

An Exploration of Human Psyche in *All the Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr

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Abstract

This research aims to explore the psychological motivations driving the actions and decisions of characters in “All the Light We Cannot See”, delving into their inner worlds and subconscious desires. It investigates the development of characters such as Marie and Werner from a psychological perspective, tracing their growth, traumas, and psychological transformation. In this Research on “All the Light We Cannot See,” I am going to contribute to psychoanalytic literary theory by examining the novel’s characters and themes through the lens of psychoanalysis. By analyzing the protagonists’ experiences and relationships during World War II, the researchers seek to uncover underlying psychological dynamics such as trauma, resilience, and the subconscious mind. Through this approach, I hope to deepen our understanding of how personal psychology interacts with historical events in shaping individual narratives within the novel.

Keywords: Human psyche, All the Light We Cannot See, Human Psychology

Introduction:

Anthony Doerr’s novel "All the Light We Cannot See" stands as a testament to the enduring power of literature to illuminate the human condition amidst the darkness of war. Set against the backdrop of World War II, the novel intricately weaves together the lives of two protagonists, Marie-Laure LeBlanc and Werner Pfennig, whose divergent yet interconnected paths offer profound insights into resilience, identity, and the moral complexities faced by individuals caught in the turmoil of history. This thesis employs a psychoanalytic lens to explore the rich psychological dimensions of Marie-Laure and Werner, delving into their motivations, desires, and emotional landscapes as they navigate through the tumultuous era of the Second World War.

“All the Light We Cannot See” by Anthony Doerr is a richly layered novel set during World War II, following the intertwining lives of two protagonists, Marie-Laure, a blind French girl, and Werner, a German orphan recruited by the Nazi army. Through the lens of Psychoanalysis, this research delves into the complex portrayal of the human psyche, focusing on the characters' motivations, desires, and emotional landscapes as they navigate through the tumultuous period of war. The analysis begins by examining Marie-Laure's experience of blindness and its psychological effects on her mental health, alongside Werner’s journey from curious boy to conflicted soldier, examining their psychological influences amidst war’s horrors and moral dilemmas.

While numerous studies have explored the themes and historical context of “All the Light We Cannot See,” there remains a gap in the analysis of its psychological dimensions, particularly in terms of the intricate portrayal of the human psyche amidst the challenges of

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war, displacement, and trauma. This thesis aims to fill this gap by offering a comprehensive examination of the character's motivations, desires, and emotional landscapes through the lens of Psychoanalysis.

Literature Review:

The psychoanalytic movement originated in the clinical observations and theoretical formulations of Austrian psychiatrist Sigmund Freud, who coined the term psychoanalysis in the late nineteenth century. Initially developed as a method for treating emotional and psychological disorders, psychoanalysis later evolved into a comprehensive theoretical framework emphasizing unconscious mental processes, often described as “depth psychology.” At its core, psychoanalysis seeks to uncover hidden thoughts, desires, memories, and emotions that shape human behaviour and psychological distress.

Psychoanalysis functions both as a theory and a therapeutic practice. As a method of treatment, it encourages patients to engage in free association, allowing them to speak openly about personal experiences, childhood memories, and dreams. This process aims to bring repressed material into consciousness, thereby addressing the root causes of emotional disturbances. Freud believed that unresolved childhood experiences and unconscious conflicts were central to conditions such as anxiety, depression, and hysteria. Through increased self-awareness, psychoanalysis promotes emotional healing, behavioural change, and psychological integration.

Freud’s work was influenced by his collaboration with Josef Breuer, particularly the famous case of Bertha Pappenheim, known as “*Anna O.*” *Treated by Breuer rather than Freud*, she exhibited symptoms of hysteria that reportedly diminished when she verbalized traumatic experiences related to her father’s illness. This case led to the notion of the “talking cure,” which became foundational to psychoanalytic therapy. Although later scholars questioned the extent of Anna O.’s recovery, the case remains significant in the history of psychoanalysis.

Psychoanalytic theory is grounded in the assumption that the human mind consists of conscious and unconscious components. According to Freud, the unconscious mind contains repressed desires, urges, and memories that are often disturbing or socially unacceptable. Despite remaining outside conscious awareness, these elements exert a powerful influence on behaviour. Freud further proposed a structural model of personality comprising the id, ego, and superego. The id represents instinctual drives, the ego mediates between internal desires and external reality, and the superego embodies internalized moral and social norms. Psychological conflict arises from the tension among these structures.

Memory occupies a central place in psychoanalytic theory. Freud argued that childhood memories are not accurate reproductions of the past but reconstructions shaped by later experiences and unconscious processes. Psychoanalysis, therefore, does not seek an objective historical truth but rather explores how past experiences are remembered, repressed, and symbolically reactivated. Jean Laplanche described this as a “*history of the unconscious*,” marked by repression, resurfacing memories, and discontinuities. Concepts such as repression and transference explain how unresolved childhood conflicts re-emerge in adult relationships, including the analytic setting.

