



# REPRESENTATION OF DREAD AND DESPERATION BY WERNER: 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 dread and desperation depicted by the character Werner Pfennig, a German boy in the novel *All the Light We Cannot See* written by Anthony Doerr. The novel depicts a 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. 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 make him an asset to the German army. The paper attempts to explore the concept of dread and desperation and highlights feelings of disconnection, confusion, and search for meaning by Werner in the novel.

**Keywords:** Anthony Doerr, *All the Light We Cannot See*, Existentialism, Søren Kierkegaard, Werner, dread, desperation, World War.

The term “Dread” refers to the feeling of anxiety or being worried about something that might happen. On the other hand, the term “Desperation” refers to a state of hopelessness. Contemporary novel characters exhibit dread and desperation as personality traits, making them more complex and relatable. Authors create complex and engaging stories that resonate with readers through dread as a trait. These concepts in literature are explored through the characters’ emotions, actions, and motivations.

Dread also known as angst, is a fundamental concept in the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard. It is a profound and pervasive sense of anxiety, fear, and dread that arises from the human experience of freedom and the uncertainty of the future. “According to the 19th-century philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, dread, or angst, is a desire for what one fears and is central to his conception of original sin.” (Britannica)

Human beings have a natural inclination to seek significance and direction, but this desire is often thwarted by the fact that life is inherently uncertain and unpredictable. The more one tries to impose meaning and order on their life, the more one becomes aware of the abyss of uncertainty that lies beneath. The realization leads to a sense of dread, as one confronts the possibility that their lives may be meaningless and that their choices may have no ultimate significance. “It is the anxiety of understanding freedom when considering undefined possibilities of one’s life and one’s power of choice over them. Angst is one of the primary features of Kierkegaard’s philosophy. It is deeper than anxiety, it is a sort of dread, however – dread without an object.” (Eternalised)

According to Kierkegaard, the self is constantly torn between its potential and its actual existence, leading to a sense of despair and anxiety. The concept of the self is central to his understanding of existential despair. He believes that the self is not a fixed entity, but rather a dynamic and developing process. “An individual is in despair when he or she is not moving in the direction of the person they potentially could be, or in Kierkegaard’s words, despair is the consequence of: “...not willing to be the self which one truly is.”” (Søren Kierkegaard and the Value of Despair)

The authors explore the human experience of freedom and responsibility. Through their works, existentialist writers highlight the absurdity and uncertainty of life, leading to feelings of anxiety, despair, and desperation. By examining these concepts, readers gain a deeper understanding of the human condition and the existential crises that one faces.

Kierkegaard believed that dread and desperation are closely related concepts. He argued that dread is the precursor to desperation, as it is the awareness of one’s freedom and the possibility of making choices that can lead to negative outcomes. Desperation, on the other hand, is the result of the realization that one’s choices have consequences that can affect their very existence.

He believed that the fundamental human condition is one of anxiety and despair and that the only way to overcome this despair is through a leap of faith into a relationship with God. Furthermore, Kierkegaard believed that individuals must take responsibility for their existence and that this responsibility is what causes anxiety and despair (Adam).

The novel *All the Light We Cannot See* written by Anthony Doerr is a historical fiction 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 periods but is always narrated in the present tense.

As the story unfolds, Marie-Laure and Werner's paths converge, and their desperation and dread become intertwined. Both characters are struggling to survive in a world that is torn apart by war, and their desperation is fuelled by their fear of the unknown. The novel masterfully captures the emotional intensity of their experiences, conveying the sense of dread and desperation that permeates their lives. The novel's setting, during the final days of World War II, serves as a backdrop for the existential despair that permeates the narrative. The characters' experiences are marked by uncertainty, fear, and the constant threat of death, which underscores the futility of human existence in the face of war.

The action happens primarily in Paris and Saint-Malo, France, and Germany. As the war intensifies, 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.

Werner Pfennig, the protagonist of the novel, struggles with existential dread throughout the novel. As a young German boy, he is torn between his desire to understand the world around him and his sense of powerlessness in the face of the Nazi regime. Being an orphan, grappled him with existential questions. As a member of the Nazi Youth, he is forced to confront the moral implications of his actions and the consequences of his choices. His existence is marked by a sense of duty and obligation, which he struggles to reconcile with his desires and values.

Werner's existential dilemma is exemplified in his relationship with his sister, Jutta. He is torn between his loyalty to the Nazi regime and his love for his sister, who is increasingly disillusioned with the war. His choices are influenced by the societal pressures and expectations placed upon him, which highlight the tension between individual freedom and collective responsibility. "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) His dread is deeply rooted in his sense of responsibility. As a talented radio operator, he is recruited by the Nazi army to track down the French Resistance. The responsibility weighs heavily on him, as he is forced to confront the moral implications of his actions. His innocence is eroded as he witnesses the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime.

