
**CONCEPTUAL DICHOTOMIES AS COGNITIVE
AND ETHICAL FRAMEWORKS IN ANTHONY
DOERR'S *ALL THE LIGHT WE CANNOT SEE***

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INTRODUCTION

The relevance of examining conceptual dichotomies in contemporary American historical prose is determined by a constellation of interrelated literary and theoretical factors. Historical fiction occupies a prominent position in modern literary discourse, as it enables authors and scholars to revisit past events, reassess their influence on the present, and, in certain cases, anticipate future social and ethical trajectories. As a genre, historical prose functions not merely as a narrative reconstruction of history, but as a space for cultural memory, moral reflection, and ideological negotiation.

Within this framework, Anthony Doerr's novel *All the Light We Cannot See*, which constitutes the object of the present study, stands out as a paradigmatic example of a profound artistic engagement with the experience of the Second World War. Rather than offering a documentary or linear account of historical events, the novel reconstructs wartime reality through a system of intersecting perspectives, symbolic imagery, and narrative contrasts. This approach allows Doerr to represent war not only as a historical phenomenon, but as an existential and ethical condition.

By skillfully embedding conceptual dichotomies into the narrative structure, the author not only recreates moments of historical crisis but also reveals fundamental dimensions of human nature. These dichotomies foreground resilience and vulnerability, moral endurance and ethical compromise, thereby transforming individual experience into a site of philosophical inquiry. The opposition of values and states becomes a means through which the novel articulates the complexity of human choice under extreme conditions.

For this reason, particular scholarly attention is devoted to conceptual dichotomies as an essential analytical instrument in the study of the cognitive-linguistic dimensions of literary texts. Conceptual oppositions shape not

only the semantic framework of a work, but also its stylistic organization and emotional dynamics. From a cognitive perspective, dichotomies function as organizing mental models that structure perception, guide evaluation, and facilitate interpretation, enabling readers to engage with abstract ethical and existential problems through narrative form.

The problem of concepts and conceptual structures in literary discourse has been extensively explored by numerous scholars. In particular, the works of A. Andrus¹, L. Guba², M. Dudnikov³, V. Kononenko⁴, L. Petrenko⁵, M. Polyuzhyn⁶, N. Romanyshyn⁷, I. Sydorenko⁸, and M. Skab⁹ analyze the conceptual specificity of literary texts, emphasizing the role of cognitive and conceptual approaches in uncovering moral-philosophical and socio-cultural meanings. These studies demonstrate that literary concepts operate as dynamic formations embedded in cultural, ideological, and historical contexts.

A particularly influential contribution to cognitive-linguistic research is offered by W. Evans¹⁰, whose work focuses on lexical concepts, cognitive models, and their role in meaning construction. Evans's theoretical framework is especially valuable for understanding the interaction between language and conceptual structures in fiction, as it elucidates the cognitive mechanisms through which abstract meanings are formed, negotiated, and transformed within textual environments.

Given the relative lack of focused research on contemporary American historical prose from this specific perspective, the present study makes a meaningful contribution to literary scholarship. It enables a deeper

¹ Андрус А. Семантико-когнітивний підхід у сучасних лінгвокогнітивних пошуках. Науковий вісник Східноєвропейського національного університету імені Лесі Українки. 2015. № 4. С. 12–16.

² Губа Л.В. Художній концепт як репрезентант поетичної мовної свідомості. Молодий вчений. Філологічні науки. 2018. № 3(55). С. 616–619.

³ Дудніков М. О. Основні літературознавчі концепції жанру «роман» у контексті генези. Філологічні студії. 2012. № 8. С. 169–187.

⁴ Кононенко В. Концепти українського дискурсу: монографія. Київ; Івано-Франківськ: Плай, 2004. 248 с.

⁵ Петренко Л. О. Поняття концепт та концептуальний аналіз художнього тексту. Science and education a new dimension. philology. 2020. Т. 8, № 216. С. 49–52.

⁶ Полужин М. Поняття, концепт та його структура. Науковий вісник Східноєвропейського національного університету імені Лесі Українки. 2015. № 4. С. 214–223.

⁷ Романишин Н. APPROACHES TO REVEALING THE CONCEPTUAL CONTENT OF LITERARY TEXTS (COGNITIVE-DISCURSIVE AND LINGUAL-AESTHETIC PERSPECTIVE). Лінгвістичні студії. 2019. No. 38. P. 72–77.

⁸ Сидоренко І. А. Методика опису художнього концепту в сучасних антропологічних дослідженнях. Закарпатські філологічні студії. 2018. № 6. С. 117–123.

⁹ Скаб М. Методика концептуального аналізу: проблеми та вирішення. Науковий вісник ХДУ серія «Лінгвістика». 2006. № 4. С. 273–278.

¹⁰ Evans V. How Words Mean. Lexical Concepts, Cognitive Models, and Meaning Construction / Vyvyan Evans. – Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2009. – 320 p.

understanding of how conceptual dichotomies function in the representation of socio-historical and moral problems, thereby establishing the relevance and scholarly potential of this approach for further research.

1. Dichotomy: definition of the notion and classifications

In modern literary studies, the term *dichotomy* is increasingly employed, although its meaning is not always unambiguous. According to lexicographic sources, the term derives from the Greek *dichotomia*, meaning “division into two”¹¹. Other definitions describe dichotomy as a division between two completely opposed ideas or phenomena¹². While the concept is widely used in the natural sciences and mathematics, within literary studies it acquires a distinctive analytical significance.

This raises an important methodological question: how do such oppositions become meaningful and productive in the interpretation of literary texts? Dichotomy functions not only as a means of explaining differences between phenomena, but also as a widely employed literary device. Through dichotomous structures, writers create contrast between opposing ideas, generate narrative conflict, and intensify reader engagement¹³.

Among the most common dichotomies in literature are the oppositions of good and evil, body and soul, reality and imagination, man and woman, heaven and hell, and the savage versus the civilized individual¹⁴. These oppositions may be realized through interactions between multiple characters or embodied within a single character, where they manifest as internal conflict or as a struggle between competing value systems¹⁵.

There is an extensive classification of dichotomies, but the most common in the literature are:

- binary ("black and white", "woman and man");
- Hegelian (based on the principle in which opposite sides complement each other, forming a whole); – dualistic (one opposite should always dominate the other: "good versus evil", "matter versus reason");
- quantitative (classification of things based on calculations: "big and small", "slow and fast");

¹¹ Dichotomy – examples and definition of dichotomy. Literary Devices. URL: <https://literarydevices.net/dichotomy/>

¹² Dichotomy. Cambridge Dictionary | English Dictionary, Translations & Thesaurus. URL: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/dichotomy>

¹³ The artist of the beautiful literary devices | supersummary. SuperSummary. URL: <https://www.supersummary.com/the-artist-of-the-beautiful/literary-devices/>

¹⁴ Dichotomy. Cambridge Dictionary | English Dictionary, Translations & Thesaurus. URL: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/dichotomy>

¹⁵ Dichotomy. Cambridge Dictionary | English Dictionary, Translations & Thesaurus. URL: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/dichotomy>

- qualitative (classification based on subjective opinion: "beautiful and ugly", "good and bad");
- moral (opposition of moral values: "mercy against greed", "justice against dishonesty");
- psychological (contrast of personal traits: "extraversion and introversion", "thinking and feelings")¹⁶.

Each type reflects a different principle of opposition and offers specific analytical possibilities for interpreting literary meaning.

Like any literary device, dichotomy possesses both advantages and limitations. Its strengths include conceptual clarity, which enables a clear differentiation of opposing phenomena and facilitates a deeper analysis of themes and ideas, as well as structural predictability, since dichotomies often allow readers to anticipate narrative developments or conflicts based on minimal textual cues. At the same time, dichotomies may suffer from incompleteness, as they do not always encompass the full spectrum of an object's characteristics, and from excessive simplification, whereby complex phenomena are reduced to rigid oppositions that obscure ambiguity, hybridity, and nuance¹⁷.

Thus, dichotomy may be defined as a mode of conceptual opposition that enhances textual comprehension by foregrounding contrast and tension. It enables readers to perceive conflicting dimensions with greater clarity, facilitates the identification of key ideas, and structures the semantic and ideological space of a literary work by articulating its central contradictions.

Analyzing Anthony Doerr's historical novel *All the Light We Cannot See*, we arrive at the conclusion that conceptual dichotomies play a decisive role in generating the work's semantic depth and ethical complexity. Within the narrative structure of the novel, dichotomies function not as decorative oppositions but as organizing principles that shape character development, plot progression, and moral evaluation. For analytical purposes, the conceptual dichotomies identified in the novel can be classified into three major groups: **(1) moral-ethical**, **(2) ontological**, and **(3) political**. Each of these categories fulfills a distinct interpretive function and will therefore be examined separately.

