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# DESTABILISING BINARY OPPOSITIONS IN ANTHONY DOERR’S “ALL THE LIGHT YOU CANNOT SEE”: SYNERGETIC, THANATOLOGICAL AND COGNITIVE PERSPECTIVES

This article examines the instability and semantic permeability of fundamental binary oppositions in Anthony Doerr’s “All the Light We Cannot See”. Employing a synergetic approach in conjunction with cognitive poetics, sensory narratology, and thanatological studies, the paper analyses the oppositional structures of *light/darkness*, *childhood/adulthood*, *individual/collective*, and *duty/morality*. Rather than functioning as fixed conceptual categories, these oppositions emerge as dynamic and mutually interdependent constructs whose boundaries are repeatedly destabilised by the experience of war.

Particular attention is devoted to the representation of death and the transformation of the categories of life and future under the conditions of World War II. The article argues that A. Doerr’s narrative constructs a polyphonic thanatological discourse in which death acquires multiple symbolic manifestations conditioned by individual consciousness and cultural memory.

The study further demonstrates that sensory experience – especially tactile and olfactory perception – constitutes an essential epistemological principle within the novel and contributes to the formation of a distinctive synesthetic mode of representation. The ambivalent nature of scientific knowledge is likewise explored through the opposition between cognition and destruction.

By integrating insights from comparative literature, trauma studies, and cognitive literary criticism, the paper demonstrates that A. Doerr’s novel challenges rigid dichotomous thinking and proposes a more fluid understanding of ethical, existential, and epistemological categories.

**Key words:** Anthony Doerr, binary oppositions, synergetics, thanatology, cognitive dimensions, sensory narratology, synesthesia, war narrative.

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# СТИРАННЯ МЕЖ У БІНАРНИХ ОПОЗИЦІЯХ У РОМАНІ ЕНТОНІ ДОРРА «УСЕ ТЕ НЕЗРИМЕ СВІТЛО»: СИНЕРГЕТИЧНИЙ, ТАНАТОЛОГІЧНИЙ ТА КОГНІТИВНИЙ ПІДХОДИ

У статті досліджено нестабільність і семантичну проникність базових бінарних опозицій у романі Ентоні Дорра “All the Light We Cannot See” («Усе те незриме світло»). За допомогою синергетичного підходу в поєднанні з когнітивною поетикою, сенсорною наратологією та танатологічними студіями автор аналізує опозиційні структури світло / темрява, дитинство / дорослість, індивідуальне / колективне й обов’язок / мораль. На відміну від усталених концептуальних категорій, ці опозиції постають як динамічні й взаємозалежні конструкти, межі яких постійно розмиваються під впливом воєнного досвіду.

Особливу увагу приділено репрезентації смерті та трансформації категорій життя і майбутнього в умовах Другої світової війни. Обґрунтовано, що художній наратив Е. Дорра формує поліфонічний танатологічний дискурс, у якому смерть набуває множинних символічних виявів, зумовлених індивідуальною свідомістю та культурною пам’яттю.

Дослідження також доводить, що сенсорний досвід – насамперед тактильне й ольфакторне (нюхове) сприйняття – виступає одним із ключових епістемологічних принципів роману та сприяє формуванню своєрідної синестезійної моделі художньої репрезентації. Амбівалентна природа наукового знання розглядається крізь призму опозиції пізнання / руйнування, що демонструє його неоднозначну роль у воєнному контексті.

За допомогою інтеграції підходів компаративістики, trauma studies (студій травми) та когнітивної літературної критики у статті доведено, що роман Е. Дорра руйнує жорсткі дихотомічні моделі мислення і пропонує більш гнучке осмислення етичних, екзистенційних і епістемологічних категорій.

**Ключові слова:** Ентоні Дорр, бінарні опозиції, синергетика, танатологія, когнітивні виміри, сенсорна наратологія, синестезія, воєнний наратив.

**Introduction.** Anthony Doerr’s *All the Light We Cannot See* occupies a distinctive place within contemporary war fiction due to its multilayered narrative architecture and its sustained interrogation of conventional dichotomies. Although the novel has attracted considerable critical attention internationally, its reception within Ukrainian comparative literary studies remains comparatively limited. Such a situation renders the text particularly significant for further scholarly inquiry, especially in view of its potential to expand contemporary discussions concerning the instability of cultural, ethical, and existential categories.

