



The Tragedy of War -- A Neorealism Interpretation of *All the Lights We Cannot See*

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Abstract— The novel *All the Light We Cannot See* by contemporary American novelist Anthony Doerr, which won the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for Literature. From the perspective of neorealism, this paper analyzes the different living environments and different ways of growth and redemption of Werner and Marie-Laure. At the same time, it reveals the survival difficulties of people during the war and thus reveals the anti-human and destructive nature of war.

Keywords— *All the Lights We Cannot See*; Neorealism; Werner; Marie-Laure; Anti-war



I. INTRODUCTION

Anthony Doerr, a young American novelist, was born in 1973 and has won numerous awards for his short story collections such as *The Scavenger* and *The Wall of Memory*. His fifth work, *All the Light We Cannot See*, won the Pulitzer Prize for Literature (Fiction), Carnegie Prize for Outstanding Novel, and the Australian International Literature Award in 2015. *All the Light We Cannot See* is a novel about World War II, which tells the story of the growth process of the blind girl Marie-Laure in France and the orphan Werner in Germany during the war. Anthony Doerr did not provide a strong description of war scenes, but instead used contrasting techniques to project his perspective onto small people, showcasing the cruelty and destruction of war by depicting the difficult lives of ordinary people.

At present, the study of this work abroad is mainly about the theme and characters of the work, and only a few

articles are based on the interpretation of critical theories, such as feminism, new historicism and trauma theory. Evelyn Beck (2014) and Judy Murray (2014) both commented on the theme of the work. William T. Vollmann (2014) commented on the main characters in the work. Martha Schulman (2014) traced the creative background of this work. Dave Eagle (2014) analyzed the postmodern aesthetic traits reflected in *All the Light We Cannot See*, as well as the correlation between the classic imagery and the psychological state of the characters in the novel. The research on this work in China has just started, mainly involving theme research, language features, and creative modes. They are also very interested in the growth process and character characteristics of the male and female protagonists. Some scholars also conduct research from specific theoretical perspectives, such as trauma theory, existentialism theory, space theory, new historicism, etc. It can be seen from the current research situation at home and abroad that few scholars interpret this work from the

perspective of neorealism.

This paper attempts to interpret the connotation and theme of the work in a deeper level from the perspective of neorealism. Through the basic creative principles of typical environments and characters, we can understand the impact of real major historical events on the lives of ordinary people and the common survival difficulties of people in the era of war through the typical characters Marie-Laure and Werner. The main characters in the novel bear the imprint of the times, representing a typical social problem at that time: the permanent trauma brought by war to people. This paper will demonstrate the different living environments of Werner and Marie-Laure as well as their different ways of growth and mutual redemption through neorealism techniques such as parallel space narrative, fragmentation narrative and psychological description of characters. This reveals the destructive nature of war and the survival difficulties in war. This calls on everyone to cherish peace, actively face the darkness in life under any circumstances, and believe that light always exists.

II. TEXTUAL FEATURES

In this paper, I will analyze this work from two aspects: the textual features and artistic features of neorealism. Neorealism novels are no longer the product of writers' personal imagination and fiction, but the ingenious combination of fact and fiction. The reintroduction of historical figures and events into realistic novels has become a major feature of it. In the eyes of writers, literature is subjective, and they create an imagined real world according to their own thoughts; History and news history are objective, and historical events are real records. Therefore, on the one hand, they question traditional realism, and on the other hand, they integrate history and news into their novels.

Firstly, in terms of content, one of the biggest features of this novel is the use of a combination of virtual and real techniques, integrating the legend of "Flame of the Sea" into the novel. And based on this, it narrates the story of Marie-Laure and her father guarding the "Flame of the Sea" branch, as well as the plot of German officers listening to the rumors of "Flame of the Sea" and seeking gems in other countries in the context of war to cure their own terminal illness. In

All the Light We Cannot See, Doerr fictionalizes a precious gem called "Flame of the Seas". The mysterious legend about it is that the person who owns this gem will live forever, but everyone he loves will be haunted by bad luck, never ending, making people imagine it. The legend of "Flame of the Sea" caught the attention and frantic search of German Sergeant von Rumpell, who was suffering from cancer. By chance, Marie-Laure, who had obtained the "Flame of the Sea", gradually grew stronger after losing a close relative, and bravely struggled with von Rumpell in a solitary building.