2. Moral-Ethical Dichotomies

Moral-Ethical Dichotomy I: Life and Death

One of the most prominent and emotionally charged oppositions in war narratives is the dichotomy of **life and death**. This opposition constitutes a core

¹⁶ Дихотомія – що це таке, в науці, філософії, політиці та житті. Termin.in.ua. URL: https://termin.in.ua/dykhotomiia/#Tipi_dihotomii

¹⁷ Дихотомія – що це таке, в науці, філософії, політиці та житті. Termin.in.ua. URL: https://termin.in.ua/dykhotomiia/#Tipi_dihotomii

structural element of war fiction, symbolizing the struggle for survival and foregrounding the dramatic intensity of armed conflict. In *All the Light We Cannot See*, the life–death dichotomy is not limited to physical survival but is closely intertwined with ethical degradation, hope, fear, and the illusion of control.

A particularly revealing embodiment of this dichotomy is the character of **Staff Sergeant Reinhold von Rumpel**, a German officer whose lifelong fascination with rare minerals culminates during the occupation of France – especially Paris – where he seeks access to the National Museum of Natural History. There, according to legend, is kept the mythical diamond known as the *Sea of Flames*, a stone believed to grant protection to its owner while simultaneously bringing misfortune to those around them. Before learning of his terminal illness, von Rumpel is portrayed as a calculated, disciplined individual, as illustrated by the following passage:

“Von Rumpel keeps his voice polite. Civilized. Paris is not Poland, after all. Waves must be made carefully. Things cannot simply be seized. What did his father used to say? See obstacles as opportunities, Reinhold. See obstacles as inspirations” (Doerr, p. 324).

In this passage, irony, antithesis, and metaphor converge to construct an image of von Rumpel as a cautious and rational man who carefully plans his actions. His determination and pragmatism are expressed through his ability to instrumentalize every circumstance for personal gain. The ironic emphasis in the opening lines – *“...his voice polite. Civilized.”* – highlights the dissonance between outward civility and inner brutality. This façade of refinement masks a character defined by cruelty, arrogance, and unwavering self-interest.

The metaphors embedded in the repeated injunction *“See obstacles as opportunities... inspirations”* articulate von Rumpel’s guiding life principle: every barrier is merely a resource awaiting exploitation. On a symbolic level, this worldview anticipates his later moral collapse, suggesting a mindset in which ethical limits are consistently subordinated to personal ambition.

Upon learning of his terminal illness, von Rumpel undergoes a radical transformation. The previously composed and calculating officer becomes a ruthless pragmatist governed by a single, overpowering impulse: the desire to survive. Constructive personal traits give way to emotional detachment and moral indifference. In his attempt to postpone death, von Rumpel resorts to every available means, driven by the fantasy of gaining enough time to remain with his daughters, listening to their singing and witnessing their growth. This obsession ultimately leads him to Marie-Laure’s house, which he begins to search obsessively:

“That the house stands while so many others have been destroyed is evidence enough. The stone must be inside. He simply needs to find it while

there is time. Clamp it to his heart and wait for the goddess to thrust her fiery hand through its planes and burn away his afflictions. Burn his way out of this citadel, out of this siege, out of his disease. He will be saved. He simply has to drag himself up from this bed and keep looking. Do it more methodically. As many hours as it takes. Tear the place apart. Begin in the kitchen. One more time" (Doerr, pp. 336–337).

The metaphor "*Clamp it to his heart*" conveys intense emotional urgency, symbolizing von Rumpel's desperate belief that physical proximity to the stone might guarantee salvation. The image of a *goddess* who will "burn away his afflictions" introduces a mythological and quasi-religious dimension, revealing his turn toward the transcendent after the collapse of rational hope. This intertextual invocation of divine intervention underscores the helplessness of a character who, having exhausted empirical means, resorts to magical thinking as a final refuge.

Hyperbolic expressions such as "*As many hours as it takes. Tear the place apart*" emphasize his obsessive resolve, which paradoxically contrasts with his physical weakness. Repetition of the constructions "*He simply needs to...*" and "*He simply has to...*" reproduces the rhythm of an intrusive internal monologue, evoking compulsive thought patterns and psychological fixation. Through this stylistic strategy, Doerr renders the mental state of a man trapped between impending death and illusory control.

This internal struggle becomes even more explicit in the brief assertion: "*He will be saved. He simply has to drag himself up from this bed and keep looking*" (Doerr, p. 337).

The verb phrase "*keep looking*" foregrounds the endlessness of von Rumpel's efforts. The search itself becomes both a defiance of mortality and a mechanism for preserving a sense of agency. Looking, in this context, replaces living; action substitutes for hope.

Ultimately, however, von Rumpel's attempt to escape death fails: "*Five days in this house and no diamond, the last German-controlled port in Brittany nearly lost, the Atlantic Wall with it. Already he has lived beyond the deadline the doctor predicted. And now the tolling of two tiny bells? This is how death comes? The candle rolls gently. Toward the window. Toward the curtains. Downstairs the door of the house creaks open. Someone steps inside*" (Doerr, p. 343).

This passage marks the culmination of von Rumpel's helplessness in the face of fate. Time advances relentlessly, while circumstances remain unchanged. Antithetical structures – "*Five days... and no diamond*" versus the gentle, almost indifferent motion of the candle – create a sense of suspended finality. The repeated preposition "*toward*" emphasizes movement toward

an irreversible boundary, reinforcing the temporal pressure closing in on the character.

The rhetorical question “*This is how death comes?*” introduces a fatalistic tone that conveys shock, fear, and existential disbelief. The “*tolling of two tiny bells*” functions as a symbolic oxymoron: the bells are small and seemingly insignificant, yet they announce an event of absolute finality. Similarly, the image of the extinguishing candle operates as a conventional yet powerful metaphor for the end of life, intensifying the atmosphere of inevitability and loss.

Von Rumpel does not receive a redemptive conclusion. Despite his deeply flawed character – marked by greed, exploitation of suffering, and self-aggrandizement – his desperate will to live evokes a measure of readerly empathy. This ambivalence compels reflection on the paradox of hope: even morally compromised individuals cling to life with a fervor that exposes the universal human fear of annihilation. In this way, the life–death dichotomy in Doerr’s novel transcends moral simplification, revealing survival itself as an ethically unstable and profoundly human impulse.

Moral–Ethical Dichotomy II: Fidelity and Betrayal

Another significant moral–ethical conceptual dichotomy in *All the Light We Cannot See* is that of **fidelity and betrayal**, which acquires particular intensity under conditions of military and political conflict. Such contexts invariably divide individuals into those who remain faithful to their state, oath, or personal convictions and those who, driven by fear or the instinct for survival, betray their ideals, their country, or even their own sense of self. In Doerr’s novel, however, this dichotomy is not presented as a static moral opposition. Instead, fidelity and betrayal unfold as dynamic ethical processes shaped by coercion, vulnerability, and gradual accommodation to violence.

A characteristic embodiment of this dichotomy is the friendship between Werner and Frederick, whose bond is formed at Schulpforta, the elite educational institution designed to prepare young boys for participation in war. Schulpforta represents a closed disciplinary system governed by rigid hierarchy, strict obedience, and normalized cruelty. Within this environment, individuality is systematically suppressed, and moral sensitivity is treated as weakness. Despite these conditions, Werner and Frederick manage to establish a relationship grounded in mutual understanding and emotional support, preserving a space of humanity within an institution that actively works to eradicate it.

“Werner tries out various theories on Frederick, but Frederick, he’s learning, moves about as if in the grip of a dream, his trousers too big around the waist, the hems already falling out. His eyes are both intense and vague; he hardly seems to realize when he misses targets in marksmanship. Most nights

Frederick murmurs to himself before falling asleep: bits of poems, the habits of geese, bats he's heard swooping past the windows. Birds, always birds" (Doerr, pp. 139–140).

This passage employs a range of stylistic devices that deepen the psychological portrait of Frederick and accentuate his ethical otherness. The metaphor "*as if in the grip of a dream*" presents him as a figure partially detached from the regimented reality of the military school, underscoring his incompatibility with its demands. The antithesis "*intense and vague*" captures the tension between outward attentiveness and inner estrangement, suggesting a consciousness that refuses full assimilation into the system. The repetition "*Birds, always birds*" verbalizes an obsessive semantic field that symbolically encodes longing for freedom and mobility – values rendered inaccessible within the confines of Schulpforta. Auditory imagery associated with bats "swooping past the windows" reinforces the nocturnal, liminal quality of Frederick's inner world, aligning him with creatures that exist on the margins of visibility and control.

These stylistic strategies allow Doerr to construct Frederick as a character whose moral sensibility resists militarization. His dreaminess, vulnerability, and compassion distinguish him sharply from his peers and render him an anomaly within the institutional order. It is precisely these qualities that attract Werner, who is drawn to Frederick's pacifism and humanity as an alternative ethical orientation amid systemic brutality.

"Werner washes Frederick's mess tin for him; he shares homework answers, shoe polish, sweets from Dr. Hauptmann; they run next to each other during field exercises. A brass pin weighs lightly on each of their lapels; one hundred and fourteen hobnailed boots spark against pebbles on the trail" (Doerr, p. 140).

