## A Thousand Years of Good Prayers | Summary and Analysis

Summary of A Thousand Years of Good Prayers by Yiyun Li



focusing on the main character, Mr. Shi. The main themes of A Thousand Years of Good Prayers are friendship, love, loyalty, connection, culture, language, freedom and conflict.

A Thousand Years of Good Prayers by Yiyun Li is a short story written in third-person narrative,

## A Thousand Years of Good Prayers Summary The story begins with a man named Mr. Shi, from China, explaining that he is a rocket scientist who is

visiting America- a very nice country, he thinks. He easily makes acquaintances, despite not speaking fluent English, and everyone is friendly. He even makes a friend- an old woman from Iran whom he calls "Madame". Though they cannot understand each other, they converse for hours. Mr. Shi tells her about being a rocket scientist in China, about his daughter, and they agree that they love America. He admires how positive and cheerful the woman is, and almost wishes to confide about the times in the past, when his daughter was young and his life was hopeful. But the language barrier prevents him from doing so. It is then revealed that he had flown from China to America to help his daughter recover after her

divorce from a seven-year marriage, despite her telling him there was no need for the visit. In the end, he disguised it as a wish to see America for his birthday and she had no choice but to fly him out. She doesn't talk much, only praises the food he cooks, albeit half-heartedly. Her father is sure she is hurt, though he doesn't know why the marriage ended- his main intention is to find out. But no matter how much he asks, she never talks to him. When he asks why she is not happy, she denies, telling him that people can be both happy and quiet- just like he used to be. He is taken aback by this uncharacteristic directness from her. The next day, Mr. Shi tells Madame that his daughter is not happy. She is dressed in bright colours, and he thinks about the old Chinese saying that people are lucky to cross paths even once in their lifetime.

He then thinks about his daughter, who probably feels that he is a nuisance. He realises that nobody has listened to him with such understanding before- he did not even talk this much to his wife before he died. He wishes it was his daughter talking to him, but she is not interested. Mr. Shi's conversation with Madame once again ends with both of them praising America, for they are able to share such stories freely. Over dinner, Mr. Shi tries to convince his daughter to speak to the woman for some positivity. She is dubious, and her father wonders why she is so confrontational- so unlike her mother, who was a model woman. To that, his daughter points out that she could never succeed in making him talk. She asks him

how long he is planning to stay in America. When he tells her that he will stay until she recovers, she

gets up and leaves the room. The scene then switches to Mr. Shi telling Madame in Chinese that his wife

would have done a better job at cheering up their daughter. He explains that he loved his family dearly,

but could never spend time with them because he couldn't speak to them- his job as a rocket scientist

required strict confidentiality. Now, though he knows it was impossible then, he wishes he had

established a habit of speaking to his daughter. He gave more importance to work than family. That night, at dinner, his daughter tells him that she paid for him to take a tour around America- after all, he did say that he came to see the country. He protests, but she tells him it is already booked. Then, someone calls her. She takes the call in the room, but the door remains open- she speaks in English, laughing loudly and freely in a way Mr. Shi has never heard. When she returns, he confronts her, and she tells him it is a male friend from Romania. She tells him he is a lover, and when her father asks how they could have gotten close in just the month since the divorce, it is revealed that they have known each other for a long time. She finally tells him that her divorce was because she never spoke enough to her ex-husband, who was Chinese. She says it is different in English- after all, her parents never spoke, so she never learnt how to express emotions in Chinese. Mr. Shi gets upset, demanding if she was blaming him and her mother for the situation, and saying they never spoke because there was no

problem to speak about.

Analysis

she calmly tells him that she and everyone else knew that he wasn't. She apologizes for hurting him, which he denies, and says she'll book the tickets for the tour. He requests that she arrange a direct flight from the end of the tour back to China. It is finally revealed, as Mr. Shi sits in the park to say goodbye to Madame before his trip, that he was not a rocket scientist after all. He used to be, and it was a noble profession. But one day, he started speaking to a woman who worked at a card punching machine. They only talked- it was nothing more than that, they talked more and more. But it never crossed the line of verbal exchange. However, as he was a married man, this was seen as wrong by the society. Mr. Shi explains this to Madame, who is twirling a leaf in her hand, which she finds beautiful. He continues the story, still in Chinese, saying that he was given an ultimatum- to publicly apologize for

