

Analysis of literary devices, themes, and structure of madeleine thien's novel do...

[Literature](#)



Madeleine Thien's novel *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* is a story crafted to be vivid and magisterial- intimate and grandly political. Thien's masterful writing, her weaving of history into fiction, her use of themes and literary devices truly stamp the mind with an after-image. Her characters' essence is skillfully captured and portrayed throughout the novel. Meanwhile, the story's unique structure following the tale of Ai-ming's fractured family earns the novel a certain universality.

Thien's quest to unveil the interlocking fates of the novel's characters using historical events, themes, and literary devices impresses in many ways. First, the writer skillfully tracks back and forth across more than seven decades of history, assembling the story of the lives of both Marie's and Ai-Ming's families. She weaves Mao Zedong's reign, the Land reform campaign, the Cultural Revolution and the Tiananmen Square demonstrations into her narrative. The images she uses throughout the novel, especially her depictions of the Red Guards' brutality are graphic. The Tiananmen Square protests are also depicted with blazing intensity rendering this novel both a beautiful and at the same time shocking and sorrowful work. Most impressively though, the writer depicts painfully well the coldness of living through the Cultural Revolution. Presenting detailed day-to-day casual conversation charged with perfunctory praise for the party and Chairman Mao, she communicates the numbness of experiencing a violent assault on one's identity. It is around this experience that Thien develops one of her novel's most striking themes- depersonalization during a time of cultural impoverishment. The novel revolves around the idea that the power of the individual is lost in their bid to escape opposing forces and frictional

resistances. Another theme that emerges from Thien's work lies in the possibility that time is bent and elastic. Yet, through the Book of Records, another possibility is examined. In Zhuli's words: " Maybe, a long time ago, the Book of Records was set in a future that hadn't yet arrived." Such themes along with Thien's masterful use of literary devices ensure that the mind is never still while reading the novel. The literary devices Thien uses include the many translation games in *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*. These conceptual differences of written language underline the chasm between the secure and the ever changing. Another literary device that stamps the reader's memory is the repetitive mention of the Book of Records. The book serves as both a narrative device and a metaphor for a history that can neither be remembered nor forgotten. Finally, Thien's compelling writing is characterized by the antithesis built by Glenn Gould's two recordings of Bach's Goldberg Variations which appear throughout the novel like a soundtrack of suffering and redemption. The antithesis lies between the chaotic Maoist politics and the delicate dreams of Thien's characters.

This fascinating interplay between suffering and redemption is rooted in the psyche of one of Thien's main characters: Zhuli. At the beginning of the novel, Zhuli is depicted losing her parents at a very tender age. Her parents-land owners- are trussed, beaten and sent to re-education camps. Broken and alone, she ends up living with her aunt Big Mother Knife, uncle Ba Lute and cousins Sparrow, Dashan and Flying Bear. After the suffering she experienced in Bingpai she has finally found redemption in the home of Sparrow who introduces her to what would later become her only salvation-music. As the story unravels, Zhuli becomes a charming life force. She is

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charismatic, dedicated and completely absorbed in practicing the violin. According to Thien, when Zhuli played the violin “ it was as if she sifted the dust away, lost the notes and found the music.” As the story progresses and the Cultural revolution breaks out, Zhuli’s heart, once brimming with dreams and aspirations, becomes hostage to its inner score. Whatever frail, ghostly sense of identity she still has causes her suffering. Yet, the call inside her head is always louder than the call of the outside world- the Communist Party. She chooses not to surrender to the party’s assault of her identity and resorts to what she feels is redemption: death. It is easy to connect with this character because of how she stays true to herself. To me, staying true to myself is the most lasting expression of humility. The world is not always acting the way we thought it would. Zhuli would not play in Moscow, London or Berlin just as I would never dance again at my beloved dance school, which was burned to the ground by wildfires in Greece. How could she argue with nonsense? How could I argue with fate? Zhuli was brave enough to decide not to. She decided to let go and take back her “ narrative”. She inspired me to do so too. Witnessing how Zhuli evolved as a character throughout the novel I realized that what we see with our eyes is transient and ephemeral, yet what we see through our heart is everlasting and eternal.

The novel’s structure, spanning three generations and lapping up against the shores of two continents, also creates an antithesis between the ephemeral and the everlasting. The story begins in 1991, at the house of Marie and her mother in Vancouver Canada. The newest addition to their household, Ai-Ming, a Chinese student seeking refuge after the Tiananmen square

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demonstrations, sets the plot into motion. The novel soon fractures into different subplots beginning with Mao's reign in the late 1940's and concluding with the aftermath of the Tiananmen square protests of 1989. The novel examines four different historical eras that do not necessarily come in chronological order. During the first era, we are introduced to Big Mother Knife, her sister Swirl and Swirl's husband Wen the Dreamer who live through the land reform campaign and the executions that follow. The second era involves Zhuli, Kai and Sparrow during the cultural revolution, during which they experience terrible oppression of their artistic fervor. The third era focuses on Sparrow and his daughter Ai-Ming during the Tiananmen square protests. The last era presented in the book is the "present" when Marie is assembling the stories of Ai-Ming's ancestors and realizing they are intrinsically connected to the stories of her own family. The story behind the Book of Records is a constant presence throughout the novel. Of course such a structure is testament to Thien's seductive style. It communicates sophistication and maturity of narrative. It mimics the mechanics of a tangled and chaotic world. Yet, as the novel progresses, all the different subplots become so incorporated into the Book of Records that the line between fact and fiction, past and present is blurred. This can cause confusion and make the plot difficult to follow. Its bulky structure renders the novel complex and erudite but at the same time cultured and refined. Thien surely manages to keep her material entirely in control.

Ultimately, *Do Not Say We Have Nothing* proves that Madeleine Thien is a skilled storyteller who knows how to use literary devices, themes, character profiles and structure to craft a coherent yet sophisticated narrative- one

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that is brimming with the sound of music and images of some of history's most ominous chapters.