In this fragment, the enumeration of small, repetitive acts – washing, sharing, running – foregrounds fidelity as a practice of everyday care rather than a grand moral declaration. These gestures establish a rhythm of mutual support that counters the harshness of the surrounding environment. At the same time, the sound image of "one hundred and fourteen hobnailed boots" produces a stark auditory metaphor for the mechanization and depersonalization of military life. The boys are reduced to synchronized movement, their individuality erased by uniform cadence. The symbolic detail of the brass pin "weighing lightly" introduces a double semantic layer: while physically insignificant, it carries a growing moral burden as a marker of affiliation with an oppressive hierarchy. The juxtaposition of intimate friendship and institutional symbolism highlights the tension between personal loyalty and enforced conformity.

During winter holidays, Werner's reflections reveal an emerging conflict between individual aspiration and imposed destiny:

"‘Do you ever wish,’ whispers Werner, ‘that you didn’t have to go back?’ ‘Father needs me to be at Schulpforta. Mother too. It doesn’t matter what I want.’ ‘Of course it matters. I want to be an engineer. And you want to study birds. Be like that American painter in the swamps. Why else do any of this if not to become who we want to be?’ A stillness in the room. Out there in the trees beyond Frederick’s window hangs an alien light. ‘Your problem, Werner,’ says Frederick, ‘is that you still believe you own your life’" (Doerr, p. 166).

This dialogue crystallizes the ethical divergence between the two characters. Werner's question articulates a belief in agency and self-determination, while Frederick's response – *"It doesn't matter what I want"* – signals resignation to external authority. The antithetical exchange between idealism and fatalism exposes two incompatible worldviews shaped by the same environment. The image of the "alien light" beyond the window functions symbolically, suggesting a future that is present yet inaccessible, visible yet fundamentally estranged. Frederick's final remark, *"you still believe you own your life,"* introduces bitter irony, dismantling the illusion of personal autonomy under totalitarian control and redefining fidelity as loyalty to truth rather than hope.

Upon returning to Schulpforta, the boys are once again subjected to the institution's rigid discipline, violence, and systematic humiliation. A pivotal episode involves the collective punishment of a prisoner:

"When his turn arrives, Werner throws the water like all the others and the splash hits the prisoner in the chest and a perfunctory cheer rises. He joins the cadets waiting to be released. Wet boots, wet cuffs; his hands have become so numb, they do not seem his own. ... Frederick, who clearly cannot see well without his glasses. Who has not been cheering when each bucketful of water finds its mark. Who is frowning at the prisoner as though he recognizes something there. And Werner knows what Frederick is going to do" (Doerr, p. 170).

Here, the metaphor *"his hands have become so numb, they do not seem his own"* conveys both physical and moral dissociation. Werner's participation in cruelty is marked by a loss of agency, reflecting the process by which obedience erodes ethical responsibility. The contrastive portrayal of Frederick – who refuses to cheer and appears to recognize the prisoner's humanity – underscores the divide between mechanical compliance and moral awareness. The repeated relative clauses isolate Frederick's actions, intensifying the sense of inevitability implied by the closing sentence and foreshadowing the consequences of his fidelity to conscience.

As the narrative progresses, Frederick's ethical otherness becomes increasingly visible and dangerous: "*Frederick's dreaminess, his otherness – it's on him like a scent, and everyone can smell it*" (Doerr, p. 176).

This simile frames difference as something perceptible and punishable, transforming individuality into evidence of deviance. Werner's attempts to suppress his guilt by immersing himself in technical work fail to restore equilibrium: "*Werner tries to lose himself in his work in Hauptmann's lab... but even in those late hours, it is as if the sky has dimmed and the school has become a darker, ever more diabolical place*" (Doerr, p. 176).

His recurring visions of Frederick freeing birds from the pages of a massive book operate as a symbolic counter-narrative, opposing the textual rigidity of ideology with an image of liberation and care. These hallucinations function as ethical reminders that Werner cannot fully silence.

The disappearance of Frederick marks a turning point: "*But what does the truth matter in this place? Werner imagines twenty boys closing over Frederick's body like rats; he sees the fat, gleaming face of the commandant... while blood slowly fills the floor... Werner skips lunch and walks in a daze... it's a sunny, bright noon, but his heart is being crushed slowly in a vise... as if he's peering through several feet of blue water*" (Doerr, p. 190).

The rhetorical question expresses the collapse of truth in an environment governed by violence. Hyperbolic imagery of blood flooding the floor amplifies the moral catastrophe of the institution, while the contrast between bright daylight and inner devastation underscores the dissonance between external normalcy and internal collapse. The metaphor of submerged perception conveys Werner's shock and ethical paralysis.

Although Frederick survives, he never recovers: "*Sometimes at night, Werner sees Frederick when he is not there... Frederick: who did not die but did not recover*" (Doerr, p. 195).

This final formulation resists closure. Frederick becomes a living remainder – a figure who embodies the cost of fidelity in a world that punishes moral resistance. Werner's enduring guilt testifies to betrayal not as a single act, but as a gradual surrender of moral agency.

Taken together, these episodes demonstrate that the dichotomy of **fidelity and betrayal** in Doerr's novel is realized as a complex ethical continuum. Fidelity emerges as loyalty to conscience and humanity, even at the cost of suffering, while betrayal manifests through accommodation, silence, and fear-driven compliance. In this sense, the novel reframes betrayal not as overt treachery, but as the slow erosion of responsibility – an insight that deepens its moral and philosophical resonance.

Moral–Ethical Dichotomy III: Good and Evil

The next moral–ethical conceptual dichotomy is **good vs. evil**. Although this opposition is among the most canonized binaries in literary studies, it remains analytically productive precisely because each author re-parameters it – shifting the “center of gravity” from abstract moral allegory toward everyday micro-decisions, embodied vulnerability, and the social technologies that normalize harm. In Doerr’s novel, the dichotomy is not staged as a simplistic clash of moral essences; rather, it is distributed across perceptual regimes (what can be sensed, what is concealed), ethical habits (care, attentiveness, restraint), and institutional scripts (indoctrination, surveillance, coercion). In this sense, “good” emerges less as a stable attribute than as a practice of humane orientation under pressure, whereas “evil” appears as both overt violence and the quieter corrosion of conscience engineered by war.

Textual and plot-based analysis allows us to locate this dichotomy, first, in the contrast between **Marie-Laure’s sustained capacity for kindness and moral lucidity** – even under occupation – and, second, in the **systemic cruelty** embodied by the Nazi apparatus and the officers who enact its logic. The novel’s ethical architecture is built on the insight that goodness is most visible not when it is triumphant, but when it must operate without guarantees: when there is no certainty of reward, no promise of safety, and no stable horizon of justice.

Marie-Laure, despite the blindness that accompanies her from childhood, performs goodness as a disciplined form of perception and an insistence on human dignity. Her disability is repeatedly framed by others as misfortune or familial “curse,” yet the narrative reconfigures it as an epistemic alternative – an experience that intensifies attention to texture, sound, rhythm, and relational presence. In the museum scene, the child’s world is not reduced by blindness; it is reorganized by it into a different sensory ontology:

“The children she meets brim with questions: Does it hurt? Do you shut your eyes to sleep? How do you know what time it is? It doesn’t hurt, she explains. And there is no darkness, not the kind they imagine. Everything is composed of webs and lattices and upheavals of sound and texture.” (Doerr, p. 45).

Here, the battery of questions (“Does it hurt? ... How do you know...?”) dramatizes a gap between normative assumptions and embodied reality, while Marie-Laure’s reply reframes blindness not as absence but as *recomposition*: “no darkness, not the kind they imagine.” The metaphoric sequence – “webs,” “lattices,” “upheavals” – turns perception into a structured, almost architectural event, implying that moral resilience is grounded in the capacity to *re-pattern experience* rather than surrender to deprivation. Goodness, in this optic,

becomes inseparable from attentiveness: to the world's fine-grained surfaces and to the needs of others.

During the occupation, Marie-Laure's moral stance does not remain a private virtue; it is tested under immediate threat. In an air-raid scene, Doerr constructs urgency through parallel repetition and narrowing temporal units, but he also foregrounds a decisive ethical feature: her refusal to reduce life to mere self-preservation. The narrative stages a tension between what she "should" do for safety and what she chooses to protect as meaningful:

"Every second the airplanes draw closer; every second is a second lost. She should be rushing downstairs. She should be making for the corner of the kitchen where a little trapdoor opens into a cellar full of dust and mouse-chewed rugs and ancient trunks long unopened. Instead, she returns to the table at the foot of the bed and kneels beside the model of the city" (Doerr, pp. 21–22).

The anaphora "She should be..." functions as an internalized imperative – an ethics of survival scripted by common sense. Yet the pivotal "Instead" marks the emergence of an alternative logic: the model city becomes a condensed symbol of memory, belonging, and civic continuity. The cellar is described in concrete, almost tactile detail ("dust," "mouse-chewed rugs"), intensifying the realism of possible refuge; the choice to return to the model therefore cannot be dismissed as naïve. Rather, it suggests that goodness is also *fidelity to meaning* – the preservation of inner order when outer order collapses.

