

Symbolism and  
personal significance  
in all the light we  
cannot see



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Historians, philosophers, and writers alike can attest to the human struggle to follow a certain moral code; history shows a constant rift between what humans claim they should do and what they actually do. If this rift did not exist, many a crises and war could be averted, but humanity would not be its beautifully flawed self. In the novel *All the Light We Cannot See*, Doerr is raved over for “masterfully and knowledgeably re-creat[ing] the deprived civilian conditions of war-torn France and the strictly controlled lives of the military occupiers” (Hooper 23). However, the use of literary devices in the novel reflects a message deeper than that of just another war-time story. Doerr utilizes the war setting as a means of further exploring the nature of humanity in a distinct context. He does not define the characters by war; he defines the characters and gives them a war to respond to. The novel is different from other war stories, in that its focus is on the independent choices of the characters, the reasoning behind these choices, and the means by which these choices intertwine the lives of the characters. That being said, Doerr shares his understanding of the nature of humanity with the reader in his utilization of literary devices used in context of reader-response theory. More specifically, Doerr does this with his use of symbolism. By using symbolism throughout the novel, Doerr gives the reader connections between characters, which then allows the reader to clearly compare and contrast the plight of the characters in reference to the symbol. Also, the use of symbolism lets the reader critically consider universal concepts in different contexts, which initiates critical thinking in the reader without the explicit use of theory (Richter 962-963). In his novel *All the Light We Cannot See*, Anthony Doerr uses the key symbols of the blindness, the

maze, and the radio to compare and contrast the two main characters and to reflect this theme that in troubling times humanity should pursue love.

Blindness, ironically, leads the character Werner to spiritual enlightenment, which occurs when he is stuck underground in the Hotel of Bees. When Werner is in total darkness, essentially blind, he is surprised to find that “ Sometimes, in the darkness, Werner thinks the cellar may have its own faint light... After a while, he is learning, even total darkness is not quite darkness; more than once he thinks he can see his spread fingers when he passes them in front of his eyes” (Doerr 211). Despite being in total darkness, Werner is able to “ see” the room based on his spatial memory. This foreshadows the moral insight Werner will gain, for during his grimmest hours with nothing to distract him from his conscience, Werner decides his next plan of action based on what he knows to be right. Before this experience, Werner has acted against his better judgment. He is a manifestation of the Faust legend, listening to those who claim “ We act in our own self-interest. Of course we do. Name me a person or a nation who does not. The trick is figuring out where your interests are” (Doerr 84). It is this attitude which prevails among the wealthy and the Nazi leaders. It is this attitude which turns a nation of humans with ability to show compassion into a land of death and persecution. At the Nazi school facility Werner trains at, Werner feels like he “ is succeeding... [and] being loyal... being what everybody agrees is good” yet “ every time he wakes and buttons his tunic, he feels like he is betraying something” (Doerr 250). Werner rejects the cry of his innermost soul: “ is this not wrong?”, because the people around him are saying that “ what [Nazi Germany represents] is an ordering... [of]

chaos.. [and] the evolution of the species.... the... greatest project human beings have ever embarked upon” (Doerr 194, 240). This false promise of order, protection, and success blinds Werner to all other pursuits, including the pursuit of love. It is not that Werner truly believes the lies he is told; it is that Werner chooses to believe these things because to say otherwise would make his life more difficult and take his potential for success. But now that Werner is surrounded by darkness, he sees the darkness in himself, and “ his ambition and shame [become] one and the same” (Doerr 450). When Werner’s physical eyes are rendered useless in the dark, Werner opens his introspective eyes to see past the twisted propaganda he has pretended to believe, and looks at the reality of himself and his situation. He sees that while his friend “ Frederick said we don’t have choices, don’t own our lives... in the end it was Werner who pretended there were no choices” (Doerr 407).