Here, Mr. Shi's daughter points out his lie. When he insists that it's because he was a rocket scientist,

he did not think he was wrong- there was no affair, they only talked. But because of this, he lost his job as a rocket scientist and spent his life in the lowest rung of the professional ladder. As all of these happenings were to be kept strictly confidential, it was never revealed to his wife, and he never spoke. He did not answer his wife's questions, until she had none left. He watched his daughter grow up in silence. As he explains to Madame, he wonders about love- romantic love, platonic love, emotional love...he certainly felt a connection with that woman at the hole punch machine. But ultimately, he chose his family, his wife and daughter, over pursuing anything with her. He did not want to wrongly admit a love

his affair and continue his job, or to lose his job and not apologize. Mr. Shi refused to apologize because

affair for the sake of his job, hurting those around him. Didn't he make the right decision? He shakes away a stray thought- that life is made meaningful by our sacrifices- and deems it because he is in a foreign country. He decides not to think too much, and rather live in the present. Amidst all his thoughts, his dear friend Madame quietly held up a golden leaf, shining in the air for him to admire. A Thousand Years of Good Prayers

## The most prominent feature of this story is the emphasis on the language and cultural differences, even with Mr. Shi's dialogue. Whenever he speaks in his mother tongue, Mandarin, his words are italicized to highlight the difference. This creates a visual representation of the contrast to coincide with the oral as well as the thematic contrasts in the story. The tone and structure is very interesting- A Thousand Years

of Good Prayers often switches between Mr. Shi's thoughts, his conversations with his daughter, and his recollection of those conversations among other things as he talks to his friend, Madame. The conversations with Madame act as the representation Mr. Shi's life from his own point of view, while his dinners with his daughter shed light on the other perspective- and the reality. The reason for the switch in tenses is because of the balance between anecdotes, memories and present conversations. Li employs dialogue, observation, and internal monologue. There is also a plot twist towards the end, which is brought by a major shift in the reality of the character. The first theme established was that of culture- and more specifically, cultural difference. Mr. Shi is shown in America explaining his profession to strangers and conversing freely with everyone, something which could not have happened in the strictness of his home country. He even makes a friend who understands him despite the cultural and language barrier- they both agree that they love America, a

land where they are free to live the way they want. From this, we can immediately tell that Mr. Shi is not from America, and hence is not familiar with the American culture or the English language. We also learn that he is a rocket scientist, something he seems very proud of. The second point to note here is that he and the woman get along perfectly fine despite being unable to understand each other. This is because of the old woman's personality- she had a positive cheerfulness about her which could brighten anyone's day. This represents the importance of outlook and optimism. On the contrast, Mr. Shi finds it difficult to talk to his daughter, who speaks his language. The maximum interaction they have is her half-hearted praise of his cooking, which showcases a sense of

obligation, It also crosses his mind when he speaks to Madame that all people are meant to cross paths

for a reason. This is a subtle foreshadowing. His daughter's divorce seems to be a very difficult subject for Mr. Shi. He is convinced that it is her exhusband who hurt her, and wants to stay in America until she has recovered. Here, we see themes of conflict- while she is not particularly enthusiastic about his visit, he feels very strongly about it. He keeps trying to make her talk to him, and is finally shocked when that speech comes in the form of rebuttals. We are also once again introduced to cultural differences- in Chinese culture, it is unheard of for a daughter to talk back and question her father. Women were supposed to behave a certain way, according to society- timid, shy, and cooperative. Mr. Shi feels shocked to hear his daughter question

and argue, as he feels it is unbecoming.

is it a wish for his daughter to be better than he was? She points out that she never heard expressions of emotion from her parents in Chinese, hence it is just easier to talk in English. This provides an insight to the relationship between Mr. Shi and his late wife, as well as his earlier behaviour. Mr. Shi feels that his friendship with Madame is a positive experience and encourages his daughter to become close with her as well, which she refuses blatantly. We also see how Madame's friendship has impacted Mr. Shi's life- sometimes, it helps to have a friend who is willing to listen and appreciate

everything one says. Mr. Shi found that in Madame- a sense of underlying mutual understanding, and a

because of his job, but we can almost see a double standard. We may wonder- is it a double standard, or