The same ethical stamina is rendered even more starkly when the town burns. Doerr emphasizes a paradox: Marie-Laure cannot see the flames, but she registers catastrophe with acute precision, and she responds not with panic but with a self-instructional discipline of breath and cognition:

"She smells smoke and knows. Fire. The glass has shattered out of her bedroom window, and what she hears is the sound of something burning beyond the shutters. Something huge. The neighborhood. The entire town. ... The house is not yet in flames. But for how long? Calm yourself, she thinks. Concentrate on filling your lungs, draining them. Filling them again. She stays under her bed. She says, 'Ce n'est pas la réalité'" (Doerr, pp. 80–81).

The clipped declaratives ("Fire." "Something huge.") mimic shock while refusing melodrama; the rhetorical question ("But for how long?") is the moment where fear enters language. Yet the repetition of breath instructions – "Filling... draining... filling again"—reasserts agency at the level of bodily rhythm. The French phrase "Ce n'est pas la réalité" functions as a psychological shield, but also as a cognitive strategy: it creates a thin membrane between self and terror, enabling action rather than collapse. The novel thereby implies that goodness is not sentimental softness; it is a practiced capacity to remain human – lucid, composed, responsive – inside circumstances designed to dehumanize.

Against this figure of moral perception, Doerr juxtaposes the machinery of evil, which operates not only through weapons but through rumor, hunger, and epistemic destabilization. Even before full occupation, the Parisian “talk” about Germans is a catalogue of grotesque exaggerations – an ecology of fear that spreads faster than facts:

“A Germans, a gardener claims, have sixty thousand troop gliders; they can march for days without eating; they impregnate every school-girl they meet. A woman behind the ticket counter says the Germans carry fog pills and wear rocket belts; their uniforms, she whispers, are made of a special cloth stronger than steel” (Doerr, p. 55).

Hyperbole here is not merely comic distortion; it is a portrait of informational war as a moral environment. The “fog pills” image is especially suggestive: it metaphorizes the way propaganda and rumor cloud judgment, making populations easier to manage. Evil thus expands beyond direct brutality into the manipulation of perception – training people to imagine the enemy as superhuman, omnipotent, and therefore irresistible.

Later, occupation becomes legible through starvation, silence, and the slow normalization of atrocity. The scene describing Paris under rationing compresses a social catastrophe into concrete practices of survival, and then refracts it through Marie-Laure’s imagination in a sequence of auditory and symbolic fragments:

“In Paris, the women say, people are waiting in line five hours for a loaf of bread. People are eating pets, crushing pigeons with bricks for soup. There is no pork, no rabbit, no cauliflower. The headlights of cars are all painted blue, they say, and at night the city is as quiet as a graveyard: no buses, no trains, hardly any gasoline. ... From the kitchen window comes the wit wit wit of a barn swallow... Ghosts. Germans. Snails” (Doerr, pp. 113–114).

The comparison “quiet as a graveyard” is not decorative: it installs death as the city’s new acoustic baseline. The list of absences (“no pork, no rabbit, no cauliflower”) reads like an inventory of a broken everyday. The final elliptical triad – “Ghosts. Germans. Snails.” – collapses fear, occupation, and the uncanny slowness of survival into three blunt nouns, enacting how evil saturates consciousness until categories blur. Notably, the barn swallow’s “wit wit wit” inserts nature’s persistence as a counterpoint, but not a consolation: it intensifies the sense that human cruelty has made the ordinary world strange.

Crucially, the novel’s most analytically incisive account of evil is not limited to battlefield violence; it is the **ideological production of cruelty** – the deliberate shaping of children into instruments. Doerr exposes totalitarian pedagogy as a program of moral mutilation: censorship, falsified documents, racial “science,” and systematic training in affective numbness. The following

passage crystallizes the process by which a community is taught to regard death as honor and to transmute grief into loyalty:

"Reinhard Wçhlmann's father falls. Karl Westerholzer's father falls. Martin Burkhard's father falls... 'Doesn't everything,' he says, 'die at last and too soon? Who would not be honored to fall? To be a paving stone on the road to final victory?' ... A child is born, and the world sets in upon it. Taking things from it, stuffing things into it... the Reich measures their noses, clocks their hair color. The entropy of a closed system never decreases" (Doerr, pp. 204–205).

The repetitive “father falls” is a ritualized syntax of loss: it makes death routine, exchangeable, administratively manageable. Martin’s rhetoric then performs the key operation of propaganda: it converts mortality into infrastructure – “a paving stone” – so that individual lives become materials for an abstract “victory.” The metaphor “A child is born, and the world sets in upon it” describes socialization as invasive pressure, implying that ideology is not merely taught but *installed*. Finally, the scientific aphorism about entropy functions as a devastating metaphor for the Reich’s moral physics: a “closed system” that forbids genuine difference and reflection can only decay. Evil, in this model, is not only what the system *does* to others; it is what it *does to meaning* – how it sterilizes language, repurposes honor, and trains children to narrate their own dehumanization as pride.

Thus, the dichotomy of good and evil in Doerr’s novel is realized through an ethical contrast between **careful, reality-based humanity** (Marie-Laure’s attentive courage, her refusal of panic, her commitment to meaning and to others) and **institutionalized dehumanization** (rumor as fear technology, hunger as social control, propaganda as the manufacture of consent, racial pseudo-science as moral reductionism). The novel insists that war’s deepest injury is not only physical destruction but the distortion of the human capacity to perceive, to judge, to feel, and to choose. Within this framework, goodness appears as the stubborn preservation of humane perception and responsibility, whereas evil appears as the organized attempt to make such preservation seem futile, irrational, or even “dishonorable.”

3. Ontological Dichotomies

Ontological Dichotomy I: Light and Darkness

Reading the novel through the lens of **ontological dichotomies** makes it possible to isolate three structurally dominant oppositional pairs: **light and darkness**, **reality and fantasy**, and **the visible and the invisible**. These binaries do not function as decorative thematic motifs; they operate as organizing principles that regulate how experience becomes narratable, how perception

becomes ethically charged, and how private interiority is staged against the pressures of history.

The first of these dichotomies – **light/darkness** – runs through the entire narrative, constantly shifting between literal and metaphorical registers. On the literal plane, the novel foregrounds Marie-Laure's blindness; on the metaphorical plane, it redefines "light" as a mode of cognition, hope, and self-directed agency. Paradoxically, it is precisely through the character's loss of visual sight that Doerr intensifies the epistemological value of light: Marie-Laure's desire to learn, to orient herself, and to broaden her lived world becomes a sustained movement toward knowledge and inward strength, i.e., toward "light" as an existential achievement rather than a physical condition.

Although her blindness is often framed by others as misfortune – an inherited burden, a "curse," a sign of deprivation – Marie-Laure's trajectory demonstrates the opposite logic: limitation becomes a catalyst for moral and intellectual formation. The girl does not accept the role of a passive dependent. She strives to remain autonomous, to walk the city, to meet new places and people, and to inhabit space as an active subject rather than as an object of care. In this effort, her father's inventions – miniature models, tactile maps, and puzzle boxes – function as pedagogical instruments that translate urban complexity into touchable form, giving her a practical and symbolic pathway from "darkness" as fear and uncertainty toward "light" as intelligibility and competence.

"Usually Marie-Laure can solve the wooden puzzle boxes her father creates for her birthdays. Often they are shaped like houses and contain some hidden trinket. Opening them involves a cunning series of steps: find a seam with your fingernails, slide the bottom to the right, detach a side rail, remove a hidden key from inside the rail, unlock the top, and discover a bracelet inside" (Doerr, p. 37).

In ontological terms, these puzzle boxes stage a crucial principle: the world is not simply "given" to the subject but must be *accessed* through method, patience, and inference. For Marie-Laure, the boxes become more than a playful pastime. They materialize a philosophy of knowledge: meaning is concealed, but not inaccessible; complexity is real, but not unbeatable. Each hidden seam, rail, and key embodies a cognitive lesson that darkness is not the same as emptiness – it is a condition that can be negotiated through structured attention. Consequently, her father's creations become a form of light within darkness: not illumination in the optical sense, but illumination as a disciplined opening of the world.

At the same time, the novel carefully stresses the limits of representation. The city models cannot reproduce the full phenomenology of real life: they cannot

carry the smell of bread on the street, the density of spring air, or the exhaust of traffic. Yet their incompleteness is precisely what makes them ontologically productive: they do not replace reality but train a competent relation to it. They teach Marie-Laure to convert abstraction into action, to convert a miniature system into navigable space, and – most importantly – to cultivate trust in her own agency. In this sense, the models are not merely practical tools; they are ethical supports that enable autonomy under conditions where autonomy is structurally difficult.