Binary oppositions have traditionally functioned as one of the principal mechanisms through which literary texts organise meaning. Nevertheless, modern literary discourse increasingly demonstrates the insufficiency of rigid dichotomous models for representing the complexity of human experience. In A. Doerr's novel, oppositional pairs such as *light and darkness*, *individual and collective identity*, *duty and morality*, and *childhood and adulthood* do not operate as mutually exclusive entities. Instead, they reveal a dynamic and permeable character, whereby their semantic boundaries become blurred under the influence of war, historical trauma, and personal experience.

From this perspective, the synergetic approach appears particularly productive, since it enables literary phenomena to be understood as open systems characterised by instability, interaction, and constant transformation. Such a methodological framework allows the novel to be interpreted not as a juxtaposition of fixed meanings but rather as a complex network of interrelated categories whose significance emerges through their interaction.

Equally important is the thanatological dimension of the narrative. Death in *All the Light We Cannot See* transcends the status of a merely biological event and acquires philosophical, ethical, and symbolic implications. Rather than presenting a unified image of death, A. Doerr constructs a polyphonic thanatological discourse shaped by individual memory, historical violence, and subjective perception. Consequently, the categories of life and future also undergo semantic transformation, acquiring fatalistic and existential connotations characteristic of wartime consciousness.

Another important feature of the novel is its emphasis on sensory perception as a means of cognition. Through the figure of Marie-Laure and the predominance of tactile and olfactory imagery, A. Doerr challenges the traditional primacy of vision and foregrounds alternative modes of experiencing reality. This aspect of the text permits its examination through the lenses of cognitive poetics and sensory narratology, thereby opening new possibilities for understanding the relationship between embodiment and literary representation.

The present study **aims** to investigate the mechanisms through which Anthony Doerr destabilises core binary oppositions and constructs a multidimensional representation of human existence under conditions of war. Particular attention will be devoted to the symbolic manifestations of death, the transformation of existential categories, and the epistemological function of sensory experience. The article seeks to demonstrate that the novel ultimately replaces rigid conceptual polarities with a relational model of meaning grounded in ethical ambiguity, individual agency, and the interconnectedness of human experience.

**State of Problem Research and Reception.** Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* has attracted sustained scholarly attention since its publication in 2014, primarily because of its multidimensional representation of war, memory, morality, and perception. Existing scholarship demonstrates a gradual shift from predominantly thematic and historical interpretations towards interdisciplinary approaches integrating cognitive literary studies, trauma theory, phenomenology, and sensory narratology.

Another important area of research concerns the symbolic system of the novel, particularly the semantics of light and vision. Mihaela Damian, in *The Metaphor of Light – Perspectives on Conceptual Metaphors: Case Study on Anthony Doerr's All the Light We Cannot See* (Damian 2023), investigates the conceptual metaphor of light from the perspective of cognitive linguistics, demonstrating that visual imagery extends beyond literal perception and functions as a complex cognitive and cultural construct. Her findings provide an important foundation for analysing the instability of the opposition light/darkness, although the broader interaction of binary oppositions remains insufficiently explored.

The cognitive dimension of Marie-Laure's blindness has also received considerable scholarly attention. Md. Mozaffor Hossain (Mozaffor, 2023) examines the psycholinguistic manifestations of blindness, arguing that A. Doerr reconstructs perception through language and demonstrates that cognition is not dependent exclusively upon vision. His analysis highlights the relationship between sensory experience, language, and consciousness, thereby supporting interpretations grounded in cognitive poetics and embodied cognition.

Recent studies increasingly approach the novel through the framework of sensory narratology and phenomenology. Areeba Ali (Areeba, 2025)

applies the phenomenological theories of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Don Ihde to demonstrate that tactile and auditory perception constitute alternative epistemological systems through which Marie-Laure interprets reality. This perspective significantly expands the understanding of sensory experience in the novel and reinforces contemporary discussions concerning embodied perception in literary discourse.

