

All the light we cannot
see and human
nature



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In daily life, people tend to make a mix of selfish and selfless decisions. In times of conflict, decisions are more important and can be the difference between life and death. Anthony Doerr tells us that during times of conflict, it is human nature to pick a side of either selfish or selfless decisions.

Doerr shows us that people tend to pick a side based off of love or fear. Love, in this case, is showed in devotion to a person or an organization. Fear is the fear of the consequences of war or conflict, like imprisonment, torture, and death. Not only does fear or love motivate someone to pick a side, it also causes people to change sides. In *All the Light We Cannot See*, Doerr shows that in times of conflict, it is human nature for people to gravitate towards selfishness or selflessness. Doerr uses his characters to show that love and fear determine people's inclination to selfishness or selflessness, and their ability to change between the two. *All the Light We Cannot See* follows the story of two different characters, Werner Pfennig and Marie-Laure LeBlanc. Werner's story takes place in Germany, and Marie-Laure's story takes place in France, but the stories happen at the same time. Marie-Laure lives with her father Daniel LeBlanc, who works at the Museum of Natural History. Marie-Laure hears about the legend of the Sea of Flames, a diamond that is said to make the holder immortal but kill the holder's family. Von Rumpel, a German official, is searching for the diamond, and Marie-Laure and her father flee with the diamond to live with her great-uncle Etienne. Marie-Laure and Etienne later in the story help the resistance by broadcasting codes they receive in loaves of bread. As this happens, Werner is sent to the National Institute, a boarding school for raising young boys to become German soldiers.

His skills at building radios earn his spot there, and after he graduates, he works with teammates Volkheimer and Neumann One and Two, known as the Neumanns, to hunt foreign radios. Werner hears Marie-Laure's broadcasts that she does with her great-uncle Etienne and is motivated to save her from von Rumpel, who is in her house trying to find the diamond. Werner kills von Rumpel and saves Marie-Laure. After being saved, she hides the diamond in a hidden grotto she uses, where she was previously held up by von Rumpel, and gives the key to the grotto to Werner. The characters separate and never see each other again. Doerr uses his character, Werner, to show how fear can cause someone to make selfish decisions. Werner is also used as an example of someone who changes and begins to act selflessly because of love. Werner's selfish decisions in the novel are motivated by fear. Werner demonstrates his selfishness by looking out for himself. He doesn't speak up against things he feels are wrong. When Werner was a teenager at the National Institute, he watched his peers be mistreated by authority figures. He then proceeded to obey those authority figures he disagreed with and followed orders he knew were wrong. Later in the book, when Werner is working with Volkheimer and the Neumanns, he acts the same way. Werner complies with his duties, reports the locations of foreign radios, and enables the killings of the people using those radios.

Despite disagreeing with this and having the power to prevent it, Werner simply watches it happen. In both these scenarios, Werner remains silent because he believes he has no choice but to follow orders. When Frederick is whipped by Bastian, an instructor at the National Institute, Werner is unsure whether he should speak up for his friend. ...every part of him wants to

scream: is this not wrong? But here it is right...Werner opens his mouth but closes it again. (Anthony Doerr, *All the Light We Cannot See*) This quote on page 194 shows that Werner sees no other choice but to remain silent. Werner's fear causes him to act selfishly by not standing up for Frederick. The other choice he refuses to acknowledge is the acceptance of the consequences of speaking up. He also remains silent because of his fear of the consequences of speaking up. His fear of these consequences is rational. The cruel and grotesque beating of Frederick that resulted in Frederick being sent home is terrifying to Werner and deters him from speaking up as Frederick did. Frederick speaking up resulted in his beating, and the fear of this and the other consequences motivates Werner to comply with orders he disagrees with. Despite fear influencing Werner's decisions, he is able to make an important, selfless decision that changes him.

When Werner hears Marie-Laure's broadcast, he makes the decision to not tell his team about its existence. The broadcast brings back memories of him and his sister Jutta listening to that same broadcast and music, and Werner is deeply moved by this. He confronts his years of moral cowardice and sees that he does have another choice; the choice he has refused to acknowledge until now. He sees that he can risk and accept the consequences to make a decision he knows is right. Werner's decision is affected by his memory of Frederick's refusal. This recollection is shown on page 407, .. it was Werner who pretended there were no choices, Werner who watched Frederick dump the pail of water at his feet-I will not- Werner who stood by as the consequences came raining down. (Anthony Doerr, *All the Light We Cannot See*) This memory helps Werner realize he has multiple options, and that

accepting the consequences is part of doing what he knows is right. This memory helps Werner change and make a selfless decision. Werner, inspired by Frederick's defiance, accepts the dangers of his decision and risks himself for Marie-Laure. This decision to act for others instead of himself is an act of selflessness that changes him. Werner's love for Jutta, the broadcasts, and the broadcaster he doesn't even know cause him to act selflessly. Etienne is used to show how fear can prevent someone from acting selflessly, even if they want to act selflessly. He is also used to show that love can be stronger than fear, and can enable people to act selflessly.

