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**THE PROBLEM OF BLURRED CORE BINARY  
OPPOSITIONS IN THE NOVEL *ALL THE LIGHT WE  
CANNOT SEE* BY ANTHONY DOERR**

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**Abstract**

The article deals with the problem of blurred boundaries of the core binary oppositions, namely "light / darkness", "childhood-adolescence / adulthood", "individual / collective", "duty / morality" in the novel *All the light we cannot see* by Anthony Doerr, which highlights the topicality of synergetic approach in modern comparative studies. The problem of blurring between the components of key binary oppositions is one of the moving forces in the analyzed novel, and is of significant novelty for further receptive practice. It is also emphasized that the author interprets the category of death in the analyzed novel, referring to the destructive strategy, aimed to show the goalless sense of death in the context of mass extermination of the population during wars. The category of life is shown in the context of absurd, where its such structural component as future is highlighted with fatalistic semantics. Categories of light and darkness also acquire a new artistic reflection in the analyzed work. The category of knowledge is represented in two semantic aspects – as a tool for cognition of the world to better understand it, and as a tool for destroying those who do not own it. The study of cognitive processes on the basis of verbal data, the separation of a separate layer of so-called tactile literature in the history of literature – one of the new milestones of literary studies. Anthony Doerr is not

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limited to a certain monimage of death. Characteristically, in the novel we trace various alternatives to the thanatological image. Anthony Doerr achieves the effect of polyphony of the thanatological category in the novel *All the Light We Cannot See* through the image of death in the worldview and given experiences of each key character of his creative work. The only thing that unites all variants of the death image is complete lack of fear of possible death.

**Key words:** concept, category of death, category of life, image, novel, synergetic approach, synesthesia.

*"Even complete darkness*

*it is no longer so complete" (novel, p. 150).*

**Introduction.** 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*"<sup>1</sup> (Shvydka, 2016: 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: 71); they become visible in the context of "general", after critical discarding the layers of the categories of national and individual. In the analyzed work of the Pulitzer Prize winner we trace a kind of breaking stereotypes about the representation of binary oppositions, where the blurring of boundaries between their structural categories visibly dominates, and the categorical polarity of binary components erases. The above mentioned emphasizes the **topicality** of synergetic approach to analysis of the problems in the novel *All the Light We Cannot See* by Anthony Doerr in particular, and of our scientific research work in general. Moreover, absence of reception of Anthony Doerr's creative works form a gap in the domestic literary criticism; although the analyzed novel is a bestseller, translated into many languages, including in Ukrainian in 2016, it has not yet become the object of interest in the works of local comparativists.

**The aim of the article** is to analyze the core problems in the novel *All the Light We Cannot See*, focusing on the blurring of the core binaries, such as "light / darkness", "individual / collective", "duty / morality", "childhood-adolescence / adulthood", etc. This aim is planned to be reached through the

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detailed analysis of the thanatological concept and its symbolic representation in Anthony Doerr's analyzed novel.

**Presenting main material.** The two main characters in Anthony Doerr's novel *All the Light We Cannot See* are children who, by fate, went through all the horrors of World War II. Depicted not as martyrs, not as victims ("*Not martyred emblems, like Anne Frank or the British evacuees on the torpedoed City of Benares*" (Veill, 2016)), but as ordinary common children, thousands of whom died aimlessly in the war with which they had nothing in common.

One of the characters is Marie-Laure LeBlanc, the blind daughter of the widowed locksmith and artificer Daniel at the Natural Museum in Paris. Shy but brave and resourceful, the girl learned to navigate the streets of her neighbourhood with a accurate wooden model made by her father to help his daughter in city orientation. Marie-Laure is interested in the mollusks she is allowed to work with in the Natural Museum, which is a metaphorical parallel to the girl's lifestyle due to her physical disability, namely blindness. Symbolic in this perspective is also the author's choice of Marie-Laure's favourite book, namely Jules Verne's novel *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*, written in Braille.

When the Nazis invaded France in 1940, Marie-Laure and her father fled to the coastal city of Saint-Malo to seek refuge with Monsieur Etienne, her grandfather's brother, a hermit whose way of life is permeated with echo of the First World War. Shortly afterwards, Daniel is arrested by the Germans and he disappears, leaving Marie-Laure alone with Etienne and his housekeeper. "*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: 54).

