

# **INTERNATIONAL BACCALAUREATE**

**MAY 2022**

**EXTENDED ESSAY**

**Group 2: English B HL**

**Category 3: Literature**

***All The Light We Cannot See***

**Anthony Doerr**

**An analysis of the concepts “lightness” and “darkness”**

**RQ: “How does Anthony Doerr convey the contrary concepts lightness and darkness in the novel “All The Light We Cannot See” from the aspects of characters, locations and objects.”**

**Word Count: 3551**

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	INTRODUCTION.....	3
II.	BACKGROUND INFORMATION.....	5
III.	THE CONCEPT “DARKNESS”	
IV.	SETTING .....	6
	i.    Nazi Germany.....	7
	ii.   The Nazi Party and It’s implications.....	7
	iii.  The Orphanage .....	.8
	iv.   The Nazi War Effort .....	9
V.	THE CONCEPT “LIGHTNESS”	
	i.    France.....	10
	ii.   The radio .....	11
VI.	THE CONCEPT “ILLUSIONS OF LIGHTNESS”	
	i.    Books .....	12
	ii.   The model city.....	12
	iii.  Sea of Flames .....	14
VII.	CONCLUSION .....	15
VIII.	BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	17

## I. INTRODUCTION

The novel “All the Lights We Cannot See” by Anthony Doerr mainly focuses on the many forms of “darkness” in our lives. However, “lightness” as the contrast of “darkness” is also prevalent, which mainly we are unaware of.

*It's a reference first and foremost to all the light we literally cannot see: that is, the wavelengths of the electromagnetic spectrum that are beyond the ability of human eyes to detect (radio waves, of course, being the most relevant). It's also a metaphorical suggestion that there are countless invisible stories still buried within World War II — that stories of ordinary children, for example, are a kind of light we do not typically see. Ultimately, the title is intended as a suggestion that we spend too much time focused on only a small slice of the spectrum of possibility.*

*Anthony Doerr*

Anthony Doerr's novel “All the Light We Cannot See” takes place in the World War II era France and Nazi Germany. The novel tells the story how the two protagonists' paths collide in France. The first protagonist, Werner Pfennig's story starts in an orphanage in Germany. Werner encounters all kinds of horrors that the Nazi's have created; all the way from segregation by race to child labour and to brainwashing children with party propaganda. Werner starts to develop an interest in radios and this interest of his leads him into joining the youth training programme. Meantime, the second protagonist Marie-Laure's story begins in Paris where she lives with her father

Daniel. Despite being blind, both with the novels that her father reads to her and the city model that her father created enables her into the world through her wide imagination. The infamous gem “the sea of flames” is a diamond that had a reputation for bringing a curse over the owner. However, there were still hunters looking for the gem. The gem was located at the museum that Daniel worked in when the Nazi invasion of France started. After escaping Paris because of the invasion, Marie-Laure and Werner’s paths cross in Saint Malo where they encounter gemologist Reinhold Von Rumpel, who is hunting the Sea of Flames in order to defeat his sickness that will eventually kill him in order to be immortal. Werner learns that Von Rumpel is heading to capture the gem through a radio transmission. In order to stop Von Rumpel, Werner shoots him dead.

This paper seeks to explore how the author conveys the concepts “lightness” vs “darkness” in the novel, “All the Light We Cannot See” from the aspects of objects, locations, characters and their psychological development. In the novel, the author Anthony Doerr mainly uses symbols, slogans and contrast in order to portray the elements of darkness and lightness. The themes lightness and darkness will be explored by delving deep into details of symbols that are hidden in the characters and the messages that certain objects convey. This research question is really interesting and worthy of investigating and exploring due to the novel conveying different societies and ideologies which are expressed deeply including human values and how they clash with Führer’s Reich’s sick complexes and fascist war effort. While comparing these contrasting themes, the novel successfully teaches us how there is light in darkness and darkness in lightness.