The ethical and historical dimensions of A. Doerr's narrative have likewise been investigated by Florentina Anghel, whose study *Art Puzzling War in Anthony Doerr's All the Light We Cannot See* interprets the novel as a complex artistic response to the moral ambiguities of war. F. Anghel demonstrates that A. Doerr's narrative rejects binary distinctions between heroism and victimhood while foregrounding the universal vulnerability of human existence under conditions of military conflict (Florentina, 2020).

More recent scholarship has extended these discussions into the fields of memory studies and spatial narratology. Raghad M.R.A.M. Alshayea (Alshayea, 2026) interprets Saint-Malo not merely as a historical setting but as a dynamic space where memory, trauma, and sensory perception converge. Such an approach further illustrates the novel's capacity to integrate individual experience with broader processes of cultural remembrance.

Despite these valuable contributions, existing criticism has largely examined individual aspects of A. Doerr's novel in isolation. Considerable attention has been devoted to metaphor, blindness, trauma, phenomenology, or historical representation separately, whereas comparatively little research has investigated the dynamic interaction among these categories through the prism of blurred binary oppositions. Likewise, the convergence of synergetic methodology, cognitive poetics, thanatology, sensory narratology, and ethical criticism remains insufficiently developed within current A. Doerr scholarship.

The present study seeks to address this gap by proposing an integrative interpretative model in which the instability of binary oppositions functions as the principal mechanism of meaning production. Such an approach makes it possible to examine the categories of light and darkness, life and death, individuality and collectivity, morality and duty not as fixed conceptual polarities but as dynamic semantic structures generated through the interaction of historical trauma, embodied perception, ethical responsibility, and cultural memory.

**Discussion.** The analytical potential of Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* resides not only in its historical subject matter but also in its resistance to stable conceptual classifications. The novel presents war as a multidimensional phenomenon that simultaneously disrupts ethical systems, transforms modes of perception, and destabilises the binary structures traditionally employed to organise human experience. Consequently, the interpretative framework adopted in this study combines principles of synergetics with insights derived from cognitive poetics, trauma studies, sensory narratology, and thanatological criticism.

Within a synergetic perspective, literary texts may be understood as open systems whose internal elements interact dynamically rather than according to rigid hierarchical principles. Such an approach proves especially relevant to A. Doerr's narrative, where categories conventionally perceived as oppositional cease to function as isolated semantic entities. Instead, they become mutually dependent and reveal their meanings only through processes of interaction and transformation. War itself serves as the principal catalyst of this process, dissolving clear distinctions between innocence and guilt, morality and duty, victimhood and complicity, light and darkness.

From the standpoint of trauma studies, the novel demonstrates how historical catastrophe affects both individual consciousness and collective memory. Trauma in A. Doerr's narrative cannot be reduced to a single event; rather, it manifests itself through fragmented recollections, interrupted temporal sequences, and the impossibility of restoring the continuity of ordinary existence. The nonlinear structure of the narrative reproduces this traumatic experience formally, as temporal dislocations and retrospective episodes reflect the fractured nature of memory itself. Consequently, the narrative architecture becomes inseparable from the psychological realities experienced by the characters.

Equally productive is the perspective offered by cognitive literary studies. A. Doerr's text repeatedly foregrounds the processes through which reality is perceived and interpreted. Knowledge in the novel is not presented as an objective and neutral category; instead, it emerges as a complex mechanism capable

of generating both creation and destruction. Such ambivalence challenges Enlightenment notions of scientific progress as an unequivocally positive force and reveals the ethical dimensions inherent in acts of cognition.

Moreover, sensory narratology offers another important avenue for interpretation. Through the figure of Marie-Laure, whose blindness radically restructures conventional perceptual hierarchies, A. Doerr shifts attention from visual dominance toward tactile and olfactory forms of cognition. The world represented in the novel is therefore not primarily visual but multisensory, constructed through touch, sound, smell, and memory. Such a mode of representation expands traditional assumptions concerning literary mimesis and foregrounds the embodied character of human experience.

The central figures of the novel, Marie-Laure LeBlanc and Werner Pfennig, are introduced not as heroic embodiments of national myths but as ordinary children whose lives become subject to the destructive mechanisms of history. Their experiences challenge conventional representations of wartime childhood, which often rely on idealised images of martyrdom or heroism. Instead, A. Doerr foregrounds vulnerability, uncertainty, and the accidental nature of survival.