The mystery of "Flame of the Sea" comes from the legendary curse: the land goddess created "Flame of the Sea" and prepared to give it to her lover, the God of sea, but the gem was found by the prince. The goddess was enraged and cursed the gem, cursing those who possessed it: the one who possessed it would live forever, but everyone he loved would be haunted by bad luck and never end. However, as long as the gem was thrown into the sea and those who deserved it were given it, the curse would be lifted. In the story of "Flame of the Sea", whether it is the prince who first picked up the gemstone or the duke who bought the gemstone several years later, everyone who owned this gemstone has become destitute and alone, seemingly confirming the existence of the curse. In the novel, in order to prevent the precious gem "Flame of the Sea" from falling into the hands of the enemy, LeBron, the father of the museum's key manager, Marie-Laure, takes "Flame of the Sea" to the small seaside town of St Malo. German Sergeant von Rumpell suffered from cancer and was crazily longing for the blue diamond that "whoever possesses the gemstone will live forever". LeBron hid the gemstone in his daughter's miniature model, and Marie-Laure became the owner of the gemstone. With it came the unknown fate of his father, the illness and death of his nanny, Mrs. Mane, and the arrest of his uncle, Etienne. Marie-Laure, who is familiar with the legend of "Flame of the Sea", once believed that her safety and the experiences of her friends and family were all caused by a curse when she accidentally discovered the gem. The "Flame of the Sea" brought misfortune to Marie-Laure, but what she wanted to discard was what von Rumpell desperately wanted. The Flame of the Sea symbolizes human desires. It is unique and priceless, making people cannot help but want to possess it. Throughout history,

human desires have always been the driving force behind every major war. The countries that launched the war were determined to seize the wealth and land of other countries. In order to obtain the wealth and benefits they craved; they spared no cost to seize them. However, the invaded countries were not willing to give up their wealth and tried their best to resist, causing misfortune and triggering war. The curse of "Flame of the Sea" will only benefit the owner, and even so, the misfortunes around it will inevitably affect the owner. Correspondingly, after the end of the war, whether it is the initiator or victim of the war, the winner or loser, the gain of benefits from the war is far less than what they lose compared to the economic collapse and casualties. By combining mythological gems with world wars in this way, the author aims to illustrate that the pursuit of desire can lead to misfortune and even trigger war, and this cruel war only brings endless harm and pain to people.

Different from traditional novels, American neorealism novels have a cross genre structure. The representative work *The Color Purple* by Alice Walk, a renowned black female novelist in contemporary American literary circles, is a groundbreaking epistolary record of Silly's growth from a black woman who has been bullied by black men to a person with independent spirit and personality. This cross-genre structure strengthens the artistic charm of the novel and achieves the goal of expressing the author's thoughts and themes. In this novel, a large number of letters appear, combined with the plot of the novel, forming this cross-subject structure. The letters that constantly appear in the novel are correspondence between Werner and his sister Jutta.

"Dear Werner,

Why don't you write? [redacted] The foundries run day and night and the stacks never stop smoking and it's been cold here so everyone burns everything to stay warm. Sawdust, hard coal, soft coal, lime, garbage. War widows and every day there are more. I'm working at the laundry with the twins, Hannah and Susanne, and Claudia Förster; you remember her; we're mending tunics and trousers mostly. I'm getting better with a needle so at least I'm not pricking myself all the time. Right now I just finished my homework. Do you have homework? There are fabric shortages and people bring in slipcovers, curtains, old coats. Anything that can be used they say must be used. Just like all of us here.

Ha. I found this under your old cot. Seems like you could use it.

Love,

Jutta" (Doerr, 267)

At first, Werner and Jutta only shared their respective lives, thoughts, and greetings towards each other. Werner told Jutta about the experiments he conducted in Dr. Hauptmann's studio, his experiences in field training, and the story of his friend Frank. And his sister only shares her daily work. However, it can be seen from the crossed-out part of the letter content in the text that all letters have been checked by a dedicated person, and inappropriate words inside will be deleted. Any mention of the cruelty of war, the mistakes of war, and similar words that bring harm to people will be deleted. In the context of war, people's freedom of speech is restricted.

