

All the light we cannot  
see: the costs of war



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Anthony Doerr's remarkable novel, "All the Light We Cannot See," is a literary piece that moves briskly, efficiently, and beautifully in precise and pristine sentences. Every sentence is a lyrical poetry that the author carefully structured. The novel is a work of historical fiction opening with two memoirs of two different children in the opposite sides of World War Two. This literature tackles the grand themes of war, fate and free will, the sacrifices of parents, physical blindness versus spiritual blindness, fear, control versus power, the power of knowledge, and the possibilities of magic and legend. The most prominent theme of the novel highlights war. Doerr's work of fiction uses physical symbols to showcase the effects of war on people, of resistance to oppression, and the effort of citizens trying to maintain normality, creating a whole better understanding for readers about the outcomes of war. The author uses three symbols in the novel that are closely tied to the main characters, and these symbols will help to portray the author's view on war through a new perspective to surface hidden stories of World War II.

The first symbol that the author uses to explain the results of war is a small model of the town of Saint-Malo built by Marie-Laure's father, Monsieur LeBlanc; elucidating the effects of war to cities and to the people. At the beginning of the novel, it is described how the model city of Paris and Saint-Malo town that Monsieur Leblanc created are accurate by proportions and placing of the buildings. The model of Saint-Malo is described by Marie-Laure in detail " Her fingers pass the shipbuilder's shed on the rue de Chartres, pass Madame Ruelle's bakery on the rue Robert Surcouf. In her imagination she hears the bakers sliding about the on the flour-slicked floor... baking

loaves in the same four-hundred-year-old oven that Monsieur Ruelle's great-great-grandfather used. Her fingers pass the cathedral steps - here an old man clips roses in a garden; here beside the library, Crazy Hubert Bazin murmurs to himself as he peers with his one eye into an empty wine bottle..." (Doerr, 243). Unlike the model, the streets of the real town is bustling with people living their daily lives, like the people Marie-Laure included in her narration. In the progress of World War II, occupied France is under direct Nazi German control, the streets of Saint-Malo mimics the streets of the model; growing more desolate as citizens attempts to escape the wrath of Nazi Germans by staying inside their houses. Civilians in Europe had war on their doorstep with bombings and killings, "...the siege of Saint-Malo, the shelling lulls, as though all the artillerymen abruptly fell asleep at their guns. Trees burn, car burns, houses burn. German soldiers drink in their blockhouses. A priest in the college cellar scatters holy water on the walls" (Doerr, 375). Some were put into camps; Jews, Gypsies, Homosexuals, and anyone else the Nazis felt posed a threat to the creation of the master race were put in concentration camps and many millions were killed. War did not only happen in the frontlines against heavy infantry, but also the common people in the home front.

France plunged into a dark age, occupied by Nazi Germans with the terrible implications bombing raids, executions, deportations, murders and famine. Slowly the resistance took shape and began to react. The author uses two different objects, a wardrobe and a radio, and connects both of them to create a symbol of the resistance to oppression. After the Nazi Germany has occupied France, radios were being outlawed in the whole country, yet some

kept illegal radios showing resistance to oppression. Keeping these illegal radios would allow them to communicate with the allies in hopes of defeating the Nazis, “ When Marie-Laure comes through the front door with the bread, when he’s opening the tiny scroll in his fingers, lowering his mouth to the microphone, he feels unshakable; he feels alive. 56778. 21. 4567. 1094. 467813. Then the time and frequency for the next broadcast. They been at it for several months, new slips of paper arriving inside a loaf of bread every few days...” (Doerr, 331-332). Etienne a member of the resistance creates an effort to contribute to the war effort to take back their freedom; giving information to the Allied forces in the period of the Normandy Landings of D-Day. The wardrobe on the 6th floor of Etienne’s house would become a doorway to secrets, outside of the wardrobe, is an average storage space with nothing suspicious or out of the ordinary, however behind this piece of furniture hides the secret: an illegal radio. This wardrobe emphasizes how people stay strong and resist in times of oppression and how even the most unlikely people can make a big difference during hard times. The radio plays a big part in both Werner’s and Marie-Laure’s lives, as this is the way they meet each other, symbolizing the connection of people all over the world. The book Marie-Laure reads throughout most of the novel, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* by Jules Verne, is mentioned many times. Marie-Laure is seen reading phrases from it as years passed on, through good and bad times. It is not the book that would be a symbol, but her actions of reading a book becomes a symbol that even in the duration of the Second World War, citizens creates an effort to try living a regular life every day. Marie-Laure reads as if she is living a normal life with her father. After Werner introduces himself to Marie-Laure, he comments on how brave she

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was, she then replies "... I lost my sight, Werner, people said I was brave. When my father lefts, people said I was brave. But it is not bravery, I have no choice. I wake up and live my life" (Doerr, 469), and she is left with her uncle, and later, when her uncle is taken away and she is left alone in the house to fend for herself. In the most difficult time, she reads the book into her great-uncle's radio to comfort herself for all those experiences in the hardships of war, she reads to comfort and keep her mind off the terror that is happening all around her. In the course of the Second World War, people in the home front continues to live a regular life, shut in their homes as friends, families, and anyone around them disappear, and their way of living changing.

As far as World War II novels go, " All the Light You Can See" follows the desolation and barbarism of war, but the language feels startlingly fresh. Following Werner and Marie-Laure, two young people forced to make almost impossibly difficult choices, one fighting for the Nazis, the other for the French Resistance in World War II. The author masterfully allows readers to see the world through the eyes of a blind girl, writing rich details filling all the five senses simultaneously in ways readers can visualize it. Marie Laure must come to terms with the loss of her eyesight in the midst of the beginning of World War II, books allow her to see beyond the visible world: She reads the braille versions of Jules Verne's Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea. While Werner sees the chance to train at a military academy under the Nazis as an opportunity to escape his difficult life for his sister Jutta. This circumstance, and countless others, shed light on the hidden horrors of the darkest time in history. All wars comes with pain, despair, and

senseless despair. War has never solved anything, it creates financial problems for all the parties involved, creates sadness, resentment, and most devastatingly: people die. Death rips families apart, destroys bonds, terminates love, and slays the very inception of happiness. All of which situations could have been solved much less violently, and less destructive.