The narrative juxtaposition of the two protagonists creates a complex dialogic structure. Although they inhabit opposing sides of the conflict, both characters are united by their intellectual curiosity and their desire to understand the surrounding world. Their eventual encounter, delayed until the culmination of the novel, functions not merely as a narrative device but as a symbolic convergence of parallel existential trajectories.

The retrospective structure of the narrative contributes significantly to this effect. Rather than unfolding chronologically, events are fragmented and repeatedly revisited from different perspectives. Such a composition produces a polyphonic narrative space in which no single voice possesses interpretative authority. Meaning emerges through the interaction of multiple consciousnesses, memories, and experiences.

Importantly, war itself is deprived of heroic grandeur. The text consistently emphasises the absurdity of violence and the vulnerability of ordinary lives subjected to historical forces beyond individual control. Neither Marie-Laure nor Werner occupies the position of a traditional protagonist capable of altering the course of history. Their actions acquire significance precisely because they preserve fragments of humanity within a context designed to eradicate it.

One of the most significant manifestations of semantic instability in the novel concerns the opposition between childhood and adulthood. Under ordinary circumstances these categories imply a gradual process of maturation. In A. Doerr's narrative, however, war destroys the temporal continuity associated with human development.

Marie-Laure and Werner are forced into existential situations that exceed the boundaries of childhood. Their confrontation with violence, loss, and mortality accelerates psychological maturation while simultaneously preserving traces of childish curiosity and vulnerability. As a result, neither category remains intact.

Werner's fascination with radio technologies exemplifies this ambiguity. His intellectual abilities provide access to educational opportunities and social advancement, yet they also transform him into an instrument of ideological violence. Similarly, Marie-Laure's blindness does not signify weakness but rather becomes the basis of an alternative epistemological relationship with reality. Both characters inhabit an intermediate space in which the boundaries separating innocence from experience become increasingly unstable.

This dissolution of temporal distinctions reflects one of the principal existential paradoxes of war. Adolescence, normally associated with hope and self-discovery, becomes inseparable from fear, death, and moral responsibility. Consequently, childhood and adulthood cease to function as discrete categories and instead form a continuum characterised by uncertainty and fragmentation.

Another crucial binary structure destabilised by the novel concerns the relationship between individual agency and collective ideology. A. Doerr repeatedly demonstrates how totalitarian systems seek to eliminate individuality by transforming human beings into components of a larger mechanism. The interpretation of the core binary oppositions in Anthony Doerr's novel *All the Light We Cannot See* through the prism of the national and universal makes it possible to trace individual semantics, its, according to N.V. Shvydka, "inner

veiled essence"[1] (Shvydka, 2016, p. 71). We agree that "<…> such symbols, like the condensed text in a concise form, due to the established structure represent the collective experience" (Shvydka, 2016, p. 71); they become visible in the context of general, after critical discarding the layers of the categories of national and individual.

Werner's education at Schulpforta exemplifies this process. The institution systematically suppresses personal identity and replaces it with collective values founded upon obedience and conformity. Yet despite ideological pressure, the novel emphasises the persistence of individual ethical consciousness. Werner's growing moral unease illustrates the inability of collective doctrines to eradicate personal responsibility entirely.

The figure of Frederick further reinforces this idea. His physical weakness and intellectual sensitivity place him outside the ideological ideal promoted by the Nazi regime. Nevertheless, his refusal to conform ultimately reveals a form of moral courage absent in many stronger individuals. Through Frederick, A. Doerr demonstrates that ethical resistance often manifests itself not through heroic action but through the preservation of one's humanity.

Jutta's persistent questioning of ideological narratives similarly introduces a counterpoint to collective thinking. Her seemingly simple question – whether something becomes right merely because others approve of it – constitutes one of the novel's most profound ethical inquiries. In this respect, A. Doerr exposes the fragility of any ideological system based upon the subordination of individual conscience to collective imperatives.

Among the numerous oppositional structures operating within *All the Light We Cannot See*, the dialectic of light and darkness occupies a particularly significant position. However, unlike traditional symbolic systems in which light unequivocally signifies goodness and knowledge while darkness denotes evil and ignorance, A. Doerr constructs a far more complex semantic network in which these categories continually overlap and penetrate one another.