## **II. Background information**

The novel takes place during World War II; the era in Europe between 1938-1945. World War II was the bloodiest war in human history and had great cultural, psychological and economic effects on the modern world we live in. This conflict, basically set the standards of human rights, and war laws that include not targeting civilians, doctors or the injured. Considering that, nations with extremist ideologies such Mussolini's fascist Italy, Imperial and colonial Japan, communist and authoritarian Soviet Union and the most infamous Hitler's Nazi Germany took part in World War II. These extremist countries did not follow war laws which were set with the Geneva convention. The novel heavily focuses on the criminal activities of the Nazi German Reich. Orphan children working in coal mines to fuel the Nazi war effort; children as young as 14 joining the military training barracks, mass murder and genocide of the Jewish. Mistreating people who are not member of the so-called "Aryan" race which Hitler and his chain of command have created gather people of Germanic ancestry together. These actions and policies that the Nazis enforced on the general population have led to the construction of the theme of darkness in the means of character development. The dark atmosphere that the Nazi party created have led to the system that created characters like Reinhold Von Rumpel which are totally motivated by greed and desire for absolute power.

### III. SETTING

The locations the two main characters Marie-Laure and Werner start at the beginning of the novel also carries research importance in writing this essay in the means of conveying the opposite states of the atmospheres of Nazi Germany and Free France under the scope of darkness and lightness. Paris is an important setting in the novel. Marie-Laure Leblanc and her father Daniel Leblanc's stories start in Paris. Paris with its history and regime of a full democracy is a torch for liberty and humanity. The other location chosen by the writer is the orphanage in Germany and the Hitler youth programme training barracks. This setting is chosen by the writer in order to create a contrasting theme of light and darkness. The themes of darkness and lightness contrasts with each other because of their absorbing nature of their occurrence. If one, darkness or lightness, overpowers the other, the more powerful one absorbs the other making it an internal clash between darkness and light throughout history. The setting that Werner's story begins symbolise control over the people and the systematic hatred towards any kind of foreign ideology or race. With these two locations chosen as a starting point for the two main characters Marie-Laure Leblanc and Werner Pfenning, the writer conveys the completely different worlds that these characters live in and come from. This contrast is very critical in how the novel and the theme darkness and light is constructed using the setting, plot and the characters.

#### **IV. Darkness**

##### **i. Nazi Germany**

In the novel "All the Light We Cannot See", the themes of darkness and light are included as a contrast of the countries that are included in the novel which are The French Republic, rich with culture, history and art, and most importantly democracy and human rights; and the other being The National Socialist Nazi German Reich infamous with extremism, terror, oppression and horror. The darkness is portrayed using the Nazi ideology and its members. The dark environment can be felt just at the beginning of the novel in the orphanage that one of the main characters Werner and his little sister Jutta lives in. There is constant pressure on the orphan children as Nazi or SS (Hitler's special unit) army officers visit the orphanage in order to assert the authority amongst the children to indoctrinate their young and naive minds into the extremist Nazi ideology.

##### **ii. The Nazi Party and Its Implications**

The theme of darkness is felt through the daily lives of normal citizens living in the Nazi Reich. Even the simplest and most usual events take place in an authoritarian and oppressive way. Members of the Nazi party or the military always come on top in every situation and they become dominant in every field their presence are in. These small groups of people dominate the German state with political and military operations and build an empire on fear and threats. Deep inside, everyone in the

Nazi party knows that their reign of fear and oppression is temporary and their dictatorship is a house of cards ready to disband at any uncertainty or defeat.

### iii. **The Orphanage**

The Orphanage that Werner grows up in conveys the horrors and terrors of the Nazi regime. The writer conveys the oppression of other races and extreme amounts of pressure enforced upon these orphan children by including the orphanage as a setting in the novel. At the orphanage there were regular inspections made by Nazi party members in order to check in on the kids and on the lady managing the orphanage. These inspections were a regular custom at the orphanage in order for the Nazi Party to enforce their authority and horror upon the children and grow them into Nazi's. The whole system of the Orphanage is used in order to corrupt these small children's minds and raise them with hatred and anger and use them as a fuel in their never ending war machine which is the Nazi Youth programme. "Does the brain, which lives without a spark of light, build for us a world full of light?", as mentioned in the quote from the novel the management of the orphanage knew well that they have to destroy any sign of humanity and light inside the minds of these children to continue their reign of terror. Also the discrimination and racism towards the orphanage mother, because of her French descent, shows Werner and his sister Jutta the dark realities and new normals that the Nazi regime have brought upon the daily lives of these orphans and Germans in general. With all of these extremist customs and actions we are introduced to the new "normals" that the Nazi Party has created in several years of power while ruling Germany.



