



## Araştırma Makalesi • Research Article

### A Bard in Search of The Lost Time: The Time and Memory Perception in Thomas Wolfe's *The Lost Boy*\*

*Yitik Zaman Peşinde Bir Ozan: Thomas Wolfe'un The Lost Boy Adlı Eserinde Zaman ve Anı Algısı*

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#### ÖZ

Thomas Wolfe eserlerinde otobiyografik öğeleri ustaca kullanan Amerikalı bir yazardır. Thomas Wolfe, "The Lost Boy" adlı kısa hikâyesinde kendisini de karakterize eden Eugene Gant'in öz arayışını incelemektedir. Eser dört bölümünden oluşmaktadır. Her bölüm farklı bir aile bireyinin geçmiş zaman ve anılarına dair anlatımını içermektedir. Eugene Gant, öz arayışı esnasında; anılarını canlandıran aile fotoğraflarından, yaşanan mekânlardan ve hatta en ufak anı kırıntılarında bile yararlanır. Aile bireylerinin anlatımlarından yararlanarak bilinçaltına itilen anıları gün yüzüne çıkarmaya çalışır. Ana temasını yitiklik, yalnızlık, zamanın akıp gitmesi gibi unsurların şekillendirdiği bu hikâyede zaman; anıları bilinçaltına iten, unutturan ve silip yok eden bir unsurdur. Zaman, aynı zamanda, farklı etmenler aracılığı ile anıların canlanmasını sağlayan bir unsurdur. Bu çalışmada, Eugene Gant'in geçmiş zaman ve şimdiyi bir birine bağlayarak anıları tekrardan canlandırması incelenecektir.

#### ABSTRACT

Thomas Wolfe is an American writer who uses autobiographical elements artfully in his works. Wolfe writes about the self-searching of Eugene Gant, the main character in *The Lost Boy*, who characterizes himself, Thomas Wolfe. The book consists of four parts. Each part contains a different family member's narration about past and memories. During self-searching Eugene Gant benefits from family photos, living spaces and even the slightest crumbs that animate memories. He tries to bring to light the memories, which were pushed into subconscious, benefiting from narratives of family members. Time is a factor which pushes the memories into subconscious, makes them forget in this story where elements such as loss, loneliness, time flies, shape the leitmotif. Time is also a factor bringing memories alive through different elements. In this study Eugene Gant's reanimating of the memories by linking past to present will be examined.

## 1. Giriş

Thomas Wolfe, notable for a member of lost generation, is one of the most important writers of American literature. One of his distinctive short story, *The Lost Boy* deals with Eugene Gant's [aka Thomas Wolfe's] search for the past and for his older brother Grover, who died at the age of eleven. The lost boy Grover's story is recounted from four different

perspectives. Sullivan (2002: 68) emphasizes that their haunting sense of loss, isolation, and the passage of time forms this story. The first narrator is Grover himself. In the first part, Wolfe wants to touch the close relation between Grover and his father. Here, writer fictionalizes all events based on his own memories. Grover tells the reader about the relationship between him and his father. Grover is a young boy who delivers newspapers. On his way he sees the

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Crokers' candy shop. He wants to buy some, but there isn't enough money on him. So, he proposes Mr. Croker to pay the bill with stamps. After payment, Grover notices that he has given three more stamps to Croker. When he wants them back, old shopkeeper does not give. Resignedly, he leaves there. Grover goes to his father's masonry shop. Actually, while leaving from candy shop, Grover decides not to tell about the incident, but when his father, Mr. Gant asks the reason of his unhappiness, he starts to talk. Grover's father, gets angry with Croker and insults him as lame, stingy etc. Croker gives the stamps back to Grover and they turn back to his father's shop.

The second part of the story is told by Grover's mother. She recounts the story to his younger son, Eugene. The story starts at Indiana. They are on a train and Grover asks questions to a stranger man in their compartment. His mother warns him not to disturb the man, but the stranger says that Grover is a blushing boy, Grover does not annoy him. And the conversation between Grover and the stranger goes on. According to his mother, Grover is a respectful and quiet boy. He is a mother apple of mother's eye.

Grover's sister tells the third part of the story. The main point of this part is an old family picture Eugene does not take part in. Grover's sister wonders about if everybody misses their past or not. Their longing to past makes their memory bright. They remember every corner of their hometown.

And, at the last part of the story we see Eugene Gant who looks for his past via memories, pictures, and every detail that brings his memory back in the stream of time river. All protagonists are haunted by longing for past and their lost lives. Mother looks for her beloved son, sister looks for her clever and genius brother and, Eugene looks for his elder brother and himself.

