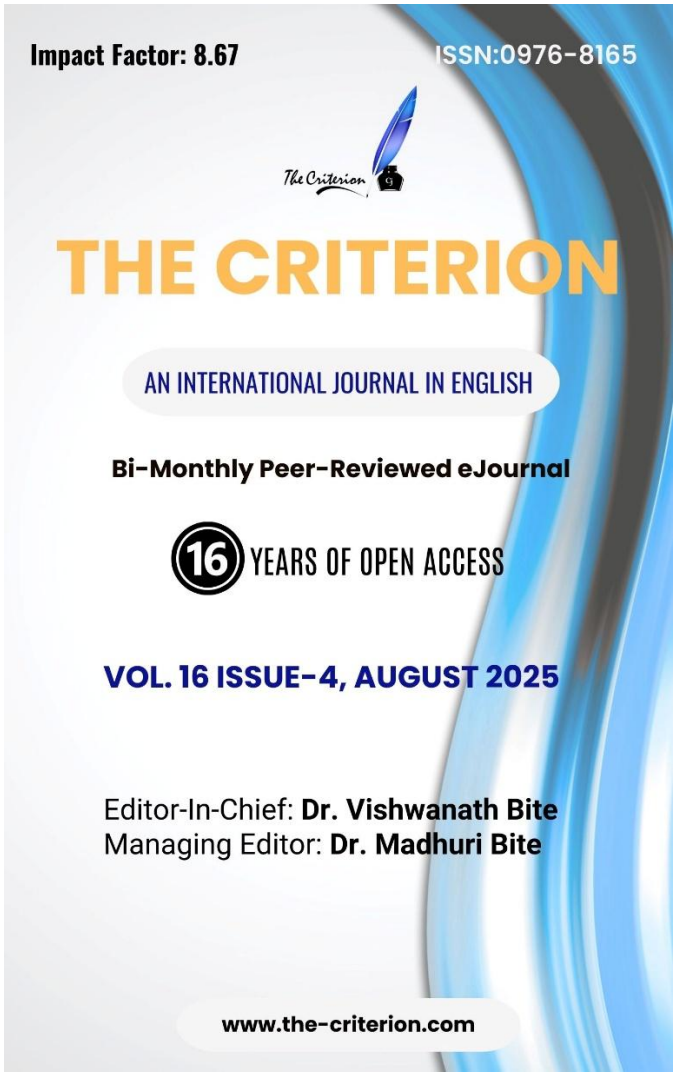


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Ethical Ambiguity and Humanistic Values in Twenty-First Century War Fiction: A Case Study of *All the Light We Cannot See*

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Abstract:

Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* offers a poignant exploration of World War II through the intimate experiences of two young protagonists, Marie-Laure LeBlanc and Werner Pfennig. This article examines the novel's humanistic approach to war, focusing on themes of empathy, moral ambiguity, and the symbolic interplay of light and blindness. Moving beyond conventional war narratives centered on battle and nationalism, Doerr foregrounds individual lives marked by vulnerability and ethical complexity. Through a close reading of the novel's characters, themes, and narrative structure, this study demonstrates how *All the Light We Cannot See* challenges dehumanizing portrayals of conflict and reaffirms the enduring capacity for compassion amid violence. The novel's emphasis on human connection and moral choice underscores the potential for literature to cultivate empathy and ethical reflection in times of war.

Keywords: Humanistic war literature; Anthony Doerr; *All the Light We Cannot See*; empathy; moral ambiguity; symbolism; World War II; narrative structure; human connection.

Humanism is a philosophy which believed in the ethical responsibility of human beings to lead a peaceful and prosperous life and should also contribute to the greater well-being of humanity. It asserts the importance of dignity and freedom of man. According to humanists, Humanism is responsible for the development and progress of individuals by ensuring equality among all. The core concern of this theory was mortality. Through this, it aims at building a more humane society where people can live freely and peacefully.

