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All the Light We Choose Not to See

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All the Light We Chose Not to See

“We're blind to our blindness. We have very little idea of how little we know. We're not designed to know how little we know.”

- Daniel Kahneman

In observing the “significant” moments which determine the focal points of historical periods, it is first important to determine who is accepted as the writer of history; the one who decides what is and is not remembered. Anthony Doerr, through the character of Herr Siedler, in his 2014 novel *All the Light We Cannot See* explains that “...history is whatever the victors say it is...Whoever wins, that’s who decides the history. We act in our own self-interest...The trick is figuring out where our interests are” (84). In addition, scholars such as Holly L. Collins have further explained that, “In a world where History is written by the victors, the voices of those who are either themselves or whose ancestors were violently oppressed and exploited often go unheard” (195). From this we can logically assume that presently, at least according to some, the victors are the ones who generally determine history. However, this idea is not an original one as it was Winston Churchill who originally coined the phrase: “History is written by the victors.”

This can be seen in humanity’s collective remembrance of World War II, as the complete obliteration of the small sea-side city of Saint-Malo, France was almost completely forgotten amidst other events which were deemed more important or traumatic by the war’s victors, the Allied forces: such as the Holocaust or atomic bombings of Japan. That is not to say that the events of Saint-Malo were any less significant or devastating, but rather that from the profusion of historically significant moments they were among the events of WWII which were selected

for removal from historical significance. However, considering the aforementioned notion that history is typically written by the victors, it is not hard to imagine why this was the case, as this city was not the primary focus of the British and American armies during WWII. In fact, at the time, the Allied forces were looking for much larger port cities – such as Brittany, Brest and Lorient - to occupy, in order to support the tri-country military effort of approximately 1 million troops for several weeks in the event of supply shortages (Ganz).

Even though the bombings of Saint-Malo may still, by comparison, seem less significant than some of the other events which occurred during WWII, it is important to note that the events which occurred in Saint-Malo ultimately set the precedent for the remainder of the war, particularly regarding the efforts that took place in France in following months. As a result, the removal of the events in Saint-Malo from society's collective historical memory of WWII occurred under what might be regarded as a form of selective remembrance, or in other words: selective blindness. A blindness that Doerr effectively addresses in *All the Light We Cannot See* by way of the personal blindness that each of his characters experience, the actual obliteration the city undergoes and the limited view the general population had of WWII at the time. Given that, Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* functions as a microcosm for the real and much larger issue of selective blindness which actually exists in humanity's collective historical remembrance.

One of the primary instances where Doerr addresses this issue can be seen as Werner, a German boy who has been recruited into the Nazi Youth program to work with radios, encounters a train packed with "prisoners" passing by in the middle of the night (Doerr 317-319). Though Werner does not explicitly ask about the contents of the train cars, it is clear that his understanding on who is in them and where they are going is limited. This is evidenced by the

fact that as the train passes, two distinct things happen. One, Neumann Two calls them “prisoners” (318), and is never questioned further by Werner about the event. Two, as he gazes at the cars, Werner notes that: “Many sit with their backs against sacks at the front of the car....some of the prisoners... sleeping” (319). Given our current knowledge of the Holocaust and the conditions those who were transported to the concentration camps were kept in, we can clearly see that this is a powerful instance of dramatic irony. We, as readers are aware of the significance of the events transpiring, but the characters, who are actually encountering them, are not. More importantly, through this textual moment, the Holocaust still clearly had its influence on the narrative events of *All the Light We Cannot See*, but given Werner’s ignorance and the nonchalance of the other German officers, it appears that Doerr’s inclusion of this scene serves not as a homage to the tragedy of the Holocaust, but rather as evidence of the selective blindness evident.

In fact, it isn’t until the train has nearly passed and Werner notices “a face flash past, pale and waxy, one ear pressed to the floor of the car” that he realizes: “Each car has a wall of corpses stacked in the front” (Doerr 319) and that subsequently something more significant and potentially sinister is taking place. Regardless, as significant and horrifying as this moment is for Werner, his experience with the train is never addressed again. From his perspective it seems as if this event pales in comparison with others he has, such as the violent murder of an innocent French woman and her young daughter Werner witnesses on one of his many hunts for radios (368). In fact, his reaction to his encounter with the Holocaust victims on the train hardly compares to the moment he sees the young dead girl; as he simply asks questions upon seeing the mass amounts of death on the train but becomes physically ill for days after witnessing the murder of the young child (397-399).