The narrative then dramatizes learning as a long struggle against dread, frustration, and repeated failure – emotions that the text implicitly codes as “darkness,” not because they are morally negative, but because they threaten to foreclose possibility. Doerr renders the process with insistently incremental temporality, showing that “light” is achieved not by sudden transformation but by sustained practice.

“Tuesday after Tuesday she fails. She leads her father on six-block detours that leave her angry and frustrated and farther from home than when they started. But in the winter of her eighth year, to Marie-Laure’s surprise, she begins to get it right. She runs her fingers over the model in their kitchen, counting miniature benches, trees, lampposts, doorways. Every day some new detail emerges – each storm drain, park bench, and hydrant in the model has its counterpart in the real world. Marie-Laure brings her father closer to home before making a mistake. Four blocks three blocks two. And one snowy Tuesday in March, when he walks her to yet another new spot, very close to the banks of the Seine, spins her around three times, and says, ‘Take us home,’ she realizes that, for the first time since they began this exercise, dread has not come trundling up from her gut” (Doerr, pp. 41–42).

The opening repetition (“Tuesday after Tuesday”) places failure in a ritual frame: darkness is not a single event but a recurring lived condition. The adjectives “angry and frustrated” anchor the emotional realism of learning, refusing to idealize resilience as effortless. Yet the turning point – “she begins to get it right” – reconfigures the ontology of the city: what was previously an opaque space becomes legible through correspondences between model and world. The list of miniature elements (benches, trees, lampposts, doorways, storm drains) enacts a cognitive poetics of detail: mastery is built not through grand revelation but through the accumulation of small, reliable anchors. Finally, the bodily metaphor – dread “trundling up from her gut” – makes fear visceral and involuntary; its sudden absence marks not mere success in navigation, but a deeper ontological shift: the world becomes inhabitable without panic.

In this way, the light/darkness dichotomy in the novel does not simply mirror Marie-Laure’s blindness. It encodes a larger philosophical claim: “darkness”

names the felt experience of constraint – fear, disorientation, dependence – while “light” names the achieved capacity to orient, to know, and to act. What is most persuasive in Doerr’s construction is that the victory of light is never framed as total or final; it is local, earned, and continually tested. The novel thus transforms an apparently “simple” binary into an analytic model of human becoming: knowledge does not abolish darkness in the external world, but it can prevent darkness from colonizing the self.

Ontological Dichotomy II: Reality and Fantasy

Analyzing the dichotomy of **fantasy and reality** in the novel, it becomes evident that it permeates the entire narrative, generating for the reader a persistent sense of simultaneous immersion in both the empirical world and the imagined realms inhabited by the characters. Doerr does not oppose fantasy and reality as mutually exclusive domains; rather, he constructs them as interpenetrating modes of experience, through which characters negotiate trauma, limitation, and hope. Fantasy, in this sense, does not negate reality but supplements it, offering cognitive and emotional strategies for endurance.

For Marie-Laure, whose blindness deprives her of direct visual exploration, literature becomes a privileged space for transcending physical and situational boundaries. Adventure fiction, in particular, functions as an epistemic extension of the world she cannot see. Her fascination with Jules Verne’s *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* is therefore not incidental. Despite the bookseller’s dismissive remark that the novel is “only interesting for boys,” Marie-Laure not only insists on owning it but becomes increasingly invested in its unknown worlds and speculative possibilities. The narrative of exploration, danger, and discovery serves as a symbolic bridge to a realm inaccessible through sensory perception yet fully available through imagination.

Even under occupation, Marie-Laure’s attachment to adventure literature remains intact. She repeatedly asks her uncle Etienne to read aloud books that are not adapted into Braille, thereby reaffirming her desire to access knowledge in its most expansive forms. Her commitment to reading becomes a metaphor for the resilience of imagination, which proves capable of resisting external restrictions imposed by war, fear, and surveillance. The culmination of this attachment occurs on her sixteenth birthday, when she receives a copy of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* – a gift she rereads obsessively, even when the narrative is already memorized, transforming repetition into a ritual of hope.

“‘Chapter One,’ she reads. ‘A Shifting Reef.’ The year 1866 was marked by a strange event, an unexplained occurrence, which is undoubtedly still fresh in everyone’s memory.... She gallops through the first ten pages, the story coming back: worldwide curiosity about what must be a mythical sea monster, famed

marine biologist Professor Pierre Aronnax setting off to discover the truth. Is it a monster or moving reef? Something else? (Doerr, p. 59)

In this passage, Doerr skillfully employs stylistic devices that convey Marie-Laure's excitement and reconstruct the atmosphere of adventure and mystery. The direct quotation of the opening chapter – "*Chapter One... A Shifting Reef*" – serves a dual function: it immerses the reader in Verne's fictional universe while simultaneously underscoring the vital role literature plays in Marie-Laure's inner life. The rhetorical questions – "*Is it a monster or moving reef? Something else?*" – reproduce the suspense of discovery and mirror Marie-Laure's own intellectual curiosity, drawing the reader into a shared process of anticipation. Parallel constructions and enumerations heighten narrative momentum, tracing the gradual unfolding of the Vernean plot. The metaphorical verb "*gallops*" replaces a neutral description of reading speed, expressing emotional urgency, enthusiasm, and imaginative propulsion. The historical framing – "*The year 1866 was marked by a strange event*" – adds a layer of pseudo-documentary realism, reinforcing the illusion that fantasy itself can claim a form of truth.

Yet this imaginative immersion unfolds against an unyielding reality. The tension between fantasy and lived experience becomes particularly visible in the scene of Marie-Laure's birthday gift:

"On the floor outside Marie-Laure's bedroom door waits something big wrapped in newsprint and twine. From the stairwell, Etienne says, 'Happy sixteenth birthday.' She tears away the paper. Two books, one stacked atop the other. Three years and four months have passed since Papa left Saint-Malo. One thousand two hundred and twenty-four days. Almost four years have passed since she has felt Braille, and yet the letters rise from her memory as if she left off reading yesterday. Jules. Verne. Twenty. Thousand. Leagues. Part. One. Part. Two." (Doerr, pp. 64–65).

Here, the epithet "*something big wrapped in newsprint and twine*" creates an atmosphere of anticipation and quiet ceremony. The modest packaging contrasts with the emotional magnitude of the gift, emphasizing that meaning does not depend on material excess. The symbolic weight of Verne's novel transforms the moment into an affirmation of continuity: imagination survives absence, loss, and temporal rupture. The precise calculation of time – "*three years and four months... one thousand two hundred and twenty-four days*" – introduces a quantitative register that intensifies the emotional impact of separation from her father. Time becomes measurable, oppressive, and heavy, reinforcing the distance between past security and present vulnerability.

The fragmented syntax – "*Jules. Verne. Twenty. Thousand. Leagues.*" – mimics the tactile rhythm of Braille reading, slowing the narrative pace and foregrounding the physical effort involved in accessing text. This stylistic choice

not only authenticates Marie-Laure's embodied experience but also magnifies the joy and concentration accompanying the act of reading. The retrospective phrase – *“as if she left off reading yesterday”* – collapses temporal distance, suggesting that memory functions as a bridge between past and present, fantasy and reality. Reading thus becomes an act of temporal resistance, preserving identity across rupture.

Despite the harsh reality of occupation, Marie-Laure does not abandon her capacity to dream. She imagines herself one day visiting the distant places described in her favorite books, drawing strength from the belief that the world extends beyond the confines of war. Her imagination does not isolate her from others; on the contrary, it motivates acts of ethical generosity. Seeking to offer listeners hope and momentary escape from wartime monotony, she activates her uncle's radio transmitter and begins broadcasting readings from Jules Verne's novel. In this act, fantasy is transformed into communal resistance: a shared imaginative space that counters fear, restores human connection, and affirms the necessity of dreaming even amid devastation.

Through the sustained interaction of fantasy and reality, Doerr demonstrates that imagination is not a retreat from truth but a mode of survival and moral engagement. Fantasy provides Marie-Laure with cognitive freedom, emotional continuity, and the capacity to sustain others, while reality tests and refines these qualities. The dichotomy thus resolves not into opposition but into productive tension, revealing how the imagined world enables characters to endure, interpret, and ultimately confront the real one.

Ontological Dichotomy III: Visible and Invisible

One of the most striking realizations of the dichotomy **“the visible and the invisible”** in the novel is the depiction of the Resistance movement's struggle against the German occupiers. Under occupation, the inhabitants of Saint-Malo are forced to adapt to a reality imposed by military power, surveillance, and fear. Yet beneath the surface of apparent compliance, an alternative layer of action persists – covert, fragmented, and deliberately concealed. This hidden activity constitutes the realm of the “invisible”: a network of small, calculated interventions that subtly reshape reality, destabilize the occupiers' control, and affirm the ethical necessity of resolve and loyalty even under extreme constraint.

Doerr emphasizes that resistance does not always manifest through open confrontation. Instead, it often takes the form of ordinary gestures performed by ordinary people, whose outward appearance masks their subversive intent. This strategy of invisibility becomes both a means of survival and a form of power, allowing resistance to operate beneath the occupiers' field of vision.