In Germany, meanwhile, Werner Pfenning, an orphan with an incredible

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desire for technical knowledge, is coming of age in the mining town of Zulferein, centered around a coal mining complex. When he and his sister Jutta find a broken shortwave radio outside the orphanage where they live, Werner repairs it, being very skilful in technical reconditioning. On one of the waves they hear a mysterious Frenchman talking about science, namely they both were attracted to the programme about light: "*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: 37).

Werner's passion for science and his gift for understanding the principles of radio mechanics gave him a place in the nightmarish school of training the Nazi military elite of the Third Reich. The boy obeyed the orders without appeal, and when he graduated, despite his very young age, he was assigned to a group of so-called "sweepers", where his task was to find the senders of illegal encrypted radio messages. However, over some time, Werner becomes significantly depressed by what is happening, he is increasingly haunted by memories of French transmissions, which remind Pfenning of a time when science was a kind of instrument or tool for creating miracles to represent its fruitful and purposeful progress, but by no means not death.

The paths of both characters intersect in 1944, when Allied troops landed on the beaches of Normandy, and Werner's military unit went to Saint-Malo to track down and destroy the sender of mysterious reconnoitring messages.

The very depiction of their meeting is the culmination of the novel *All the Light We Cannot See*, creating such a complex plot structure as those wooden models made by Marie-Laure's father. Retrospection to the events of previous years exacerbates the narrative tension. Each part of the plot reveals information in two perspectives – from the position of both Marie-Laure and Werner – which solves the plot puzzle line by line, stroke by stroke.

The problem of blurring between the components of key binary oppositions is one of the moving forces in Anthony Doerr's novel *All the Light We Cannot*

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*See*, and is of significant novelty for further receptive practice. The above-mentioned problem of blurring is especially noticeable during the Second World War, against the background of which the plot of the analyzed creative work unfolds.

Categories of light and darkness also acquire a new artistic reflection in the novel *All the Light We Cannot See*. The image of darkness is reflected in the novel in two perspectives too: firstly, on the example of Marie-Laure as a physiological category manifested through the blindness of the girl; secondly, as a symbolic category because of the image of Werner's spiritual blindness with his blind trust in and, consequently, justification, the ideology of fascism. We agree with the foreign critics of the analyzed novel, who believe that Anthony Doerr also appeals to the deep levels of interpretation of darkness (Yin, 2019: 1) by using this image in the novel *All the Light We Cannot See* as a metaphor for inhumanity, the manifestations of which permeate the plot. The semantics of the image of light can be interpreted, in addition to the direct meaning, through the prism of the category of paternal love of Monsieur Daniel LeBlanc to his daughter Marie-Laure, because "*the walls may fall, the whole city may crumble, but the brightness of this feeling does not dim*" (Doerr, 2016: 136).

The phrase "*is it right to do something just because others do so*" (Doerr, 2016: 97), said by Werner's sister Jutta, only deepens the problem of blurring the boundaries between individual and collective, where no patriotic slogans or illusory nation-building goals justify the devaluation of one person's life in the eyes of another. 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: 101), or feel the breath of death behind your back. Thus, the author reinforces the feeling of the absurdity of life through the opposition 'individual / collective', namely through the introduction into the plot of motivating, but only at the first sight, lines from the song of the Hitler Youth to the words of Friedrich Gelderlin<sup>2</sup>.

The feeling of the absurdity of life is also intensified by Anthony Doerr due to adding new interpretational semantics to the image of weapon. The love for

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weapons ("*Eight soldiers from the Luftwaffe, none of whom will live even an hour, sing a love song to their monarch*" (Doerr, 2016: 10)) is expressed, for example, by comparing a rifle with a baton. Such an analogy is quite symbolic, because during the war weapon is not only mean of self-defense, but also an object for the mass destruction of the military and civilians, a kind of executor of destinies in human hands, as well as a baton in the hands of a conductor.

The townspeople of Saint-Malo, where the main plot events of the analyzed novel take place, have come to terms with the presence of war in all areas of their lives, it is perceived as a familiar daily event, a kind of background for setting the agenda. And even when the air defense signal sounds, "*someone hurries to the bomb shelters*", "*someone tells himself that this is just a training alarm*", and others simply linger "*to seize a blanket, prayer book or deck of playing cards*" (Doerr, 2016: 1).

