

*Light Amidst the Darkness: A Feminist Analysis of Blindness in  
All the Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr

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ABSTRACT

As its female characters deal with the devastation caused by World War II, the book *All the Light We Cannot See* examines their emotional complexity, resiliency, and trauma. Anthony Doerr provides a moving reflection on the sacrifice, grief, and personal hardships that many women went through throughout the war, as seen through the eyes of women. The book tells the tale of Werner Pfennig, a German soldier, and Marie-Laure LeBlanc, a blind French girl, whose paths meet in the war-torn French city of Saint-Malo. The story jumps back and forth in time, alternating between their lives throughout the war. In addition to being an internal conflict, Marie-Laure's eyesight increases her susceptibility to the mental and physical abuse she encounters daily. After her father is detained by the Germans, she leaves Paris and seeks

safety in Saint-Malo. Her experiences reflect the difficulties that women with disabilities have in the real world, who are frequently and disproportionately impacted by exploitation and violence. The novel's connection to gender-based violence and disability emphasizes the necessity for a feminist interpretation that recognizes how women's gendered experiences and disabilities exacerbate their suffering throughout conflict. Doerr examines how women, particularly those with impairments, must negotiate and endure repressive structures through Marie-Laure's blindness.

Keywords: War, Relationship, Displacement, Loss, and Identities

As women in Anthony Doerr's books navigate personal challenges and other influences, they show their inner power and self-discovery. These people, who are usually ignored by society, stand for moral resistance to evil in both private and military settings. Disability is a significant theme in literature that is regularly explored as a medical or societal issue. Critical disability studies aim to improve and correct the explanations offered by other fields. Although disability is a relatively new concept, it has a lengthy literary history that affects both mental and physical aspects of psychology and character. It appears consistently in works of literature.

The emotionally complex female characters in Doerr's books negotiate interpersonal connections, personal struggles, and social expectations. Using blindness as a metaphor for social marginalization, the book examines the relationship between gender, disability, and agency. It also offers a moving commentary on individual hardships and sacrifices while highlighting the emotional complexity, resiliency, and trauma experienced by women during World War II. An interesting lens through which to examine the relationship between gender, disability, and agency is *All the Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr. As a metaphor for social marginalization as well as a physical handicap, blindness frequently emphasizes how women with disabilities deal with a society that might feel both physically and socially. The book examines

the emotional complexity, resiliency, and trauma experienced by its female protagonists as they deal with the devastation caused by World War II. Doerr provides a moving reflection on the sacrifice, loss, and personal hardships that many women went through throughout the war, as seen through the eyes of women. Anthony Doerr in his book *All the Light We Cannot See* writes:

New silk banners hang above the refectory tables, ablaze with slogans. They say *that disgrace is not to fall but to lie*. They say, *Be slim and slender, as fast as a greyhound, as tough as leather, as hard as Krupp steel*. Every few weeks another instructor vanishes, sucked up into the engine of the war. New instructors, and elderly townsmen of unreliable sobriety and disposition, are brought in. All of them, Werner notices, are in some way broken: they limp or are blind in one eye, or their faces are lopsided from strokes or the previous war. The cadets show less respect to the new instructors, who in turn have shorter tempers, and soon the school feels to Werner like a grenade with its pin pulled (180).

Anthony Doerr's writing, despite not explicitly addressing feminist themes, can still explore themes like survival, war impact, and the influence of light and darkness. His historical fiction, *All the Light We Cannot See*, set during World War II, features lyrical prose and a deeply humanistic portrayal of characters, highlighting the intricate connections between gender and broader themes. The representation of Marie-Laure challenges traditional gender norms that often depict women as fragile, dependent, or passive. Her story resists the idea that women are helpless and encourages a vision of women who can act with strength and independence. Doerr writes:

Marie-Laure LeBlanc is a tall and freckled six-year-old in Paris with rapidly deteriorating eyesight when her father sends her on a children's tour of the museum where he works. The guide is a hunchbacked old warder hardly taller than a child himself. He raps the tip of his cane against the floor for attention, then leads his dozen charges across the gardens (20).

The novel begins in 1939 in Paris, where Marie-Laure's father, a museum locksmith, is entrusted with a valuable diamond, the "Sea of Flames," which is said to carry a curse. When the Nazis invade France, Marie-Laure, who is blind, flees with her father to the small coastal town of Saint-Malo. At the same time, Werner, a German boy from a poor mining town, is recruited into the Hitler Youth and eventually becomes a soldier. The novel alternates between their lives: Marie-Laure's escape to Saint-Malo with her father, Werner's rise through the ranks of the German military, and the haunting and destructive impact of the war. The story is told in fragmented time shifts, jumping back and forth between the war years and the time when the city of Saint-Malo is bombed by the Allies in 1944, where the fates of the two characters collide. Doerr writes:

She can hear the bombers when they are three miles away. A mounting static. The hum inside a seashell. When she opens the bedroom window, the noise of the airplanes becomes louder.