“Madame Ruelle, the baker's wife – a pretty-voiced woman who smells mostly of yeast but also sometimes of face powder or the sweet perfume of

sliced apples – straps a stepladder to the roof of her husband's car and drives the Route de Carentan at dusk with Madame Guiboux and rearranges road signs with a ratchet set. They return drunk and laughing to the kitchen of Number 4 rue Vauborel" (Doerr, p. 268).

In this passage, Doerr constructs a multilayered portrait of resistance through stylistic contrast. The epithets "*pretty-voiced woman*" and "*sweet perfume of sliced apples*" situate Madame Ruelle firmly within the sphere of domestic normalcy, evoking warmth, familiarity, and feminine gentleness. Sensory imagery – especially olfactory detail – anchors the character in everyday life, associating her with bread, kitchens, and care rather than with danger or rebellion. This deliberate emphasis on the mundane heightens the paradox of her actions: resistance is enacted not by stereotypical heroes, but by figures whose visibility is strategically innocuous.

At the same time, the dynamic verbs "*straps,*" "*drives,*" and "*rearranges*" foreground purposeful agency. The physicality of the actions – moving ladders, altering road signs with tools – underscores that resistance is materially grounded, not merely symbolic. The humorous note in "*drunk and laughing*" further complicates the scene: laughter becomes a quiet form of defiance, a refusal to internalize fear. Ironically, the very lightness of the moment strengthens its subversive force, suggesting emotional resilience as a component of resistance.

A similar logic operates in another episode, where resistance is enacted through knowledge, rumor, and botanical detail: "*Three days later, Madame Fontineau overhears that the German garrison commander is allergic to goldenrod. Madame Carré, the florist, tucks great fistfuls of it into an arrangement headed for the château*" (Doerr, p. 269).

Here, irony functions as a central rhetorical device. The fact that something as fragile and ornamental as flowers can be weaponized against military authority destabilizes conventional hierarchies of power. The commander's allergy transforms a personal weakness into a tactical opportunity, while the florist's bouquet becomes an instrument of sabotage disguised as civility. The contrast between the elegance of floral arrangements and their covert lethality exemplifies the novel's broader logic: the invisible undermines the visible from within its own codes of decorum and order.

These episodes reveal how Doerr systematically opposes appearance and function. Actions that seem harmless – or even absurd – carry significant strategic weight. Domestic labor, social gossip, and aesthetic gestures become tools of resistance precisely because they evade suspicion. The visible surface of everyday life conceals an invisible infrastructure of dissent.

Beyond these individual acts, the novel broadens the scope of the visible/invisible dichotomy by cataloguing the diverse strategies employed by the

Resistance. Some inhabitants alter road signs to misdirect German troops; others transmit coordinates of artillery positions; still others circulate painted coins bearing the inscription “*Free France Now*”, hoping these messages will reach liberating forces. Each action is small in isolation, yet together they form a dispersed system of opposition that steadily erodes the occupiers’ sense of control.

Crucially, Doerr resists portraying resistance as spectacular or immediately effective. Instead, he insists on its cumulative logic. What remains invisible to the enemy – individual gestures, anonymous contributions, fleeting disruptions – becomes visible in its consequences. Confusion spreads, authority weakens, and the occupiers’ dominance is exposed as contingent rather than absolute. The novel thus reframes visibility as a liability for power and invisibility as a condition of endurance.

Through this ontological opposition, Doerr articulates a profound ethical insight: history is not shaped solely by what is publicly seen or officially recorded. It is also – and often more decisively – shaped by what operates in concealment, by those who act without recognition, and by forms of courage that do not announce themselves. The dichotomy of the visible and the invisible therefore becomes a framework for understanding resistance itself: not as a single heroic narrative, but as a constellation of hidden acts whose moral significance exceeds their immediate perceptibility.

In this way, *All the Light We Cannot See* affirms that invisibility does not equate to insignificance. On the contrary, the unseen labor of resistance becomes the very force that preserves human dignity and reshapes reality from within, demonstrating that even the smallest, least visible actions can participate in the struggle for freedom.

4. Political Dichotomies

Political Dichotomy I: War and Peace

Political dichotomies occupy a central place in the novel, as war itself is a socio-political phenomenon grounded in armed aggression and violence as a means of resolving conflicts. When analyzing a historical novel devoted to wartime experience, particular attention must be paid to the political dimensions articulated through the text. In *All the Light We Cannot See*, these dimensions are structured through a system of conceptual oppositions that include **war and peace**, **freedom and humiliation**, and **patriotism and collaborationism**. These dichotomies do not remain abstract political categories; rather, they are embodied in everyday experience, emotional perception, and ethical decision-making.

The first and most fundamental opposition – **war versus peace** – is revealed through the contrast between the protagonists’ lives before the war and their

existence under occupation. Doerr deliberately emphasizes the rupture between a stable, meaningful past and a present defined by chaos, deprivation, and fear. This contrast not only underscores the tragic nature of armed conflict but also allows the reader to grasp the profound emotional and social consequences of war for individual lives.

"For portions of every day, she manages to lose herself in realms of memory: the faint impressions of the visual world before she was six, when Paris was like a vast kitchen, pyramids of cabbages and carrots everywhere; baker's stalls overflowing with pastries; fish stacked like cordwood in the fishmonger's booths, the runnels awash in silver scales, alabaster gulls swooping down to carry off entrails. Every corner she turned billowed with color... Now her world has turned gray. Gray faces and gray quiet and a gray nervous terror hanging over the queue at the bakery and the only color in the world briefly kindled when Etienne climbs the stairs to the attic... to send another of Madame Ruelle's messages, to play a song" (Doerr, pp. 112–113).

In this passage, a dense network of epithets, metaphors, personification, contrast, symbolism, and sensory detail constructs Marie-Laure's emotional universe. The epithet *"faint impressions of the visual world"* conveys the fragility and elusiveness of her childhood memories, while the repetition of *"gray"* (*"gray faces," "gray quiet," "gray nervous terror"*) articulates the emotional monotony and suffocating fear of wartime existence. The metaphor *"her world has turned gray"* functions as a political metaphor for life under occupation, where vitality, diversity, and spontaneity are erased by repression.

At the same time, memory becomes a counter-political space. The richly colored imagery of vegetables, pastries, fish, and markets – *"pyramids of cabbages," "deep purple glaze of eggplants"* – creates a sensory archive of peace that resists the erasure imposed by war. Even though Marie-Laure cannot see these colors, Doerr deliberately invokes them to signify abundance, stability, and the fullness of life that once existed. This contrast intensifies the reader's awareness of what has been lost and exposes war as a force that drains the world of meaning as much as of resources.

Symbolic detail further deepens the political dimension of the scene. The phrase *"alabaster gulls swooping down to carry off entrails"* suggests that struggle and violence have penetrated even ordinary, peaceful spaces, foreshadowing the predatory logic of war. Meanwhile, Etienne's physical effort – *"knees cracking"* as he climbs to the attic – symbolizes the bodily and moral burden of resistance. His radio transmissions momentarily restore *"color"* to the gray world, transforming sound into a political act that reintroduces hope and agency into a space dominated by fear.

Through this juxtaposition of memory and present reality, Doerr constructs peace not merely as the absence of war, but as a condition of sensory richness, emotional security, and human connection. War, by contrast, is shown as a systematic reduction of life to monotony, anxiety, and survival. Colors thus function simultaneously as markers of loss and as symbols of longing for a restored future in which peace might once again prevail.

The possibility of returning to normality is also suggested through anticipatory detail. The narrative hints at a future in which Etienne will no longer need to transmit artillery coordinates, and Madame Ruelle can return to helping her husband in the bakery rather than risking her life in the Resistance. This projection of postwar life does not diminish the gravity of wartime suffering; instead, it reinforces the political value of peace by showing what war has interrupted and what remains worth restoring.

Another dimension of the political dichotomy between war and peace emerges in the characters' refusal to abandon their city despite increasing danger: "*The rumors are that only essential personnel and those with medical reasons will be allowed to stay in Saint-Malo. 'We're not leaving,' says Etienne. 'Not when we might finally be doing some good. If the doctor won't give us notes, we'll pay for them some other way'*" (Doerr, p. 352).

Here, rumor functions as a political instrument of uncertainty, reflecting the instability and fear that dominate occupied cities. Etienne's firm declaration – "*We're not leaving*" – articulates a stance of civic responsibility and moral resistance. His words reveal a redefinition of patriotism: loyalty is expressed not through grand ideological statements, but through the willingness to remain, to help, and to accept personal risk for the sake of others. The ironic remark about paying for medical notes "some other way" introduces an element of subversive ingenuity, highlighting how survival under occupation requires both courage and adaptability.

This scene contrasts the logic of war – flight, coercion, self-preservation – with the ethics of peace, understood as responsibility, solidarity, and commitment to communal well-being. The decision to stay becomes a political act that affirms dignity in the face of humiliation and oppression.

