

ENGLISH – ALL THE LIGHT WE CANNOT SEE ESSAY

"Some people are weak in some ways, sir. Others in other ways."

'All the characters have weaknesses but only a few have genuine strengths.'

Discuss.

In his intricate and thought provoking historical narrative All The Light We Cannot See, Anthony Doerr explores the nexus between societal pressure and innate strength. While weakness is fostered by defying the status quo without reward, innate strength is promoted by one's upbringing as well as exposure to acts of inhumanity.

Doerr utilises Frederick to demonstrate that the morality of an individual, when socially isolated, can be belittled and ultimately quashed by society during a time of cultural turmoil. Upon passively opposing his superiors and peers at Schulpforta by claiming that he "will not," abuse the already tortured prisoner, Frederick is ostracised and is ultimately left with little more than his brain's "basic functions," after his continual abuse. Despite this though, he still firmly believes that it "doesn't matter" what he wants, a symptom of a society rife with flawed beliefs which does not value morality. Rather, this society is built on fear and selfish intentions, as exemplified when Herr Siedler says that, at that time, they acted in their "own self-interest," and the most pertinent issue was "figuring out where [their] interests are." Furthermore, not only is this rare sense of moral strength belittled, but Frederick is also made to suffer the consequences for defying his superiors. At this point, he quips to Werner that his problem is that he still believes he "owns," his life, thus showing how he has been abused to the point where he believed that his actions were worthless and his rare sense of morality belittled, both of which serve as vindication for his abuse. This is furthered through Madame Manec, whose narrative of the frog in boiling water culminating when "the frog cooks," thus cementing the notion that when raw innocence is placed in a society rife with injustice, strength is quashed and in its place lays a sense of futility. Despite this, there are characters who have the moral fortitude to rise above this overwhelming social expectation.

While societal pressure degrades one's innate strength, this can be overcome by the means of a sheltered upbringing, as exemplified by the rare loving relationship between Daniel LeBlanc and Marie-Laure. His support is first evident when Marie-Laure loses her sight and yet, he tries "to stay optimistic," and trains her to "guide herself without the need of sight." In painting their relationship like this, Doerr shows Daniel's devotion to his daughter, hence implying the presence of a seemingly unbreakable bond between father and daughter, and thus suggesting that Marie-Laure has been raised in a sheltered environment, and hence that there have been fewer external influences to deprave Marie-Laure. Furthermore, Marie-Laure's love of marine science is used by Doerr to allude to how her upbringing has led to her desire for stability and consistency in her life in a time of inherent chaos. This is particularly evident in the symbol of the whelk, to which Marie-Laure gains an admiration for due to its ability to withstand predators and remain attached to rocks, all the while maintaining its beauty. Doerr uses this to demonstrate how Marie-Laure's upbringing has allowed her to withstand the propaganda and influence of a corrupted society, thus allowing her to exude her innate sense of strength as a result of her love of natural sciences. All of this amounts to a nonchalance in Marie-Laure that is characteristic of an individual who is oblivious to the amorality of the world around her. This nonchalance is epitomised when she says that what she has done "is not bravery," and that all she does is "wake up and live [her] life." This self-belittling contrasts the belittling of Frederick, in that Marie-Laure's stems from a sheltered upbringing, resulting in an oblivious individual that is able to show her innate strength, whereas Frederick is dehumanised as a result of his strength. In doing this, Doerr shows how even in a time of crisis, the power of love is greater than that of endemic societal

constraints. Thus, Doerr employs Marie-Laure to demonstrate how societal pressure can be overcome via a sheltered upbringing, allowing her to demonstrate her inherent and rare strength.

As well as a sheltered upbringing, Doerr employs Werner to assert that exposure to inhumanity can reignite one's once-lost strength. This transformation is shown when Werner, who is initially scolded by Jutta "lie to [himself]," but not to her, to ultimately realising the missteps in his ways when he quips that it was him "who pretended there were no choices." Doerr employs this contrast to show the effects of exposure to the amoral acts, namely the shooting of the little girl by Neumann Two, on one's ability to defy the status quo and show strength. Doerr also employs the motif of the Sea of Flames to convey this, in that just as the gem was formed out of pressure over a long period of time, so too was Werner ultimately strengthened by the sheer weight of societal pressure, ultimately allowing to exude the strength that was once present in him, which led Frau Elena to ponder that Werner would do "something great." Therefore, Doerr utilises Werner to demonstrate that as well as a loving upbringing, exposure to inhumanity can ignite internal flames that mould and foster strength in times of turmoil.

While Doerr employs Frederick to demonstrate that the morality of an individual can be belittled and ultimately quashed by society during a time of cultural turmoil, he uses Marie-Laure and Werner to show that genuine strength can be fostered through love as well as inhumanity. Thus, Doerr ultimately shows the vast number of different forms of strength, and how each can be formed from a plethora of sources and events.