

All the Light We Cannot See

– A Community with a Shared Future for Mankind Through the Lens of Horney's Anxiety Theory

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Abstract: In *All the Light We Cannot See*, Anthony Doerr masterfully crafts a narrative that not only traverses the boundaries of time and geography but also delves deep into the core of human experience. Set against the tumultuous backdrop of World War II, the novel intricately weaves the lives of Marie-Laure, a blind French girl, and Werner, a German boy whose fates intertwine in the fortified town of Saint-Malo. Through a narrative that oscillates between the haunting beauty of Doerr's prose and the stark reality of war, the novel explores themes of fate, resilience, and the unseen connections that bind us. This paper will dissect the novel's stylistic elements, including its narrative structure, thematic explorations, and symbolic use of language. Furthermore, it will apply Karen Horney's anxiety theory to analyze the deeper psychological dimensions of its main characters, providing insight into their behaviors, motivations, and evolution. Finally, the essay will interpret the story from the perspective of a community with a shared future for mankind, exploring how the novel's themes and messages resonate with and inform our understanding of our interconnected world.

Keywords: *All the Light We Cannot See*, Horney's anxiety theory, motivation analysis, a Community with a shared future for mankind

1. Introduction

Anthony Doerr is an American novelist with many famous works including *The Shell Collector*, *About Grace* and so on. He has won three O. Henry Awards, a National Magazine Award, and a Wheelbarrow Award for his short stories. His works have been included in the Best American Short Stories, the Anker's Selection of New American Short Stories, and the Scribner Selection of Contemporary Fiction. In 2007, the prestigious literary magazine *Granta* included Anthony Doerr in its list of the twenty-one best Young American novelists. Doerr published his second novel *All the Light We Cannot See* in 2014, which was on the New York Times and the United States Amazon bestseller list. Then in 2015, Doerr won the Pulitzer Prize.[1]

All the Light We Cannot See transcends time and geography, delving into the essence of human experience. Against WWII, it intertwines the lives of blind French girl Marie-Laure and German radio prodigy Werner in Saint-Malo. Their fates explore themes of fate, resilience, and unseen bonds. Marie, motherless and blind since age 6, aided the Allies via radio while separated from her family. Werner,

orphaned after his father's death, aimed to escape his destiny and studied at the National Institute, later deployed to the front. Alone in her uncle's attic, Marie tuned into the radio and read science fiction. Werner concealed her distress signal and tried to save her, but ultimately perished in a minefield himself. Doerr's vivid prose captures the environments and inner worlds, interlaced chapters heighten suspense, mirroring war's fragmented reality.[2] This novel's profound themes on war, human connections, and hope have garnered critical praise and global readership.

2. Character Analysis under Horney's Anxiety Theory

2.1. Anxiety Theory

“Anxiety” means narrow or contracting, used to described as a state of feeling nervous or worried that something is about to take place. Sigmund Freud is a pioneer in this field. At first, he regarded anxiety as a crucial factor of neurosis. However, later, he thought that anxiety was a result of conflict and the ego simply responded to it as a sign of danger or unhappiness so as to produce a defense strategy to weaken anxiety and maintain stability of human's emotion. Besides, Freud also proposed that there were some irresistible basic anxieties, such as losing or leaving one's mother, showing that anxiety comes from all aspects. And he classified anxiety into three types: realistic anxiety, neurotic anxiety and moral anxiety.[3] The later scholars also payed attention to the interpersonal relationship.

2.2. Horney's Anxiety Theory

2.2.1. Anxiety

Karen Horney's anxiety theory is a cornerstone of her psychological work. Neurotic anxiety is defined as a chronic sense of worry and apprehension that arises from interpersonal conflicts and the perceived threat to one's security and self-identity.[4] Horney posited that this anxiety is a response to a hostile environment and can lead to various neurotic behaviors as coping mechanisms. These behaviors are attempts to manage the anxiety but often end up exacerbating the individual's sense of insecurity and dissatisfaction.