At the literal level, darkness is embodied in Marie-Laure's blindness. Yet physical deprivation does not translate into epistemological deficiency. On the contrary, the absence of sight facilitates alternative forms of cognition that challenge the dominance of visual perception. Darkness, therefore, ceases to represent ignorance and instead becomes the condition through which another mode of experiencing reality emerges. The paradox embedded in the novel's title itself encapsulates this idea: invisible phenomena are not necessarily inaccessible. Human understanding often transcends the limits imposed by sensory perception. "She thought she would live in Paris with her father during all her life. That she will always come to Dr. Gerard in the afternoon. That every year on her birthday her father would give her a different brain teaser and a book, and she would read all of Jules Verne, Dumas, and perhaps Balzac and Proust. That her father would always moo, carving small buildings in the evenings, and she would always know how many steps to take from the front door to the bakery (forty) and how many more to the restaurant (thirty-two), and that there would always be sugar to put in the morning coffee" (Doerr, 2016, p. 54).

By contrast, Werner's trajectory reveals a different manifestation of darkness. His blindness is not physiological but ethical. His fascination with scientific knowledge gradually becomes subordinated to ideological structures that deprive technical expertise of its moral neutrality (Goh, 2019). Consequently, darkness acquires symbolic connotations associated with moral indifference and intellectual obedieence. Significantly, this condition develops not through inherent malice but through the progressive erosion of ethical autonomy under totalitarian circumstances. "Of course, the brain is locked in complete darkness, children," says the voice. – "In the skull it floats in a clear liquid, but does not see light. However, the world it constructs in the imagination is still flooded with light. It is full of colours and movements. So how, children, does the brain, which lives without a speck of light, manage to create an enlightened world for us?" (Doerr, 2016, p. 37).

Light, similarly, cannot be reduced to a simplistic metaphor for virtue. Radio waves, one of the central images in the novel, constitute invisible forms of light capable of transmitting both knowledge and destruction. Scientific discoveries that inspire wonder and intellectual curiosity simultaneously become instruments of surveillance and death. Thus, light itself acquires an ambivalent

[1] Herein and after the translation is ours – authors.

status, revealing the ethical complexity underlying technological progress.

At a more intimate level, the semantics of light become associated with affective bonds and emotional memory. Daniel LeBlanc's devotion to his daughter represents a form of spiritual illumination that persists despite the devastation surrounding them. Such moments suggest that light in A. Doerr's novel is not a metaphysical absolute but a relational phenomenon generated through empathy, memory, and human attachment (Veill, 2016): "<…> the walls may fall, the whole city may crumble, but the brightness of this feeling does not dim" (Doerr, 2016, p. 136).

Consequently, the opposition between light and darkness loses its categorical rigidity. Both concepts reveal internal contradictions and become inseparable from one another. Rather than functioning as antagonistic entities, they form a dialectical unity that reflects the ambiguity of human existence itself.

Another central binary destabilised throughout the narrative concerns the relationship between duty and morality. Traditional wartime narratives often construct these categories as mutually reinforcing principles; loyalty to one's nation is presented as synonymous to ethical righteousness. A. Doerr, however, systematically dismantles such assumptions.

Werner's participation in the Nazi war machine illustrates the tragic consequences of subordinating moral judgment to institutional obligations. His technical brilliance and obedience ensure his integration into structures of power, yet the very qualities that secure his social advancement simultaneously contribute to his ethical disintegration. Duty becomes detached from moral responsibility and transforms into an instrument of violence.

Importantly, the novel avoids simplistic condemnations. Werner is not portrayed as an ideological fanatic but as an individual trapped within historical circumstances that exceed his capacity for resistance. This complexity prevents any reduction of his character to a binary opposition between victim and perpetrator. Instead, A. Doerr foregrounds the tragic ambiguity inherent in human actions under totalitarian regimes.

The moral dilemmas experienced by Werner expose the inadequacy of collectivist ideologies that justify violence through abstract concepts such as sacrifice, patriotism, and historical necessity. Through Jutta's scepticism and Frederick's refusal to conform, the narrative repeatedly privileges individual conscience over collective imperatives (e.g. "is it right to do something just because others do so" (Doerr, 2016, p. 97)).