Following Freud, several theorists expanded and revised psychoanalytic thought. Carl Jung diverged from Freud by introducing concepts such as the collective unconscious and the “shadow” self, arguing that Freud overemphasized sexuality. Other theorists, including Winnicott, Kohut, Fairbairn, and Sullivan, explored ideas of self-structure, object relations, and

relational conflict. Contemporary psychoanalysis emphasizes the relational unconscious, suggesting that psychological conflict arises not only from instinctual repression but also from clashes between internalized self–other relationships shaped by culture, family, and social experience.

After Freud died in 1939, psychoanalysis diversified into multiple schools, including ego psychology, object relations theory, and self-psychology. While Freud retained his topographical and structural models of the mind, later psychoanalysts focused more on strengthening the ego, interpersonal relationships, and adaptive functioning. Despite these developments, repression and unconscious motivation remain central psychoanalytic concepts.

Anthony *Doerr's* novel *All the Light We Cannot See* has received extensive scholarly attention for its historical context, narrative structure, and themes of war and survival. However, comparatively little research has examined the novel through a psychoanalytic lens. Existing studies often focus on historical trauma, resilience, and ethical conflict while neglecting the unconscious motivations shaping the characters' behaviour.

Marie-Laure LeBlanc's blindness heightens her psychological sensitivity and inner perception. Her ability to interpret the world through sound and touch reflects a rich inner life and psychological resilience, as illustrated by Doerr's descriptions of her sensory awareness and her tactile exploration of the miniature city. Psychoanalytically, her reliance on internal visualization suggests strong ego development and adaptive coping mechanisms amid trauma. Similarly, Werner Pfennig's experience at the Nazi training school reveals the conflict between order and chaos, ideology and reality. The regime's obsession with genetic "order" contrasts sharply with the destruction of war, highlighting psychological dissonance and repression. Werner's internal struggle reflects unconscious guilt, moral conflict, and the repression of ethical impulses under authoritarian pressure.

Previous scholarship by James (2015), Smith (2016), and Anderson (2020) has addressed themes of war, survival, and trauma, while Johnson (2017) and Brown (2018) focus on Marie Laure's blindness and Werner's moral dilemmas. However, these studies rarely engage deeply with psychoanalytic theory. This research addresses that gap by applying psychoanalysis to uncover the unconscious motivations, desires, and psychological conflicts driving the characters' actions.

By employing psychoanalytic theory, this study aims to deepen understanding of how personal psychology interacts with historical trauma in *All the Light We Cannot See*. Such an approach not only enriches character analysis but also offers broader insight into the psychological effects of war, memory, and repression on the human psyche.

Research Questions:

The primary research questions guiding this study are:

- i How do interpersonal connections shape the identities of Marie-Laure and Werner and contribute to their psychological development?
- ii How does psychoanalytical theory explain the motivations and desires of Werner throughout the novel?

Methodology:

This thesis adopts a qualitative research methodology to explore the psychological dimensions of "All the Light We Cannot See." Close reading techniques will be employed to analyse key passages and character interactions within the novel, focusing on thematic motifs such as light and darkness, memory, trauma, and resilience. Primary sources for analysis will

primarily include the novel itself, supported by secondary sources including scholarly articles, critical analyses, and theoretical works in psychoanalysis and historical fiction.

Thematic analysis will guide the exploration of how Marie-Laure's and Werner's inner worlds evolve in response to external challenges and interpersonal relationships. By examining these themes through a psychoanalytic lens, we aim to uncover deeper layers of meaning within the narrative, offering new perspectives on the characters' psychological landscapes and the novel's broader thematic resonance.

Theoretical Framework:

Central to this thesis is the application of psychoanalytic theory, a profound framework for understanding the unconscious motivations and psychological development of literary characters. Originating with Sigmund Freud and expanded by theorists such as Carl Jung and Jacques Lacan, psychoanalysis posits that human behaviour is shaped by unconscious desires, conflicts, and defenses manifest in conscious actions.

By employing psychoanalytic theory to analyze "All the Light We Cannot See," this thesis seeks to uncover the hidden psychological dynamics that propel Marie-Laure's and Werner's journeys. Marie-Laure's experience of blindness, for example, serves not only as a physical condition but also as a metaphor for her inner resilience and unique perception of the world. Through her tactile exploration of her father's miniature models and reliance on other senses, Marie-Laure navigates the challenges of war-torn France with courage and adaptability, embodying Freudian concepts of ego development and adaptation to adversity.

Werner's journey, on the other hand, invites examination through Jungian concepts such as the shadow of the repressed and darker aspects of the personality that emerge under duress. Initially driven by intellectual curiosity and a desire for knowledge, Werner's trajectory shifts as he is swept into the Nazi war machine, confronting ethical dilemmas and moral compromises that challenge his sense of self and conscience. His internal struggle reflects Jung's theories of individuation and the integration of conflicting aspects of the psyche, as Werner grapples with the realities of war and the choices that define his destiny.