Frederick, who claims to be passive in life, is in reality one of the few brave individuals to stand up to the crowd and pursue his convicted love for all humans, facing the consequences dutifully. Frederick, who when demanded to throw the freezing water on the dying Soviet prisoner looks straight ahead as “ The night steams, the stars burn, the prisoner sways, the boys watch, the commandant tilts his head,” and “ pours the water onto the ground,” stating “ I will not” (Doerr 229). Because of this action, this refusal to comply with the cruelty of the school and the blind obedience demanded of him, Frederick is physically abused by his classmates to the point of neurological damage, and is sent home from the Nazi training school. Once Werner becomes desperate enough to open up his heart and allow himself to be enlightened in the bombed hotel basement, as well as fully realize his own

conviction, “ It is as if he has been drowning for as long as he can remember and somebody has fetched him up for air” (Doerr 406). This relief is Werner’s conscience, which had been repressed before this time of reflection, but in this time is finally heard and accepted. Frederick, who pursues love, ends up physically crippled but pure in heart. Werner, in contrast, pursues personal gain and convenience. As a result, he loses his sense of self and damages the relationship between himself and his beloved sister Jutta, the only person who challenges Werner’s unruly ambition. After the epiphany in the darkness, when he finally follows Jutta’s advice to follow his heart and ends up falling in love with Marie-Laure, the first thing he thinks is “ Jutta... I finally listened” (Doerr 475). Had Werner listened to Jutta and pursued his soul’s calling earlier, he would not have needed to be brought into all-enveloping darkness to see the light and love within himself.

In contrast with Werner’s, Marie-Laure’s blindness is representative of her keen moral insight. She describes it: “ What is blindness? Where there should be a wall, her hands find nothing. Where there should be nothing, a table leg gouges her shin. Cars growl in the streets; leaves whisper in the sky; blood rustles through her inner ears” (Doerr 27). Here, initially, the description of blindness meets the readers understanding. It is unmet expectations. It is the fear of the unknown, fully capsized. However, the end of the description takes an unexpected turn. It discusses Marie-Laure’s gifts within the blindness. Her hearing improves, so she is able to focus it in such a way that she can understand the world through the little movements her ears pick up. This parallels her ability to act within her views of morality, for she is able to focus on such views and act in consideration of these beliefs,

instead of in spite of them, in contrast to Werner. This follows the universal idea that “when blindness pops up in a story... the author wants to emphasize other levels of sight and blindness beyond the physical” (Foster 202). Marie-Laure’s sense of morality is apparent with her willingness to assist the French resistance and her protection of the stone, not because she cherishes its high dollar value but because she wants to be rid of it. Her intuitive insight sees that the stone has the power to morph men into monsters, and she hopes “that Papa hasn’t been anywhere near it” (Doerr 52). Marie-Laure’s moral compass is undeniable. However, Marie-Laure’s blindness would not have helped her develop into the convicted person she became, without the help of Marie-Laure’s father’s love. Her father, who “says he will never leave her, not in a million years”; who claims “You can do this, Marie” even when she feels “she cannot”, is her anchor and means of exploring the world despite her fear (Doerr 31, 37). Because Marie-Laure has her father’s support when dealing with the blindness, she has the courage to cope with the struggles of being blind and so pursues life with bravery. The love between her and her father gives Marie-Laure the courage to live in the light, despite being blind.

Another significant symbol is the maze, which essentially represents the troubles Marie-Laure faces, especially the blindness which makes her whole life like a maze. Marie-Laure listens to her logic when faced with a problem, because she is experienced in dealing with mazes. When she is diagnosed with “Congenital cataracts. Bilateral. Irreparable,” the “Spaces she once knew as familiar... [became] labyrinths bristling with hazards” (Doerr 27). She is forced to regard the objects around herself differently, and move

around these objects using the new skills she develops. Her father teaches her to “ walk the paths of logic. Every outcome has its cause, and every predicament has its solution. Every lock its key” (Doerr 111). Marie-Laure’s blindness trains her to approach the unknowable with sensibility, and her father’s love empowers her to handle the blindness. However, when Marie-Laure is faced with the imprisonment of her father, the love she once depended on is taken and she lapses into a depression, in which “ everything in the house scares her... she is angry... [and] every second it feels as if her father slips farther away” (Doerr 226). She has lost direction and no longer has the motivation to face her problems. It is not until she goes to see “ the ocean! Right in front of her!” and “ the labyrinth of Saint-Malo has opened onto a portal of sound larger than anything she has ever experienced,” that Marie-Laure is able to face the maze again (Doerr 231). She falls in love with the awe-inspiring ocean, and finds within this love a passion for the beauty of the outside world she once considered too overwhelming to face. With this newfound motivation, she can emotionally process the loss of her father and choose her next steps in life with the logic she had been taught. It is with this renewed love and passion that Marie-Laure learns to face her blindness and her problems once more.

The symbol of the maze shows up in the life of Werner, in that Germany is described as an “ ever-quickenning, ever-expanding machine” with factories and businesses and streets filled with worker ant people (Doerr 69).