Her arguments also shed light on the fact that Mr. Shi himself never spoke. He insists that it was

mutual respect for each other's words. It signifies the importance of emotional connection: when one's mind connects to another's, it is a very strong bond fueled by the ability to talk for hours and understand one another completely. The constant praising of America suggests freedom. Mr. Shi feels that people are allowed to express their identity and be themselves in America, which is very different from the society he grew up in. Despite this thought, he still feels a culture shock when his daughter laughs and talks with another man on the phone. He says she was "laughing like a prostitute" which is a very intense comment- and perfectly

encapsulates cultural differences. In China, the society is very strict. Such loud voices, free laughter and

easy chatter was frowned upon. And women who spoke and laughed so easily with men were looked at

in contempt and labelled poorly. Mr. Shi immediately associates his daughter's actions with those thoughts, while his daughter, who has lived in America for years, does not agree. We see conflict due to cultural differences, as well as Mr. Shi's realisation that the marriage ended because of his daughter, not the man. The revelation of the truth is a shocking plot twist. The reason not only being the several mentions of Mr. Shi's profession and how that impacted his family life, but also because throughout the story, he had been portraying himself as an ideal man, an ideal father. Through the truth, we realise that nobody is really 'ideal'. After all, though his conversations with the card-punching woman of the past might have been platonic, he still lied about his profession to his family, ignored them, and then lied about it to Madame as well. He was possibly avoiding the harsh reality and the judgmental eyes of the public.

However, he comes clean to Madame, despite knowing that she cannot fully understand him. He feels a

When Mr. Shi recalls his time with the card-punching woman, it leads us to wonder about the line

sense of safety and responsibility to share the truth before he leaves.

between romantic and platonic. Though it was not a physical affair, could it be considered an emotional affair? After all, he spoke to this woman more than he ever spoke to his wife. And towards the end of the story, we can see that he did contemplate leaving his wife and child for her, but ultimately chose loyalty and family over even his career. We once again think about the emotional connection Mr. Shi had earlier mentioned- his mind connected with the woman's, and conversation flowed easily. There was nothing more, no suggestive advances, no physicality- just talking. But somehow, the bond and understanding within the conversation led Mr. Shi to wonder if it could be a type of love. The fact that he was given an ultimatum that cost him his job by his company is an implication of his society. This could be the reason he often praises America for its freedom. Nobody can meddle in other/s

business, and he might have been thinking about his own experience at the time. We also wonder

his belief that it is the husband who wronged his daughter. It is possible that Mr. Shi left America

whether his actions towards his wife- ignoring her questions until she stopped asking- is what prompted

slightly unhappily because of the conversation with his daughter. But the revelation of the truth to Madame, and her gentle response, could have cheered him up. Madame simply held up a golden leaf, twirling it so that it shined in the sun after Mr. Shi's shocking confession. She is not angry at him for lying- though we don't know how much she understood- nor does she react adversely to the truth. She simply listens and remains a physical presence of support next to him. Mr. Shi has a stray thought which is more Americanized and less suitable for his society, and dismisses it as foreign thoughts in foreign land. This symbolises his understanding that cultural differences do exist, and while he lives in the traditional Chinese culture, her daughter lives in America.

She must live her life the way she wants- as America stands for, especially in his eyes- and he must let

her be. When Madame holds up the leaf, calling it beautiful, it symbolises new beginnings and hope. It

acts as a reminder of the beauty of the world and the individual, no matter how many struggles and

mistakes are faced along the way.