Discussion:

Intrapersonal Connections and Identity:

In *All the Light We Cannot See*, Anthony Doerr explores how interpersonal relationships shape identity and psychological development during wartime. The lives of Marie-Laure LeBlanc and Werner Pfennig are deeply influenced by their connections with caregivers, mentors, and peers. Through psychological perspectives such as attachment theory, psychosocial development, and social learning theory, the novel shows how human relationships guide personal growth and moral awareness.

Marie-Laure's identity is primarily shaped by Daniel LeBlanc, Etienne LeBlanc, and Madame Manec. Daniel's love, patience, and innovative teaching methods help Marie-Laure develop independence, confidence, and resilience despite her blindness, reflecting the importance of secure attachment. After Daniel's arrest, Etienne becomes a protective father figure whose emotional support and moral guidance strengthen Marie-Laure's courage and sense of responsibility. Madame Manec, as a maternal and resistant figure, inspires bravery, compassion, and social engagement, further shaping Marie-Laure's character.

Werner Pfennig's psychological development is influenced by contrasting relationships. His sister Jutta serves as his moral conscience, challenging Nazi ideology and shaping his ethical awareness. Dr. Hauptmann, Werner's mentor, nurtures his intellectual

abilities but also entangles him in moral corruption, creating deep internal conflict between ambition and conscience. Werner's relationships with fellow soldiers Frederick, Volkheimer, and Bernd expose him to moral courage, hidden humanity, and the brutal cost of war, leading to growing disillusionment.

The brief meeting between Marie-Laure and Werner in Saint-Malo becomes a turning point for both characters, symbolizing empathy, moral awakening, and the power of human connection across enemy lines. Ultimately, the novel demonstrates that interpersonal relationships play a crucial role in shaping identity, resilience, and moral clarity, even amid the chaos and devastation of war.

Motivation and Desire:

In *All the Light We Cannot See*, Anthony Doerr presents Werner Pfennig as a character whose motivations and desires can be effectively understood through psychoanalytical theory. Rooted in Sigmund Freud's concepts of the id, ego, and superego, psychoanalysis explains how unconscious desires, moral conflict, and early experiences shape Werner's psychological development. Werner's journey reveals a continuous struggle between ambition, survival, and ethical responsibility.

From an early age, Werner is portrayed as a curious and intelligent boy, fascinated by radios and driven by a desire to understand the world around him. This curiosity reflects the id's instinctual drive for pleasure, knowledge, and escape from the harsh realities of his impoverished mining town life. His longing to avoid the fate of working in the mines motivates him to pursue opportunities that promise intellectual freedom and survival.

Werner's ego mediates these desires by adapting them to reality. His decision to attend the Nazi training school at Schulpforta reflects a pragmatic attempt to escape poverty, even as he remains uneasy about the ideology imposed there. The superego, shaped by his sister Jutta's moral influence, his father's death, and societal expectations, creates deep internal conflict. Jutta's opposition to Nazism serves as Werner's moral conscience, intensifying his guilt and self-doubt as he becomes complicit in the regime's actions.

To cope with this conflict, Werner employs defense mechanisms such as denial and repression, distancing himself from the moral consequences of his work and suppressing traumatic experiences, including the loss of his friend Frederick. These repressed emotions resurface as guilt, anxiety, and disillusionment, driving Werner toward moral reckoning.

Ultimately, Werner's encounter with Marie-Laure becomes a turning point, prompting his desire for redemption. His decision to protect her represents a rejection of ideological corruption and an affirmation of his humanity. Through a psychoanalytical lens, Werner's character illustrates how unconscious conflict, guilt, and moral awareness shape motivation and desire, highlighting themes of atonement and the search for meaning in a world shaped by violence and war.

Conclusion:

Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* is a powerful exploration of human resilience, identity, and moral complexity set against the devastation of World War II. By applying psychoanalytic theory to the characters of Marie-Laure LeBlanc and Werner Pfennig, this study has examined how unconscious desires, internal conflicts, trauma, and interpersonal relationships shape their psychological development and moral choices. The analysis reveals the intricate relationship between individual psychology and the external pressures of war.

Marie-Laure's blindness is central to her identity and psychological strength. Through adaptation, heightened sensory awareness, and secure emotional bonds, particularly with her father, she develops resilience and independence. Psychoanalytic concepts related to ego

development help explain her ability to adjust to reality and endure loss and displacement. In contrast, Werner's journey reflects deep moral conflict. His intellectual curiosity and desire for purpose, influenced by early childhood loss, draw him into the Nazi system, while repression and guilt gradually erode his sense of self. Jungian ideas of the shadow and individuation illuminate Werner's struggle to confront his complicity and reclaim his humanity.

Ultimately, the novel emphasizes the transformative power of human connection. Relationships act as moral anchors, guiding both characters toward ethical awareness and self-discovery. Through a psychoanalytic lens, *All the Light We Cannot See* reveals how identity is formed through resilience, conscience, and choice, even amid the darkness of war.

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