#### iv. **The Nazi War Effort**

One of the symbols that is used to convey the theme of darkness is the Nazi War Effort. Hitler and his ruling class is using every bit of material varying from raw materials such as steel, coal, rubber and even manpower to fuel the blood thirsty war machine; the German military. In order to continue fighting the entire European states, The Nazi Party needs every little bit of manpower they can get in order to sustain the great war in which they resort to child labour to close up the lack of manpower. Every child in the orphanage has to go down the mines when they become 15; Nazi party members call it the "ideal age for working". Also the slogan "Work sets you free!" can be seen across several places such as work camps and concentration camps used to imprison, torture and work enemies of German Nazi regime such as Jews, cripples, foreigners. When the "ideal" age for Werner to work in the coal mine has come, he is informed by the Nazi commander. He and the other children go to the mines coming back with illnesses and soariness in which they feel the darkness that the military junta (regime) has turned their lives into directly both physically and mentally. The realities that living under an authoritarian dictatorship hits Werner hard. This war effort deeply affected both Marie-Laure and Werner. The war effort made Werner work for the Party because of his desperation for survival in the brutal environment in Germany. On the opposite side of the entanglement, Marie-Laure's blind world got even darker as the German army advanced through France and destroyed any signs of modernity and civilization. She had to leave everything that she and her father had in Paris and flee.

## **V. Light**

### **i. France**

In the novel the theme of light is very critical because in a way it is used to portray the opposite states of France and the Nazi Germany. These conflicting worlds are specifically chosen by the writer in order to deliver the message that there are always light despite the darkness. The whole theme of World War II is the clash of two opposite sides which are liberty, freedom, life and authoritarianism, oppression and death. This message is also delivered to the reader with the title selection. The title "All the light we cannot see" is picked in order to convey the message that there are light in every aspect of life and history whether how dark and hopeless the era or event is. The important thing is to know the existence of this light and try to expose it.

The writer uses specific objects, themes and characters in order to convey the theme of lightness and its presence in the era and locations that the novel takes place in. These objects are placed in certain locations and time in the plot to both symbolise hope and humanity, still remaining in the dark and the bloody era the novel takes place in which is World War II, the deadliest era in human history.

## ii. Radios

Radios are used as a motif by the author in a way that they symbolise communication. Communication is in the human nature and radios in the novel are placed in the plot to represent beacons of light inside of darkness. Using the radios people communicate, different languages and cultures intercept. As said in the novel "Radio: it ties a million ears to a single mouth.". Werner's passion for engineering sparks when he finds a broken radio. He reverse-engineer the radio and learns how it works and finally manages to fix it. Werner finds different frequencies where broadcasts are made at. Hearing a French man's broadcast, he feels his vision was opened to the world through a radio which he felt was like a beacon of light inside of the dark environment he was living in. Werner felt like he made a connection with the rest of the world through radios. Also at the end of the novel, Marie used a radio while she was stuck during the bombing of Saint Malo. She broadcasted herself reading books. She felt she was still connected to the outside world even though she was stuck during a bombing. This broadcast eventually led to Werner finding him proving that radios are connecting people through every situation.

## **VI. Illusions of lightness**

### **i. Books**

Books are also a critical piece of the plot and the message that the author is trying to convey. Books represent dreams, hopes and enlightenment. Marie-Laure's father started buying books and reading them to his daughter Marie from a young age. Marie is a blind girl, obsessed with literature and the all the stories and perspectives brought with literature. Marie saw the world classic novels that her father read to her as a way to explore the world in pure light despite her blindness condition darkening her entire world view. She fills the void created by her absence of seeing sense with her imagination. She created the characters, the setting and the eras that these novels take place in using her imagination and world view. However, "If only life were like a Jules Verne novel, thinks Marie-Laure, and you could page ahead when you most needed to, and learn what would happen." She will learn that these imaginations were just an illusion of light inside of her world filled with darkness to the brim. Later Marie-Laure's father started purchasing her Braille books, which are designed for blind people to read using special textures that represent the letters in the Latin alphabet. Despite her daughter's deep affection towards being able to explore the different perspectives about the world through books, Daniel could not purchase his daughter a lot of Braille books because of their unaffordable prices. This lack of Braille books lead Marie-Laure to read the Braille books that she curenly owns again and again. This repetitive reading of the same stories and adventures created a sense of emphathy and deep understanding of different perspectives, cultures and lifestyles from all across the globe.