Essentially, it is conveyed as maze-like. For example, in Saint-Malo, “ people whisper, the Germans have renovated two kilometers of subterranean corridors under the medieval walls; they have built new defenses, new

conduits, new escape routes, underground complexes of bewildering complexity” (Doerr 10). The Germans have turned their own home into a foreign and intimidating land, a menacing labyrinth. Most of the fear of Germany is because of its intimidating military, which fights in seemingly unfaltering unity with the attitude that “ Everything is glory and country and competition and sacrifice” (Doerr 62). Werner is lost in all of this nationalism; he is lost in the maze of Germany which sings out blasphemy as if it is pure truth and defines purity as a list of required genetics. Germany, which orders its soldiers, “ Do not trust your minds” because they are “ always drifting towards ambiguity, toward questions, when what you really need is certainty. Purpose. Clarity” (Doerr 264). Germany perpetuates the maze, because in contrast to Marie-Claire’s pursuit of reason, it calls for a complete disregard of thinking processes in lieu of uncompromising patriotism. In order to deal with this maze, Werner also finds love, both within the sea and within Marie-Claire. When Werner describes the sea, he says “ It is my favorite thing, I think, that I have ever seen. Sometimes I catch myself staring at it and forget my duties” (Doerr 405). Here Doerr directly compares Werner and Marie-Laure, for they are on two opposing paths yet find the same force of nature appealing. It is dramatic irony, in that the reader can see the unity of passion between the characters before the characters themselves realize their love. This dramatic irony foreshadows Werner’s eventual focus on Marie-Laure as the motivation to act on his inner heart of compassion. Werner describes first seeing Marie-Laure in the same manner: “ Why are Werner’s hands shaking? Why can’t he catch his breath?... This, he thinks, is the pure they were always lecturing about at Schulpforta” (Doerr 413). In both of these cases, Werner stops participating in the work

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which he truly believes is wrong, because he has seen something which he loves. He is so overwhelmed with emotion in seeing his heart's desire, he cannot pretend his heart desires anything else. This is the way in which Werner is freed from the maze.

Elsewhere, the radio is a symbol of hope for Werner. When he first listens to the radio, the world around Werner “ looks the same as it always has... Yet now there is music. As if, inside Werner's head, an infinitesimal orchestra has stirred to life” (Doerr 33). Although Werner is stuck in an orphan's home, destined to work in the dangerous coal mine which orphaned him, the radio is a means of escaping this hopeless reality and dreaming of a different future. In fact, Doerr establishes Werner's morality with the radio, because “ Werner's favorite [radio program] is one about light: eclipses and sundials, auroras and wavelengths.” The radio speaker teaches, “ What do we call visible light? We call it color. But the electromagnetic spectrum runs to zero in one direction and infinity in the other, so really, children, mathematically, all of light is invisible” (Doerr 53). This program is metaphorical and shows the equality of all humanity in seeing light, that in technicality all are blind because light exists both infinitely and not at all. Werner's appreciation of this program reveals his moral beliefs in the value of light and the equality of all human beings. This emphasizes the height of corruption which occurs as this quest to escape the fate of the coal mines consumes Werner, and “ in his nightmares, he walks the tunnels of the mines. The ceiling is smooth and black; slabs of it descend over him as he treads” (Doerr 68-69). This fear of being trapped perverts him.

Instead of hoping for love, Werner places his hopes in his future success and the possible luxuries his talents give him access to. Here lies the risk of hope; that humanity may hope in a force of corruption. In this case, the radio which “ties a million ears to a single mouth” plays “out of loudspeakers all around Zollverein, the staccato voice of the Reich”, which “grows like some imperturbable tree; its subjects lean towards its branches as if toward the lips of God” (Doerr 63). Werner’s misplaced hope is only a reflection of all of Germany, which hopes in Hitler, losing sight of morals while in pursuit of prosperity. It is not until later, at the Hotel of Bees, that Werner uses the radio for the right reasons and finds another source to discover hope in. Werner is stuck, and “the radio is hopeless. He wants to close his eyes, forget, give up... But Volkheimer wants to make an argument that life is worth living” (Doerr 211). Werner’s friend and military partner Volkheimer is the love which pushes Werner to finish his last act in pursuit of hope. Because Volkheimer believes Werner’s life is worth living out, Werner is given the strength to continue despite the overwhelming evidence proving his situation to be hopeless. In this same place of blindness, Werner not only reaches enlightenment, but also finds the love he wants to hope in, replacing the ambition which once blinded his judgment. In one last act of desperation, Werner attempts to fix the radio and succeeds, hearing Marie-Laure’s voice on the radio calling for help. Even though Werner’s job is to kill all who broadcast rebellious radio waves, Werner thinks back to his last moment of darkness in which he accidentally kills a young girl while raiding an apartment complex in search for a radio. Because of this occurrence, Werner is more aware of the impact of his actions and wary of violence. He knows his own heart is not complacent with murder, even if it means losing luxury