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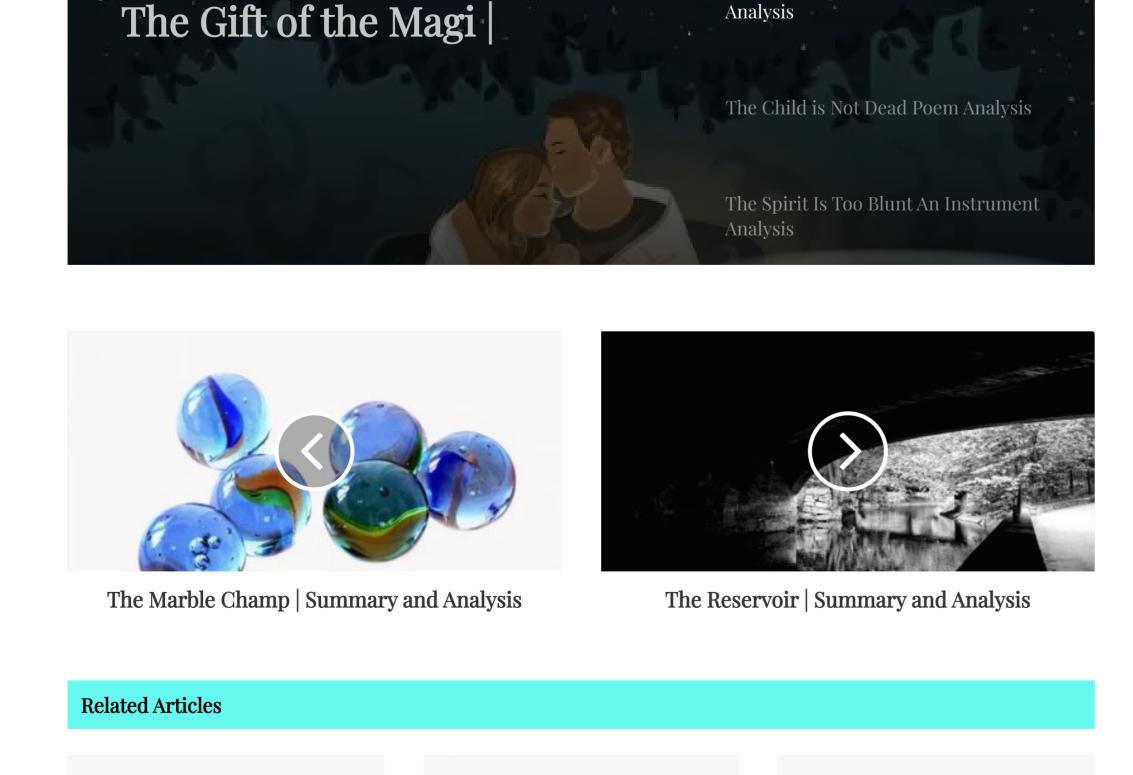
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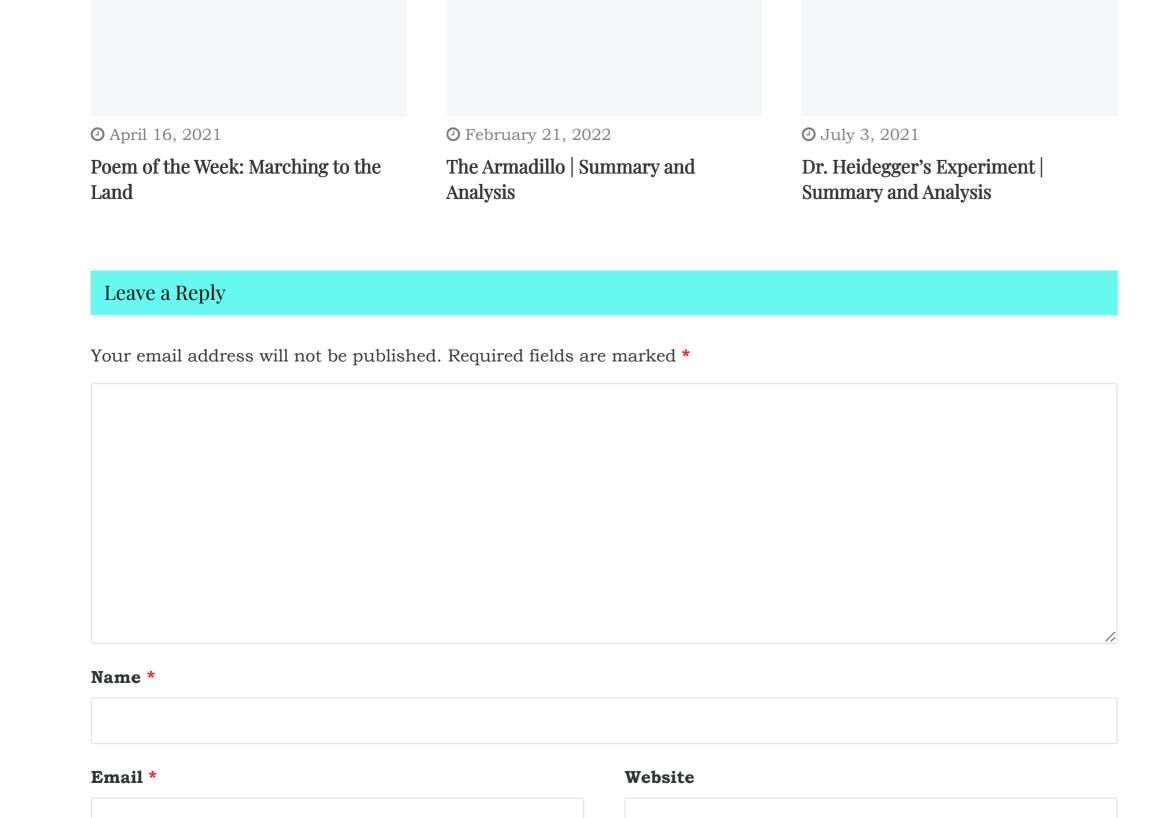
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