Selfishness in Werner Pfennig From Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* (2014)

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Abstract

All the Light We Cannot See (2014), a novel by Anthony Doerr, is a Pulitzer Prize–winning work of fiction, awarded in 2015. The narrative deals with the moral dilemmas faced by its protagonist, Werner Pfennig. Werner Pfennig is an eighteen-year-old German orphan serving the Nazi regime. Scholarly studies on the text thus far portray Werner as a victim of circumstance, in navigating the harrowing wartime challenges on his own. However, this study argues that his actions are primarily driven by rational selfish motives. This study therefore examines the rational selfish acts of Werner, highlighting his choices and decisions in relation to his self-sacrifices. Following that, the discussion centers on his relationships with and treatment towards other characters within the text. The reading of the novel is enlightened through the concept of rational selfishness proposed by Peter Schwartz in his book, *In Defense of Selfishness: Why the Code of Self-Sacrifice is Unjust and Destructive* (2015). The textual analysis of the selected text aims to contribute to the broader discussion of Doerr's novel and war literature. Additionally, it explores the applicability of Schwartz's framework to further the understanding and appreciation of literary works. The findings of the study reveal that Werner displays more irrational selfishness than rational selfishness. Moreover, even in instances where Werner displays no selfishness, they result in destructive consequences. In conclusion, the study highlights the moral dilemma experienced by the protagonist from the selected text, and the implications of his rational and irrational selfishness during the war.

Keywords: WWII literature, rational selfishness, moral ambiguity

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Introduction

Literature has long mirrored human morality, often through morally complex characters. Ralph Waldo Emerson writes in *Thoughts on Modern Literature* (1840) that literature has three hierarchical classes: scientific works dealing with realities, imaginative works, and the highest class, which expresses moral elements. Emerson argues that a good writer exploring morality should examine not only the positive but also the darker sides of human conditions, including selfishness. He notes that selfishness is not inherently immoral and that morality differs for each individual rather than following conventional social rules.

In this evolving tradition, Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* (2014) offers fertile ground for questioning moral ambiguity in extreme conditions. During World War II, Werner Pfennig, a German orphan, leaves his sister to join the Nazi school and pursue his dream of becoming an engineer. He sacrifices his principle of not hurting innocent people and obeys soldiers, using his skills to help destroy anti-German radio transmissions. While scholarship presents Werner as a morally ambiguous victim, evidence of his selfishness has not been found. This gap allows this paper to argue that Werner shows traits of rational selfishness, using a checklist based on Peter Schwartz's *In Defense of Self-Sacrifice* (2015). Rational selfishness exists only when the five self-sacrifices are absent and does not involve harming others; if it does, Schwartz categorizes it as irrational.

To address this gap, this article introduces a philosophical framework proposed by Peter Schwartz. Schwartz's concept of rational selfishness has been built based on philosopher Ayn Rand's rational egoism (1964, p. 11). Rand defines selfishness as "concerned with one's self." She views selfishness not as vice but as a rational moral value (1964). Schwartz enlists five elements of self-sacrifices that must be avoided to achieve rational selfishness. The five elements of self-sacrifices are "sacrifice of one's concern," (Schwartz, 2015, p. 14) "sacrifice of one's interest," (Schwartz, 2015, p. 53) "one's continual sacrifice," (Schwartz, 2015, p. 73) "sacrifice against one's choice," (Schwartz, 2015, p. 104) and "sacrifice of one's mind" (Schwartz, 2015, p. 186).

This article argues Werner portrays traits of rational selfishness, and it aims to investigate how his actions align with Schwartz's framework. It poses three guiding research questions: (1) What are the acts of rational selfishness exhibited by Werner Pfennig in the novel? (2) How do the acts of self-sacrifice determine whether Werner Pfennig is rationally selfish? (3) How does Werner Pfennig's behavior impact the other characters and the moral fabric of the narrative?

This study focuses exclusively on Werner Pfennig due to the subtlety and complexity of his moral ambiguity. The significance of this study is to examine Werner's rational selfishness because it is less overtly conveyed in the selected novel. In framing this protagonist as a character who navigates World War II through rational selfishness, this study offers a new lens for understanding Doerr's novel. Schwartz's concept of rational selfishness has only been used in the studies of sociology, and there is a lack of scholarly application to literary works. Therefore, the study expands the application of Schwartz's concept of rational selfishness to literary analysis, offering an interdisciplinary approach that bridges philosophy and literature while contributing to existing scholarship on the novel.

Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* (2014) has emphasized the psychological and moral development of Werner Pfennig thus far. Most analyses portray Werner as a morally ambiguous character shaped by traumatic incidents during the war. The literature review examines major contributions that have focused on Werner Pfennig's trauma, victimhood, and moral complexity and locate a gap which justifies the study.

Several scholars examine Werner's psychological trauma and inner conflict. Pandit (2019) uses Freud's trauma theory to show that Werner, shaped by his upbringing and forced enlistment, becomes a resilient survivor of wartime trauma, transforming from a curious child interested in engineering to a soldier complicit in violence. Mengqi (2023) highlights Werner's vulnerability through the letters he exchanges with his sister Jutta, showing that, like his friend Frederick, he is morally uncertain and ultimately victimized by the system that recruited him.

The trauma and loss that Werner experiences are further examined through psychoanalytic approaches. Margot Wadell (2019) analyzes Werner's inner and outer conflicts using Freudian theory, arguing that when Werner processes his traumatic experiences, the experience helps him to understand a deeper part of himself. She concludes that Werner is a victim in his own ways after experiencing traumatic losses in his life. Despite this, he has found ways to survive both internally and externally, with different levels of consciousness and truthfulness toward the war (Wadell, 2019). These studies thus far have acknowledged Werner's dark moments during the war and have concluded him as a victim.

Narrative scholars have also analyzed Werner's characterization, especially how the novel's form shapes the reader's perception of his morality. Jessica Shepherd (2019) argues that Doerr's use of the present tense and nonlinear timeline creates urgency and strengthens the narration by building an effective buildup. She states that the alternating timeline does not affect the plot but instead shows the characters' development well. Florentina Anghel (2020) similarly notes that the shifting timeline creates a "puzzle-like" narrative that balances war and moral spirit. She concludes that this timeline balances the realities of war and influences Werner's decisions and behaviors.

Other scholars focus on symbolic and archetypal readings of Werner's morally ambiguous actions. Daniel Marchalik (2016) uses Stella Bolaki's theory of "victim art" to argue that Doerr reduces Werner's moral ambiguity by portraying him as a victim who becomes a savior, especially when he rescues Marie-Laure. Marchalik suggests that Werner's redeemed humanity lessens his complicity in war crimes, but he does not examine whether Werner's actions show rational selfishness. Darrell Stafford (2018) analyzes the novel using Barbara Johnstone's linguistic archetypes. Drawing on *The Linguistic Individual* (1996), he studies the traumatic traits in the narrative and links Doerr's choices to the "patient approach" found in *The Wanderer* (late 10th century AD), which centers victims' emotional lives over depictions of violence. He concludes that Doerr uses the same narrative method.

Moreover, Nurul Sakinah (2019) uses Viktor Frankl's logotherapy to interpret Werner's search for meaning during the war. She defends him as brave because he resists Nazi orders, rescues Marie-Laure, and finds his existential purpose. Similarly, Yusrina Prihatika (2017) applies New Criticism to examine symbols of Werner's guilt and moral redemption, concluding that he redeems himself by resisting Nazi ideology and helping Marie-Laure, reclaiming his lost

humanity. While these studies highlight Werner's internal struggles, they view his decisions symbolically to commend his humanity. Likewise, Vinisha Kamalakannan (2023) offers a thematic reading of morality and empathy, arguing that Werner still shows hope, loyalty, and love, and that this goodness should be lauded.

Based on the scholarly findings conducted thus far, it shows that Werner Pfennig's character is analyzed on his moral ambiguity but lacks general consensus on his acts of rational selfishness. Therefore, this paper fills the gap by analyzing Werner's rational selfishness by using the checklist provided by Schwartz from *In Defense of Selfishness: Why the Code of Self-Sacrifice is Unjust and Destructive* (2015).

Research Methodology & Conceptual Framework

This study employs qualitative textual analysis to examine the portrayal of rational selfishness in Werner Pfennig from Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* (2014). For this study, textual analysis aids in interpreting the selected text through the lens of rational selfishness, as outlined in Schwartz's *In Defense of Selfishness: Why the Code of Self-Sacrifice is Unjust and Destructive* (2015). A close reading is conducted to extract relevant textual evidence addressing the research questions and objectives.