He confronts the harsh realities of war, including the brutal treatment of Jews and other minority groups. The loss of innocence leads to a deep sense of disillusionment and existential angst, as he struggles to reconcile his youthful ideals with the harsh realities of the world around him. "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)

Werner's dread was driven by his search for meaning and purpose. As a young boy, he is fascinated by science and technology, and he sees these fields as a way to understand and control the world around him.

The radio purrs and the woman laughs and Herr Siedler looks almost nothing, Werner decides like his neighbors, their guarded, anxious faces – faces of people accustomed to watching loved ones disappear every morning into pits. His face is clean and committed; he is man supremely confident in his privileges... “Good with tools,” Herr Siedler is saying. “Smart beyond your years. There are places for a boy like you. General Heissmeyer’s schools. Best of the best. Teach the mechanical sciences too. Code breaking, rocket propulsion, all the latest.” Werner does not know where to set his gaze. “We do not have money” (Doerr 84).

He becomes more deeply embroiled in the war, he begins to realize that his scientific pursuits are ultimately futile in the face of the chaos and destruction that surrounds him. Werner's existential angst is further exacerbated by the consequences of his choices. He is forced to confront the moral implications of his actions, and he begins to realize that his decisions have real consequences for others. The realization leads to a deep sense of guilt and regret, as he struggles to come to terms with the harm he has caused.

According to Kierkegaard, desperation is a transfigured version of dread. Both the concepts are illuminated by reference to the notion of sin, and they are constitutive of the dialectic of selfhood. “A subjectivity that faces the existential despair Kierkegaard believed was at the core of human existence and chooses, for the right reasons, to return to the world with an attention, a care, an ethic, a religiosity, and a love that makes life meaningful in the deepest sense it can be for a person.” (Conley)

Werner is driven by a deep-seated desperation to escape his circumstances and forge a better future for himself. His desperation is fuelled by his passion for science and technology, which he sees as a means of transcending his humble origins and achieving greatness. He is motivated by his desire to prove himself to his sister, Jutta, and to find a sense of belonging and purpose in a world that seems determined to crush him. His relationships with Frederick and Marie-Laure serve as a comfort and inspiration, reminding him that there is still beauty and humanity in a world torn apart by war.

As he becomes more involved with the Nazi regime, he is forced to confront the consequences of his actions. He is torn between his duty to his country and his moral obligations to protect innocent lives. His experiences in the war also lead him to question the concept of responsibility. The realization weighs heavily on his conscience, contributing to his existential despair.

*You have been called*, says the letter. Werner is to report to the National Political Institute of Education #6 at Schulpforta. He stands in the parlor of Children’s House, trying to absorb it. Cracked walls, sagging ceiling, twin benches that have borne child after child after child for as long as the mine has made orphans. He has found a way out (Doerr 124).

He is drawn to the world of science and technology, hoping to find answers to his existential questions. However, his experiences in the war and his involvement with the Nazi regime lead him to question the value of his pursuits. Werner's dread is rooted in his sense of powerlessness in the face of the war. Despite his intelligence and resourcefulness, he was unable to change the course of events or prevent the destruction that surrounded him. The powerlessness leads to a deep sense of despair and hopelessness, as he struggles to find meaning in a world that seems to be spiralling out of control.

Frederick said we don't have choices, don't own our lives, but in the end it was Werner who pretended there were no choices, Werner who watched Frederick dump the pail of water at his feet—I will not—Werner who stood by as the consequences came raining down. Werner who watched Volkheimer wade into house after house, the same ravaging nightmare recurring over and over and over (Doer 407).

His search for meaning is reflected in his relationships with others. He forms connections with people who share his values and ideals, but these relationships are often complicated by the circumstances of war. His interactions with Marie-Laure, a young French girl, are particularly significant, as they offer a glimpse of hope and humanity in a world torn apart by conflict. "For Kierkegaard, the only way out of this is to take a leap of faith, which may be the ultimate irrational experience, but for him it is the most reasonable thing you can do, you choose the person you are going to be rather than the world choosing for you." (Eternalised)

The novel *All the Light We Cannot See* is a powerful exploration of the human experience during World War II, capturing the emotions of dread and desperation that defined the lives of those who lived through it. The novel is a testament to the power of human resilience, showing how even in the darkest of times, people can find ways to survive and thrive. Further scope of study where the novel can be analysed in the perspectives of Memory and Trauma. It explores how memories of the past shape our understanding of ourselves and our place in the world.

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