This same incident, the death of the young French girl, also seems to overshadow several other central events, or rather allusions to central events, of WWII which Werner encounters, namely that of the landings of D-Day. While it is unknown as to whether or not the beach where Werner “winds through a series of barricades and makes for the tide line... [narrowly avoiding] a line of anti-invasion obstacles shaped like a child’s jacks, strung with razor wire, extending at least a mile down the shoreline” (Doerr 398) is actually Normandy beach, this description closely mirrors that of the actual beaches in France in 1944, particularly the location where the landings of D-day took place on June 6th (American History Association). However, upon encountering this scene, which to a young boy kept from the daily horrors of the front lines should have been at least notable, Werner behaves apathetically; blind to the significance and horror that history has associated with these beaches as he climbs back into the truck without a word (Doerr 399). With this in mind, it is apparent that Werner serves as a microcosm of selective remembrance as he undergoes a selective remembrance or selective blindness on a personal level, choosing which events are most meaningful for him and which of them will be selected for removal from his own historical remembrance.

A similar argument can be made of Werner’s little sister, Jutta, following Werner’s departure from the Nazi Youth program into France to hunt down and retrieve radios. As is established early on in the novel, Jutta has a good memory, whether it be for schoolwork or for the radio broadcasts that she takes interest in (Doerr 73). However, after one of the most traumatic events in the young girl’s life, a rape by 3 Russian soldiers when she is no older than fifteen (490-491), Jutta’s only remembrance of it is of the four words which were spoken by the officer during the incident: “*Kirill, Pavel, Afanasy, Valentin*” (491), which she later determines to be names of his comrades. This forgetfulness is not due to the fact that Jutta’s memory is

overwhelmed by the events surrounding her, but rather that her remembrances have been consciously selected. This is evidenced in the fact that Jutta regularly wills away thoughts “of the war, of Frau Elena, of the awful last months in Berlin” (502), and instead thinks of the fact that “she can [now] buy pork seven days a week” and she has heat in her home (502). This is particularly interesting, as Jutta, differing from most rape victims, uses selective remembrance as an effective defensive or coping mechanism for the trauma that she experienced – though the actual effectiveness of it could be debated (Campbell). It is clear that her selective remembrance does not exist for the same reasons that Werner’s does. Jutta is not blind to the important events happening around her through distraction or misinformation, but she instead chooses what she will and will not remember.

Finally, and perhaps the most blatantly obvious way in which Doerr chooses to support the point of selective remembrance, or selective blindness, is through the character of Marie-Laure, a young blind French girl living in Saint-Malo during WWII. Due to the fact that Marie-Laure was not born blind but rather gradually lost her ability to see as she grew to the age of six (Doerr 23), it appears that Doerr is addressing selective blindness through her. Specifically, as Marie-Laure slowly loses her sight over the course of several years, finally culminating in total blindness at the age of six years old, it is probable that Doerr is making a critical statement at the outset of the novel about selective remembrance or selective blindness: that it does not occur overnight, as we are able to observe through Werner’s and Jutta’s experiences, but that it develops over time, eventually culminating in a complete loss of “sight.” Through Marie-Laure this can be observed by comparing her physical descent into darkness with the mental descent made by both Werner and Jutta. Werner’s initial reaction to the Nazi regime is skeptical, but he eventually finds a way to accept it for a time, particularly as it benefits him personally (83). Jutta,

on the other hand, simply develops a way to slowly forget about all the awful things she endured. This too can be seen to have occurred gradually as she explains at the end of her journey that she has still not quite mastered the skill of permanently deleting all of the memories from her brain (502).

It is through Jutta's claim made to Herr Siedler about her experience that finally explains why she is unable to completely forget the experience. Here, she is not the victor. The Russian soldiers are. Therefore, her mental history has been written by those who have acted upon her, rendering her, in the words of Holly L. Collins: "...violently oppressed...exploited... [and] unheard (195). That is not to say that Jutta is completely incapable of altering her own personal history to include only that which she deems important, but rather that it is much more difficult to exclude those things from her memory which remain as brandings from the victors. Werner, conversely, is easily able to write and rewrite his own personal version of history as he is among the victors in all of the situations he encounters, ranging from the events of the Holocaust to his participation in murdering civilians for radios. It is because he is a victor that his history is not defined by the events others deem important or traumatic, but rather the events which impact him to the largest degree.

Therefore, through his masterful blending of history with narrative, it is clear that Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* not only exists as a fresh retelling of the events of WWII, but also as a microcosm for the larger issue of historical blindness which constantly affects the world in which we live to a large degree. That is to say that through the characters of Werner, Jutta and Marie-Laure respectively, Doerr seeks to expose and explain the complexities of history which exist when the issues of selective blindness and selective remembrance are introduced. Ultimately, it cannot be disputed that there are events in history which are forgotten, whether by

conscious effort or by the overshadowing of “more important” events. However, as the issues of selective blindness and remembrance infiltrate our tellings of history, the truth becomes skewed to fit the need of a given individual or population. As a result, important details, events and peoples are forgotten by the archives of history, rarely to be retrieved and/or discussed again. Thus, with this in mind, the question is no longer whether or not history has been molded, but rather what is our place in and our contribution to it?

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