The analysis process in this research is divided into several steps. To address the first research objective, the study will identify the rational selfish acts demonstrated by Werner Pfennig. For the second research objective, the analysis will examine how the acts of self-sacrifice determine whether Werner Pfennig exhibits any rational selfishness acts. Finally, for the third research objective, the study will explore how the actions and behaviors of Werner Pfennig impact the other characters from the selected text. To analyze if Werner Pfennig exhibits any traits of rational selfishness, Schwartz's concept of rational selfishness from *In Defense of Selfishness: Why the Code of Self-Sacrifice is Unjust and Destructive* (2015) is adopted. Schwartz's concept of rational selfishness contains five elements of self-sacrifices that an individual needs to avoid.

Conceptual Framework

In 1964, Ayn Rand proposes her theory of "rational egoism," or rational selfishness. Rand (1964) defines selfishness as being "concerned with one's self" and argues that this benefits the individual. She states that a man who does not value himself cannot value anyone or anything else. Schwartz (2015) complements Rand by listing five elements of self-sacrifice to show that self-sacrifice is not a virtue. He argues that rational selfishness is important and not immoral, emphasizing that it occurs only when an individual's desires are reasonable and do not come at the expense of others. If pursuing these desires harms others, selfishness becomes irrational, and the outcome of one's actions determines its rationality. Any form of self-sacrifice means the action cannot be classified as selfish. Moreover, the absence of selfishness also becomes destructive when it harms others. The five elements are: (1) sacrifice of one's concern, (2) sacrifice of one's interest, (3) one's continual sacrifice, (4) sacrifice against one's choice, and (5) sacrifice of one's mind (Schwartz, 2015).

According to Schwartz (2015), sacrifice of one's concern is the act of an individual being forced to give up their ambition for the wellbeing of others. This self-sacrifice fosters the belief that one's time and resources rightfully belong to others in need, regardless of one's own hardship. Schwartz argues that this imposes a false moral obligation; the idea that pursuing one's own desires is inherently immoral. Ultimately, Schwartz concludes that this principle of self-

sacrifice is harmful, as it forces the individuals to abandon their legitimate interests, even when they have caused no harm (pp. 17–21).

The second element of self-sacrifice, as Schwartz (2015) explains, is the sacrifice of one's interests. This sacrifice forces individuals to relinquish the surplus goods or benefits, such as wealth or resources (pp.56–60). This form of sacrifice compels individuals to accommodate others' irrational desires, even when those desires are harmful. This includes irrational desires such as substance abuse or even compulsive spending (Schwartz, 2015, p. 61). Moreover, it requires individuals to voluntarily give up things they hold in high regard, both materially and emotionally. This is done under the false belief that true morality arises in prioritizing others' needs. Schwartz rejects this view, asserting that such sacrifice undermines personal value and genuine happiness (pp. 65–66).

The third element of self-sacrifice is one's continual sacrifice, which is the continual relinquishment of one's concerns and interests, because a single act is deemed insufficient (Schwartz, 2015, p. 70). This form of sacrifice imposes a constant moral obligation to prioritize others' wellbeing, and portrays self-preservation as being negative. Schwartz criticizes this sacrifice, arguing that its purpose is not to uplift the needy but to denigrate those who have achieved success (pp. 71–72). He justifies that such sacrifice weakens personal boundaries, encourages guilt-driven moral obligations, and finally results in the loss of individual identity (Schwartz, 2015, p. 72).

Schwartz's (2015) fourth element of self-sacrifice requires individuals to act against their own choices to meet the needs of others (p. 105). This involves acting against one's desires, values, or preferences, which Schwartz argues compromises personal freedom and leads to irrational outcomes. He criticizes this sacrifice for forcing individuals to conform to moral expectations or to be a slave to a higher authority. These expectations result in individuals disregarding their personal judgment, even when the actions may be inefficient or harmful. (Schwartz, 2015, pp. 104–105). In doing this self-sacrifice, individuals are expected to suppress their ambitions and independence to prove moral worth, a notion Schwartz strongly disagrees (pp. 105–107).