In Horney's view, anxiety is “in fact emotional reaction to danger and may be accompanied by physical sensations, such as trembling, perspiration, violent heart-beat, which may be so strong that a sudden, intense fear may lead to death”. Anxiety can be seen as “a fear in essence which involves a subjective factor”.

From Horney's perspective, both the disorder of individual interpersonal relationship and cultural environment can cause people to be anxious. She points out that excessive emphasis on individual thoughts and constant individual competition deteriorates relations among human, generates hostility between people, and makes individuals feel lonely, helpless and absurd.

Horney suggests four means that human employ to protect themselves against the basic anxiety, including securing affection, submissive attitude, power and withdrawal.

2.2.2. Defensive Strategies

Anxiety generate deep insecurity and misery, and gradually becomes unbearable for people. Therefore, human develop defensive strategies gradually in order to reduce their anxiety and protect themselves. Horney proposes three defensive strategies based on the neurotic needs: moving toward, against, and away from people, symbolizing people's basic attitude towards others and themselves.[5]

Moving toward people means compliance. People with this defensive strategy have a compulsive and indiscriminate need for close relationships as well as the sense of belonging and they make all ways to realize it. They are inclined to avoid quarrel and compromise with others. Besides, they

cannot recognize self-value and depend on others excessively. In other words, they unconsciously evaluate themselves through others' words, and their emotions are thus easily influenced.

Moving against people means aggression. People with this strategy tend to feel hostile. They are eager for success and admiration, believing in themselves and are always ready to prove themselves. These strong-minded people persist their own ideas and won't be easily changed by others.

Moving away from people means detachment. People with such strategy feature the general estrangement from people. Moreover, they emphasize the need for privacy. In fact, both of them serve their need for complete dependence. Another important characteristic of them is estrangement from self. They cannot clearly know what their real thoughts and escape from their inner thoughts.

2.3. Character Analysis

Protagonists in *All the Light We Cannot See* fall into anxiety due to different causes. Combining the novel with Horney's anxiety theory helps better explore the deeper meaning of the novel.

The symptoms of anxiety of the main characters in the novel are reflected in three aspects: loneliness, hostility and helplessness.[6] They are disgusted with themselves and their environment, fearful and cowardly of war, and even confused about their own identity. The reasons for their anxiety are reflected in two aspects: personal factors and external factors. Marie's anxiety originated from her own physical defects, and the mental pressure brought about by the misfortune of her native family deepened her anxiety while Werner's anxiety stems from the mental stress brought about by the lack of security and satisfaction in childhood. In addition, individuals are closely related to the world. The cruel war is another important trigger for their anxiety, and the mandatory regulations and low social status make them fall into the abyss of anxiety. As their anxiety increases, they have to develop defense strategies to relieve their anxiety by being close to others, avoiding others or trying to detach themselves from their negative selves and avoid hostile situations. Finally, the protagonists overcome their anxiety in the face of the atrocities of the Nazis.

2.3.1. Marie-Laure's Worldview

Marie-Laure is a representative of the invaded country. Her physical defect and the corresponding anxiety could be the epitome of those who have been physically injured or even disabled in the war.

Children with physical defects often lack security and satisfaction, making it harder for them to achieve things independently. [7] This can lead to increasing anxiety and dissatisfaction with life. Marie's anxiety stemmed partly from her physical defect: losing her eyesight at six. This made her perceive the world as more dangerous and led her to constantly worry about potential risks. When the Second World War broke out, as citizens of the invaded country, Marie-Laure's and Etienne's peaceful lives were completely disrupted. They were terrified and anxious about the turbulent life during the war, especially when Marie's father was taken away by the German army, which, for Marie, meant losing the closest family member, making her more insecure about life.

In order to relieve her anxiety, Marie turned closer to her family, hoping to get more love and support from her father and great-uncle. Horney suggests that when people with anxiety move toward people, they show "a marked need for affection and approval and an especial need" for others. When Marie and Etienne sank into anxiety, they tended to be closer and conform to family, trying to avoid conflicts with each other, in order to grasp senses of security and belonging.