Eugene's nostalgic search, in time river via memories, has deep psychological factors. Freud says:

*"Memories are curious things. Sometimes they masquerade as thoughts, feelings, or images, without revealing themselves as memories. Sometimes they come to mind and seem relatively meaningless, other times they overwhelm consciousness and cast us back into a vividly remembered past"* (Conway, 2006:548).

Eugene gathers all the events about his lost brother. Eugene's vivid mind can find out hidden memories. This feature is a gift by God. In a letter written by Wolfe, he writes to his payer that he possesses a good memory and he doesn't forget anything (Nowell, 1956: 529).

The memories which are frozen in time river can be unearthed by Eugene without any loss. Reader does not care about the lack of plot in *The Lost Boy*, because the purpose of reading this story can only be for the psychological profundity. Edel (1959: 24) states that, *"in the modern psychological novel there is no 'story' in the old sense, and there is only one character (at a time) with which to identify oneself."* Eugene aims to identify himself in *The Lost Boy*, and puts himself to the center of the narration without integrity between narrations.

## 2. The Lost Bard: Thomas Wolfe

The modern American writer Thomas Wolfe is known for his sizable autobiographical books. Although he lived a short

life of thirty eight years, he penned many literary works. He is received as one of the members of Lost Generation. However, he does not regard himself as a lost person. At the beginning of the twentieth century, many American writers like Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Dos Passos, E.E. Cummings, Archibald MacLeish, and Hart Crane moved to Europe, especially to Paris. They stated that America was not so free as Europe for writing everything uncensored and it was not a suitable place for inspiring writers to produce artful products. Wolfe (1964: 646) indicates that:

*"I don't feel that I belong to a Lost Generation, and I have never felt so. Indeed I doubt very much the existence of a Lost Generation, except insofar as every generation, groping, must be lost. Recently, however, it has occurred to me that if there is such a thing as a Lost Generation in this country, it is probably made up of those men of advanced middle age who still speak the language that was spoken before 1929, and who know no other. These men indubitably are lost. But I am not one of them."*

Although, he rejects being one of the members of lost generation, he confesses that he is, personally, lost (1964:646). He is lost because he cannot find his real soul he is in search of. We can state that Wolfe presents himself as an exile, but his exile concept is so different. Reader can observe in Wolfe's novels and short stories that he approves the earth as a detention colony, and according to Wolfe, real living space of human being is their mother's womb and birth is the gate of exile. Wolfe (1929: 132) expresses this idea with this sentence, *"Naked and alone we came into exile. In her dark womb we did not know our mother's face; from the prison of her flesh have we come into the unspeakable and incommunicable prison of this earth."* This situation is related with one of the most important psychoanalyst Otto Rank. He claims that the reason of anxiety, the first trauma and primary repression starts at the time of child's birth (Kalay, 2016:40). Wolfe seems very close to Rank's assertion. In this regard, Kennedy (1962: 132) states that Wolfe writes for declaring the problem of human isolation: *"that man is lost in this world, alone and unable to communicate with his neighbor or with his dearest loved ones. They are akin to him in flesh only."* Wolfe, in the course of his life, isolates himself from society. He devotes himself to explore the unseen side of the life.

Thomas Wolfe's novels and short stories have a lack of attraction based on devoid of plot. Bernard Devoto, who was one of the most important critics of that era, criticizes Wolfe for not being a matured writer based upon some reasons like lack of plot, technique, meaningful cohesion etc. Devote castigates Wolfe hard. According to Bernard Devoto (1953: 143) *"the truth shows up in two much simpler facts: that Mr. Wolfe is still astonishingly immature, and that he has mastered neither the psychic material out of which a novel is made nor the technique of writing fiction."* Indeed, when Devote criticized Wolfe for the factors mentioned above, it was so mundane to write autobiographical stories or novels in America.

