

The Dialectic, 2019



By Zadie Smith

Author's biography: Zadie Smith was born in London, England, and is the author of five novels, three collections of essays and a collection of short stories. She has won literary awards including the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, the Orange Prize for Fiction, the Whitbread First novel Award and the *Guardian* First Book Award, and has been shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and the Bailey's Women's Prize for Fiction. Zadie Smith is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the Royal Society of Literature. She is a regular contributor to the *New Yorker* and the *New York Review of Books*.

Introduction to the story

1. What is the meaning of the title: *The Dialect*?

Denotation (literal or primary meaning of a word)
Connotation (an idea or feeling which a word invokes for a person in addition to its literal or primary meaning.)

2. What is an **EPIGRAPH**? Why would authors use these?
3. The epigraph for our story is from a line of poetry: "**How can anyone fail to be**" (from "Yesterday Down at the Canal," by Frank O'Hara.
 - a. What seems special about this quotation?
 - b. What do you think it means?
 - c. Does there seem to be a connection with the title of the story?

FIRST READING

To **REALLY** make sense of a literary text, it takes **multiple readings**. Let's read the story once and try to pick out some important details.

Group 1:

1. You are in charge of finding out what the narrator tells us about the setting.
2. How does the narrator use the setting to particular effect? (Are there any **symbols**?)

Group 2:

1. You are in charge of finding out what the narrator tells us about the socio-economic situation of the family.
2. How important do you think this is for the story?

Group 3:

1. You are in charge of finding out what the narrator tells us about the personalities of the characters (**characterisation**).
2. How is this information revealed? (**Third person** narration? Dialogue?) What is the effect of this? (For example: Is the psychological insight convincing? Does the overall effect feel more objective?)

Vocabulary (in order of appearance)

- Temperamental
- Murk
- Buoy
- Silt
- Willy-nilly
- Camouflage
- Cusp
- Ludicrous
- Aspiration
- Gawkers
- Emigrated
- Furtively
- Chicken sexers
- Vats

How can anyone fail to be

—“Yesterday Down at the Canal,” Frank O’Hara

THE DIALECTIC

“I would like to be on good terms with all animals,” remarked the woman, to her daughter. They were sitting on the gritty beach at Sopot, looking out at the cold sea. The eldest boy had gone to the arcade. The twins were in the water.

“But you are not!” cried the daughter. “You are not at all!”

It was true. What the woman had said was true, in intention, but what the girl had said was true, too, in reality. The woman, though she generally refrained from beef, pork and lamb, ate—with great relish—many other kinds of animals and fish, and put out flypaper in the summer in the stuffy kitchen of their small city apartment and had once (though her daughter did not know this) kicked the family dog. The woman had been pregnant with her fourth child, at the time, and temperamental. The dog seemed to her, at that moment, to be one responsibility too many.

“I did not say that I am. I said that I should *like* to be.”

The daughter let out a cruel laugh.

“Words are cheap,” she said.

Indeed, at that moment the woman held a half-eaten chicken wing in her hand, elevated oddly to keep it from being covered in sand, and it was the visible shape of the bones in the chicken wing, and the tortured look of the thin, barbecued skin stretched across those bones, which had brought the subject to mind.

“I dislike this place,” said the daughter, definitively. She was glaring at the lifeguard, who had once again had to wade into the murk to tell the only bathers—the girl’s own brothers—not to go past the red buoy. They weren’t swimming—they could not swim. There were no waters in the city in which to take lessons, and the seven days they spent in Sopot each year was not long enough to learn. No, they were leaping into the waves, and being knocked over by them, as unsteady on their feet as newborn calves, their chests gray with that strange silt which fringed the beach, like a great smudge God had drawn round the place with a dirty thumb.

“It makes no sense,” continued the daughter, “to build a resort town around such a filthy and unwelcoming sea.”

Her mother held her tongue. She had come to Sopot with her own mother and her mother had come with her mother before that. For at least two hundred years people had come here to escape the cities and let their children run wild in the public squares. The silt was of course not filth, it was natural, though no one had ever told the woman exactly what form of natural substance it was. She only knew to be sure to wash out all their costumes nightly in the hotel sink.