And also she turned to escape from others and even her ego by recalling the sweet days with her father and immersing herself in reading and so on. According to Horney's theory of anxiety, people with anxiety disorders who are forced to adopt defensive strategy of moving away from people often show "estrangement from the self that is, a numbness to emotional experience, an uncertainty as to what one is, what one loves, hates, desires, hopes, fears, resents, believes". They are unwilling to face

the reality and escape from their inner thoughts. In the novel, when Marie sank into anxiety, she suffered from self-hatred. And the mental activities that betrayed reality made her away from the true life and got some relief from fiction, forcing herself to move away from her inner self and showed the estrangement from herself.

Marie hoped to be stronger and struggled to fight the German invaders in her way of broadcasting.[8] She found self-value and agreement in moving against people. By contributing to her country and encouraging compatriots, she obtained much more security and felt her inner strength.

2.3.2. Werner's Inner Conflict

Werner's character is a vivid portrayal of a young individual caught in the midst of societal and moral turbulence. His journey from an orphan in a mining town to an elite student at NPIC, and finally to his role in the war, reflected Horney's concept of neurotic anxiety. Werner's internal conflict, particularly his struggle between his innate curiosity and intelligence, and the oppressive ideologies of the Nazi regime, showcased his response to the anxiety created by conflicting loyalties and moral dilemmas. He attempted to reconcile these conflicts and finally found a sense of identity and security in a disordered world.

Horney points out the need for love and affection is compulsive and indiscriminate. According to Horney, when people are gripped by anxiety, they want to be close to their family members, and even to integrate into the society in order to obtain the sense of belonging. In the novel, Werner's moving toward people performed as working hard to obey the rules seeming dehumanized. He hoped to make efforts to integrate into the society by fitting himself into the surrounding no matter it is good or not. His good performance brought him respect and recognition and developed a harmonious and stable relationship with others. The sense of belonging from obeying the rules gradually lessened his anxiety caused by his hesitation about the dehumanized rules.

When Werner talked about German army with his sister, they held completely different opinions. However, Werner's attitude towards German army had already deviated during the war, which caused him to be anxious and to be hostile to his living environment. So in order to relieve the anxiety, he kept a distance with his sister and stopped communicating with her about what German army did in the war, only sticking to his own ideas.[8] He indulged himself in his imagination that the German army is on the right side. And this conforms to Horney's defensive strategy of moving away from people, with which people will care only about their own thoughts, the thoughts that prevent them from anxiety caused by conflicts between inner self and the outside world.

Finally, Werner was brave enough to accept his true self and chose to follow his heart. He no longer followed the dehumanized rules and expressed his expectation to freedom and peace. He tried to save Marie by standing up to his superiors and obstructing his partner's actions. He is "alert and keen in an argument and will go out of his way to launch one for the sake of proving he is right" as Horney said about people with the defensive strategy of moving against people.

3. Story in the Context of the Community with a Shared Future for Mankind

As Anthony Doerr said, "In trying times, people always manage to find something within themselves, some source of strength, some sense of right and wrong, some humanity. In this sense, the novel isn't just another story about WWII—it's a story about the things that connect us, always."

3.1. War and Trauma

Scholars like Yang Yixiao have studied the novel's trauma narrative, focusing on individual child trauma and war's destructive force. Wang Xiaohong emphasizes Werner's self-salvation through rescuing Marie and notes that war traumatizes almost everyone, including Germans themselves.

The war threatens men's lives and leads to grave humanitarian disasters. Individuals trapped in the physical and psychological turmoil of war suffer immensely. Judith Herman, a trauma expert, emphasizes in *Trauma and Recovery* that the anguish of psychological trauma originates from a sense of powerlessness, plunging humans into helplessness and fear, leaving individuals with a "feeling of extreme fear, helplessness, loss of control and facing destruction".[9] Marie and Werner both exhibit evident symptoms of hypervigilance, a symptom of PTSD. For example, For instance, Marie finds it unbearable to hear lists, which reminds her of the despair upon losing her father.