Otherwise, the night is dreadfully silent: no engines, no voices, no clatter. No sirens. No footfalls on the cobbles. Not even gulls. Just a high tide, one block away and six stories below, lapping at the base of the city walls (11).

Gender performativity is a term first used by the feminist philosopher Judith Butler in her 1990 book *Gender Trouble*. She argues that being born male or female does not determine behavior. Instead, people learn to behave in particular ways to fit into society. The idea of gender is an act or performance. This act is the way a person walks, talks, dresses, and behaves. She calls this acting "performativity of gender" (xiv). What society regards as a person's gender is just a performance made to please social expectations and not a true expression of the person's gender identity. Judith Butler's feminist theory, particularly her concept of gender performativity and the construction of identity, can be applied to *All the Light We Cannot See* to offer a deeper understanding of the character of Marie-Laure, especially her blindness. Butler's theories focus on how gender and identity are not innate or fixed but are performed and socially constructed

through repeated actions and societal expectations. Though Butler's ideas primarily center on gender, they can also be extended to other aspects of identity, including disability. Judith Butler argues that gender is not an inherent or fixed trait but rather something that is constituted by repeated actions, behaviors, and societal norms. Gender is enacted through behavior and expectations. Butler's theory of performativity may be applied to how people are viewed and understood based on their social and physical characteristics, including disabilities, even if her focus is on gender.

Although it plays a big role in Marie-Laure's identity throughout the book, her blindness does not define her in a rigid or constricting manner. Her ability to act in the world is not limited by her blindness; rather, she uses her actions to enact her identity. Butler's paradigm states that her handicap is a component of a broader performance of identity that is influenced by her decisions, actions, and relationships with others rather than something that fundamentally limits or defines her. According to Butler, Marie-Laure's blindness is a component of her performance of defiance against social expectations that she be obedient or reliant due to her condition. She defies the notion that her impairment would inevitably lead to helplessness by performing with agency and tenacity.

*All the Light We Cannot See* explores the invisible connections between people, their moments of kindness, suffering, and love amidst war, and the unseen effects of war on individuals. The novel also explores the concept of disability, which encompasses impairments, activity limitations, and participant restrictions. In her influential *Introduction to Disability Studies*, Simi Linton makes an extended argument for "setting off disability studies as a socio-political-cultural examination of disability from the interventionist approaches that characterize the dominant traditions in the study of disability" (132).

In the context of Marie-Laure's blindness, Butler's theory would suggest that her disability is socially constructed through the expectations placed upon her. Marie-Laure's ability to live independently, solve problems, and contribute to resistance efforts during the war highlights how disability does not solely define

her and how her performance of independence challenges societal expectations. One of Butler's central concepts is that people who deviate from societal norms are often treated and marked as different and inferior. In the case of Marie-Laure, her blindness might serve as a marker that others might use to classify her as other or less capable, particularly in a world that values sight and efficiency in wartime. Marie-Laure's blindness positions her as the other in a visual world, and she is often treated with a certain amount of pity or concern by those around her.

However, the way she performs her identity, by actively participating in her survival, challenges the ways that the world perceives her. Rather than accepting the social construction of being helpless or incapable due to her blindness, she creates a new performance that speaks of resilience, independence, and resourcefulness.

Anthony Doerr's novel explores humanity during a devastating conflict, focusing on small, personal moments. Doerr portrays female characters as strong creatures, illustrating their sisterhood and survival. Marie-Laure and Madame Manec are examples of women's movements during the war in Saint-Malo, developing resistance clubs and spreading messages like 'Free French Now'. The novel by Doerr explores the impact of war on characters like Marie-Laure and Werner, highlighting their adaptation and reliance on hope and human connection. The relationships between characters, including Werner, Marie-Laure, and her father, are central to the narrative. Cultural stories often simplify disability's complexities, limiting lives and governing disabled women. Feminist Disability Studies aim to challenge these stories and re-imagine women and people with disabilities.

Literature highlights the treatment of imperfect individuals with disabilities, with society treating them as a waste. The imperfect nature of people is not the issue, but society's reliance on them for assistance, highlighting the dual nature of impairment and disability. Petra Kuppers says,

Disability culture is the difference between being alone, isolated, and individuated with a physical,

cognitive, emotional, or sensory difference that in our society invites discrimination and reinforces that isolation – the difference between all that and being in a community. Naming oneself part of a larger group, a social movement or a subject position in modernity can help to focus energy, and to understand that solidarity can be found – precariously, in improvisation, always on the verge of collapse (109).

In *All the Light We Cannot See*, the protagonist, Marie-Laure LeBlanc, explores the intersection of war, disability, and gender. Despite not explicitly engaging with feminist theory, her character's resilience and support from Madame Manec reflect the real-life situation in Germany and France during World War II. Doerr writes:

“Can you see this?” asked the doctors. “Can you see this?” Marie-Laure will not see anything for the rest of her life. Spaces she once knew as familiar, the four-room flat she shares with her father, the little tree-lined square at the end of their street have become labyrinths bristling with hazards. Drawers are never where they should be.

