

Sacrifice and revenge: the forces behind 'nothing'



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Throughout great works of literature, an underlying message helps to give depth to the story and allow the reader to take away a moral lesson from the story. In literature, this underlying message is often referred to as the theme of the story. Some pieces of literature have many themes, some only one. The novel *Nothing* by Janne Teller is of the former, as it possesses many themes. The themes of how revenge leads to friends doing awful things to one another and how sacrifice is necessary in order to achieve a goal or inspire change in a person. These two major themes help to develop the story as a whole by changing many events in the story and leading many characters into trouble. The two major themes of revenge and sacrifice in *Nothing* are necessary to give the story depth and meaning, while also contributing to the plot of the story as a whole.

The first theme of revenge is displayed many times during the story. As all the kids are beginning to give their own items up into the pile of meaning, their emotions begin to kick in and they start to attack one another, making someone else give up something bigger and more important than they did to get revenge on them. For example, when Agnes is made to give up her favorite pair of sandals into the pile, she immediately seeks revenge on Gerda for making her do such a thing. She even states that “ I looked down at my bare feet and decided Gerda was going to pay” (Teller 39). Agnes then proceeds to demand Gerda give up her favorite pet hamster to get back at her for giving up her shoes. This theme continues with Ursula-Marie who had her favorite blue braids cut right off her hair to be placed on the pile of meaning. She gets revenge on Hussain by making him give up something of grave importance to him. Teller says “ she turned calmly to Hussain and in a

gentle voice, her teeth only moderately clenched, said: ‘ your prayer mat!’” (Teller 99). Hussain is a Muslim and giving up his prayer mat into the pile would get him in a lot of trouble, and that is exactly what occurred when Ursula-Marie makes him do it. Following this, Hussain does not come to school for a whole week and when he finally does return he has many bruises, marks, and a broken bone from his father beating him over “ losing” his prayer mat. From both of these sentences, a theme of how revenge always has severe negative impacts on another person, and brings little joy to the person indulging in such action. The theme of revenge in the story helps to teach a moral lesson to the reader while also helping to develop the novel as a whole.

The other theme of sacrifice is also displayed several times throughout the novel. The entire part of the kids giving up their personal possessions and placing these treasured items into the pile of meaning is all sacrifice. They are making this sacrifice on behalf of Pierre Anthon in order that they can be able to show him that there is meaning on Earth and that consequently, he will come down from his plum tree. One of the biggest sacrifices made in this grand affair was Jon-Johan who had to give up his index finger. Sofie offered to handle the work of chopping it off and Jon-Johan was in a state of complete panic, attempting every possible way to avoid losing his index finger. However, he ultimately had to do it. This was because he needed to make a sacrifice for himself. As Teller says, “ what was to happen was a necessary sacrifice in our struggle for the meaning, we all had to do our bit. We had done ours, now it was Jon-Johan’s turn” (Teller 147). Teller makes it perfectly clear that Jon-Johan has to go through with this action because he

needs to make a sacrifice. This idea makes up the main theme that sacrifice is necessary in order to achieve a goal. This thesis contributes to the overall meaning of the story and adds depth to the novel as a whole. The themes in *Nothing* are necessary in order to give the story meaning, but the themes also inspire several plot elements that shape the novel as a whole. The theme of sacrifice drives the entire middle section of the novel, because all the kids are making sacrifices in order to show Pierre Anthon that life does in fact, have meaning. The sacrifice does not end here, however, because Pierre Anthon ends up sacrificing his own life, after he is murdered in the mill fire. Many plot elements are also centered around the theme of revenge and its effects on the characters. Revenge is the driving force as people are forced to give up something then choose what the next person is to give up. This leads to babies graves being dug up, dogs being beheaded in cold blood, and even people's fingers being chopped off. All these major events of the story would not be possible without the idea of revenge.

In *Nothing* by Janne Teller, the two themes of sacrifice and revenge help to both add depth and meaning to the story, while simultaneously driving the plot and creating events that are essential to the story as a whole. These themes allow the readers to take away a moral lesson from the story, while also contributing to the overall plot of the story and influencing almost all of the decisions the characters make throughout the story. The themes of this novel are extremely vital to its effect on its readers and make *Nothing* the story that it is. The themes of revenge and selfishness in *Nothing* help to shape the story, while reminding its readers of valuable moral lessons and creating a plot that leaves its readers on the edge of their seat.