Wu JinRong delves into the causes of the PTSD and recovery of their trauma, thereby uncovering its profound social realities. The analysis of war literature works from the perspective of trauma provides a realistic insight, highlighting the significant psychological toll war takes on individuals. This understanding is crucial for people to reflect on the importance of peace.[10]

By exploring war trauma and individual recovery, the novel expresses ardent longing for peace.

3.2. A Community with a Shared Future for Mankind

The community of shared future for mankind aims to accommodate the legitimate concerns of other countries while pursuing its own interests, and promote the common development of all countries while pursuing its own development. Postmodern community is a kind of emotional community. In *The Conflagration of Community: Fiction before and after Auschwitz*, J. Hillis Miller emphasizes the role of community commonality and emotion in shaping community. He saw the community's foundation in mutual understanding and empathy. [11] Shared traumatic events bind victims, fostering common hatred of war, and a shared pursuit of peace. This shared destiny underpins a lasting peace.

Also, war greatly influenced normal social orders and brings physical and psychological trauma to people in both sides. [12] When people experience the conflict "between the stimulation of our needs and our factual frustrations in satisfying them", they will perceive the constant discrepancy between their desires and their fulfillment and sink into anxiety, which brings an unclear sense of self and a loss of identity. In order to obtain the self recognition and relieve the inner anxiety, people sometimes choose to move away from the reality, which only to be a temporary escape and self-deception. In the novel, only through moving towards and against people could Marie and Werner really made self-relieve and achieved self-identity. During disasters like wars, people are called to move toward and see each other while to be firmly against difficulties and the evil.

The book transcends its setting to explore themes crucial to today, focusing on the interconnection of people regardless of nationality, ideology, or disability. Marie and Werner's parallel lives illustrate this connection, highlighting the universal desire for peace, understanding, and belonging. Even in war's chaos, the characters find beauty and connection, showing humanity's resilience.[13] Peace fosters personal development, and the community of human destiny connects people's needs, focusing on collective and individual interests. This eases contemporary anxieties, providing a direction for people to move towards and strengthening us against greater evil.

Anthony Doerr's narrative urges empathy and understanding, especially in times of division, emphasizing individual agency. Through its characters' experiences, the novel shows how empathy transcends boundaries. Marie watches the world sensitively, while Werner empathizes with those he was taught to despise. The novel argues that empathy and understanding are not just moral choices but crucial for survival and coexistence, building a harmonious future.[14] Characters' decisions highlight the impact of individual choices on life's tapestry. Marie's resistance and Werner's choices, against the backdrop of war, illustrate how personal choices shape both individual destinies and humanity's collective future. The novel testaments to the power of individual agency in creating a more connected and empathetic world, emphasizing a shared future requires everyone's efforts.

4. Conclusion

In exploring *All the Light We Cannot See* through Karen Horney's anxiety theory, several key insights emerge. The characters, particularly Marie-Laure and Werner, are portrayed with profound complexity, embodying both the struggles and resilience inherent in the human condition. Through the application of Horney's theory, their psychological landscapes are further illuminated, revealing how their responses to anxiety shape their actions and growth.

The novel transcends its settings to address universal themes of human interconnection, empathy, and the significance of individual choices. It underscores the enduring human spirit in the face of adversity and our capacity for empathy. Marie-Laure and Werner are powerful reminder of the impact of individual on the collective community with their distinct yet interwoven paths, which invites readers to explore the depths of human experience and highlights stories' capacity to convey complex human emotions and experiences, fostering a deeper understanding of ourselves and others.

The novel not only enriches our understanding of a specific historical period but also resonates with contemporary global challenges, advocating for a world where empathy and connection prevail over division and conflict.[15] War, political ideologies, and societal expectations on individuals can lead to similar forms of neurotic anxiety and coping mechanisms in contemporary settings. It encourages readers to reflect on modern stressors, such as political unrest, social pressures, and moral dilemmas that influence individual mind and behavior, highlighting the importance of resilience, self-awareness, and pursuit of authenticity in the world full of uncertainty.

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