Humanism, as a philosophical and cultural movement, emphasizes the dignity, worth, and rational potential of the individual. It advocates for a worldview, grounded in reason, ethics, and a commitment to human flourishing, rooted in the classical traditions of Greece and Rome and revitalized during the Renaissance, At its core, Humanism seeks to elevate human potential through education, inquiry, and a rejection of dogmatic authority. As the Humanist philosopher Corliss Lamont eloquently stated, *"Humanism, in brief, is a philosophy that asserts the dignity and worth of man and his capacity for self-realization through reason; it affirms that nature—the totality of being—is the only reality, that reliable knowledge is best obtained when we use the scientific method, and that the human good lies in the growth and perfection of individual lives and in the achievement of a humane society"* (Lamont, *The Philosophy of Humanism*, 1949). This enduring outlook continues to shape contemporary thought across disciplines, providing a vital ethical and intellectual framework in an increasingly complex world.

A Literary work does not offer us the absolute truth but ultimately depicts the universal truths of human life and nature. Literature is the voice of an individual or a community belonging to a particular time period. It reflects a society or a community paving way for a better understanding of the world. In this era of detached human interactions, Literature acts as a medium through which we can establish a connection with each other.

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Contemporary fiction has responded by emphasizing the ethical ambiguity of survival and resistance in times of total war as global warfare increasingly implicates non-combatants and erodes traditional moral binaries. The evolution of war literature in the twenty-first century reflects a growing shift from epic, ideologically framed depictions of conflict to narratives that foreground moral complexity, psychological trauma, and the civilian experience. Among the most critically recognized contributions to this literary shift is Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* (2014), a novel that reconfigures World War II through the lens of two adolescents caught on opposing sides of history. Doerr offers a subtle, human-centered exploration of individual agency, memory, and ethical responsibility under the pressures of authoritarianism and systemic violence, rather than engaging with battlefront heroism or nationalistic triumph.

This article positions *All the Light We Cannot See* as a representative work of twenty-first-century war fiction that disrupts reductive moral categorizations by employing narrative strategies and symbolic frameworks grounded in humanistic ethics. Through a close reading of the novel's dual protagonists, Marie-Laure LeBlanc, a blind French girl navigating German, occupied France, and Werner Pfennig, a gifted German youth coerced into serving the Nazi war effort, this study explores how the novel dramatizes the conflict between internal conscience and external compulsion. Ethical subjectivity is central to this analysis, as articulated by philosophers such as Emmanuel Levinas, persisting even in the most dehumanizing conditions.

The discussion reveals how Doerr's treatment of blindness, sound, technology, and space functions not merely as metaphor but as a means of interrogating visibility, complicity, and the possibility of moral imagination during wartime, drawing upon contemporary literary criticism, trauma theory, and narrative ethics. This article situates *All the Light We Cannot See* within broader discourses on post-postmodern historical fiction, demonstrating how its structure and

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style reflect a renewed commitment to empathetic storytelling in a global era still shaped by war. Doerr's novel underscores the enduring relevance of literature as a space for ethical inquiry and humanistic reflection in a time when civilian vulnerability and ideological extremism continue to define modern conflicts.

Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* revisits the well-trod ground of World War II literature with a fresh, humanistic lens that privileges the inner lives and ethical struggles of individuals over the grand sweep of military history. The novel, primarily set in Nazi-occupied France, follows two young protagonists: Marie-Laure LeBlanc, a blind French girl whose resilience shapes her journey, and Werner Pfennig, a German orphan whose scientific talents entangle him in the machinery of war. It is truly admiring to see how Doerr's narrative challenges traditional war portrayals by emphasizing the human cost of conflict and the complex moral terrain navigated by those involved. The article argues that the novel's humanistic approach serves not only as a critique of war's brutality but also as a profound meditation on empathy, moral ambiguity, and the redemptive power of human connection.

