grief at his friend's funereal: "The faces were only formally sad but Dick's lungs burst for a moment with regret for Abe's death, and his own youth of ten years ago," (201). It is obvious that by mourning the death of Abe, Dick inadvertently laments his own unavoidable ruin which has already begun with his marriage to Nicole amid the Great War. However, despite this association of Dick and Abe, they differ in terms of their grip on idealism. While Abe silently accepts his demise refusing to transform; however, Dick strives to believe heroism and idealism until the very end: Abe "just sat, happy to live in the past. The drink made past happy things contemporary with the present, as if they were still going on, contemporary even with the future as if they were about to happen again" (Fitzgerald, 1996: 111).

Failure of Dick's Romantic Idealism against the Brutal Realities of a Post-war West

Tender traces the failure of Dick Diver's romantic idealism against the brutal realities of a post-war West where the traditional values of honor, decorum, propriety and morality have been replaced by the nihilism of the era that was ushered in by the War. Dick initially tries to persist as an idealist and cannot "shut these matters [Victorian morals] into their Victorian side-chambers . . ." like Nicole did for instance (Fitzgerald, 1996: 151). The narrator sarcastically remarks his idealist heroism as such "in 1916 he managed to get to Vienna under the impression that if he did not make haste, the great Freud would eventually succumb to an aeroplane bomb" (124). Dick's unrelen-

ting idealism also causes him to make a wrong choice in his choice to marry his patient Nicole, ignoring Franz's and Dr. Dohmler's warnings. In the end, this unhappy marriage of an idealist psychiatrist to his wealthy patient becomes one of the factors causing his fall: "His work became confused with Nicole's problems; in addition, her income had increased so fast of late that it seemed to belittle his work" (177). And as Nicole gradually gains in strength and recovers from mental sickness, Dick Diver slowly sinks deeper: "her health and beauty against his physical deterioration, her unscrupulousness against his moralities" (Fitzgerald, 1996: 300).

Therefore, in the novel we trace the decline of once an aspiring young man who tragically succumbs to mores of the time and wastes his life away as an alcoholic and decadent individual. Some instances from the novel showcasing his dissipation: For example, a heavily drunk Dick humiliates himself over and over again, gets beaten up and is put in jail in dishonor. Eventually, "[h]e's not received anywhere anymore" as he loses all manners and decorum (Fitzgerald, 1996: 286). In his bouts of alcoholism, he recklessly abandons his work in the clinic along with his academic ambitions. While his resistance to an extra marital affair with Rosemary at the beginning of the novel shows that he is still trying to live by his rules, his surrender to immoral passions at the end of the novel marks a point of no return. When he goes and waits for Rosemary to leave the film set, he himself knows that "he was now doing marked a turning point in his life- it was out of line with everything that had preceded it"(Fitzgerald, 1996: 100). Dick's struggles in the post-war period of the Roaring Twenties bear some autobiographical allusions to the author's life as well. As such, scholar Milton Stern's study which highlights these autobiographical connections is informative:

F. Scott Fitzgerald had been born into a Victorian era that emphasized stiff proprieties and the initiation of the young into seemly traditions and decorous conventions of a prim nineteenth-century world: chastity, conformist nationalism and religiosity, polite manners and language, prissy public values and behavior. But he grew up in a rebellious era, following World War I, in which all the old gods and proprieties had been demolished in the high explosive disillusion and cynicism occasioned by the unspeakable carnage and conditions of the Great War. (1994: 3)

With the old morals and values blown into pieces at the trenches during the War, Dick is unable to adopt to a changed world, and perhaps more tragically, he is helplessly aware of his own gradual demise: "I had gone into a process of deterioration" (Fitzgerald, 1996: 284). Dick's disillusionment with people, and ideals, e.g. the American dream, and the world in general is generated by the realization of the brutal realities of the times: "He got up to Zurich on less Achilles' heels than would be required to equip a centipede, but with plenty- the illusions of eternal strength and health, and of the essential goodness of people; illusions of a nation, the lies of generations of

frontier mothers who had to croon falsely, that there were no wolves outside the cabin door" (125).