A similar ethical and political impulse is articulated in Madame Manec's famous question: "*Madame Manec says, 'Don't you want to be alive before you die?'*" (Doerr, p. 148).

This seemingly simple phrase carries profound philosophical and political resonance. It functions simultaneously as a rhetorical challenge and a call to action, reminding characters – and readers – that mere biological survival under tyranny does not constitute life in its full sense. Within the context of the novel, the question urges Etienne to continue broadcasting resistance messages despite

the danger they pose. It appeals to a conception of freedom grounded in action, choice, and moral responsibility rather than passive endurance.

Madame Manec's words reframe political resistance as an affirmation of life itself. To act, to help others, and to remain faithful to one's ideals is presented as the only way to resist the dehumanizing effects of war. Even under conditions of extreme threat, the novel insists that individuals retain the capacity – and the obligation – to choose meaningful action over fearful silence.

Taken together, these episodes reveal how political dichotomies in *All the Light We Cannot See* are realized through lived experience rather than abstract ideology. **War and peace, freedom and humiliation, patriotism and collaborationism** are enacted in memory, perception, dialogue, and everyday decision-making. Doerr's novel thus demonstrates that the political is inseparable from the personal: history is not only fought on battlefields, but negotiated in kitchens, attics, bakeries, and inner lives. Through this lens, peace emerges not as a distant ideal, but as a fragile, continuously enacted commitment to human dignity, responsibility, and hope.

Political Dichotomy II: Freedom and Oppression

Freedom and oppression constitute one of the novel's most structurally pervasive political dichotomies. Across the majority of episodes, Doerr stages historical violence not merely as a sequence of external events but as a regime of pressure that narrows the characters' horizon of choice until freedom survives chiefly as a remembered possibility or a deferred promise. In this sense, the war-zone is not only a geographical space; it becomes a cognitive environment in which agency is continuously negotiated, diluted, or confiscated.

Werner Pfennig's trajectory renders this dichotomy with particular force because his longing for self-determination is born inside deprivation. From childhood he grows up among exhausted miners and the material scarcity of an orphanage; the very conditions that should have provoked social protection instead create a pipeline into ideological capture. His dream is recognizably modern and emancipatory: to become an engineer, to build, repair, and understand – first by assembling radios from salvaged parts, then by listening with Jutta to broadcasts that seem to open invisible corridors toward other worlds. Yet the novel insists on a bitter paradox: the medium that appears to offer imaginative escape is also the state's most efficient instrument of enclosure. Radio functions simultaneously as aperture and trap – an emblem of freedom that can be repurposed into a technology of obedience.

Doerr crystallizes this ambivalence in the early orphanage broadcasts, where the voice of the regime speaks in the grammar of inevitability and collective uplift: "*We live in exciting times, says the radio. We make no complaints... Is it any wonder... that courage, confidence, and optimism... fill the German*

people? Is not the flame of a new faith rising from this sacrificial readiness?" (Doerr, p. 39). The rhetoric is coercive precisely because it pretends not to be: the repeated interrogatives simulate dialogue while foreclosing dissent, converting listeners into the implied "we" of a manufactured unanimity. Even the metaphor of "the flame of a new faith" reframes political submission as spiritual vocation, elevating sacrificial readiness into a quasi-religious moral absolute. When a children's choir chants, "*We hope only to work, to work and work and work, to go to glorious work for the country,*" the anaphoric repetition produces a sonic image of programmed subjectivity – work not as a means to personal flourishing but as the total horizon of value (Doerr, pp. 39–40). The "glory" promised here is not individual dignity; it is the aesthetic veneer of totalitarian discipline.

This ideological preparation precedes and outlasts open invasion. The state does not simply recruit bodies; it engineers perception, training citizens – especially children – to anticipate "external threats," to accept hostility as natural, and to interpret self-erasure as honor. In this framework, oppression is not only the presence of violence but the internalization of a narrative in which freedom appears selfish, even unintelligible. Werner senses the fissure between the cultivated myth of order and the empirical reality of war, and the novel registers that fissure as cognitive dissonance: an awakening that is painful precisely because it arrives too late to restore innocence.

The later Eastern Front passage intensifies this critique by exposing the absurdity of "order" under conditions of mass displacement and industrialized death: "*And yet what order are they making out here? The suitcases, the queues, the wailing babies, the soldiers pouring back into the cities with eternity in their eyes – in what system is order increasing? Surely not in Kiev, or Lvov, or Warsaw. It's all Hades... as if huge Russian factories cast new men every minute. Kill a thousand and we'll make ten thousand more*" (Doerr, p. 259). The repeated questions operate as an ethical audit of propaganda's central claim: if the regime promises *Ordnung*, why does reality resemble the underworld? The infernal allusion ("Hades") reclassifies occupied landscapes as spaces where ordinary moral coordinates collapse. Most importantly, the factory metaphor dehumanizes the human – precisely to indict the system that already treats people as infinitely replaceable units. War here is not heroic contest but a production line of expendability, where both victim and perpetrator are absorbed into an algorithm of loss.

Against this thick atmosphere of coercion, the novel introduces a counter-symbol of freedom – radio again, but now resemanticized. For the characters, it can feel miraculous: an apparatus of "invisible wires" that collapses distance and resists the isolation war imposes. What matters is not the device's technical

range but its ethical intention: the desire to reach another person, to protect, to console, to speak beyond borders that armies draw.

This alternative valence is articulated in Marie-Laure's exchange with Etienne: "*She leans over the microphone, says, 'Hello out there.' ... 'How far can it transmit, Uncle?' 'Far.' ... 'I thought that if I made the broadcast powerful enough, my brother would hear me. That I could bring him some peace, protect him as he had always protected me'*" (Doerr, pp. 122–123). The dialogue shifts radio from a mouthpiece of the state to an instrument of relational ethics. Transmission is imagined not as conquest of an audience but as care across separation; "peace" becomes something one can attempt to deliver, however fragily, through sound. The short, elliptical answers ("*Far.*" "*Easily.*" "*Yes.*") convey both the simplicity of the mechanism and the depth of what is at stake: in wartime, even the possibility of being heard can feel like a form of freedom.

The same redemptive function appears in the orphanage scene, where listening becomes a shared ritual that temporarily suspends coercion and restores a sense of human community: "*Every evening he carries his radio downstairs... They tune in to newscasts, concerts, operas, national choirs, folk shows... Frau Elena among them, hardly more substantial than a child herself*" (Doerr, p. 39). The catalogue of genres signals cultural plurality – an implicit rebuttal to ideological monologue. Even when news and propaganda coexist in the same stream, the act of gathering around music and voice produces a micro-space of belonging that war cannot wholly extinguish. In this light, radio becomes a contested symbolic field: the same technology can be weaponized to colonize consciousness or reclaimed to preserve dignity, imagination, and connection.

Thus, the political dichotomy of freedom versus oppression in Doerr's novel is not staged as a simple moral diagram in which freedom belongs to one side and oppression to another. Rather, it is dramatized as a struggle over meaning-making itself: who narrates reality, who controls the channels of perception, and whether an individual can still recognize their life as their own. Werner's education shows how oppression works most effectively when it masquerades as opportunity and collective purpose; Marie-Laure and Etienne show how freedom can survive as an act of address – an insistence on voice, relation, and ethical attention even when the world demands silence.

Political Dichotomy III: Freedom and Oppression

When examining the political dichotomies of the third group – *patriotism* versus *collaborationism* – the novel reveals how individuals are forced into morally ambiguous choices between supporting the occupying power and resisting it. This opposition is articulated through characters' actions and reflections, which expose profound internal conflicts and illuminate the

complexity of human behavior under the extreme pressures of war. Rather than presenting these positions as fixed moral categories, Doerr foregrounds their psychological instability, showing how survival, fear, admiration, and resentment coexist within the same consciousness.

This tension is rendered with particular clarity in the episode depicting Claude, the French perfumer, whose perception of the occupying soldiers unsettles conventional expectations of hostility toward the enemy:

“Around four p.m., a small company of German soldiers strolls up the rue Vauborel. They are lean, salmon-faced, and earnest; they have serious eyes; they carry their weapons barrel-down, slinging them over their shoulders like clarinets. They laugh to one another and seem touched underneath their helmets with beneficent gold. Claude understands that he ought to resent them, but he admires their competence and manners, the clean efficiency with which they move. They always seem to be going somewhere and never doubt that it is the right place to be going. Something his own country has lacked.” (Doerr, p. 180)

The description of the soldiers as “lean, salmon-faced, and earnest” deliberately departs from stereotypical representations of occupiers as brutal and faceless aggressors. Instead, the epithets humanize them, endowing the scene with an unsettling normalcy. Further modifiers such as “serious eyes” and “clean efficiency” reinforce an image of discipline and purpose, qualities that Claude implicitly contrasts with what he perceives as France’s disorganization. The metaphor “slinging them over their shoulders like clarinets” aestheticizes the weapons, momentarily neutralizing their lethal function and transforming them into instruments of harmony rather than violence. Similarly, the phrase “touched underneath their helmets with beneficent gold” introduces an almost halo-like imagery, paradoxically sanctifying the occupiers and exposing the seductive power of order and confidence in times of chaos.