The novel offers the reader an interesting glimpse into the French Resistance, and how the lives of ordinary people was affected during that time. Humanity had always been a key factor in the continuity of human lives over centuries. But its significance attains its peak during war times, where there is a need to restore the lost peace and harmony. The world had witnessed many wars including the two World Wars. In spite of this, human life and humanity continue to flourish. This is the result of humanity that people carry within themselves. Werner was a dutiful soldier but more than that he was a human being and it was his responsibility to save a life which he did for Marie Laurie.

One of the most profound ways *All the Light We Cannot See* engages a humanistic perspective is through its emphasis on the individual suffering and moral complexity wrought by war. It

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does not focuss on battles or strategic victories, Doerr illuminates the ways in which war disrupts ordinary lives, eroding safety, trust, and possibility. Marie-Laure and Werner embody the vulnerability of youth caught in the vast machinery of global conflict, reminding readers that the deepest wounds often occur far from the battlefield.

Marie-Laure's blindness is not portrayed as weakness but as a form of heightened perception, metaphorically representing the innocence and resilience required to navigate a world darkened by occupation (Doerr 98). Her daily struggles underscore the quiet endurance of those civilians caught in war's crossfire. Werner's story, by contrast, reveals the moral compromises imposed on young people coerced into complicity. His internal conflict between scientific curiosity and the knowledge that his skills facilitate harm, highlights war's ethical grey zones and challenges simplistic notions of guilt and innocence.

Doerr's careful rendering of their lives invites readers to recognize the multifaceted human cost of war. The convergence of their fates through a moment of compassion signals the novel's broader humanistic message: that even amidst violence, the capacity for kindness and moral choice persists.

The novel resists clear moral binaries by portraying characters enmeshed in ethical uncertainty. Werner's journey epitomizes this tension. Werner's talent is exploited, as he was raised in poverty and drawn into the Nazi educational system, and that forced him into roles he neither fully understands nor desires. His gradual awareness of the moral implications of his work reveals the complexities of culpability under authoritarian systems.

Secondary characters further complicate the moral landscape. Frederick's refusal to conform to brutality and his subsequent punishment emphasize the personal cost of integrity, while Etienne, Marie-Laure's uncle, embodies the struggle to find courage in resistance despite

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trauma. These portrayals align with philosophical reflections on war's ethical ambiguity, inviting readers to engage empathetically rather than judge hastily.

Empathy emerges as a central theme and form of resistance within the novel. The bond between Marie-Laure and Werner, mediated through fragile radio transmissions, symbolizes the enduring power of human connection across ideological divides. Werner's decision to protect Marie-Laure, despite his role in the German war effort, foregrounds compassion as an act of defiance against dehumanization. Doerr's depiction of small acts of kindness, Etienne's broadcasts, Madame Manec's civil disobedience, Jutta's dissent, highlights that resistance need not be grandiose but can emerge from simple refusal to abandon care. This humanistic focus challenges readers to see empathy not as weakness but as an ethical imperative, resonating with Emmanuel Levinas's idea that the face of the other demands a moral response (Levinas 89).

When a prisoner who had escaped from the work camp is captured by Volkeimer and brought the school, the cadets, upper class men and the instructors are asked to soak him with a bucket of water each. Turn by turn, everyone gets engaged in this cruel action including Werner. When it is Federick's turn. He pours the water on to the floor expressing his protest. Once again, he is firmly ordered to throw the water on the prisoner and he takes no hesitation to deny the same. He disagrees to soak the prisoner when the latter is no more. In the eyes of the others, the prisoner is a barbarian who escaped from the war camp and was caught by the soldiers. But for Federick, a man with human heart, saw him just like a weak and helpless human being who needs human care and mercy. He is punished to death in an extremely brutal manner and this in turn is justified by the German soldiers. On the other hand, Federick who refused to be a part of this inhuman act was considered the weakest cadet and was constantly bullied and harassed by others. For them, a soldier's weakest point was his refusal to take a life which was their core duty. Amongst those soldiers, aiding inhuman acts, Federick was an exceptional human being guided by the principles of kindness and Humanity.