Such an approach aligns with contemporary ethical criticism, which emphasises responsibility rather than ideological certainty. Moral agency in the novel is represented not through heroic gestures but through acts of compassion, empathy, and the preservation of one's humanity. In this context, morality emerges as an existential category grounded in relationships rather than abstract doctrines.

The category of death constitutes one of the principal organizing principles of the novel. Nevertheless, A. Doerr rejects monolithic representations of mortality and instead constructs a highly differentiated thanatological discourse in which death assumes multiple forms conditioned by individual consciousness and historical experience.

From the perspective of cultural thanatology, death in *All the Light We Cannot See* transcends biological finality and becomes a symbolic category mediating the relationship between memory, guilt, and identity. Each character perceives mortality differently, thereby creating a polyphonic structure that prevents the emergence of a singular thanatological narrative.

For Marie-Laure, death gradually loses its exceptional character. Constant exposure to destruction transforms mortality into a component of everyday existence. The boundaries separating life from death become increasingly blurred, reflecting the normalization of catastrophe characteristic of wartime consciousness. Survival itself acquires a contingent nature, no longer perceived as an inherent condition but rather as a temporary suspension of annihilation.

In contrast, Werner experiences death through guilt and memory. His visions of murdered civilians and his inability to dissociate himself from the violence surrounding him reveal the traumatic persistence of ethical responsibility. Death becomes inseparable from remembrance, generating a psychological space in which the past continually intrudes upon the present. Every young man should live such a wonderful period as youth, and not grow up prematurely, taking up

arms, because "each of them is a piece of clay, and a potter – a handsome commandant with a shiny face – sculpts four hundred identical jugs" (Doerr, 2016, p. 101), or feel the breath of death behind your back.

Monsieur Etienne introduces yet another dimension to the thanatological discourse. Haunted by the experience of the First World War, he inhabits a liminal existence suspended between memory and reality. His agoraphobia symbolises the impossibility of returning to ordinary life after traumatic rupture. Through this character, A. Doerr explores the long-term consequences of violence and the transmission of trauma across generations. "Raw-boned death", according to Monsieur Etienne, "rides down the street, stopping the riding horse from time to time to look out the windows. Fiery horns on her head, smoke from her nostrils, and holding in her bony hand a list recently supplemented by new addresses" (Doerr, 2016, p. 229).

These diverse perspectives create what may be termed a polyphonic thanatological consciousness. Death is no longer represented as a single event but as a multifaceted phenomenon encompassing biological extinction, psychological trauma, historical memory, and ethical responsibility.

A particularly distinctive feature of A. Doerr's novel lies in its rejection of teleological interpretations of death. Unlike traditional heroic narratives that attribute transcendental meaning to sacrifice, *All the Light We Cannot See* emphasises the absurdity and arbitrariness of destruction.

The deaths depicted throughout the novel are frequently deprived of narrative grandeur. Soldiers perish anonymously, civilians disappear without explanation, and entire communities become casualties of historical processes beyond their control. Such representations correspond to modern thanatological theories that interpret twentieth-century warfare as a form of depersonalised mass extermination: "Eight soldiers from the Luftwaffe, none of whom will live even an hour, sing a love song to their monarch" (Doerr, 2016, p. 10).

In this context, the future itself undergoes semantic transformation. Under normal circumstances, the future signifies possibility and development. During wartime, however, it becomes increasingly associated with uncertainty and fatalism. Expectations are replaced by apprehension, and temporal continuity gives way to existential instability. Young people, whose lives should be full of events, and not end aimlessly, where death is an excuse for illusory patriotism, will be able to enjoy only the air that "swells the possibility of the future" (Doerr, 2016, p. 38).

A. Doerr repeatedly foregrounds this transformation through landscape imagery. Nature, traditionally associated with renewal and vitality, acquires ominous overtones. Spring itself appears fragile and provisional, while descriptions of ruined streets and devastated environments emphasise the intrusion of death into spaces ordinarily associated with life. Consequently, the novel dismantles the opposition between vitality and destruction by demonstrating their coexistence within the same historical reality.