## ii. City Models

Daniel Leblanc builds little city models for her daughter throughout the novel. He first builds a model of Paris where he and her daughter Marie-Laure live in. After fleeing from the raging German army which was getting closer and closer to the French capital Paris, they settle down in the city of Saint Malo. Arriving in Saint Malo, Daniel gets to work to create a city model of the town. He created these city models in order to simulate the city that they live in for his blind daughter. He wanted to make Marie Laure feel the city. He wanted her to embrace the culture and life around the streets. The models represent Daniel Leblanc's struggle to enlighten his daughter Marie Laure's world by making her understand her surroundings using her sense of touch. However, there was a factor that both models of Paris and Saint Malo missed: humans. A city without humans loses the core factor that gives itself life, character and culture. How much Daniel Leblanc tries to mimic cities of Paris and Saint Malo without humans, the models he makes are just empty voids of buildings without any soul and life. His struggle to bring light onto the dark life of Marie Laure ends up proving that darkness spreads all across the continent in the era that novel takes place in. When Saint Malo gets invaded by the German Nazi military, the streets get emptied because of all the restrictions and curfews that the invasive forces apply to the town. At this moment, the city and the model became one, humanless and lifeless. This realization describes the theme of illusion in the novel, the illusion of lightness surrounded by darkness. After experiencing Saint Malo, lifeless Marie-Laure realises the city models her dad made for her are just a pinch of light in a dark world, just a little illusion to trick a mind.

### **iii. Sea of Flames**

The sea of Flames is an infamous diamond that symbolizes human greed and hunger for wealth and power. The tales about the Sea of Flames being told about in the society shows how ravenous people in search of a better life demolish their already steady and settled lives. The author created this side plot of an infamous diamond called The Sea of Flames in order to show how dark desires and ambitions for power, authority and fame can surround people's lives and tear them apart. This diamond symbolises illusion. The diamond looks precious and glamorous. All of the myths about the diamond tells that it makes you invincible, immune to deadly diseases and bring power and wealth to you. However, the actual reality that whenever someone acquired the Sea of Flames, everything they have in their lives starts to break apart. The character in the novel seeking for the Sea of Flames is Reinhold Von Rumpel. Von Rumpel is a powerful Nazi Party member. He has an expertise in gems and he is ready to do everything that his power and authority in the Nazi Party to get what he wants. His greed can be seen from the quote: "A real diamond is never perfect.". He is a man who is never satisfied. He is assigned to gather rare and precious artifacts from the nations that are capitulated by the Nazi Germany military forces. He is collecting these precious artifacts from these occupied lands as war reparations and gathering them in a museum. Hitler wanted to gather everything he could to this museum to represent all of the achievements of humankind and symbolise that he owns the entire humanity. The Sea of Flames had a special significance to Von Rumpel because of his cancer diagnosis. Von Rumpel thinks that if he gained the diamond he could beat cancer. This motivation of his leads him to many atrocities. These cruel actions of Von Rumpel during his hunt for the diamond represents the darkness spreading over people's lives because of

human greed, invincibility and power. Basically the author placed the Sea of Flames into the plot to better emphasize on the theme of illusion of lightness. Sea of Flames tricked people for centuries promising eternal lightness but only brought darkness with its existence.

