

2019 Midwest Modern Language Association Convention

Panel: Female Authors and Duality: Creating a Third Space

Presentation title: "Twins in Blood Only: Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and the Failure of Foils"

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Session #102. Friday, 1:00-1:55pm

Good afternoon. My presentation is titled, "Twins in Blood Only: Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and the Failure of Foils". I initially conceived of this to be a conference paper, but as I jumped into the novel with a class of high school juniors and seniors last spring, I realized that it was the germ of a conference paper, but also a truly dynamic teaching text. What follows is my experiences teaching the novel, as well as how my students and myself worked through some of the more complex and troubling aspects of the plot. I'm retaining my focus on the role of the twins in the novel, and I would also claim that Smith's entire novel contains a multitude of colliding Third Spaces that form, intersect, interact, dissolve, and re-form as something new. This, as I will explain shortly, is an action that the students at my school also constantly engage in.

First, a little background on my students and the class. I teach at a residential STEM high-school in Aurora, Illinois. It's a public school that only accepts students who are Illinois residents, and we draw students from all over the state. The students at IMSA are highly gifted in STEM fields, which is the primary reason they end up with us, BUT we have a, and I'm only a little biased here, fabulous Humanities curriculum. The class I taught this novel in is a junior and senior level elective called Modern World Fiction. As the course title would suggest, the class aims to introduce students to the incredibly numerous and diverse literary offerings beyond the American canon. In my sections of the course, I often resorted to pulling fiction from

my pile of New Yorker magazines--giving students the most current pieces I could. While we did read some longer works during the semester, *White Teeth* was the only novel.

Zadie Smith is a British author with an English father and a Jamaican mother. Her multicultural background and both the added richness and conflicts it brings impact much of the book's plot. *White Teeth* was her debut novel, and Smith was in her early 20's when it was published. Critics often draw comparisons between Smith and Salman Rushdie because both authors pack their works with a clamoring multitude of characters, stream of conscious point of view perspectives, a touch of magical realism, and challenging themes. While I considered tackling one of Rushdie's shorter novels with this class, ultimately I decided that Smith's novel was more approachable, a decision that some of my students may still question.

*White Teeth* follows the lives of two very different families in London--One, the Jones Family, consists of Archie Jones and his much younger second wife, Clara Bowden, a Jamaican woman who has been raised as a Jehovah's Witness. They eventually have a daughter, Irie, who struggles with her bi-racial identity and her position in society in early 1990's London. The other family is led by the patriarch Samad Iqbal, a Bengali immigrant who served with Archie in World War II. The Iqbal family includes Samad's wife, Alsana, and their twin sons, Magid and Millat.

The twin sons are where we will focus our attentions because of a fateful decision their father Samad makes, that the students really reacted strongly to. I suppose that's a good sign, it indicates that were at least reading something! Samad grows increasingly dismayed at how Westernized (Samad's choice word is corrupted) his sons are becoming, and schemes to send them back to Bangladesh. Finances prevent him from buying two plane tickets, so he makes the decision to send one of the twins back. All of this is done behind his wife's back, utterly without her knowledge. With the help of Archie, Samad spirits one son, Magid, the more scholarly, focused twin, to Heathrow Airport, and away he flies. The other twin, Millat, stays behind. In a

twisted sort of way, Samad initially gets his wish, Magid grows up with Samad's relatives and seems to adopt extremely traditional Muslim customs as an avid scholar. Yet he will eventually return to England speaking perfect British English, and has plans to be a lawyer. He will join forces with a scientist working on gene manipulation, whereas Millat, the left-behind brother, defies his parents, loves Western movies--especially those involving gangsters, smokes pot, and becomes completely Westernized before joining a militant Muslim group. It is worth noting that although they are physically separated at the age of 9, and will remain so for the next 8 years, Magid and Millet both experience many parallel events--such as both of them breaking their noses

The myriad facets involved in a clash of cultures and familial intentions within *White Teeth* really resonates with my students, many of whom are first-generation with immense pressures placed upon them to succeed. Often times these pressures force them to travel between different spaces of identity--they may exhibit certain characteristics at school which are completely buried when they are with their families. The academic or career expectations that families put onto students may lead them to create a response persona which is very different from how the student might opt to self-express. Our school's residential component allows students to try on different identities because they are physically apart from their families, sometimes for extended periods of time. I also have had many students who are twins, right now I have a student who is a triplet. In the case of that student, one of his two brothers at IMSA, and one is not. The splitting of a core binding like a twin sibling, many times for the first time, is quite an impactful one. Many students at IMSA are also bi-racial, and understand the plight of a character like Irie Jones--whose disastrous attempt to straighten her hair in order to conform to more Western notions of female beauty results in a chemical burn and the loss of huge chunks of hair.

Because Magid and Millat spend their formative years absorbing extremely different cultural atmospheres, it makes sense that the twins meet up in their teens as different people. But what

my students identified in our discussions, is that although they may appear quite different, they are actually following parallel tracks. Magid's obsession with genetic research parallels Millat's slide into fundamentalism. Both become briefly infatuated with Irie, and both will sleep with her on the same day. Her daughter--also inhabiting multiple cultural spaces--will later write letters to "Bad Uncle Magid" and "Good Uncle Millat" without any knowledge of paternity. My students appreciate the diverse paths the twins follow, but always come back to how much they are the same---pushing at the powerful links that their biology really does serve.

Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* is able to resonate with readers on multiple levels, as it displays conflicts of family, culture, faith, and learning. It is also a challenging text to present to high school readers, but one in which allows students to see themselves reflected in ways they may never have encountered in literature before. The twin pair of Magid and Millat Iqbal and the parallel, not-parallel experiences they undergo demonstrate the powers of biology to many students who may be seeing their own cultural history as an impediment, and may allow them reflection on the impact and power of culture and the self.