The impact of the war on Dick Diver's fall is also remarked by the introduction of Tommy Barban, the walking war machine, as an antagonist in the novel. Dick's idealism is contrasted with the militarism of Tommy Barban, a heartless killing machine and mercenary, fighting anybody's war for money. Unlike Abe North, Barban is immune to the trauma of the war and thus becomes the embodiment of the senseless brutality of the Great War as well as the greedy imperialistic ideologies which led the governments in Europe to send the young men to die. Like a post-world society which has swept away the ideals of Dick, Barban, as an allegorical symbol of war and destruction, ends up snatching away his wife Nicole. Fitzgerald's characterization of Tommy, Barban, as his name suggests, a barbarian, fits his representation of him as a cruel mercenary as well: "Well, I'm a soldier. . . My business is to kill people" (Fitzgerald, 1996: 48). Tommy is the embodiment of the bellicose attitude behind the War, so the narrator shuns the character and what he stands for: "Barban was the end product of an archaic world, and as such, worthless" (48).

If the War, allegorically characterized by Barban, is a culprit in Dick Diver's demise, another important factor is the cultural atmosphere of the Roaring Twenties, which produced a new carefree and unscrupulous generation of the wealthy socialites, following the wartime devastation. Therefore, Dick Diver's idealism is also contrasted with the crass materialism of the haughty and shallow rich embodied by Nicole Diver. Nicole descends from a wealthy Midwest family for which "with no landed aristocracy in the North and Midwest and, after 1776, no other formally recognized aristocracy, money became the principal measure of success and status. All that was needed to acquire social standing was wealth" (Miles, 1976: 31). Nicole dominates over Dick with her money; as such, her money precipitates Dick's dissipation: "It was the money which ruined Dick, Nicole's money which was her fathers and her grandfathers" (Fitzgerald, 1996: 151). Her social status and upbringing starkly oppose Dick Diver's, who has been raised with the moral codes of the Victorian South, which has valued traditional morality and manners above else. In the end, his struggles to construct his world according to those ideals prove fruitless; and this failure is metaphorically implied in his efforts to cleanse the beach from gravels in the French Riviera. Dick Diver desires to create his ideal world on the beach, perhaps the only thing in his life not provided by his wife Nicole's money; however, his constructed world comes crashing down as each new wave of the sea brings more gravels to the shore. In fact, the book McKisco is trying to write—he proves to be a real literary success at the end— serves as a metatext which offers a summary of the plight of Dick Diver. McKisco, for instance "takes a decayed old French aristocrat and puts him in contrast with the mechanical age" (Fitz-

gerald, 1996: 24). Likewise, Fitzgerald takes a dissipated middle-class man Dick, with his long-cherished Victorian values and puts him in an age of the Roaring Twenties and nihilism where those values have lost their meaning to the power of money and the destruction of the War.

Conclusion

Tender is the Night is a realistic portrayal of the demise of an idealist Dick Diver in a degenerated and fragmented post-war world of the Roaring Twenties. He is portrayed to be the unrelenting romantic who is "energized by illusions and imagination but also destroyed by them" (Stern, 1994: 35). "In the broken universe of the war's ending" a disillusioned Dick Diver sinks deeper and deeper into his disintegration, as his name suggests, dives into the sea of realities (Fitzgerald, 1996: 247). Having "abandoned the old virtues of his father and dissipated his energies just as western culture had abandoned the old aristocratic virtues for a crass materialism", Dick Diver's ruin reflects the disorientation of a Lost Generation in a post-war West (Lehan, 1969: 73). The epigraph to the novel, taken from the British Romantic John Keats' poem "Ode to a Nightingale"—also inspired the title— aptly conveys the message of hopelessness and despair imparted at the end of the novel. Like the lonely speaker in the poem who approaches his death and as a sign ceases to hear the beautiful singing of the nightingale in a gloomy night in the dark forest, Dick Diver witnesses the dissipation of his world in a tumultuous time of decadence, disorientation and darkness: "Already with thee! tender is the night /. . . But here there is no light,/ Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown/ Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways" (Keats, 1820).

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