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Even though one of the protagonists, Werner is a German, his presence brought a sense of security to Marie- Laure. She felt like those who left her are not far away and are keeping her safe from the outer world. Werner's assuring words, "I am not killing you, I am hearing you. On Radio," made her feel that she has someone with her, whom she could trust. She might have felt that humanity is still alive. People can be kind to each other even though they are not pure in the eyes of the so-called pure ones. Her smile on seeing him can be considered as a symbol of Humanity.

Light and blindness function as potent symbols that deepen the novel's thematic concerns. Marie-Laure's blindness metaphorically suggests a mode of perception beyond physical sight, emphasizing empathy and intuition as forms of "seeing" truth amid chaos (Doerr 102). Conversely, light symbolizes knowledge, hope, and moral clarity but also exposes vulnerability, mirroring the dual nature of technology like radio waves that can heal or harm. The interplay of these motifs underscores the limits of human perception in war and highlights the novel's core message: that genuine understanding requires moral imagination and compassion extending beyond what is immediately visible.

Doerr's dual narrative and nonlinear chronology enhance the novel's humanistic impact. By shifting perspectives between Marie-Laure and Werner and weaving past with present, the narrative fosters empathy by allowing readers to inhabit both sides of the conflict. The fragmented timeline reflects memory's complexity, emphasizing war's lasting psychological effects. Literary techniques such as rich sensory detail and symbolic motifs draw readers into the characters' subjective experiences rather than distant historical events, thereby centering human connection and ethical reflection as the novel's primary concerns (James 521).

Another significant dimension of *All the Light We Cannot See* lies in its intricate depiction of trauma and memory, particularly how individuals internalize and respond to wartime horrors.

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The novel foregrounds the fragmented and nonlinear structure of memory as a way of mirroring trauma's disruptive and recursive nature. This aligns with trauma theory as articulated by scholars like Cathy Caruth, who argues that traumatic experience resists coherent narrative because it overwhelms the subject's ability to process it in real time. Werner's haunting flashbacks to his time at the Nazi school, the death of Frederick, and the violence he indirectly facilitates through his work as a signal tracker all point to a psyche marred by guilt and confusion. Similarly, Marie-Laure's moments of disorientation and sensory overload reflect the profound dislocation experienced by civilians in occupied territories. Doerr does not portray trauma as a dramatic spectacle but as a slow, corrosive force that lingers in small, repeated gestures and silences. The novel's refusal to resolve these emotional wounds fully is itself a humanistic gesture, acknowledging that moral and psychological recovery from war is never absolute.

Language and storytelling function as both a refuge and a form of resistance in the novel. Marie-Laure's relationship with her father and uncle is mediated through books and stories, particularly Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, which becomes a symbolic anchor of hope and imaginative escape. Stories, in this sense, serve not as distractions from reality but as means of constructing meaning in a chaotic world. Etienne's clandestine radio broadcasts are another example of language's subversive power: through them, truth and empathy are transmitted even under a regime built on lies. In both cases, the act of communication becomes an assertion of humanity against the dehumanizing forces of war. These uses of language echo the broader philosophical commitments of humanism, which regards dialogue, literacy, and critical inquiry as vital tools for cultivating ethical awareness and civic responsibility.

The novel also critiques technological progress when it is divorced from moral consideration. Werner's fascination with science and engineering—encouraged by a Nazi ideology that

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equates technological supremacy with national superiority—ultimately becomes a vehicle for moral conflict. Doerr presents technology not as inherently evil, but as ethically ambivalent: it can be used to connect people, as in Etienne's broadcasts, or to locate and destroy them, as with the Nazi use of radio triangulation. This duality reflects a central tension in modernity itself, where scientific advancement often outpaces ethical reflection. In this sense, Doerr joins a lineage of literary voices—including Mary Shelley, George Orwell, and Kurt Vonnegut—who question the human cost of progress. Werner's eventual disillusionment with the regime that trained him illustrates the dangers of divorcing rationality from empathy, and science from conscience.