The fifth element of self-sacrifice to avoid is the sacrifice of one's mind. This is the voluntary suppression of independent thought, cognitive abilities, and intellectual freedom to conform to ideological or authoritative expectations (Schwartz, 2015, p. 186). He contends that this self-sacrifice strips individuals of their identity and reduces them to passive followers who do not think, choose, or act for themselves (pp. 187–189). Schwartz calls such individuals as "zombie order-followers," describing them as people who blindly obey authority without using their own judgment (pp. 194–195). He warns that this destructive absence of rational selfishness enables moral atrocities, as individuals give up their conscience in the name of obedience (Schwartz, 2015, pp. 196–197).

Peter Schwartz's concept of rational selfishness has yet to be explored within the field of literary studies. However, his concept of selfishness has been utilized in the field of sociology. By using Schwartz's framework, the study contributes to new interdisciplinary approaches in literary studies and helps in highlighting the value of morally ambiguous characters like Werner Pfennig.

Findings & Analysis

The first incident showing Werner's rational selfishness occurs at age fourteen, when he joins the Nazi school Napola in Schulpforta, Germany, in June 1940 to pursue science and engineering (Doerr, 2014, pp. 112, 124). Despite his sister Jutta's warnings about Nazi atrocities and how Napola has corrupted other boys from their orphanage, Werner sees it as a step toward becoming a proper engineer (Doerr, 2014, p. 133). Jutta confronts him:

"You'll become just like Hans and Herribert."
"I won't."
"Spend enough time with boys like that and you will." (p. 133)

Nonetheless, Werner prioritizes his ambition, and promises Jutta that once he becomes an engineer, he will fly her to the west and even take a train together to "all the way to Paris" (Doerr, 2014, p. 133). Werner's action, which according to Schwartz (2015) is not sacrificing his "concern," (p. 15) resulting in rational selfishness. However, as the narrative progresses, this ambition leads Werner to comply with violent practices at Napola, including abusing the prisoners and weaker cadets (Doerr, 2014, pp. 168, 228–229). These actions conform Jutta's fears and mark a shift from rational to irrational selfishness, as Werner's pursuit of desire causes harm to others. Thus, while his initial action reflects rational selfishness, the consequences of his choice reveal a moral decline.

The second incident occurs when fourteen-year-old Werner continues to serve at Napola despite hesitating about Nazi ideology (Doerr, 2014, p. 195). Initially motivated by ambition, he feels guilty witnessing cruelty, especially from Officer Bastian, who targets weaker cadets (Doerr, 2014, pp. 168, 191). In one exercise, Bastian gives weak cadet Ernst a ten-second head start, warning that if the others reach the finish line first, Ernst will be punished (Doerr, 2014, p. 169). Though Ernst narrowly avoids the punishment, later the same exercise leaves Werner's friend, Frederick, beaten until he bleeds and collapses (Doerr, 2014, pp. 193–195). Werner struggles to understand the cruelty but does not leave Napola even after seeing Frederick, "[b]lood is running from his nose or eye or ear, maybe all three. One of his eyes is already swollen shut; the other remains open. His cheek is gashed and leaks tendrils of blood" (pp. 194-195).

His inaction, especially when Frederick suffers severe abuse, reveals a prioritization of his "concern" over moral responsibility. Schwartz (2015) explains, rational selfishness requires that one's desires be reasonable and not come at the expense of others. Werner's continued service in a system that harms peers like Frederick demonstrates irrational selfishness. Werner who does not sacrifice his "concern" of becoming an engineer is achieved through compliance in cruelty.

The third incident occurs when Werner fails to defend his friend Frederick at Napola. Werner consistently remains silent while Frederick is repeatedly abused by Officer Bastian and bullied by the other cadets (Doerr, 2014, pp. 168, 238–239). Frederick, compelled to join Napola by his parents, remains morally upright and refuses to conform to Nazi ideology, becomes a target of bully. Werner, despite witnessing Frederick's suffering, chooses not to intervene. He admits, "He did nothing while Frederick was beaten and has done nothing since" (Doerr, 2014, p. 217).

Even as Frederick endures increasingly cruel punishments, including forced sprints in snow and severe beatings, Werner "does nothing to stop it" for his friend (Doerr, 2014, p. 238). When

no one stands up for Frederick, the other cadets start to bully him in the campus, "[b]oys leave dead mice in Frederick's boots. They call him a poof, Blowjob, countless other juvenile sobriquets. Twice, a fifth-year takes Frederick's field glasses and smears the lenses with excrement" (Doerr, 2014, p. 239).

