

# OH F\*\*\*K! WRITERS AND BAD LANGUAGE



What are our responsibilities regarding 'bad language'? Perhaps our main responsibility is to know what is 'bad', but more than that to know why. Only then are we likely to know how to make effective use of 'bad language' in our writing.

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*FUCK* is probably the most celebrated of the 'Anglo-Saxon swear words'. It is described by linguists as one of the two 'maximally taboo words' in modern English. The word seems to have been taboo for most of its existence.

There is little doubt that the word is broadly Germanic, but its precise origin has never been identified and is still the subject of lively speculation. Lack of a definite and authoritative historical source for the word has driven some to come up with fanciful explanations. For example it is often said that *fuck* is an acronym. One version of popular mythology has it that the phrase originated at the time of the Plague when the king decreed that it was necessary to replace the dead population, hence: 'Fornicate Under the Command of the King'. Another version says it means 'Felonious and Unlawful Carnal Knowledge'. This sounds like the invention of a policeman facing a judge.

Almost certainly the word is connected to the conjectured ancient Indo-European root-word *peik*, meaning enmity. Although we often refer to it as an 'Anglo Saxon' word, we have no record of it in surviving Anglo-Saxon texts. If the Anglo Saxons knew the word, they do not seem to have written it down. Scots sources provide us with *windfucker* and *fuckwind* (windhover) and *fucksail* (foresail) and suggest the Old Norse root *fukja* (to drive or be driven by the wind), and perhaps the origin of the phrase 'run like fuck'. It is likely that the word was first loaned from Scandinavia into Scots and then into English, and seems to have derived from a dialect word like the Norwegian word *fukka* meaning to copulate or the Swedish dialect word *focka* meaning copulate or hit, and may also be related to the Swedish word *fock* meaning penis.<sup>1</sup>

Eric Partridge has pointed out that many of the possible root words and their current cognates in modern languages have the primary meaning of 'to beat', 'to strike', 'to offer a blow', and only as a secondary application, the idea of 'to copulate'. He makes much of the connection to the Latin words *futuo* and *futuere* (from which comes French *foutre*), *batuere* (to batter or strike), and the German *ficken* (to strike). There is also, it seems, a connection to Latin *pungere* (root of our pugil) meaning to strike. This double meaning is common in other sexual words in English: e.g. shag, roger, knocking, bang, bonk. And metaphors for the penis follow this line too, where the penis is characterised as a weapon, e.g. tool, drill, hammer, pile driver, meat tool, axe, chisel, crank, prick, chopper, heat seeking moisture missile, pink bazooka, pocket rocket, love truncheon. The closeness of the sex act and the idea of violence is

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<sup>1</sup> I have drawn freely on: J. Ayto, *Bloomsbury Dictionary of Word Origins* (London, 1990); J. MacDonald, *Dictionary of Obscenity & Taboo* (London, 1988); J. Willinsky, *Empire of Words: The Reign of the OED* (Princeton, 1994); *Compact Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1989); D. Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of the English Language* (Cambridge, 1997); D. Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Language* (Cambridge, 1995); Bill Bryson, *Mother Tongue* (Harmondsworth, 1991); Chambers' *Official Scrabble Words* (London, 1992/93); G. Hughes, *Swearing*, (Harmondsworth, 1998); J.Green (ed.), *Cassell Dictionary of Slang*, (London, 1999); S. Burgen, *Your Mother's Tongue: A Book of European Invective* (London, 1996); J. Sheidlower, *The F Word* (London, 1995).

unfortunate, but apparently deep-rooted and widespread among Indo-European cognates.<sup>2</sup>

Although the word may originate in ancient times it is only relatively recently that the word *fuck* has appeared in the written language. In Chaucer's day the words *swive* and *dighte* were both synonymous with *fuck*, yet unlike *fuck*, could both be written without any problem. According to the *OED*, *fuck* seems to have been written down for the first time only in 1503, when the poet Dunbar used the word *fuckit*. However, the personal name, John le Fucker, dating from records in 1278 shows that the word was around long before it was first written down.<sup>3</sup>

Laws passed in 1606, 1623, 1642 and tightened up in 1649 made swearing illegal. Swearing on stage was particularly problematic for the Puritanical London council. Indeed, so feverish was the conflict between the council and the actors that all the Capital's theatres were built just outside the city boundaries. Shakespeare, though he did not use *fuck*, playing upon the word several times. In *The Merry Wives of Windsor* he used the words *firk*, *foot* and *focative*. In *Henry V* Alice, speaking French mispronounces the word *foot* as if it were the French word *foutre*, causing Queen Katherine to exclaim that a language which had the word *foutre* for foot must be marvellously corrupted and totally unfit for use by the lords of France. In *Henry IV* (Part ii) Pistol says: 'A foutre for the world and worldlings wise' and later: 'A foutre for thine office'. He may be using the French form, but the message is clear.