The explicit contrast between what Claude “ought to” feel – resentment – and what he actually experiences – admiration – foregrounds the psychological fracture at the heart of collaborationism. His reaction is not born of ideological alignment but of emotional exhaustion and disillusionment with his own nation’s perceived failure. The observation that the soldiers “never doubt that it is the right place to be going” functions symbolically: certainty itself becomes attractive, even when it belongs to the enemy. Doerr thus suggests that collaboration often begins not with betrayal, but with a longing for clarity, stability, and direction in a disintegrating moral landscape.

Claude’s drift toward collaboration becomes explicit in a later passage, where opportunism overtakes hesitation: *“Big Claude goes to the window. This too could be opportunity. Occupation authorities will want to know that a stranger is pacing off distances and making drawings of houses. They will*

want to know what he looks like, who is sponsoring this activity. Who has sanctioned it. This is good. This is excellent" (Doerr, p. 183).

Here, the short declarative sentences – "*This is good. This is excellent.*" – signal a decisive internal shift. The gradation from cautious observation to enthusiastic approval reveals how quickly moral reflection gives way to calculation. The clipped syntax and rapid succession of thoughts convey urgency and predatory alertness, as if Claude's mind were trained to identify advantage rather than justice. The epithet "Big Claude" draws ironic attention to the disparity between his physical presence and his ethical fragility.

This episode exemplifies collaborationism as a survival strategy rooted in self-interest. Claude is willing to endanger another person's life to secure material comfort – food, safety, warmth – commodities rendered scarce by occupation. Doerr neither absolves nor fully condemns him; instead, he exposes collaboration as a morally compromised response to systemic deprivation, one that thrives in conditions where ethical ideals appear incompatible with survival.

In sharp contrast to Claude stands Etienne LeBlanc, Marie-Laure's great-uncle, whose trajectory embodies an alternative response to occupation. Initially portrayed as a reclusive, traumatized man paralyzed by fear and memories of past loss, Etienne undergoes a gradual but decisive transformation following the death of Madame Manec. Confronted with the responsibility of protecting Marie-Laure, he transcends his psychological confinement and commits himself to the Resistance.

This transformation is encapsulated in the following passage: "*Etienne feels strangely good as he steps outside; he feels strong. He is glad Madame Ruelle has assigned him his final task. He has already transmitted the location of one air-defense battery: a cannon on a shelf of rampart beside the Hotel of Bees. He needs only to take the bearings of two more*" (Doerr, p. 267).

The phrase "strangely good" captures the paradox of Etienne's emotional state: fear has not disappeared, but it has been eclipsed by purpose. The repetition of "he feels" emphasizes a renewed corporeal presence, as if action has restored his sense of self. The contrast between his earlier paralysis and his present feeling of strength underscores the novel's assertion that ethical engagement can counteract even deeply rooted trauma. Madame Ruelle's "final task" confers not only danger but meaning, framing resistance as a moral vocation rather than reckless defiance.

The precise spatial detail – "a cannon on a shelf of rampart beside the Hotel of Bees" – anchors Etienne's actions in concrete reality, reinforcing the strategic and material significance of his contribution. The understated phrasing "*He needs only to take the bearings of two more*" heightens narrative tension while conveying inevitability: Etienne has crossed a threshold from which

retreat is no longer possible. His patriotism is defined not by rhetoric but by quiet, methodical action undertaken at immense personal risk.

Although Etienne ultimately falls into the hands of the occupation authorities, his commitment remains unbroken. His patriotism is inseparable from his devotion to Marie-Laure and his belief in collective responsibility. Through Etienne, Doerr articulates a model of resistance grounded in care, solidarity, and ethical resolve rather than heroic spectacle.

Taken together, these contrasting figures – Claude and Etienne – demonstrate how the dichotomy of patriotism versus collaborationism operates not as a simple moral binary but as a spectrum shaped by fear, desire, trauma, and conscience. Doerr's narrative resists didactic judgment, instead exposing the fragile conditions under which ethical choices are made. Collaboration emerges as a corrosive accommodation to oppression, while patriotism is redefined as the willingness to act for others despite fear. In this way, the novel insists that even the smallest decisions, whether driven by self-preservation or moral responsibility, carry profound historical and ethical weight.

CONCLUSIONS

The present study has demonstrated that conceptual dichotomies constitute one of the central organizing principles of *All the Light We Cannot See*, functioning not merely as thematic oppositions but as dynamic cognitive and narrative mechanisms through which Anthony Doerr constructs meaning. Life and death, good and evil, fidelity and betrayal, light and darkness, reality and imagination, visibility and invisibility, freedom and oppression, patriotism and collaborationism are not arranged as static binaries; rather, they are continuously destabilized, reconfigured, and reinterpreted through the lived experiences of the characters. Their specificity lies precisely in this refusal of rigid polarization.

From a conceptual-semantic perspective, these dichotomies operate as gradational rather than absolute categories. Doerr embeds them in characters' perceptions, bodily experiences, and moral reasoning, allowing each pole to coexist with, contaminate, or transform the other. Life is inseparable from the presence of death; good is articulated through vulnerability rather than power; loyalty is tested by fear and survival; and freedom emerges not as a political abstraction but as an intimate, fragile practice sustained through communication, imagination, and ethical choice. In this sense, the dichotomies function as cognitive frameworks that structure the characters' understanding of reality while simultaneously exposing the limits of binary thinking itself.

Ontologically, the opposition between light and darkness – foregrounded already in the novel's title – extends far beyond sensory perception. Light becomes associated with knowledge, moral clarity, and connection, while

darkness signifies not only blindness or ignorance but also trauma, ideological distortion, and moral ambiguity. Crucially, Doerr subverts conventional symbolism by allowing insight to emerge from darkness and ethical blindness to persist in the presence of light. Similarly, the dichotomy of the visible and the invisible redefines agency in wartime: what remains unseen – radio waves, resistance networks, whispered acts of defiance – exerts a transformative force on history, while visible power often proves ethically hollow.

At the moral-ethical level, dichotomies such as good and evil or fidelity and betrayal are internalized as psychological struggles rather than externally imposed judgments. Characters are not positioned as embodiments of abstract values; instead, they inhabit transitional moral spaces where compassion, fear, hope, and self-interest intersect. This internalization reflects a cognitive narratological strategy: ethical meaning arises through processes of perception, memory, and affect rather than through authorial moralization. The reader is thus invited to participate in the evaluative process, experiencing moral tension as an epistemic uncertainty rather than a resolved opposition.

Politically, the dichotomies examined in this study reveal the novel's critical stance toward ideological absolutism. War and peace, freedom and oppression, patriotism and collaborationism are portrayed as lived contradictions rather than ideological slogans. Doerr exposes how totalitarian systems exploit binary thinking to suppress moral complexity, while individual resistance often depends on the ability to preserve nuance, doubt, and empathy. In this context, radio emerges as a unifying symbolic counterforce: it disrupts enforced silences, transcends borders, and restores the possibility of choice by reconnecting individuals to alternative narratives and shared humanity.

In conclusion, the specificity of conceptual dichotomies in *All the Light We Cannot See* lies in their narrative embodiment and cognitive fluidity. They are not imposed structures but experiential processes, shaped by perception, memory, and ethical decision-making. By dissolving rigid oppositions and emphasizing relational meaning, Doerr constructs a novel in which dichotomies do not divide the world into opposing camps but illuminate the fragile, often contradictory conditions under which humanity persists. This approach not only deepens the novel's philosophical resonance but also affirms its relevance as a literary meditation on moral agency, perception, and responsibility in times of historical catastrophe.

SUMMARY

The study examines conceptual dichotomies as central cognitive, semantic, and ethical frameworks in Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See*. It defines dichotomy as a productive literary opposition that structures meaning

while warning against reducing complex experience to rigid binaries. The novel's major oppositions are classified into moral-ethical, ontological, and political groups. The moral-ethical dichotomies of life and death, fidelity and betrayal, and good and evil reveal how war tests conscience, loyalty, and humanity. These oppositions function as fluid continua because the characters' choices emerge from interactions among fear, hope, trauma, compassion, and self-interest. The ontological dichotomies of light and darkness, reality and fantasy, and the visible and invisible connect perception with knowledge, agency, and moral insight. Marie-Laure's blindness, tactile maps, reading, and radio broadcasts demonstrate that imagination and attentive perception can create freedom and connection amid destruction. The political oppositions of war and peace, freedom and oppression, and patriotism and collaborationism expose how totalitarian systems manipulate language, perception, and moral judgment. Radio becomes the novel's key symbolic counterforce because it can transmit propaganda but also sustain resistance, solidarity, hope, and alternative narratives. The study concludes that Doerr transforms binary oppositions into dynamic experiential processes that illuminate moral agency, responsibility, and the fragile persistence of humanity during historical catastrophe.

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