Taking into consideration the key role of thanatological motive in the plot, the phrase "*Our flag leads us to eternity*" from the official anthem of the Hitler Youth *Vorwärts! Vorwärts!*<sup>3</sup> should be interpreted in two ways: as a patriotic slogan that glorifies the courage of a German soldier, and, consequently, motivates further valor in battle, and prophetic – as a song with which they will be led to their last journey. 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: 38). With the beginning of the war, the category of the future acquires a new sound and as a result literary interpretation, which is especially acute in the analyzed novel; from the former category of vitalistic "will" it is transformed into a fatalistic "what will happen now with us".

Anthony Doerr is not limited to a certain monoimage of death. Characteristically, in the novel we trace various alternatives to the thanatological image. "*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: 229). Thus, the recipient is presented with a Christian image of

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death. For Marie-Laure, death is an integral part of life during a war period, when destruction and the stench of corpses are not exclusively thanatological attributes, but, above all, the realities of Saint-Malo in particular and of life in general. As the girl often notes, she is "*alive only because she has not yet<sup>4</sup> died*" (Doerr, 2016: 255). In Werner's visions, death appears in the image of an innocently murdered girl from Austria, who transforms into an elderly Jewish woman from Frederick's house, whose apartment his parents dreamt to occupy and in the end they settled in it thanks to the favorable policies of the Third Reich regime: "*She becomes an elderly woman; and Werner already curses the understanding of who she really is*" (Doerr, 2016: 299). For the boy as one of the German soldiers, death is a personified character. Moreover, her age and nationality are motivated by the shameful racist policies of the Reich, which often involved murders of innocent children. Thus, Anthony Doerr achieves the effect of polyphony of the thanatological category in the novel *All the Light We Cannot See* through the image of death in the worldview and given experiences of each key character of his creative work. However, the only thing that unites all variants of the death image is complete lack of fear of possible death.

The semantics of the thanatological conceptosphere (Zhornokui, 2013: 24-38) is complemented by the introduction of the image of the road, which expresses the feeling that during the war death loses its individualized character due to mass extermination of population throughout Europe, and, consequently, the fear of it is leveled: "*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: 237).

Leveling the fear of death in the members of the Hitler Youth was brought up / "laid" from early childhood and adolescence through its sublimation into the concepts of "glory", "Fatherland", "sacrifice": "*Live honestly, fight bravely and die laughing*" (Doerr, 2016: 47).

To express the symbolism of the thanatological concept Anthony Doerr in his novel *All the Light We Cannot See* often refers to the expressive possibilities of the landscape. Or "*bare trees stand... like skeletons pulling their hands*

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out of the underworld" (Doerr, 2016: 20), or spring, which generally seems calm, "...but everything is full of tension, as if the city is on the surface of a balloon" (Doerr, 2016: 52). The fatalism present in the descriptions of nature is deepened by the perception of the environment by the characters of the novel. "This May seems to Marie-Laure the most beautiful in her life" (Doerr, 2016: 54): it is not accidentally that this last spring month is mentioned, because the girl is in the prime of her life, and because of the war not only month, but every next day can be the last. Thus, the writer brings the reader to the realization of the absurdity of the very category of life: "With each passing minute, the time left in this house, in this life, expires" (Doerr, 2016: 89).

Except the above mentioned depiction of the category of life, Anthony Doerr through the prism of war also divides this category into two stages "before" and "after" through the introduction of Monsieur Etienne's plot line in the novel *All the Light We Cannot See*. Due to that the writer manages to portray in detail the inner existential conflict of a man who has gone through all the horrors of war. Participation in the First World War became for this character a point of no return to a full-fledged life. Monsieur Etienne, who now suffers from agoraphobia<sup>5</sup>, returned from war being "not as before": "Became embarrassed. Like a mouse trapped. He saw the dead pass through the walls. Horrors at intersections. Now he does not go outside" for many years (Doerr, 2016: 91).