Once, the woman’s daughter had enjoyed the Sopot sea and everything else. The candyfloss and the shiny, battery-operated imitation cars—Ferraris and Mercedes—that you could drive willy-nilly through the streets. She had, like all children who come to Sopot, enjoyed counting her steps as she walked out over the ocean, along the famous wooden boardwalk. In the woman’s view, the best thing about a resort town such as this was that you did whatever everybody else did, without thinking, moving like a pack. For a fatherless family, as theirs now was, this collective aspect was the perfect camouflage. There were no individual people here. In town,

the woman was on the contrary an individual, a particularly unfortunate sort of individual, saddled with four fatherless children. Here she was only another mother buying candyfloss for her family. Her children were like all children, their faces obscured by huge clouds of pink spun sugar. Except this year, as far as her daughter was concerned, the camouflage was of no use. For she was on the very cusp of being a woman herself, and if she got into one of those ludicrous toy cars her knees would touch her chin. She had decided instead to be disgusted with everything in Sopot and her mother and the world.

“It’s an aspiration,” said her mother, quietly. “I would like to look into the eye of an animal, of any animal, and be able to feel no guilt whatsoever.”

“Well, then it has nothing to do with the animal itself,” said the girl pertly, unwrapping her towel finally and revealing her precious, adolescent body to the sun and the gawkers she now believed were lurking everywhere, behind every corner. “It’s just about you, as usual. Black again! Mama, costumes come in different colors, you know. You turn everything into a funeral.”

The little paper boat that had held the barbecue chicken must have blown away. It seemed that no matter how warm Sopot became there would always be that northeasterly wind, the waves would be whipped up into “white horses” and the lifeguard’s sign would go up and there would never be a safe time to swim. It was hard to make life go the way you wanted. Now she waved to her boys as they waved at her. But they had only waved to get their mother’s attention, so that now she would see them as they curled their tongues under their bottom lips and tucked their hands into their armpits and fell about laughing when another great wave knocked them over. Their father,

who could very easily be—as far as anyone in Sopot was concerned—around the next corner, buying more refreshments for his family, had in reality emigrated, to America, and now fixed car doors onto cars in some gigantic factory, instead of being the co-manager of a small garage, as he had once had the good fortune to be, before he left.

She did not badmouth him or curse his stupidity to her children. In this sense, she could not be blamed for either her daughter's sourness or her sons' immaturity and recklessness. But privately she hoped and imagined that his days were brutal and dark and that he lived in that special kind of poverty she had heard American cities can provide. As her daughter applied what looked like cooking oil to the taut skin of her tummy, the woman discreetly placed her chicken wing in the sand before quickly, furtively, kicking more sand over it, as if it were a turd she wished buried. And the little chicks, hundreds of thousands of them, perhaps millions, pass down an assembly line, every day of the week, and chicken sexers turn them over, and sweep all the males into huge grinding vats where they are minced alive.

SECOND READING

1. What questions do YOU have about the story? List three.
2. Describe the **MOOD** of the story and the **TONE** of the dialogue.
3. On the first page of the story (page 4) the chicken wing seems to take on **SYMBOLIC VALUE**. What might it represent?
4. What is the purpose and significance of the last sentence of the story? How does it develop the **MOTIFS** of the chickens and animals?
5. How important is the idea of gender to this story?
6. Now let's go back to the title and the epigraph. **Discuss** and **evaluate** their significance to the story.
7. Pick one of the key words or phrases from the story below and in two well developed paragraphs, discuss their overall importance to it:

Word Choice
1. What the woman had said was true, in intention, but what the girl had said was true, too, in reality.
2. "It's an aspiration," said her mother, quietly. "I would like to look into the eyes of an animal, of any animal, and be able to feel no guilt whatsoever."
3. Camouflage
4. It was hard to make life go the way you wanted

Appendix

Vocabulary

- In this booklet, key vocabulary terms will be highlighted in **RED**.
- We'll have quizzes on these throughout the unit.
- Be sure to understand how the word is used in context, as well as its **connotation**, **synonyms**, and **denotation**.
- A good place to start would be here: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>

Example: Devastation

- **Denotation:** The state of being rendered non-existent, or useless, often through violent action.
- **Synonyms:** annihilation, desolation, wreckage
- **Connotation:** The root of the word 'state' emphasizes that something fundamental, either physical or emotional, has been ruined.