Werner only helps Frederick by polishing his boots and helping with homework. He justifies his silence by clinging to his ambition of becoming an engineer and fitting in at Napola. Schwartz defines irrational selfishness as pursuing personal goals that cause unjust harm to others (33). Werner's silence, despite knowing Frederick's abuse is wrong, highlights his irrational selfishness. He does not sacrifice his "concern," which is his career. This is evident when Werner is proud of himself when he knows that he, "… is succeeding. He is being loyal. He is being what everybody [Napola] agrees is good" (Doerr, 2014, p. 250).

Furthermore, in April 1941, Frederick suffers a near-death incident caused by the violent attacks from the cadets (Doerr, 2014, p. 256). Werner notices that Frederick's bed is covered with blood. He observes the "[b]lood on the pillow and on the sheets and even on the enameled metal of the bed frame" (Doerr, 2014, p. 256). When Frederick suffers the traumatic injury, he is left permanently disabled, and Werner again chooses to stay silent because he does not want to jeopardize his future (Doerr, 2014, pp. 256–257, 294). His silence and compliance mark irrational selfishness that ultimately results in Frederick's devastation.

The fourth incident occurs when Werner participates in the torture and death of a captured prisoner during winter training at Napola in February 1941. Under orders from Bastian and Dr. Hauptmann, each cadet is instructed to throw buckets of freezing water on the prisoner. Werner, though internally conflicted, complies without resistance. The prisoner dies from the cold, and Werner is left emotionally numb, feeling as though his hands are no longer his own (Doerr, 2014, pp. 228–229). His internal guilt is evident, but he chooses compliance to preserve his standing and future within the school.

Werner's silence and compliance at Napola is the result of him not sacrificing his interest. Werner's "interests" are his own safety and reputation at Napola, and his career path, which according to Schwartz (2015) are the existing things that a person values. His calculated decision to obey, despite knowing it is morally wrong, reveals how his irrational selfishness causes harm to others.

After the prisoner's death, the body is left tied to a stake in the courtyard, mocked by the cadets and eventually pecked at by crows before being carted away (Doerr, 2014, p. 238). Deeply disturbed, Werner asks Volkheimer, a senior cadet, if this practice is normal. Volkheimer responds with, "They do that every year… Decency does not matter to them" (Doerr, 2014, p. 239). Despite learning Napola's cruelty, Werner does not resist the Nazi regime. His willingness to commit violence in exchange for personal security and future prospects clearly portrays irrational selfishness.

The fifth incident shows Werner breaking his promise to write Jutta "every week and twice a week if he can" (Doerr, 2014, p. 133). By October 1941, at fifteen, weeks pass without a letter. Jutta's letters, often critical of Nazi ideology, are censored at Napola, and Werner knows her questions "should not be asked" (Doerr, 2014, p. 263). To protect his cadet position and privileged status with Dr. Hauptmann, he does not reply. When Jutta asks, "Why don't you write?" (Doerr, 2014, p. 267), Werner remains silent.

Werner's action of prioritizing his career over his sister is seen as an irrationally selfish act. Based on Schwartz's (2015) concept, Werner's action comes at the expense of Jutta. Werner neglects Jutta because he does not sacrifice against his choice reasonably. Werner has two possible choices where he can either maintain his strong bond with his sister and possibly lose his chance to become an engineer or abandon his sister to build his career. He makes the choice of choosing his career over his sister by emotionally distancing himself from her. In Schwartz's (2015) view, rational selfishness requires making choices that do not unreasonably harm others. Werner's choice reflects irrational selfishness, as it causes Jutta emotional pain.

Werner sacrifices their bond for his career growth, despite admitting that Jutta is "the only thing keeping him from surrendering [to the Nazis] totally" (Doerr, 2014, p. 133). The last letter he writes to Jutta is in March 1942 (Doerr, 2014, p. 345). Nonetheless, Jutta still waits for Werner to return home in March 1945 when she sees other cadets returning home from duties, unaware that he had passed away in 1944 (Doerr, 2014, p. 488). In May 1945, Jutta is raped by occupying Russian soldiers and she feels helpless in Werner's absence (Doerr, 2014, p. 489). Werner's career-driven silence leaves Jutta emotionally and physically vulnerable, proving his selfishness is irrational.

