 Do not say we have nothing

Resource 3: examining form and structure

1. Non-linear structure:

Questions to consider:

* In what ways is this novel linear/non-linear?
* In what ways is the convention of a linear narrative structure challenged?
* How are flashbacks and shifts in time used to reflect the fluidity of memory?
* How are memories depicted as both traumatic but essential in moving towards restoration and finding solace?
* How do the movements between past and present contribute to the novel’s exploration of the difficulty in piecing together a complicated and fractured family history?
* How does the fractured structure of the novel reflect ideas of displacement?
* Why is a non-linear structure effective for representing a world where so many truths are hidden and concealed?

Quotes such as the following could be analysed and discussed:

“And suddenly I was in the car with my father. I heard rain splashing up over the tires and my father humming. He was so alive, so beloved that the incomprehensibility of his suicide grieved me all over again.”

“On Huaihai Road, Wen was asking her to be his wife. Swirl remembered the quiet of the bed when she had woken suddenly. She had picked up her son’s perfect hand, and a grey sadness seemed to move from his chest into hers…”

“How could she put these thoughts in a note? She wanted to preserve the core of herself… a note would only cause further humiliation… I am taking this record with me… it’s mine.”

I know that throughout my life I have struggled to forgive my father. Now, as I get older, I wish most of all that he had been able to find a way to forgive himself… That’s what I would tell my father. To have faith that one day, someone else will keep the record.”

1. Cyclical Chapter Structure:

Discuss the following questions:

* 1. what is significant about the structure of the novel?
  2. why does the novel begin with Part One, and move to Part Zero?
  3. why does the novel begin counting back down through the chapters half-way through?
  4. what ideas might be conveyed through this circular structure? (Consider ideas of unity, and how this reflects cyclical thought processes common in Chinese cultural ways of thinking).
  5. does this novel have a clear beginning, middle and end? How might the structure comment on continuity and enduring impacts?

Consider Thien’s following statement:

“2016 is a very particular moment. Mao Zedong was in power for 27 years, until his death in 1977; and it’s been 27 years since the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations. I think, in Do Not Say We Have Nothing, there’s a counting up and a counting down of time, an effort to make visible patterns in history, the idea of the Year Zero or the Ground Zero, these rifts in society which we keep recreating, and to which we keep returning.”

[A Conversation with Madeleine Thien, author of “Do Not Say We Have Nothing](https://medium.com/anomalyblog/a-conversation-with-madeleine-thien-author-of-do-not-say-we-have-nothing-b62a04644f7e)”:

* what does this statement reveal about the way in which the novel’s structure is used to comment on repetitions in history?
* what political perspectives/comments could Thien be representing through the use of this structure?

Consider the following quote from the novel:

“Zero is a definite point from which measurements are taken along a line… hence the zero point is the location on which all others are dependent, to which they are all related, and by which they are all determined… That summer of 1966, the year Zhuli died, was the zero point for my father.”

* in what way does this quote contribute to your understanding of the novel’s structure?

1. Musical Allusions and Musical Influences on the novel’s structure:

Read and consider the following three statements then use these to inform your discussion of the below questions. Students should also listen to Bach’s Goldberg Variations.

1. “The structures of their symphonies, partitas, sonatas, variations, etc., all worked their way into my consciousness as ways of thinking and forms of narrative. Arrivals, departures, and returns”

[A Conversation with Madeleine Thien, author of “Do Not Say We Have nothing](https://medium.com/anomalyblog/a-conversation-with-madeleine-thien-author-of-do-not-say-we-have-nothing-b62a04644f7e)”:

1. “The recurrent structure of many Western classical forms also seemed relatable to Chinese conceptions of circular time, and to the nature of memory.”

[The inspiration behind Canadian author Madeleine Thien’s latest work:](https://beta.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/the-inspiration-behind-canadian-novelist-madeleine-thiens-latest-works/article32474462/?ref=http://www.theglobeandmail.com&)

1. “The fragile dreams of Thien’s characters run in counterpoint to the disordered cruelty of Maoist politics, with Glenn Gould’s two recordings of Bach’s Goldberg Variations running through the novel like a soundtrack of suffering and redemption.”

[Do Not Say We Have Nothing Review](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jul/14/do-not-say-we-have-nothing-by-madeleine-thien-review-chinas-20th-century-tragedy)

Discussion questions:

1. in what ways do have The Goldberg Variations influenced the structure of the novel?
2. in what way are repetitions and recurring situations in the novel reflected similar to the form and structure of the Goldberg Variations?
3. brainstorm examples of arrivals, departures and returns in the novel.
4. find examples of the ‘fragile dreams’ of the characters in the novel, and in contrast to this, find examples of the disordered cruelty of Maoist politics in the novel.
5. in a novel about the devastating impacts of the suppression of artistic suppression, why is it so significant that music is so central to the stories structure?
6. what comment could Thien be making about the power of art as a form of resistance through her structure?
7. Metafiction:

Discussion Questions:

1. in what ways in ‘The Book of Records’ a metanarrative? How does it create a link between the characters? How does it draw a relationship between the reader and the characters?
2. in what ways are readers drawn into the text through being reminded of the impact of the act of reading?
3. in what way are the audience encouraged to consider the potential for texts to activate change?

Some key quotes for consideration:

“On the surface, the story was a simple epic chronicling the fall of empire, but the people trapped inside the book reminded her of people she tried not to remember…”

“She began to wonder if Wen the Dreamer, during his hours of coping the Book of Records, had merged with the author or even the characters themselves, or perhaps he had transformed into something more expansive and intangible? When he finished copying, did he go back to being himself or were the very structures of his thoughts, their hue and rhythm subtly changed.”

“He crowded the open space of the novel with landscapes and wishes of his own so that he, too, could become an inseparable part of this new world where desires he had never acknowledged were, in these characters, given form and substance and freedom.”

1. Intertextuality:

In this novel, intertextuality acts as a hidden code, which leads to the uncovering of layers of meaning. Intertextuality can be interpreted as being used by Thien as a structural device in order to reflect both the layered and complex historical, cultural and political landscape of China, as well as to symbolically mimic the concealed and hidden acts necessary in this political climate.

Some examples of intertextual references to be discussed and explored include:

1. Jiang Kai’s poetry - “Watch little by little the night turns around” adapted from Pink Floyd lyrics for “Set the controls for the Heart of the Sun,” adapted from Tang Dynasty poet Li Shangyin’s ‘Untitled poem (iii)’.
2. research the meaning of the original poem by Li Shangyin and consider the way in which this foreshadows the hidden and repressed relationship between Sparrow and Kai.
3. what does this reference reveal about the interconnectedness of Chinese and Western music?
4. The music Sparrow sings in the tea houses – “You and I are forever separated by a river…” Collected by Wang Luobin.
5. research Wang Luobin.
6. in what way is this reference a reminder of the passion and devotion to music, as well as a reference to human resilience?
7. how does this line symbolically resonate with the emotional separations that occur throughout the novel?
8. Title – ‘Do Not Say We Have Nothing’. Internationale – anthem of the Communist party of China.
   1. how is this reference used as an expression of hope and resilience?
   2. why are the students employing communist ideologies in order to express their backlash against their strict communist regime?
9. Opening of Chapter 41 of the Book of Records - “Tomorrow begins from another Dawn. Remember what I say: not everything will pass.” Bei Dao.
10. research Bei Dao and the ‘Misty Poets’. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/bei-dao
11. in what way might this reference hint at the way that artistic expression can be used as a form of resistance?
12. what is the meaning behind this line of poetry?