

## The Dialectical Journal

A dialectical journal is a conversation between you and what you are reading. It highlights the questions, connections, and ideas that you have as you read.

This process is an important way to understand a piece of literature. By writing about literature, you make your own meaning of the work in order to truly understand it. When you do this yourself, then the text belongs to you--you have made it yours. The passages are there for everyone to read; however, the connections and interpretations are uniquely yours. You are neither right nor wrong in your response. So be willing to take risks, try your ideas, and be honest.

Since the journal is a conversation between you and the text, you'll need to record parts of the text and your thoughts about the text. On the left side of your journal page, record phrases, sentences or short passages that interest you. On the right side of the page, write your thoughts about the quoted text. Use literary terms in your reflections and elaborate as you express your thoughts! Aim for a mix of comments about:

- Ⓢ what you think something means
- Ⓢ the personal connections you make (to a character, setting, event)
- Ⓢ patterns you notice
- Ⓢ predictions you can pose
- Ⓢ commentary on important decisions made by characters, ideas expressed, or key events
- Ⓢ observations about a character
- Ⓢ what seems unusual
- Ⓢ recognition of a literary technique and ideas about its meaning and purpose

Some sentence leads could include:

- Why did ...
- Who is ...
- This setting reminds me of ...
- This doesn't make sense because ...
- This idea/event seems to be important because ...
- The language makes me feel the author is ...
- When the author does ... , it creates a ... tone that ...
- This character reminds me of ... because ...
- If I were (character), at this point, I would ...
- What would happen if ...
- Now, I understand ...
- The details create / show ...
- The ... is compared to a ... and it really makes me see how ...
- The ... symbolizes ... and it ... (the effect)
- With the ... , the author creates an image of ... that ...

Entries will be evaluated on details, thoughtfulness, and variety in the type of entry. Some sample journal entries follow.

Quote

Thoughts

**“Four Skinny Trees”**

from *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros

“They send ferocious roots beneath the ground ... and grab the earth between their hairy toes and bite the sky with violent teeth and never quit their anger. This is how they keep.” (93 – 94)

“Let one forget his reason for being, they’d all droop like tulips in a glass, each with their arms around the other.” (94)

“... who grew to despise concrete.” (94)

***Lord of the Flies* by William Golding**

“A stain in the darkness, a stain that was Jack, detached itself and began to draw away. ‘All right. So long.’ The stain vanished. Another took its place. (121)

Ferocious roots and violent teeth that bite the sky are a shocking and very visual image! Wild animals are often ferocious and violent. Threatened animals and people can be ferocious and violent too. I don’t think of trees as being angry, ferocious, or violent. What is it that makes these trees so angry that they’re animal-like in their will to survive?

The image of the drooping tulips is in sharp contrast to the four raggedy trees that stand strong. With their heads bowed and huddled close together, drooping tulips do look sad, as if hope is lost. It really makes me see how one tree losing its purpose zaps strength from the others and they wilt and give up together. I’ve felt like that. When I’m not in sync with the crowd and feel different, it helps me to see others who have strength being themselves and if they give up, it’s discouraging.

The trees despise concrete. They don’t just adapt and live in their environment. They despise. That’s a human trait (personification) and despise is a very strong verb. There’s some hate in that word! What do the trees hate? Concrete that keeps them blocked in and forces roots much deeper just to hold on and grow. I would hate the concrete too!

This metaphor compares Jack to a stain, to something that mars, contaminates, and spoils. Since darkness is mentioned, it makes me think that Ralph sees Jack as evil. Biblical allusions are all over the place in *Lord of the Flies* and this makes me think the reference to darkness also shows that Jack represents the dark side of human nature. Jack being a stain, I completely understand but whom or what is the other stain? The entire next paragraph is about Roger. Is Roger a stain too?

## Quote

## Thoughts

“He (Roger) simply sat and rocked the trunk gently ... So they sat, the rocking, tapping, and impervious Roger and Ralph, fuming ... They heard him (Jack) blunder against the trunk which rocked violently.” (121)

What a contrast between Roger and Jack! Just by the way they rock the same tree trunk; you can see their different character traits. Roger gently rocks the tree trunk while tapping his stick and saying nothing. He is invulnerable, and closed. I can picture him in his own little world, stewing in his mind, but showing very little outwardly. Jack is different. When he comes along, he “blunders” into the tree trunk and rocks it “violently.” I wonder if the tree trunk symbolizes something like stability and natural order that Jack will shake violently and Roger, surprisingly, will also shake some, but gently. Does Jack’s violent blunder also foreshadow coming violence?

“There was a slithering noise high above them, the sound of someone taking giant and dangerous strides on rock or ash. Then Jack found them ...” (121)

With alliteration (slithering, sound, someone, and stride), the author creates an image of a snake, a large and dangerous snake ready to fall on Ralph and Roger! The very next line identifies the snake, “Then Jack ...”

### ***The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak**

“Rosa had a small rip beneath her right eye, and within the minute, her cardboard face was broken. Not down the center, but to the right. It gnarled down in her cheek in an arc, finishing at her chin.” ( 419)

Rosa’s cardboard face is a powerful image! With one surprising adjective, “cardboard,” I see how Rosa wears a façade, a mask that is unbending, stiff, and protective. There’s no softness to her. When her face breaks, it’s not a nice, clean opening of the mask but a “gnarled” tear that feels anguished.

### ***The Scarlett Ibis* by James Hurst**

The flower garden was strained with rotting brown magnolia petals and iron weeds grew rank amid the purple phlox ... the last graveyard flowers were blooming. ( 1)

The description by the author of “rotting brown magnolia petals” and rank iron weeds makes me see and smell decay and death. It seems ironic that anything would be blooming in this place. The effect is a heavy, dark tone that creates a sense of foreboding.

### ***The BFG* by Roald Dahl**

A brilliant moonbeam was slanting through a gap in the curtains. (*The BFG*, pg 9)

Since the author used the word slant, I picture a sharp ray of light into the room. The details help me picture the room and I wonder if the moonbeam is keeping the character awake.

***A Tale of Two Cities* by Charles Dickens**

Darkness closed around, and then came the ringing of church bells and the distant beating of military drums in the Palace Courtyard, as the women sat knitting, knitting. Darkness encompassed them. Another darkness was closing in as surely, when the church bells, then ringing pleasantly in many an airy steeple over France, should be melted into thunder cannon; when the military drums should be beating to drown a wretched voice ... So much was closing in about the women who sat knitting, knitting, that they their very selves were closing in around a structure yet unbuilt, where they were to sit knitting, knitting, counting dropping heads. (187)

The darkness described in the passage foreshadows something about to happen. Dickens usually goes for the literal to symbolic to foreshadow events. Since darkness has always been associated with evil, terror, and fear, it could be foreshadowing a coming darkness or bad time. At first, there's a literal darkness encompassing the knitting women and distant ringing church bells. That soon shifts to "...another darkness was closing in ... when the church bells ... should be melted into thunder cannon ..." meaning that France is going to put morals (church bells = church; church = morals, goodness) aside (as if France was even moral to begin with). The reader can guess that the darkness closing in brings in the eruption of war. (2008 – 2009, 8<sup>th</sup> grade student)