## **VII. Conclusion**

In the novel, the author Antony Doerr plotted a complex storyline composed with heavy emotional dilemmas and created conscientiously constructed characters that symbolise and resemble specific parts of the general themes that are dark and light and how they are conveyed. The author selected the era and the setting World War II, the most polarising event in human history. The plotline that the author chose suits the contradicting nature of darkness and lightness thoroughly. The dual character and dual setting storytelling technique is implemented into the novel in order to deepen the conflicting nature of darkness and lightness in human lives in the means of literature. Two completely opposite locations are used at the beginning of the novel to emphasize the conflicting way that the themes darkness and lightness is processed in the literary piece. The author conveyed the concepts of lightness and darkness through specific set of settings that symbolize specific emotions and psychological states related with the concepts. Cities and locations are used in order to make the reader feel the contradicting state of the world during the era. This difference between the lives of people and how the German and French societies functioned is deeply emphasized with the reference to the concepts of lightness and

darkness. The current state of France and Germany in the means of authority and freedom is given in order to correlate the concepts of dark and light with locations to make the reader sense both concepts better with this relation. France and the lifestyle centered around liberty and freedom with its cultural and artistic integrity makes it a physical embodiment of light. Germany and its ruling Nazi Party with the oppression and vigorous and absolute authority over the society illustrate the dark. Also the author constructed characters to bring a living meaning to the core themes. Von Rumpel, the Nazi gemologist persona is used to portray the darkness and its nature of spreading throughout people's lives and destroying everything in its path to domination. Marie-Laure and her affection towards books and her enthusiasm towards life despite the fact that she is blind portrays how light can spread through dark and spark a meaning of life even in the darkest and toughest times. Specific objects also have an crucial role in defining the contrast between dark and light. Some objects are placed into the plot in order to how darkness and lightness react with each other in the context of human life in the novel. Radios and the Sea of Flames are two objects in the novel that are in completely opposite states. Radios symbolize light spreading through darkness and on the other hand sea of flames spreading dark through lightness.



## VIII. BIBLIOGRAPHY

DOERR, ANTHONY. *All the Light We Cannot See*. FOURTH ESTATE LTD, 2015.

Vollmann, William T. "Darkness Visible." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 8 May 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/11/books/review/all-the-light-we-cannot-see-by-anthony-doerr.html>.

"All the Light We Cannot See by Anthony Doerr - Free Essay Example." *PapersOwl.com*, 26 Jan. 2022, <https://papersowl.com/examples/all-the-light-we-cannot-see-by-anthony-doerr/>.

Macdonald, Fiona. "How the Children of Nazi Germany Remember World War Two." *BBC Culture*, BBC, 23 Jan. 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20180123-how-the-children-of-nazi-germany-remember-world-war-two>.

Cord Pagenstecher, Valentina Stefanski. "Forced Labor – Background." *Forced Labor – Background • Forced Labor 1939 - 1945*, 7 May 2008, <https://www.zwangsarbeit-archiv.de/en/zwangsarbeit/zwangsarbeit/zwangsarbeit-hintergrund/index.html>.

Untapped New York, et al. "Art Looted in Paris during World War II: A Family History - Untapped Paris." *Untapped New York*, 4 Nov. 2021, <https://untappedcities.com/2013/04/02/art-looted-in-paris-during-world-war-ii/>.

Gordon, Noah J. "Paris Alive: Jean-Paul Sartre on World War II." *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 4 Sept. 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/09/paris-alive-jean-paul-sartre-on-world-war-ii/379555/>.

Callil, Carmin. "All the Light We Cannot See by Anthony Doerr Review – a Story of Morality, Science and Nazi Occupation." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 17 May 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/may/17/all-the-light-we-cannot-see-anthony-doerr-review>.

“Major Character Analysis and Minor Character Description.” *All The Light We Cannot See Wiki*, [https://all-the-light-we-cannot-see.fandom.com/wiki/Major\\_Character\\_Analysis\\_and\\_Minor\\_Character\\_Description](https://all-the-light-we-cannot-see.fandom.com/wiki/Major_Character_Analysis_and_Minor_Character_Description).

Malloryk. “The Hesse Heist: The Jewels Are Stolen: The National WWII Museum: New Orleans.” *The National WWII Museum | New Orleans*, The National World War II Museum, 29 Aug. 2021, <https://www.nationalww2museum.org/war/articles/hesse-heist-jewels-are-stolen>.