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Research Article

AUTHENTICITY AMIDST THE ADVERSITY: AN EXISTENTIAL STUDY ON ANTHONY DOERR'S ALL THE LIGHT WE CANNOT SEE

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to explore the concept of authenticity depicted by the characters Werner Pfennig, a German boy and Marie-Laure LeBlanc, a blind French girl in the novel *All the Light We Cannot See* written by Anthony Doerr. The novel is a poignant tale of hope, resilience and the human spirit during World War II. The plot follows two young protagonists, Marie-Laure, a blind French girl, and Werner, a German boy, whose paths intersect amid war. The novel explores existentialist themes through the characters' experiences and struggles. According to Jean Paul Sartre's philosophy, Authenticity is the state of being true to oneself, unbound by societal expectations, norms and conventions. The paper attempts to explore the concept of authenticity tied to the theme of identity of these two characters and their struggles to maintain their authenticity, their attempts to define and understand themselves amidst the adversities faced by them.

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INTRODUCTION

The term "Authenticity" refers to the quality of being true to oneself, free from feigning and artificiality. It is a complex concept that has been explored in various philosophical and cultural contexts. It is closely tied to the idea of the "true" self and involves a process of self-discovery and growth. Authentic characters are the one which the readers relate to and their authentic characterization are embedded through their ups and downs. "the characterization describes a person who acts in accordance with desires, motives, ideals or beliefs that are not only hers (as opposed to someone else's), but that also express who she really is." (Varga and Guignon)

Sartre in his work *Existentialism Is a Humanism* argues that authenticity is the fundamental virtue in his ethical outlook and he characterizes various examples of authentic and inauthentic ways of living. His notes posthumously published as *Notebooks for an Ethics*, clearly state that he intended to complete an account of ethics on the basis of authenticity.

a commitment to the importance of authenticity drives Sartre's existentialism. It does so primarily through an exploration of its absence. In plays and novels as well as in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre explores the ways in which people fail to be authentic and the damage this causes to their own lives and to the lives of those they affect (Webber).

The novel *All the Light We Cannot See* written by Anthony Doerr is a historical fiction story that takes place during World War II. The novel is set in 1944, with the Allied forces closing in on Germany. The novel is narrated by an anonymous writer who describes events in a melancholic and reflective manner. The narration of the novel moves back and forth between different time periods but is always narrated in the present tense. The action happens primarily in Paris and Saint – Malo, France and Germany. "Open your eyes and see what you can with them before they close forever." (Doerr 48 – 49)

Marie-Laure, a 16-year-old blind French girl, lives with her father, a museum locksmith, in Paris. When the Nazis occupy the city, they flee to the coastal town of Saint-Malo, where Marie-Laure's great-uncle lives. Marie-Laure's blindness forces her to rely on her other senses and to develop a deeper understanding of the world. The experience allows her to transcend the limitations of her physical condition and to find meaning and purpose in her life. Her existence is not defined by her disability, but rather by her inner strength and resilience. On the other hand, Werner, a 15-year-old German boy, grows up in a mining town, where he becomes fascinated with radio technology. He eventually gets recruited into the German army, where he is tasked with tracking down enemy radio signals. He is assigned to a task force charged with locating and destroying anti-German radio broadcasts. Werner is reluctant to join the army, but he has little choice in the matter. He is forced to participate in the war effort and his skills in radio technology

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make him an asset to the German army. "It's that history is what – ever the victors say it is. That's the lesson. Whoever wins, that's who decides the history. We act in our own self – interest. Of course we do. Name me a person or a nation who does not. The trick is figuring out where your interests are." (Doerr 84)

Marie-Laure is a young and intelligent girl, who was born in Paris to a museum locksmith, Daniel Leblanc. She was blind from a young age and relied on her father to navigate the world. As the war approaches, her father decides to send her to the coastal town of Saint-Malo, where she would be safer. He entrusts her with a valuable diamond, the "Sea of Flames," which is said to bring misfortune to its owner.

Conversely, Werner, a young boy from an orphanage in Germany, is fascinated with science and mechanics. He and his sister, Jutta, listen to a French professor's broadcasts about science, which sparks Werner's curiosity. Werner's talent for radio engineering catches the attention of the Nazi regime and he gets recruited to work for the German army.

As the war intensifies, Marie-Laure and Werner's paths cross in Saint-Malo, where Marie-Laure has taken refuge. Werner is sent to the town to track down a radio broadcast that he believes is being transmitted from the location. Meanwhile, Marie-Laure hides in the city, trying to escape the Nazi occupation.

Authenticity is the degree to which one's actions are congruent with their values and desires, despite external pressures to social conformity. It is a continuous process that requires individuals to constantly reflect on their choices and values, where the individuals develop a sense of self-awareness and an understanding of their values.

For Sartre, authenticity is the key to living an authentic and meaningful life. He defines authenticity as the process of becoming oneself. This means that individuals must create their own identity and values through their actions and choices. Authenticity requires individuals to confront their own limitations and fears, which can lead to a greater sense of empathy and compassion for others (Jean-Paul Sartre's Concept of Authenticity - PHILO-Notes).