Ground or aircraft technologies are the driving force of any war, its appearance itself means death (eloquent in this perspective is the comparison of Werner's military aircraft with a hungry fish, which in the dark rushes to its prey (Doerr, 2016: 69)), therefore, its symbolic harbinger is the smell of gasoline in the imagination of Marie-Laure. In this way, Anthony Doerr expands the thanatological conceptosphere through the introduction of olfactory images. Moreover, through this image as a direct association with death, we trace the correspondence to the thanatological classification of Ph. Aries, where death in the twentieth century appears as a rather modern character, and the researcher himself characterizes it as "death inverted" (Aries, 1992).



In our opinion Anthony Doerr interprets the category of death in the analyzed novel, referring to the destructive strategy (Demichev, 1998) aimed at maximizing the displacement of the theme of mass aimless death and death during the war from the inner horizon of human existence.

We suppose, it is the problem of humanity, philanthropy that underlies the novel. Of course, there is a cruel coincidence of death in war, but the separate story of two people through the prism of this problem introduces a post-need to find meaning, not to be confused with justification, in human and material losses during World War II. This is the innovation of the disclosure of the theme of war by Anthony Doerr on the example of the novel *All the Light We Cannot See*.

The key characters of the analyzed novel always manage to find something inside themselves, some source of strength, some sense of right and wrong, a manifestation of humanity in difficult times. Anthony Doerr carefully explores this ability in *All the Light We Cannot See*, and in this sense this novel is not just one of the stories about World War II, it is a story about things that, despite the universal, national or individual differences, always connect us as representatives of one human race.

The category of knowledge is represented in two semantic aspects: as a tool for cognition of the world to better understand it, and as a tool for destroying those who do not own it.

The relationship between curiosity and science on the example of mollusks and radio, the study of which brings hedonistic pleasure to Marie-Laure and Werner, respectively, at the same time contrasts the knowledge of the gemstone the Sea of Flames as an all-consuming knowledge with its destructive power. Marie-Laure's blindness, in fact, becomes a prerequisite for choosing the subject of her interest, because the key to cognition for a girl is tactile perception. The world for a girl is revealed solely through touch and smell. In the novel, even "otherness" in the sense of one's own unshakable position different from the collective imitation of imposed ideals has its own smell: "*Frederick's<sup>6</sup> dreaminess, his otherness – he radiates it, like a smell, and everyone smell it*" (Doerr, 2016: 168). Characteristically, the symbolism of otherness / individuality in the worldview is revealed by the author

through an appeal to the category of "light" with an emphasis on their possible interchangeability in the interpretation of the problems of the novel.

After Marie-Laure lost her sight at the age of six, although the world turned gray for her, tactile and olfactory sensations, the connecting link between the girl's consciousness and the world around her, often intertwined, partially compensate for the possibility of feeling and knowing the world. "*Now her world is gray. Gray faces, gray silence, gray annoying horror hanging over the queue in the bakery, and the color briefly returns to this world only when Etienne climbs the stairs to the attic...*" (Doerr, 2016: 242) to lead his broadcasts. The presence of constantly repeated metaphorical transfers from one perceptual sphere to another will deepen our knowledge of the phenomenon of synesthesia – the result of the interaction between several perceptual organs, which in the text of the novel *All the Light We Cannot See* can be traced on the example of the following combinations: "heavy odor", "cold aroma", "warm colors", etc. Obviously, as in the case of Marie-Laure, the absence of one sense organ greatly exacerbates the work of others, but it should be noted that the reproduction of the world will be individualized, because the options of intertwining sensations are not standard models, but motivated by a certain cognitive situation or experience background of each person.

At the same time, the human desire to better understand our world can also be used inhumanely: Werner used the radio to find out something new with the help Etienne and Henri – the last one is Marie-Laure's grandfather –, but later in life he also used it to help his countrymen kill enemy soldiers. This once again raises the issue of blurring the boundaries between the polar concepts of the objective world, and thus highlights the importance of a synergistic approach to the study of literature. Focusing on the technical role and unique understanding of the science due to the radio, Werner does not notice / deviate from acknowledging its destructive impact on human lives.