The sixth incident illustrates Werner prioritizing his technical career over the moral consequences of his actions. In 1942, he accepts a position in the Wehrmacht's technology division to track illegal radio transmissions (Doerr, 2014, p. 286). Despite witnessing railcars filled with dead and dying prisoners during his journey and observing the cruelty the Nazis impose on the citizens (Doerr, 2014, pp. 318–319), Werner remains focused on his job. Aware that his work contributes to further deaths, he chooses silence, believing his career is everything he has waited for (Doerr, 2014, p. 339).

Werner's irrational selfishness arises when he does not sacrifice his "interest," which is his job, at the expense of others. Werner's job leads him to witness further atrocities. In January 1943, during a mission, he observes Volkheimer forcing prisoners of war to give up their winter clothing and boots and sentencing them to death in the freezing cold (Doerr, 2014, pp. 343–344). Though disturbed, Werner does not intervene, prioritizing his mission over ethical concerns. His silence, despite knowing the consequences, reflects a conscious choice to protect his career, confirms Schwartz's (2015) definition of irrational selfishness.

This happens again in Vienna in April 1944, when Werner misidentifies a painted rod as an antenna, and his team kills an innocent woman and her daughter (Doerr, 2014, p. 368). Realizing the mistake, Werner is horrified but quickly refocuses on locating the next transmission (Doerr, 2014, p. 369). Werner's irrational selfish action of prioritizing his career consistently comes at the expense of innocent victims.

The seventh incident highlights Werner's usage of his technical skills gift to aid the Nazi regime. Werner excels as a technician in Wehrmacht. In August 1942, he repairs transceivers that others failed to fix, and he confidently tracks illegal radio transmissions using triangulation methods (Doerr, 2014, pp. 329, 334–335). His efficiency enables Nazi forces to locate Resistance broadcasts, resulting his team to set fire in the Allied Russian soldiers' house. In the aftermath of the incident, Werner sees:

> [t]he first dead man is on the floor with an arm trapped beneath him and a crimson mess where his head should be. On the table is a second man: slumped as if sleeping on his

> ear, only the edges of his wound showing, a whorish purple. Blood that has spread across the table thickens like cooling wax. It looks almost black. (pp. 337–338)

Werner's decision to contribute his technical skill to the Nazi is seen as irrationally selfish because he does not sacrifice his "concern" reasonably. Werner's "concern" in this scenario is to excel and ensure his value to his team, and to build his career. Werner's irrational selfishness highlights that he uses his gift to further the goals of an immoral cause and through his irrational selfishness, innocent people have died.

The eighth incident reveals Werner's destructive absence of rational selfishness through his sacrifice of mind. This is his willful suppression of independent thought to conform to Nazi authority. Schwartz (2015) calls this phenomenon a "zombie order-follower" and this causes dangerous loss of identity, where individuals follow orders without moral judgment, causing harm to others (pp. 186–195).

In 1941, Werner witnesses a prisoner's death and hides the truth from Jutta, writing letters that "must contend that everything is fine when things do not feel fine" (Doerr, 2014, pp. 227–228). He later conceals Frederick's assault, thinking, "I will never be able to tell her about this" (Doerr, 2014, p. 257). By 1944, guilt stops him from writing at all (Doerr, 2014, pp. 354–356). Jutta symbolizes his conscience, and distancing himself from her shows his suppression of independent thought. In obeying Nazi authorities, Werner harms others like Frederick and the tortured prisoner.

The ninth incident shows Werner's destructive absence of rational selfishness in April 1944, after he mistakenly causes the deaths of a mother and child in Vienna. Overcome with guilt, he silently pleads, "Blink, he thinks, blink blink blink," (Doerr, 2014, p. 368) hoping the child is alive. Instead of expressing outrage at his team, he internalizes the guilt and rationalizes it by saying they "do as they're told." Aware that he and his unit blindly follow orders, Werner suppresses his conscience and continues the mission, willfully sacrificing his mind. Following Schwartz's (2015) concept, this "zombie order-follower" behavior reflects abandonment of moral judgment. Werner's destructive absence of selfishness comes at the expense of the Viennese mother and daughter.