Etienne is a character similar to Werner because he makes decisions for himself. What is different between the two, however, is that Etienne wants to act for others, but cannot. Etienne has PTSD from fighting in World War 1 and has a phobia of leaving his house. When Etienne is introduced to Marie-Laure, she finds out that he has not been outside for decades. He has episodes of anxiety and panic that leave him vulnerable and weak. His fear and PTSD prohibit him from acting selflessly, and he can only act selfishly and for himself. They prevent him from helping in the resistance the way he wishes he could. Etienne is forced to let Marie-Laure pick up the bread with the codes, for he cannot leave the house. In this situation, his fear is more of a disability than her blindness. His inability to act for Marie-Laure and others causes him to make selfish decisions, whether he wants to or not. When Marie-Laure is held up in the grotto by Sergeant Major Reinhold von Rumpel, Etienne is alarmed by her lateness. His love enables him to make the decision to go looking for her. He is tormented while making the decision, shown on page 418, Now Etienne hyperventilates...Stands in the foyer

summoning all his resolve...His heart beats icily in a faraway cage.(Anthony Doerr, All the Light We Cannot See) Etienne had to overcome his crippling fear of the outside to go looking for Marie-Laure, and this selfless act changes him. Etienne's love for Marie-Laure overpowers his debilitating fear of the outside, and he is finally able to act for her and act selflessly as he has been wanting to do for years. After this event of him breaking through his fear, he discovers a new strength in himself.

He feels young, strong, and glad to have a job for the resistance before he is arrested. Love overpowered Etienne's fear and enabled him to act selflessly. Sergeant Major Reinhold von Rumpel is an example of someone whose fear overtakes their loyalty and causes them to change and act selfishly. Von Rumpel, before his fear changes him, acts selflessly. He is tasked with finding the Sea of Flames for Hitler and the good of the Reich. Von Rumpel intends to carry out this task no matter what. He believes in his superiors, their orders, and goes to extreme measures to track down the Sea of Flames. One extreme measure shown is his tactics used at the Museum of Natural History. He tests the patience of Professor Hublin, the museum director, in a tense battle of waiting. After von Rumpel threatens Professor Hublin's children, Professor Hublin gives in and shows von Rumpel the safe and a decoy of the Sea of Flames. He goes through all this for the Reich and is motivated by his devotion for it. However, von Rumpel and his motivations change after he finds out he has four months left to live due to a tumor in his body. This changes the reasons behind von Rumpel's search. Von Rumpel considers the legend of the Sea of Flames, and the supposed immortality it brings to the holder. He subconsciously makes the decision to look for the

diamond for his own benefit, rather than for the Reich. This changes his search and his decisions to a selfish nature. Von Rumpel becomes more desperate and frantic in his search as his time runs out.

His fear of death motivates him to act selfishly. He is also fearful of lack of control. Von Rumpel has always had control, and when he is confronted by the things he cannot control, he becomes fearful. These things he is confronted by are the tumor and his death. Von Rumpel doesn't realize his search has become selfish until his last days in Marie-Laure's house when he stresses over the location of the diamond. Von Rumpel's last days are clouded and affected by his illness and medications, and in his delirium, he acknowledges that he is going to use the stone for himself and for selfish purposes. Von Rumpel is so desperate he attempts to murder Werner, a member of the Reich, the organization von Rumpel used to serve so selflessly. Von Rumpel's fear of lack of control and death changes his motivations and decisions to a selfish nature. The character of Claude Levitte shows that people gravitate to selfishness or selflessness and often don't change. Claude's fear determines his selfishness and his decisions to remain selfish. Claude, in times of conflict, acts selfishly. He hurts other people for his own gain. Claude is seen with more material goods than the other people in town. Claude works with the Nazis by giving them information and selling out his neighbors.

Claude is motivated by greed, for his information results in more material goods, but he is also motivated by fear. Claude is afraid of the Nazis, and he gives them information to secure his position and their trust. Self-preservation, paranoia, greed, and ultimately fear motivates Claude to help

the Nazis. His actions affect the other characters. Claude is responsible for Daniel LeBlanc's arrest and helps von Rumpel locate Etienne's house. Greed motivating his selfish decisions is shown on page 410, The perfumer squints. his...eyes trumpet one message: I want. Give me. (Anthony Doerr, All the Light We Cannot See) Von Rumpel, in his interrogation of Claude, sees Claude's motives for helping the Nazis. He sees how greed was a determining factor in Claude making selfish decisions. Claude is different from Werner, Etienne, and von Rumpel because conflict does not change him. Instead, it heightens his selfishness, which was known, but less apparent before the conflict or war. Even I can see his family gets...more meat, more electricity, more butter. I know how such prizes are won. (Anthony Doerr, All the Light We Cannot See) This quote on page 269 shows that Claude's selfishness was known by his neighbors. It shows that the townspeople know that conflict hasn't changed Claude, it's simply worsened his selfishness.

Conflict caused Claude's fear and greed to affect his decisions, and his selfishness and willingness to exploit people for his own gain are revealed. Werner and Etienne overcome their fear, change, and start to act selflessly because of love. Von Rumpel's loyalty, strength, and selflessness are broken down by his fear, which causes him to act selfishly. All three characters are used by Doerr to show how love and fear change someone's selfishness or selflessness. Claude is used by Doerr to show people's tendencies to gravitate towards selfishness or selflessness. Doerr uses Claude to demonstrate that a lack of change in relation to fear or love will result in a lack of change between selfishness or selflessness. Conflict influences

people's decisions and why they make them. During times of conflict, it is human nature to lean towards selfishness or selflessness. People's fear or love determines whether they will act selfishly or selflessly. In *All the Light We Cannot See*, Anthony Doerr shows that in times of conflict, human nature is to act selfish or selfless. Doerr uses his characters to provide examples of love and fear, and how they determine people's selflessness and selfishness.