This existential dimension brings the narrative into dialogue with the philosophy of absurdism. Human beings continue to seek meaning and maintain emotional bonds despite the absence of rational explanations for suffering. Hope persists not because catastrophe can be justified, but precisely because its senselessness makes acts of compassion and solidarity ethically indispensable.

The foregoing analysis demonstrates that *All the Light We Cannot See* should not be interpreted merely as a historical novel depicting the experience of the Second World War. Rather, A. Doerr constructs a multidimensional philosophical narrative in which historical catastrophe serves as a catalyst for reconsidering the very mechanisms through which individuals perceive, interpret, and ethically evaluate reality. The novel therefore transcends the boundaries of war fiction and enters a broader discourse concerning human cognition, moral agency, and cultural memory.

One of the principal achievements of A. Doerr's narrative lies in its systematic deconstruction of binary logic. Throughout the novel, seemingly stable conceptual oppositions undergo continuous semantic transformation. Light does not simply oppose darkness; rather, both categories become mutually constitutive. Physical blindness facilitates profound cognitive insight, whereas visual perception frequently coexists with ethical blindness. Likewise, scientific knowledge functions simultaneously as an instrument of enlightenment and a mechanism of destruction. Such semantic instability demonstrates that binary categories do not possess fixed ontological status but emerge

as relational constructs shaped by historical, psychological, and cultural circumstances.

This interpretative model corresponds to contemporary developments in comparative literary studies, where increasing attention is devoted to dynamic rather than static systems of meaning. From a synergetic perspective, literary texts should be understood as open structures characterised by constant interaction among their semantic components. Meaning consequently emerges through processes of instability, transformation, and self-organisation rather than through rigid oppositional schemes. A. Doerr's novel represents a particularly convincing example of such narrative organisation, as each symbolic category derives its significance from continuous interaction with its apparent opposite.

The analysis likewise demonstrates the productivity of combining synergetic methodology with approaches derived from cognitive poetics and sensory narratology. Marie-Laure's blindness fundamentally challenges the visual paradigm that has traditionally dominated Western epistemology. The novel proposes an alternative model of cognition grounded in embodiment, according to which tactile, auditory, and olfactory perception possess interpretative capacities equal to – or, in certain contexts, exceeding – those traditionally attributed to vision. Reality thus becomes an embodied phenomenon rather than a purely visual construct.

This sensory dimension simultaneously expands contemporary understandings of literary representation. Rather than functioning solely through visual imagery, the narrative constructs a multisensory textual environment in which perception emerges from the interaction of diverse sensory modalities. Such observations support the growing scholarly interest in embodied cognition and suggest that A. Doerr's novel occupies an important position within the development of sensory fiction in twenty-first-century literature.

The ethical dimension of the novel is equally significant. A. Doerr consistently refuses simplistic distinctions between victims and perpetrators, heroism and complicity, innocence and guilt. Instead, ethical responsibility emerges as a dynamic process requiring continual reflection rather than unquestioning obedience to ideological systems. Werner's gradual recognition of the consequences of his actions illustrates that moral agency cannot be replaced by institutional duty, while Marie-Laure demonstrates that ethical resilience frequently manifests itself through empathy, compassion, and everyday acts of humanity rather than spectacular heroism.

The novel also contributes substantially to contemporary thanatological discourse. Death is represented neither as an exclusively biological event nor as a romanticised sacrifice for collective ideals. Instead, it becomes a complex cultural phenomenon encompassing historical violence, psychological trauma, collective memory, and existential uncertainty: "All winter the roads themselves, compacting the snow, turning it into smooth, blood-stained ice. And when April finally comes, bringing the stench of sawdust and corpses, <…> the ice stubbornly refuses to come off, remaining a brilliant, deadly scheme of invasion, a scar from the crucifixion <…>" (Doerr, 2016, p. 237). Through the experiences of Marie-Laure, Werner, Etienne, and numerous secondary characters, A. Doerr creates a genuinely polyphonic thanatological narrative in which mortality acquires multiple symbolic forms without ever becoming ideologically unified.