Ways vocabulary could be used in a quiz:

1. List two synonyms for 'devastation'.
2. Define 'devastation'. (Note: '*Devastation is the state of being devastated*' is a circular argument. You need to go beyond the root of the word.)
3. We've been exploring how, in 1945, Europe was in a state of devastation. Provide two examples of this.

Literary terms and definitions	
Characterisation	How the identity of a character is revealed in a text. This can be done only in a straight-forward way (description) but also through dialogue, actions, indirect narration, language, costume, etc.
Connotation	An idea or feeling which a word invokes for a person in addition to its literal or primary meaning.
Denotation	The literal or primary meaning of a word
Discuss	Offer a considered and balanced review that includes a range of arguments, factors, or hypotheses. Opinions or conclusions should be presented clearly and supported by appropriate evidence.
Epigraph	A quotation set at the beginning of a literary work or one of its divisions to suggest its theme
Evaluate	Make an appraisal by weighing up the strengths and limitations.
Mood	Mood refers to the emotional response that the writer wishes to evoke in the reader through story. This response can range anywhere from feelings of calm, fear, anger, or joy depending on the literary work.
Motif	Recurrent idea, image, or symbol that develops or explains a theme or central idea
Symbol	Symbolism is a literary device that refers to the use of symbols in a literary work. A symbol is something that stands for or suggests something else; it represents something beyond literal meaning. In literature, a symbol can be a word, object, action, character, or concept that embodies and evokes a range of additional meaning and significance.
Third person narration	A narrative or mode of storytelling in which the narrator is not a character within the events related, but stands 'outside' those events. In a third-person narrative, all characters within the story are therefore referred to as 'he', 'she', or 'they'; but this does not, of course, prevent the narrator from using the first person 'I' or 'we' in commentary on the events and their meaning. Third-person narrators are often omniscient or 'all-knowing' about the events of the story, but they may sometimes appear to be restricted in their knowledge of these events. Third-person narrative is by far the most common form of storytelling. See also point of view.
Tone	<p>Tone is a literary device that reflects the writer's attitude toward the subject matter or audience of a literary work.</p> <p>Writers use several techniques to convey tone, including word choice, figurative language, punctuation, and even sentence structure. This helps to establish a narrative voice so that the reader not only understands the words as they are presented in a work but also their meanings, as intended by the writer, character, or narrator. A defined tone allows readers to connect with the writer and/or their narrators and characters.</p>

Rubric

	5	6	7	8
Word Choice	<p>Identifies words and phrases that impact the meaning and tone of the text; clearly and accurately explains the meaning of those words and phrases as they are used in the text (e.g., figurative, connotative, and technical meanings). Clearly explains the impact of those specific word choices on the meaning and/ or tone of the text. Generally explains how specific word choices relate to context or medium.</p>	<p>Identifies words and phrases that impact the meaning and tone of the text; clearly and accurately explains the meaning of those words and phrases as they are used in the text (e.g., figurative, connotative, and technical meanings). Explains the cumulative impact of those specific word choices on the meaning and/ or tone of the entire text. Clearly explains how specific word choices relate to context or medium.</p>	<p>Identifies words and phrases that impact the meaning and tone of the text; clearly and accurately explains the meaning of those words and phrases as they are used in the text (including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings). Explains the impact of a pattern of word choices on meaning and/or tone, including how patterns of word choice relate to context or medium. Where applicable, generally explains how an author uses or refines the meaning of a key term/concept over the course of a text.</p>	<p>Identifies words and phrases that impact the meaning and tone of the text; clearly and accurately explains the meaning of those words and phrases as they are used in the text (e.g., figurative, connotative, and technical meanings). Analyses the impact of a pattern of word choices on meaning and tone and the relationship between word choice and context or medium. When relevant, clearly analyses how an author uses or refines the meaning of a key term/concept over the course of a text.</p>