"To My Dear Sister Jutta-

It is very difficult now. Even paper is hard to [redacted]

We had [redacted]

no heat in the [redacted] Frederick used to say there is no such thing as free will and that every person's path is predetermined for him just like [redacted]

and that my mistake was that I [redacted]

I hope someday you can understand. Love to you and Frau Elena too. Sieg heil." (Doerr; 283)

Later on, fewer and fewer letters between Werner and his sister could be delivered to each other, and more and more content was deleted from the letters. From the remaining content, it can be inferred that the war is becoming increasingly fierce, and all the children in the training camp are starting to go to the battlefield. Everyone must obey the command to participate in the war, regardless of their personal will. And Werner seemed to realize that his scientist's dream had been shattered, or perhaps it had been a scam from the beginning, with his talents and abilities only being used to create more lethal weapons. Werner witnessed the cruelty of the war. It forces young people who should have studied and pursued their dreams in school to face the bloody, violent, and killing on the battlefield. Werner

sympathized with Frederick's plight, but was also powerless. Frederick is an extremely bird loving person who understands various bird species and habits. Without war, he could have become a bird scientist. But he also had to be forced onto the battlefield. On the training ground, he was often bullied and beaten because he was not good at physical fitness, and he was also known as a freak because he liked birds. Under the torment of his companions and training system, Frederick finally collapsed and became a patient. War not only brings pain and disaster to ordinary people, but every soldier forced into it also suffers physical and psychological trauma, and loses their dreams and beliefs. Because they don't know exactly what they're fighting for.

III. The Artistic features

3.1 Typical Characters in Typical Environments

In terms of artistic features, compared with realism, neorealism inherits and develops the creation principle of "typical characters in typical environment". Typification is a process of summarizing the majority from a few, writing the essence in form, and expressing the general through individual expressions. In this process, generalization and personalization are intertwined, interacting and infiltrating each other, and finally displaying the universal meaning in a personalized form. Neorealism novelists, on the one hand, inherited this realism tradition, and on the other hand, developed this tradition in combination with reality, giving their typical environment and typical characters a sense of the times. *All the Light We Can Not See* focuses on shaping the general living conditions of the people of Germany and France during World War II. Each character depicted in the book is a typical character from the typical environment of World War II, and each character carries the imprint of the times.

Soldiers are typical figures in the context of war. Werner is a young soldier in the text and a microcosm of countless young soldiers in the context of war, as joining the National Youth League became a mandatory order at that time. All the boys had to be trained in the military camp, and eventually picked up their guns and walked onto the battlefield. Werner was fortunate because of his exceptional talent in physics and mathematics, which would enable

Germany to gain a favorable position in the war. There are lucky people, there are unfortunate people, such as Werner's comrades Neumann 1, Neumann 2, Baid, etc. The author has not described them much, but their endings can be imagined. There is also a regrettable Frederick who became a foolish person before going to the battlefield and was taken home. He could have become a bird scientist, but he had to come to the military camp due to the war, where he suffered from both psychological and physical trauma, ultimately forcing a healthy and lively boy to collapse. The brutal war has caused young people lose their future and even their lives. They also have to face killings, bloodshed, and violence, suffering from both physical and psychological trauma. But in the context of war, their fate can only be like this.

Marie-Laure is a blind girl living in France, a microcosm of all the lower-class ordinary people in war. But she wasn't so lucky, her eyes couldn't see like everyone else. But she also strives to survive. Her father would build a small model of the surrounding buildings for Marie-Laure, and then ask her to feel the corresponding buildings, count the corresponding streets, and remember the locations of homes, convenience stores, bakeries, and museums. Her father just hopes that Marie-Laure can survive alone. And she was also very serious about learning and memorizing, and really did it. During her father's absence, she was also living a good life. Not only that, she can even transmit information, broadcast, and evade searches, doing just as well as people who can see with their eyes. She works hard to live in order to wait for her father to come back and return to their own home with him. She also looks forward to going to "see" the world with her father and experiencing the wonderful world described in *Twenty Thousand Miles Under the Sea*. After Marie-Laure's father was arrested, only Marie-Laure, Etienne, and Mrs. Mane were left at home. They represent disabled children, the elderly, and women, three groups often seen as vulnerable groups in society, implying the weak who were forced to stay behind in the war. Under the ravages of war, they had to leave their homes, anxious about their own fate, and forced to face the separation from their loved ones. Marie-Laure's grandfather, Uncle Etienne's brother, died in World War I. Etienne was left with psychological trauma due to his brother's passing, and stayed in his room for many years unwilling to see

anyone; The sudden disappearance of her father, who had been taking great care of herself, plunged Marie-Laure into despair and pain. Later, Mrs. Mane's death due to illness also made her feel tormented. However, although such a life and death separation are a common painful experience for every family forced into war during times of war, war, like the constantly rotating Earth, will not stop due to their pain. Marie-Laure was a representative of countless ordinary people in war. They rack their brains to hide and resist, not because they are brave, but because they want to live. They did not choose to be brave on their own initiative, but because of the fragmentation of their homes and the separation of their loved ones caused by war, they lost their dependence and had to become strong in order to survive.