Another significant contribution of the novel concerns its representation of scientific knowledge. A. Doerr carefully avoids both technophilic optimism and technological determinism. Radio communication, engineering, scientific curiosity, and intellectual inquiry are portrayed as ethically neutral capacities whose consequences depend entirely upon human decisions. Knowledge therefore appears not as an autonomous force but as an ethical practice inseparable from responsibility. This perspective acquires particular relevance within the contemporary technological era, where scientific innovation increasingly raises complex moral questions extending far beyond the historical setting of the novel itself.

Consequently, *All the Light We Cannot See* may be interpreted as a literary exploration of complexity itself. The novel rejects reductionist explanations and instead foregrounds ambiguity, contradiction, and multiplicity as fundamental characteristics of human existence. Such an approach reflects broader tendencies in contemporary fiction, which increasingly resists absolute truths in favour of dialogic, pluralistic, and relational models of understanding.

**Conclusions and Prospects for Further Research.** The present study has demonstrated

that Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* systematically destabilises the traditional binary oppositions through which literary representations of war have conventionally been organised. Rather than functioning as fixed conceptual categories, the oppositions light/darkness, childhood/adulthood, individual/collective, and duty/morality evolve into fluid semantic structures whose meanings emerge through continuous interaction and mutual transformation. This process constitutes one of the principal artistic strategies of the novel and confirms the explanatory potential of the synergetic approach within contemporary comparative literary studies.

The analysis further indicates that the novel proposes a fundamentally relational model of human existence. Ethical identity is not predetermined by national affiliation, political ideology, or historical circumstance; instead, it is continuously negotiated through individual choices and interpersonal relationships. Such a perspective enables A. Doerr to avoid simplistic moral dichotomies while simultaneously preserving the ethical dimension of historical narrative.

Special attention has been devoted to the thanatological organisation of the text. Unlike conventional representations of wartime death, A. Doerr constructs a polyphonic thanatological discourse in which mortality functions simultaneously as historical reality, psychological trauma, cultural memory, and existential category. Death therefore becomes inseparable from questions of responsibility, remembrance, and moral consciousness. The novel rejects both heroic mythologisation and nihilistic resignation, instead presenting mortality as a shared condition through which human solidarity becomes possible.

Equally significant is the novel's contribution to the literary representation of perception. Through Marie-Laure's sensory experience, A. Doerr challenges the privileged epistemological status traditionally assigned to vision and foregrounds the cognitive potential of touch, hearing, and smell. Such a multisensory narrative organisation aligns the novel with recent developments in sensory narratology and embodied cognition while simultaneously expanding theoretical discussions concerning literary representation itself.

The article has also demonstrated that scientific knowledge occupies an inherently ambivalent position within the narrative. Intellectual curiosity, technological innovation, and scientific discovery are portrayed neither as inherently emancipatory nor intrinsically destructive. Instead, they acquire ethical significance only within concrete historical and human contexts. This interpretation broadens existing discussions concerning the relationship between science, morality, and political power in twentieth-century literature.

From a methodological perspective, the integration of synergetics, cognitive poetics, trauma studies, memory studies, sensory narratology, and ethical criticism has proved particularly productive for analysing A. Doerr's novel. The convergence of these theoretical paradigms makes it possible to examine literary meaning as a multidimensional and dynamic phenomenon, thereby overcoming the limitations of approaches grounded exclusively in structural or thematic analysis.

The findings of the present research suggest several promising directions for further investigation. Comparative analyses of sensory perception in contemporary war fiction could contribute to a deeper understanding of embodied cognition in literary narratives. Likewise, further exploration of thanatological discourse within postmodern historical fiction may reveal new patterns in the representation of collective trauma and cultural memory. Finally, the application of complexity theory and systems thinking to twenty-first-century fiction appears especially promising, as these approaches provide productive conceptual tools for examining literary texts that deliberately resist binary modes of interpretation.

Ultimately, *All the Light We Cannot See* demonstrates that literature possesses a unique capacity to illuminate the complexity of human experience precisely by refusing simplistic explanations. A. Doerr's novel invites readers to perceive reality not as a system of mutually exclusive oppositions but as an evolving network of interconnected ethical, emotional, and epistemological relationships. It is this commitment to ambiguity, plurality, and human interconnectedness that secures the novel's enduring relevance within contemporary world literature and confirms its significance for future developments in comparative literary scholarship.

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