The tenth incident demonstrates Werner's rational selfishness when he lies to Volkheimer about the source of illegal broadcasts coming from Etienne's house in July 1944. When Werner sees Marie-Laure leaving Etienne's house, he is struck by her vulnerability and innocence (Doerr, 2014, pp. 411–412). Marie-Laure's innocence reminds Werner of the accidental death of a young child in Vienna. Werner sees Marie-Laure as a chance to reclaim his lost humanity and decides to protect her.

Werner hides the source of transmission from Volkheimer by covering the meter and pretending to hear only static (Doerr, 2014, p. 424). This decision is not only an act of defiance against the Nazi regime but also his chance to reclaim his humanity. Werner's action is identified as rationally selfish because he does not sacrifice against his choice. Drawing on Schwartz's (2015) concept, when a person does not sacrifice against their choice, it means that they are making decisions that protect one's life and well-being without sacrificing personal values (p. 105).

By choosing to save Marie-Laure and Etienne, Werner gains control over his moral conscience. He reflects, "[a]t least he protected the secrets of her house. At least he kept her

safe" (Doerr, 2014, p. 437), portraying pride in his decision. This moment marks Werner's first act of rebellion, a turning point where he prioritizes his humanity. His action, which harms no one and saves others, fits Schwartz's definition of rational selfishness.

The eleventh incident illustrates Werner's rational selfishness when he rescues Marie-Laure from the German officer, von Rumpel. After being trapped under the rubble of the Hotel of Bees, he hears her calling for help over the radio and becomes determined to save her. Once free, he takes Volkheimer's rifle and rushes to her house. He prioritizes her safety, replaying the words, "He is here. He will kill me… He is right below me" (Doerr, 2014, pp. 459–450) in his mind. When Werner arrives, von Rumpel threatens to kill Marie-Laure, and Werner immediately grabs the rifle and shoots him (Doerr, 2014, p. 465).

Werner's action is regarded as rationally selfish because he does not sacrifice his mind. Schwartz (2015) asserts that when a person does not sacrifice their mind, they no longer suppress their minds for others. When Werner kills von Rumpel, he asks himself, "[a]ll your life you wait, and then it finally comes, and you ready?" (Doerr, 2014, p. 465). This illustrates that he releases his suppressed emotions. These emotions are the guilt and trauma that have been haunting him ever since he joined Napola. He reclaims his humanity when he prioritizes being free from the cruelty he is part of, and his action has saved Marie-Laure's life.

Conclusion

Based on the textual analysis of Werner Pfennig in *All the Light We Cannot See*, this study finds that he exhibits irrational selfishness in seven incidents, destructive absences of rational selfishness in two incidents, and rational selfishness in two incidents. Using Schwartz's framework, rational selfishness occurs when Werner reasonably preserves his choice and mind. He exhibits irrational selfishness when he fails to preserve his concern, interest, choice, or mind. Werner's absence of rational selfishness appears when he sacrifices his mind twice, which proves destructive as it harms others.

Werner's irrational selfishness is rooted in his pursuit of becoming an engineer during Nazi Germany. This includes joining and serving at Napola, participating in violence, abandoning his sister Jutta, and using his skills to support the Nazi regime. These acts come at the expense of others such as Frederick, Jutta, prisoners of war, and innocent civilians, and are therefore classified as irrationally selfish. His absence of rational selfishness is seen when he hides the truth from Jutta and contributes to the deaths of a mother and child in Vienna, showing how these actions are destructive.

However, toward the end of the novel, Werner begins to reclaim his humanity by showing rational selfishness. Lying to Volkheimer to protect Etienne and Marie-Laure, and rescuing Marie-Laure from von Rumpel, represents his rationally selfish acts. These choices no longer harm others but uphold moral integrity.

Ultimately, Werner's trajectory from irrational selfishness to the absence of rational selfishness, and finally to rational selfishness illustrates the complex ethical struggles in wartime. Schwartz's framework is a valuable tool for analyzing these dilemmas and understanding Werner's transformation from a complicit follower to someone capable of reclaiming his humanity.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that AI generative tools such as Grammarly and ChatGPT were used only for proofreading and for language accuracy. The author also states that, aside from using Grammarly and ChatGPT, no other AI or AI-powered tools contributed to the manuscript. All ideas, methodology, findings, analyses, and the overall discussion were independently developed through the author's own careful and systematic research process.

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