**Conclusions and prospects for further research.** Summing up the above-made analysis, we would like to note that the novel *All the Light We Cannot See*, firstly, due to the lack of its reception in Ukrainian literary criticism, and the problems, raised by Anthony Doerr in this novel, is undeniably relevant. Secondly, the interpretive polyvariance of the

thanatological concept, of the categories of life, war and the depiction of a man in the vortex of war, depicted in the work, once again prove the necessity and legitimacy in the context of modern comparative studies of synergetic approach to the analysis of literary works in general. Thirdly, the study of cognitive processes on the basis of verbal data, the separation of a separate layer of so-called tactile literature in the history of literature – one of the new milestones of literary studies. Anthony Doerr's novel *All the Light We Cannot See* is very relevant in this perspective due to the specifics of the plot and the introduction into its outline of the image of a blind girl (by the way, according to critic W. T. Volmann, such narrative manner presents "*an exquisitely realized creation*" (Vollmann, 2014: 1). That will allow to look at literature not only as the art of visualizing the world through its cognition by all sense organs, but also to create a certain reality only tactilely or with the help of the smell, which exacerbates the need to reconsider the category of "objective" in the process of cognition.

## Notes

1. Here and hereafter translation of the terms, quotes, quotations is ours – U. Zhornokui.
2. We mean the creative work *Death for the Fatherland*.
3. *Forward! Forward!*
4. The underlining is ours – U. Zhornokui. We believe that particle "yet" strengthens the semantics of thanatological concept through the prism of Marie-Laure's vision.
5. Agoraphobia is a type of anxiety disorder in which you fear and avoid places or situations that might cause you to panic and make you feel trapped, helpless or embarrassed.
6. Frederick is Werner's colleague in the ranks of the Hitler Youth – U. Zhornokui.

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## ПРОБЛЕМА РОЗМИТОСТІ КЛЮЧОВИХ БІНАРНИХ ОПОЗИЦІЙ У РОМАНІ ЕНТОНІ ДОРРА «ВСЕ ТЕ НЕЗРИМЕ СВІТЛО»

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### Анотація

У статті розглядається проблема розмитих меж основних бінарних опозицій, а саме «світло/темрява», «індивідуальне/колективне», «обов'язок/мораль», «дитинство-юність/зрілість» у романі «Все те незриме світло» Ентоні Дорра, що актуалізує актуальність синергетичного підходу в сучасних дослідженнях із компаративістики. Питання розмитості між компонентами ключових бінарних опозицій є одним із ключових проблем в аналізованому романі та становить неабияку новизну для подальшої рецептивної практики. Також підкреслюється, що автор у романі «Все те незриме світло» категорію смерті трактує у контексті інтерпретативної деструктивної стратегії, спрямованої на показ безцільності смерті в контексті масового знищення населення у часи воєн. Категорія життя показана в контексті абсурду, де така її структурна складова, як категорія майбутнього, просякнута фаталістичною семантикою. Категорія знання представлена у двох ракурсах – як інструмент пізнання світу для окреслення закономірностей світобудови, та як інструмент знищення тих, хто не володіє подібними знаннями. Охарактеризовано окремі аспекти загостреного тактильного світосприйняття, а саме явище синестезії. Останнє увиразнює актуальність аналізованого роману, зважаючи на лакунарність теми тактильної літератури у вітчизняному зокрема й зарубіжному літературознавстві загалом. Ентоні Дорр не обмежується лише певним монозображенням смерті: у творі «Все те незриме світло» простежуємо різні інтерпретативні альтернативи танатологічного образу. Поліфонічності категорії танатологічного Ентоні Дору вдається досягнути через зображення смерті у світосприйнятті й з огляду на пережите кожного із ключових персонажів твору, проте єдиним, що об'єднує усі варіанти зображення смерті є

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цілковита відсутність страху перед можливою кончиною. Проблема людяності, людинолюбства лежить в основі роману. Звичайно, існує певна жорстока випадковість смерті на війні, але окремо взята історія двох людей через призму зазначеної проблеми вносить пост-необхідність пошуку сенсу у людських і матеріальних втратах у часи Другої світової війни. У цьому і полягає новаторство розкриття теми війни Ентоні Дорром на прикладі роману «Все те незрима світло». У той же час людське прагнення краще зрозуміти світ також може бути використане негуманно, що вкотре порушує проблему стирання кордонів між полюсними поняттями об'єктивного світу і актуалізує важливість синергетичного підходу до вивчення літератури.

**Ключові слова:** категорія життя, категорія смерті, концепт, образ, роман, синергетичний підхід, синестезія.

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