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or a successful future. Out of this previous time of poorly placed hope, Werner gains the wisdom to hope in love. He uses the radio to figure out where Marie-Laure is hiding and then saves her from imminent death. Because Werner has renewed his soul, instead of choosing to kill Marie-Laure like his job demands him to, Werner uses the radio to pursue his love for Marie-Laure.

The radio also represents hope to Marie-Laure. Marie-Laure and her uncle help with the French resistance against Germany by using their radio to transmit secret messages to all who listen. This action is a manifestation of the choice made in their argument: “‘ Doing nothing is as good as collaborating.’... ‘ How do you fight a system?’ ‘ You try’” (Doerr 269). The radio is a means of fighting the system, and therefore a fight for hope. While the Germans take most of her uncle’s radios, Etienne keeps his biggest, most-beloved radio secretly in the attic. Etienne holds to his radio because it is one of the few objects which give him purpose and life, especially in light of his post-traumatic stress disorder and his tendency to see “ things that are not there,” which force him to stay indoors (Doerr 122). The radio is the last true reminder of who Etienne is and what he can offer the world, and “ 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 unshakeable; he feels alive” (Doerr 331). The radio is Marie-Laure’s salvation. When she is stuck in her attic, hiding from a mad Sergeant, and cannot do anything else, she calls for help on the radio in the desperate hope that someone will hear her, “ she keeps saying, ‘ Help me.’ She begs her father, her great-uncle. She says, ‘ He is here. He will kill me” (Doerr 442). At

the climax of danger, Werner saves her. Marie-Laure puts her hope in the object her uncle treasures and in the compassion of a stranger, and is rescued. Because of Marie-Laure's hope in humanity, that someone might be willing to show love, she is liberated.

It is not romantic love which saves Werner and Marie-Laure. Soon after they meet, they are separated: Marie-Laure to be brought back to her uncle and Werner to surrender to the French and American militaries. Doerr purposely points this out, with making Werner's fear that of working in a coal mine and Marie-Laure's fear that of losing her loved ones to the curse of the diamond. The coal and the diamond seem related- many mistakenly think that coal is used to make diamonds. However, it is a false assumption, just like the assumption many readers would make that this novel is focused on the romance between the two. No, Werner and Marie-Laure are saved by a different love. This is the love which is so mind-shattering, it makes the sweet-tempered Marie-Laure angry " At everything and everyone," questioning " Who knew love could kill you?" (Doerr 226). This is the love which propels life forward, which makes hope valuable, which gives humanity direction. This is the core of Doerr's novel, the message he wants to send that life is worth living whole-heartedly. It is not a love made up of fairytale endings. Werner dies soon after leaving Marie-Laure, as he half-consciously follows the sound of *Claire de la Lune*, which he first heard on the radio, and walks into a land mine. It is suicide, and Werner dies wondering " what future remains? The road ahead is blank, and the lines of his thoughts incline inward", thinking of " Marie-Laure... the pressure of his hand against the webbing between her fingers" (Doerr 480, 481). Like

Frederick, following his heart did not save Werner from an unfortunate end. But Werner dies a free soul, “ a kite, a balloon”, a person who in his last few days finds light and love and his true self (Doerr 482). This is the love which, Doerr argues, makes life worth living. Because of this love, Marie-Laure is free to explore the “ mazes there are in this world. The branches of trees, the filigree of roots, the matrix of crystals, the streets her father re-created in his models... None more complicated than the human brain, Etienne would say, what maybe the most complex object in existence, one wet kilogram within which the universe spins” (Doerr 453). Marie-Laure, at least, is able to follow her love of the beauty in the world, and revel in its wonder. Through the characters of Werner and Marie-Laure, Anthony Doerr shows the only trustworthy method of coping with the maze of life is hoping in love.