German Sergeant von Rumpell, as the villain in the novel who snatches gems, is endowed with a development process similar to that of Germany in World War II, while also symbolizing the madness and greed of human nature. He is also a typical character in the novel, a microcosm of German soldiers under Nazi rule, and also a microcosm of Germany during World War II. His frantic search for the flames of the sea also implies the historical fact that the Nazis, as a fascist dictatorship and authoritarian regime, launched wars to invade other countries after their first appearance on the historical stage, and their ambition to establish an empire. When he first appeared, although Rumpell was full of confidence, enjoying the support and praise of his family and country, and had gained a lot in occupied countries and regions, his slight physical abnormalities also made it difficult for him to ignore - the presence of cancer had already emerged. In the middle and late stages of the war, cancer recurred and spread throughout his body, causing him increasingly intense pain. The doctor believes that his time is approaching, and at the same time, his country is also about to end:

"The prospects of war plummeted - Germany withdrew from Russia and Ukraine, standing at the ankles of Italy. (Doerr, 340)

Since being diagnosed with cancer, the gemstone "Flame of the Sea" has become no longer just a rare diamond for von Rumpell. Its legendary curse - that whoever possesses the gemstone will never die, making it von Rumpell's last straw in life. For three years, while cancer spread, von Rumpell endured the pain of illness and

constantly searched for gemstones, but found nothing. The storyline of von Rumpell almost coincides with the rise and fall of Germany during World War II. The identity of patients often carries certain cultural connotations and moral significance (Ding Liming, 2019). von Rumpell's cancer hinted at the developmental risks that existed in Germany under Nazi rule. The spread of cancer and his increasing physical decline hinted at the problem of Germany's uncontrollable and powerless recovery at that time, as well as the inevitable outcome of Germany's defeat in the later stages of the war.

3.2 Time and Space Crisscross

In this novel, the intertwining narrative of time and space is also an important feature. Unlike traditional narrative techniques, the author uses intertwined time as the chapter, with August 1944 as the main theme, and adopts a flashback approach. The middle constantly flashes back to before the outbreak of war, and the segments in each chapter switch back and forth between the characters, starting from the childhood of the two protagonists in the 1930s and continuing until their meeting in 1944. However, Doerr disrupted the normal timeline and chose to set the storyline and the beginning of the novel as 1944, the year when World War II was about to end. This allowed readers of World War II history to understand what would happen from the beginning, but later turned to the background story of Werner and Marie-Laure being forced into a war, as well as their fate on the front line of St Malo. In addition to telling the story of what happened in the short five days from August 7 to 12, 1944, and making the readers shocked by the plot. The novel slowly spreads the story line, constantly flashbacks, intersperses the experiences of the two heroes, and divides the original story time from 1934 to 1944 into several fragmentation times. The narrative time of "August 1944-1934- August 1944-1940- August 1944- August 1941- August 1944-1942- August 1944- May 1944- August 1944-1945-1974-2014" has been formed, and this non-linear narrative will gradually enter a better situation as reading deepens.

In addition, in *All the Light We Cannot See*, the author creatively sets parallel perspectives and constantly switches the main perspective of the story in each chapter segment,

resulting in changes in the geographical space where the story takes place. Marie-Laure originally lived in Paris with her father, and went to the museum with him every day to work, where she heard many interesting knowledge. Later, due to the chaos of the war, the father and daughter, like other panicked Parisians, were forced to leave their city and after a period of wandering, arrived at the small seaside town of St Malo. On the other side of Germany, Werner lives in a mining area three hundred miles northeast of Paris and relies on his sister in an orphanage. After realizing his outstanding talent in radio, Werner hopes to go to Berlin to study the cutting-edge science. In order to realize his dream and change his fate as a miner, he enrolled in the National Institute of Political Education, where he received military training and joined the military after graduation. He once fought on the battlefields of Russia and Central Europe, and finally came to the small town of St Malo in France.