Wolfe writes his own experiences. According to Wolfe, an artist's interest must be the life itself. He keens on exploring the inner side of the character who has been sent to the world, the exile, unwillingly. Wolfe is interested in psychological side of life. It can be said that Wolfe's novels and short

stories are psychological products because, in psychological products, artists try to find their own reality. The narration transforms from external reality to internal reality. In psychological novel, author wants reader to reach a conclusion by compounding the clues given. Wolfe doesn't reject the autobiographical side of his works. Wolfe (1953: 6) states that:

*"It has been said of much that I have written thus far that it was autobiographical. I cannot answer such a debatable and complicated word in the short space that is allotted here and I shall not attempt to. I can only say that it seems to me that very creative act is in one way or another autobiographical."*

Freud believes that an artist takes the power and support from his own life. It is a kind of dynamo that provides sources for producing. The life of an artist is the core of his works. Within this context, Freud supports this way of writing. He thinks that artist can have a close relation with his past. To him, the autobiographical interest is a right. It is known that Freud, many times, applied to the detailed examinations and investigated them in relation to the concrete persons, for example Michelangelo and his famous sculpture Moses. Furthermore, Wolfe can be said to use free association method in the novel. Free association method was applied to neurotics by Freud, first. In free association method, the neurotic shares whatever he/she thinks in the course of session with psychiatrist. In this context, he wrote everything he remembered without concern of plot. A clean paper represents a psychiatrist to whom the neurotic person/artist tells his/her problem with free association method. A patient tells his problem to psychiatrist and he feels better, suchlike, the artist writes his problems on empty papers and he/she feels good. Wolfe's purpose of writing non-stop is to get the ideas out of his head to relax. He surmises that he talks to a loyal listener in a domestic environment such a patient talking to a therapist.

### 3. Thomas Wolfe's Perception of Time and Memory

It is important to have an idea about Wolfe's perception of time for analyzing *The Lost Boy*. As aforementioned, time is psychological time. It is not measured by seconds or hours, it is measured by durations. Wolfe's perception of time is similar to Bergson's. Childs (2002: 49) says, "*Bergson argued that psychological time was measured by duration, defined as the varying speed at which the mind apprehends the length of experience according to their different intensities, contents and meanings for each individual.*" Each individual has a different psychological background, so a different perception of time. Bergson distinguishes the time as duration and chronological time. Childs (2002: 49) states that, "*... chronological time is the time of history (hours, minutes and seconds) while duration encompasses those times in a life which are significant to an individual, and which are necessarily different for each individual.*" When we ask a person to tell about his experiences, we want him to talk about the events he remembers. So, that person feels good or bad in the course of narration. Sometimes he smiles, sometimes grieves, because he relives that moment in the past. Namely time is not limited to the past.

Wolfe (1947: 381) says that, "*people hang time up in great bells in tower, they keep time ticking in a delicate pulse upon*

*their wrists, they imprison time within the small, coiled wafer of a watch, and each man has his own separate time.*" Everybody has a different perception of time because everybody has their own memories. Time is not only a notion which can be measured by a mechanical device, time is also the duration which made you good or bad, happy or unhappy, etc. in your past and memory, time is what you lived "*several significant moment in your life which matter to you and the backdrop of clock-time is irrelevant*" (Childs, 2002:49). In another section, Wolfe (1947: 578) explains time as fable and a mystery: to him, "*it has ten thousand visages, it broods on all the images of the earth, and it transmutes them with a strange, unearthly glow. Time is collected in great clocks and hung in towers...*" So, there is not a unique definition of time to the author. Nothing is forgotten, every experience is stored in the mind. Childs (2002: 50) expresses that:

*"... it is the clock, which regulates and parcels out time, that is to blame for the tyranny of space over the psychological flow of time in the mind. It is of course only in the mind that the past is preserved, and Bergson, like many others, argued that nothing was forgotten: all was stored in the mind even if it was not brought to the surface."*

Thomas Wolfe uses different leitmotifs to symbolize the time in his novels and stories. The most prominent metaphors are river, railway and square. In *The Lost Boy*, Wolfe uses square for depicting the time. W. P. Albrecht (1953: 239) states that,

*"In Wolfe's works, 'time becomes a rushing, all erosive river, which, nevertheless, may be arrested or turned back by the memory. ... Wolfe seeks to recapture the past through memory, including unconscious memory, and to show the sensations and moods that recollections of the past evoke in the present. ... he opposes a linear concept of time with a cyclical one, wherein the eternal is repeated through apparent change."*

Eugene Gant seeks himself in memories. He walks around the town they lived in once for recapturing the past via present time. Wolfe states that time is not limited to present. Past time can be relived again. Bergson (2016: 100) expresses that, "*time forms both the past and the present states into an organic whole, as happens when we recall the notes of a tune, melting, so to speak, into one another.*" Wolfe (1943: 10) writes, "*Here is the Square, and here is the permanence, and here is Time- and all of it the same as it has always been.*" Wolfe's perception of time is so amazing. Eugene has a very vivid memory. When he sees an avocatory thing about an old event he can remember everything. Indeed this is not a kind of remembering. It is reliving that moment again. Eugene lives time in time, intrinsically, it can be called an anachrony. He can go to past and come back again in a moment. He can remember, also, the time of his ancestors. Eugene remembers the old events as if he took part in them and lived in that time. "*His mind was filled with memories which he now viewed afresh; from his new position of clarity and certainty, he saw his past as a whole*" (Wolfe, 1962: 113) as if a recorded film. Conway defines memories as intrinsic part of us, he states that they are the database or the content of the self (2006: 548). Eugene's memory was the data base of his and his ancestors' whole life.