The characters in the novel are multidimensional and authentic, with their own unique struggles and motivations. Marie-Laure, a blind French girl, depicted as a symbol of authenticity. Her blindness forces her to rely on her other senses, but she develops a unique way of perceiving the world. Her love for her father, her desire to learn and understand the world around her drive her actions. Despite the danger and uncertainty, Marie-Laure faces, she remains true to herself and her values, refusing to compromise her authenticity. "That air of otherworldliness in the snarls of her hair and the fearlessness of her step. She takes up residence inside him, a living doppelgänger to face down the dead Viennese girl who haunts him every night." (Doerr 423)

Werner Pfennig, the German boy, is opposite to Marie-Laure. His transformation from a curious and innocent boy to a soldier is both heartbreaking and believable. "Werner feels as if has been launched into a different existence, a secret place where great discoveries are possible, where an orphan from a coal town can solve some vital mystery hidden in the physical world." (Doerr 53)

He depicts a complex character who struggles with authenticity. His talent for radio repair and his fascination with science lead him to join the German army, despite his reservations about the Nazi regime. "Werner is succeeding. He is being loyal. He is being what everybody agrees is good. And yet every time he wakes and buttons his tunic, he feels he is betraying something." (Doerr 250) As he becomes more entrenched in the war effort, His actions become less authentic, and he begins to question his values and desires. His journey in the novel depicts the struggle to reconcile his sense of self with the external pressures and expectations placed upon him.

When I lost my sight, Werner people said I was brave. When my father left, people said I was brave. But it is not bravery; I have no choice. I wake up and live my life. Don't you do the same?

He says, "Not in years. But today. Today maybe I did (Doerr 469).

When he saved Marie, his actions demonstrate his humanity and compassion, since he chooses to defy his duties as a German soldier and risk his own life to save Marie-Laure. Through his action, he depicts that authenticity is not about being brave or taking risks, but about being true to oneself and living one's life with integrity.

The interactions and relationships between the characters in the novel are capturing and they reflect the complexities of human connections during times of war. The novel depicts that authenticity being a difficult and often painful process, but essential for living a meaningful and fulfilling life. The characters' struggles to maintain their authenticity in the face of adversity serve as a powerful reminder of the importance of staying true to oneself, even in the most challenging of circumstances.

For Sartre, authenticity is not just about being true to oneself, but also about taking responsibility for one's own choices, values, and identity. In the novel, Marie-Laure and Werner embody this concept of authenticity in different ways. "authenticity involves the awareness that, because we are always free to transform our lives through our decisions, if we maintain a particular identity through time, this is because we are choosing that identity at each moment." (Guignon)

Marie-Laure's authenticity is reflected in her love of science, her curiosity, and her determination to survive and thrive in the face of adversity. Werner's authenticity is more complex and nuanced, as he is torn between his loyalty to his family and his own desires, and his experiences during the war force him to confront the harsh realities of the world. Despite the differences, the characterization of Marie-Laure and Werner consists of an interconnection. They share a sense of curiosity, a love of learning and a desire to understand the world around them. Their bond is strengthened by their shared experiences, including their struggles with loss and their hopes for a better future. Both of them in the novel, emphasize the idea that authenticity is not about being perfect or achieving some idealized state, but about being true to oneself and living one's life with integrity.

We all come into existence as a single cell, smaller than a speck of dust. Much smaller. Divide. Multiply. Add and subtract. Matter changes hands, atoms flow in and out, molecules pivot, proteins stitch changes together, mitochondria send out their oxidative dictates; we begin as a microscopic electrical swarm. The lungs the brain the heart. Forty weeks later, six

trillion cells get crushed in the vise of our mother's birth canal and we howl. Then the world starts in on us (Doerr 468).

Throughout the novel, Doerr explores the tension between authenticity and inauthenticity, highlighting the ways in which societal pressures and expectations can lead individuals to conform and lose touch with their true selves. The novel suggests that authenticity is a difficult and often painful process, but it is essential for living a meaningful and fulfilling life.

The minute observations of everyday objects and the meticulous depiction of historical events add layers of complexity and authenticity to the narrative. It is through these details that Doerr paints a complete picture of the time and place, creating a powerful backdrop for the characters' journeys. Doerr's attention to detail reminds us that every object, every interaction, and every choice has the potential to hold profound meaning. The world he creates is a world of hidden gems, waiting to be discovered and appreciated (Wood).

Sartre's ideas on authenticity are particularly relevant in the way they relate to the themes of freedom, responsibility, and the human condition. *All the Light We Cannot See* is essential to the overall impact and success of the novel. It transports readers to another time and place, adds depth and authenticity to the story, and highlights the significance of the seemingly small moments in life. The characters' struggles to maintain their authenticity in the face of adversity serve as a powerful reminder of the importance of staying true to oneself, even in the most challenging of circumstances. The title of the novel, metaphorically suggests that there are countless invisible stories still buried within the War. Stories of the laymen, women and children are a kind of light we do not see typically. Their authenticity, struggles and strive for individuality and freedom is buried along with the war.

Further scope of study where the novel can be analysed in the perspectives of Memory and Trauma, where Doerr's writings grab the attention to the details the impact of traumatic events on individuals and communities, particularly in regards to the experiences of those who lived through World War II. It explores the ways in which memories of the past shape our understanding of ourselves and our place in the world.

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