Behind the constantly changing geographical space lies the fragmentation of the spiritual and cultural space brought by war to France and Germany. In Paris, due to rumors of impending German invasion, Parisians who had previously lived a peaceful and beautiful life became panicked, packing their precious belongings and rushing to the station, blocking the highway, or fleeing on foot along the road, hoping to escape the desperate flames of war. In Germany, authoritarian rule blinded most people's eyes and ears, making them believe that the country's actions were correct. Joining the army not only changed the established destiny, but also was a very honorable thing to serve the country. Despite receiving brainwashing education, there are still some people who remain sober and rational. When Werner was at school, his friend Frederick refused to obey the instructor's orders due to his conscience, and was bullied by his classmates, punished by the instructor, and ultimately suffered from serious mental illness. In a team mission after Werner joined the army, they mistakenly killed a woman and a little girl. The team members present were not indifferent to seeing blood and corpses, but instead showed varying degrees of self-blame and despair. The author traces the experiences and psychological journey of ordinary people and soldiers from Germany and France, who were opposing sides in the war, throughout the text, laying a dark tone for the entire story caused by the brutal war.

3.3 Psychological Description

Another notable feature of this novel is the use of a large amount of psychological description, which enables the author to create a more rounded character image. In the novel, the most abundant depiction of Marie-Laure's psychology is in the eighth chapter of the novel on August 9, 1944. This chapter tells the story of Marie-Laure hiding alone in her home in St Malo, where Sergeant von Rumpell also found her. Von Rumpell kept searching Marie-Laure's house, trying to find her or "Flame of the Sea," while Marie-Laure kept hiding between the rooms upstairs to protect the precious gemstone left by her father. The author provides a detailed description of Marie-Laure's psychology here.

"The rain is good too: it will stifle the ties.... Maybe to cover her noise?"

She knows exactly where the two galvanized buckets are: just inside the door of her room. She can get to them, maybe even carry one back up.

No, carrying it up would be impossible. Too heavy, too noisy, all that water sloshing everywhere. But she could go to one and lower her face into it. She could fill the empty can of beans." (Doerr, 384-386)

She hid upstairs but was so thirsty that she had to go for a drink. In her heart, she constantly encouraged herself and predetermined the route to take and the situation to encounter in advance. She even figured out her posture, what she wanted to hold in her left and right hands, and how she felt after drinking water. To motivate oneself, one must bravely take a step and drink water. Readers can feel the tense atmosphere at the time. Marie-Laure was both scared and nervous, but in order to survive, she had to drink water and move her position. She is a blind person, and when she cannot see anything, she may touch anything at any time to make a noise, or she may happen to collide with the sergeant. Either of these two situations was enough to put her in danger, but she bravely chose to step out. It's not that Marie-Laure was inherently brave, but that war and harsh living conditions forced her to be brave so that she could survive.

In addition, there are many psychological descriptions of Werner, especially in Chapter 10, when he was about to face death on August 12, 1944.

"He lingers over images of Marie-Laure her hands, her hair- even as he worries that to concentrate on them too

long is to risk wearing them out... .. Eighteen years old. All his life his schoolmasters, his radio, his leaders talked to him about the future. And yet what future remains? The road ahead is blank, and the lines of his thoughts all incline inward: he sees Marie-Laure disappear down the street with her cane like ash blown out of a fire, and a feeling of longing crashes against the underside of his ribs." (Doerr, 479-482)

After Werner met Marie-Laure, his life trajectory also changed. He was no longer a tool of collective will to kill under Nazi rule, but a person with his own clear will. He saved Marie-Laure from the hands of his own national officer, because it was Marie-Laure's continuous broadcasting that awakened his conscience and redeemed him. Werner also fell in love with Marie-Laure and had been thinking of her and worried about her safety until he died. Werner recalled that his brief life had only been eighteen years, and he had not been able to realize his dreams. Instead, he had been training for the dreams of 'others', going to the battlefield and even losing his life. It wasn't until the appearance of Marie-Laure that he understood all of this and knew what he really needed to do. What he wants is not training and then going to the battlefield to kill people, but a peaceful and joyful life. He wanted to watch his sister Jutta and other children fall asleep quietly and see Mrs. Elena kneel by the coal stove to make a fire. And such a simple wish could not be realized due to the outbreak of war, and the cruel war even left Werner and his family permanently separated.

IV. CONCLUSION

Through the analysis of the novel by the neorealism theory, it can be found that, whatever the reason, the outbreak of war is unjust and destructive, because it always hurts the majority of the people. It destroys people's bodies, wills, and deprives every child of their dreams, future, and even life. But in the darkness, we can always see light and hope. There are always people who are doing their best to live, and there are also people who are redeeming each other and becoming a beam of light in the darkness of others. We should cherish the peaceful life now and face life optimistically under any circumstances.

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