In *The Lost Boy* the old events can be remembered by the narrators as if the events happened in the recent past. Wolfe

(1943: 22) states that although the incident happened so long ago, Eugene can remember when he thinks of it, it all comes back, as if it had happened yesterday. Wolfe uses the coming of light as a metaphor for remembering the past, and blacking out of light as the oblivion of past in *The Lost Boy*. This paragraph from *The Lost Boy* shows to reader the rightness of the metaphors mentioned. Wolfe (1943: 14) writes:

*"And light came and went and came again- but now not quite the same as it had done before. The boy saw the pattern of familiar shapes and knew that they were just the same as they had always been. But something had gone out of day, and something had come in again. Out of the vision of those quiet eyes some brightness has gone, and into their vision had come some deeper color. He could not say, he did not know through what transforming shadows life had passed within that quarter hour. He only knew that something had been lost- something forever gained."*

The new day and light bring something in mind, and at the same time make something loss. Eugene's perception of time and memory is a kind of watching a recorded scene. Eugene sits on a stone at corner and watches the moment that he wants to relieve. Sometimes he grieves because of the thing that cannot be brought back.

Eugene tries to find an open door to enter into his past. He wants to live all the past again as in his father's time. Indeed, while he seeks for his brother Grover's past, he looks for his own past. Kennedy asserts that Grover visits every corner of the places that they lived. In order to articulate his ideas, he gathered memories from various blocks of his life- thoughts about the strangeness of circumstance, impression of train journeys, sights of the movement in crowded streets (1962: 154). And he remembers past events as a flashing light. He feels as if memories are streaming on a screen. The square is an important symbol of immutability both for time past and present. When Eugene reaches to the square, Wolfe (1943:10) writes, *"He stood there blindly, in the watches of the sun, feeling this was Time, this was the center of the universe, the granite core of the changelessness, and feeling, this is Grover, this the Square, this is Now."* Time past and time present, memories and now are connected to each other.

Eugene visits the house where Grover passed away. The street and around have changed but the house is the same. The proprietor lets him to look inside the house. Eugene feels so strange. Here is the house they lived in and here is Grover. The house, and also the square are coalesced with Grover. He sits there and watches his past via memory again; his memories pass like a storyboard in front of his eyes. At last, for a short time, he finds himself in the house, because the light comes again. He manages to find that open door for a while for passing the past side of life. But he never can find the eternal happiness. For a moment, Eugene stands in the house, waiting for a word, and for a door to enter in. Yet, unfortunately no one comes.

#### 4. Conclusion

Thomas Wolfe was received as a genius by some critics, novelists and editors of his era. On the other hand he was criticized a lot by some others, too. He was received as genius because he had a talent to write non-stop, also he had a very bright and vivid memory. He could remember everything of his past. He had a nostalgic longing to his past. He wanted to relive everything he missed. Sometimes he

achieved it by remembering every detail about his past but sometimes he forgot them. On the other hand he was criticized because of the lack of plot in his all works. Wolfe wanted to explore the inner reality of the characters of real life.

Wolfe's vivid mind gave him too much opportunity to write about his own experiences without any loss. Wolfe, in *The Lost Boy*, looked for her own reality. His parents lived together till Wolfe was seven years old. Then, his mother decided to open a pension far from their house. His mother was interested in real estate. Wolfe started to live with his mother. The other children lived with their father. Wolfe felt this separation's grief till the end of his life. He felt an absence of parental love and isolated himself from his family. He tried to find this warmth from the books, and his self-search started.

Contrary to his contemporary writers, he paid attention to psychological side of life. His longing for a happy family life compelled him to a nostalgic search. He imprisoned important moments of his life in his mind to relive them again. His perception of time is similar to Bergson's. Both of them supported that time was not chronological. Wolfe visited every corner of his homeland for finding the durations which he devoted himself to find and getting through his isolation. He looked for an open door which would take him to paradise he was looking for. In *The Lost Boy* we can witness his fathomless psychological search. Some time he found the door, and some time he lost it.

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