The toilet is an abyss. A glass of water is too near, too far; her fingers are too big, always too big. 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. In the stairwell, in the kitchen, even beside her bed, grown-up voices speak of despair (25).

Marie-Laure, a strong character, is vulnerable due to her blindness and wartime position. Feminist analysis can explore her vulnerability and societal views of disabled women during the war. The novel provides space for these women's voices, demonstrating their experiences and vital roles, even if not publicly recognized. In feminist literature, light symbolises knowledge, empowerment, and truth. For blind women, metaphorical light represents the knowledge they gain through non-visual means—hearing, touch,

intuition, and memory. Marie-Laure's survival in the war, despite her blindness, is tied to her ability to see the world around her through other senses. She gains resilience and empowerment by using sound, texture, and spatial memory to understand her surroundings. Instead of giving in to social pressures about how a blind woman should be, she learns to navigate the world by adjusting to her blindness.

Marie-Laure exhibits self-determination and agency in *All the Light We Cannot See* by adjusting to her blindness, defying patriarchal expectations. She exemplifies feminist ideas through her survival, ingenuity, and resolve to act within her surroundings. It is considered a feminist act of resistance that Marie-Laure participated in her great-uncle's resistance activities, including covert radio broadcasts. The book defies conventional gender norms by examining gender roles in caring and emphasizing that both men and women share responsibility during times of conflict.

Marie-Laure's blindness in *All the Light We Cannot See* can be better understood by applying Judith Butler's theories on identification and performativity. Instead of viewing Marie-Laure's blindness as a fixed, limiting characteristic, it might be viewed as a component of a broader performance of agency and resilience that questions gendered and prejudiced presumptions. Marie-Laure is a feminist and performative figure who defies the roles society would normally impose upon her, and Butler's lens helps us see how her identity is defined not by her disability but by her active performance in a world that aims to marginalize and confine her. She also loses her father and goes through the turmoil of being uprooted after being forced to leave Paris and live in hiding. The trauma of her father's separation and the fear of his safety are central themes. Marie-Laure's emotional suffering never fully dissipates, and the siege of Saint-Malo exposes her to more trauma. Doerr writes:

The war drops its question mark. Memos are distributed. The collections must be protected. A small cadre of couriers has begun moving things to country estates. Locks and keys are in greater demand than ever. The plane trees drop their seeds and huge drifts of fluff gather on the

walkways. *If they attack, why would they attack, they would be crazy to attack. To retreat is to save lives* (54).

Marie-Laure's blindness causes her to rely on her senses, leading to silence and emotional suffering. Madame Manec, a key figure in the French resistance, faces personal danger and emotional suffering due to her moral commitment to fight against the Nazi occupation. Her aging and physical health strain her, and her sense of isolation adds to her suffering. Despite her bravery and devotion, many people she helps are unaware of the extent of her sacrifice. The novel highlights the suffering of women during the war, particularly those living under Nazi occupation or facing personal losses. These women face challenges in protecting their families, coping with violence, and societal expectations. Their physical and emotional isolation is often overlooked, highlighting the importance of women's resilience during war. The novel also challenges traditional notions of femininity, as women must assume roles of strength, courage, and action in a world that does not traditionally recognize them. The sorrow of women is examined in *All the Light We Cannot See*, especially that of blind Marie-Laure, who feels alone and isolated. The book also examines the gender norms that are imposed on male characters, like Werner Pfennig, emphasizing the ethical quandaries and social constraints that men face when they fight. Doerr writes:

Werner sways between exhaustion, confusion, and exhilaration. That his life has been so wholly redirected astounds him... The procession pauses, and a gust of wind tears at the torch flames.

Then they march on, their song swirling up through the window like a bright, pulsing cloud.

O take me, take me up into the ranks so that

I do not die a common death! I do not want

to die in vain, what

I want to fall on the sacrificial mound (96).

Doerr's novel, *All the Light We Cannot See*, explores gender expectations during war, particularly in

the lives of two female characters, Marie-Laure and Etienne. The story highlights the importance of caregiving and shared responsibility, challenging traditional victimhood roles. With characters like Marie, Madame Manec, Jutta, Madame Ruelle, and Madame Blanchard pursuing a better life and independence, the book also examines the idea of sisterhood for women's survival during World War II in Germany and France. These women create sisterhood to support one another and strengthen society despite social pressure.

Characters like Marie-Laure exhibit courage and independence as the book examines the intersections of gender, disability, and resistance. It also draws attention to the terrible effects of war, such as the psychological toll it has on people, kids, and young warriors. To complicate the moral story and raise issues of guilt, complicity, and redemption, the book also examines the Nazi government and German soldiers.

*All the Light We Cannot See* examines the psychological and physical toll that war takes on women while emphasizing themes of resiliency, grief, and sacrifice. Doerr offers complex views by presenting women as change agents and personal development agents through characters like Marie-Laure and Madame Manec. These women, who have historically been disregarded or neglected, have a profound impact on history and individual challenges, proving that strength and agency can be found in unexpected places.

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