Marie-Laure's resilience is all the more powerful when viewed through the lens of disability studies. Her blindness is not portrayed as a limitation, but as a reconfiguration of perception and strength. She learns to navigate the world through touch, sound, and spatial memory, and this heightened awareness becomes symbolic of her deeper moral insight. In a world where so many characters are morally blind to the consequences of their actions, Marie-Laure's literal blindness is ironically a source of ethical clarity. Doerr thus challenges traditional hierarchies of ability, suggesting that moral perception does not always follow physical capacity. Her character affirms a humanistic ideal that dignity and value are not contingent on physical wholeness but on courage, resilience, and the capacity to care for others.

All the Light We Cannot See interrogates the concept of heroism. Unlike conventional war literature that glorifies military bravery, Doerr's novel proposes an alternative heroism rooted in survival, compassion, and resistance to dehumanization. Madame Manec's underground resistance work, Frederick's refusal to participate in cruelty, Etienne's quiet broadcasting, and Werner's final act of mercy all represent small, morally significant actions. These characters embody the idea that ethical resistance often takes place in the margins—not through violence or rebellion, but through steadfast commitment to humane values in inhumane conditions. This

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redefinition of heroism resonates strongly in contemporary global contexts where ordinary people are often forced into extraordinary circumstances, whether under occupation, dictatorship, or displacement.

The symbolic title of the novel, *All the Light We Cannot See*, underscores its central humanistic premise: that the most essential aspects of human life like empathy, kindness, memory and moral conviction that are often invisible, yet no less real. These are the "lights" that persist in the darkness of history, especially in times of war. By choosing to illuminate individual lives rather than abstract historical forces, Doerr reaffirms the importance of personal narrative in the construction of ethical understanding. In a world increasingly desensitized by violence and digital saturation, such literature becomes not only relevant but necessary. It teaches us to see the unseen, to value the small human moments that resist grand ideological narratives, and to remember that within each conflict, there are individuals whose dignity and choices define the true human cost of war.

All the Light We Cannot See transcends conventional war narratives by focusing on the intimate ethical and emotional lives of individuals. Through its nuanced characters, symbolic richness, and innovative narrative, the novel challenges simplistic binaries and affirms the persistence of empathy and moral choice amid devastation. Doerr's work highlights literature's capacity to nurture humanistic understanding, offering a vision of hope and dignity that endures even in the darkest times. The work stands as a profound exploration of humanism, morality, and empathy amid war. Through complex characters, Werner, complicit yet redemptive; Marie Laure, perception richer than eyesight; Frederick, moral integrity and world, building anchored in sensory detail and historical research, Doerr constructs a narrative that emphasizes the ethical potential inherent in daily lives. Its structure, symbolism, and integration of philosophical insight, especially Levinas's ethics and the motif of invisible light, invite readers to reflect on the limits of our perception and the moral imperative to respond to others beyond

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sight. By situating personal resilience, small acts of kindness, and moral imagination at the heart of a war story, Doerr ensures that the deepest light we cannot see is the light we give each other, a fragile brilliance in the darkness that defines our shared humanity.

The themes of *All the Light We Cannot See* resonate deeply in today's world, where armed conflicts in Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan, and other regions continue to fracture civilian life. Just as Doerr's characters endure occupation, displacement, and moral uncertainty, millions of people today face similar traumas: children uprooted from homes, families separated by war, and ordinary citizens forced into moral dilemmas by oppressive regimes or survival needs. The invisible wounds of modern warfare, psychological distress, lost education, and cultural erasure, mirror those in Doerr's narrative, showing how war's impact transcends time. In Gaza and Ukraine especially, technology plays a paradoxical role, as it did with radios in the novel, spreading both propaganda and pleas for peace. In these contemporary tragedies, the novel's call for empathy and ethical imagination becomes more urgent: we must not look away from suffering simply because we are not the ones living it. Literature like Doerr's helps us stay human in a world still learning the cost of its own violence.

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