By the Restoration the word seems to have been committed to paper with only a little more ease. The libertine courtier John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester (1647-80) wrote the word without hesitation a great many times in his poetry, but even in the morally relaxed atmosphere of the court he seems to have been the exception, and it is clear that in his use of the word he clashed with a potent taboo - a taboo so persistent that many of his poems, though they circulated freely in manuscript during his lifetime, were not published or made available in a modern edition until the late 1970s. Nevertheless, although it may have been socially unacceptable to use the word, it was still thought far, far worse to utter profanity directed at God and the monarch. After Rochester the word seems to have become taboo again and all but disappeared from printed texts until the mid-20th century.<sup>4</sup> In part the word was replaced by a euphemism, or by sound-alike words. After about 1592 *fuck* was echoed by the French *foutre*; but that became *foot* or *sfoot* in the 1600s, *footer* in the 1750s, *footy*, *frig* and *frigging* in the 1780s, *effing* in the late 1920s, and *eff* after about 1943. The word also had daring substitutes like 'Oh fiddle!' The word also became part of rhyming slang with phrases like: 'A goose and duck' and 'I don't give a Friar Tuck'. Sometimes the word *fuck* was dropped

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<sup>2</sup> E. Partridge, *Origins* (London, 1977).

<sup>3</sup> J. Green, *Cassell Dictionary of Slang* (London, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> *Poems by John Wilmot Earl of Rochester*, ed. V.de Sola Pinto (London, 1953) gave little clue as to Rochester's use of the word. This was not the case with *The Complete Poems of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester*, ed. D. M. Vieth (New Haven & London, 1968).

altogether, to lead a kind of phantom existence, as in: 'I don't give a monkey's (fuck)'.

The word *cunt* has had a similarly odd career in English. Eric Partridge says that *cunt* is related to the Latin word *cunnus* (vulva), which is related to Greek *kusthos*, and Persian *kun*, (rump or posterior) and Hittite *kun* (tail).<sup>5</sup> Other possible connections are to the ancient Greek word *konnos* (posterior) and the Hittite word *kusa* (bride). It is possible that this is also the root of Latin *cutis* (skin). It has been said that the Greek *kusthos* possibly derived from an older word *\*kuzdhos* which can be traced back to an Indo European word *\*ku* or *\*keu* (to hide or conceal), dating from about 4-6000 years ago. It is possible that this word can be traced back even further to earlier language families. Partridge, for example, points to the Egyptian words *qefen-t* (vagina, vulva) and *ka-t* (vagina, vulva, mother, women) and says that there are several cognates to be found in other Semitic languages probably indicating the basic idea of what he calls 'essential femininity'. Although *cunt* may also be related, via its ancient Indo European roots, to Latin *cuneus* (wedge) and from that to French *con*, *cun*, *cunne* and *connard*, Italian *conno*, Spanish *coño* and *concha*, Catalan *cony*, Portuguese *cona*, Welsh *cont*, and Irish *chuint*, these connections have yet to be proved conclusively.<sup>6</sup>

In English the word seems to have derived from a Germanic word, probably *kunton\**, dating from about 2000 years ago. It is possible *cunt* is related to the Old Norse and Icelandic *kunta*: the word *kunte* appears in Old Frisian, Middle Dutch and Middle Low German dialects. In Middle High German it appears as *kunte*, *conte* and *kotze* - meaning a prostitute. In Dutch it appears as *kut* (*kont* in Dutch means bum, buttocks, gender-neutral, but is always derogatory. It appeared as *cunte* in Anglo Saxon, in Middle English as *counte* and *cunte*).

However, in Swedish there does not seem to be any evidence to suggest that *kunta* was ever used in quite the same way as the word *cunt* has been used in English; now these languages generally use the word *fitta* (vulg.); *kunta* does not seem to have any meaning in either modern Swedish or modern Norwegian. Modern German also seems to have forsaken the word in favour of *Fotze* and *Arschloch*, and Italian too prefers *fica* and *stronza*. Dutch still makes use of *kut*, but it also has *rotzak*.

It would seem that *cunt* appears only once in surviving Anglo Saxon texts. After that it is next recorded in written English around 1200. Up to this time the normal word for female genitalia was *gecyndlic* and perhaps also *cwithe* (womb).

In Chaucer's day the word *quaint*, possibly from the Latin for 'known' (acquainted), was used. In *Sir Tristram* Chaucer used the word *queynte* and

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<sup>5</sup> E. Partridge, *Origins* (London, 1977).

<sup>6</sup> The derivation from Latin *cuneus* has led one commentator to wonder if the 'wedge' might not be female pubic hair glimpsed by gay Roman males, this being the limit of their acquaintance. S. Burgen *Your Mother's Tongue: A Book of European Invective*, (London, 1997), 91-92.

again in *The Miller's Tale* he writes: 'Pryvely he caught hir by the queynte'. The fact that the *Wife of Bath* also uses the word seems to suggest that although it was vulgar it was not yet thought to be obscene. She says:

For, certeyn, old dotard by youre leve,  
Ye shul have queynte right ynogh at eve.

There is knowingness about her use of the word, but no hint of impropriety.

At least up to the end of the 14th century, the word does not seem to have had any sense of obscenity, insult or denigration about it. According to the OED about the year 1230 there was in the St Pancras area of London a street called Gropecuntlane. There was a similar street name in Cheapside, and in 15th century Oxford and York there were streets called Grapcunt Lane. James MacDonald has written:

Until the Middle Ages, parts of the body and bodily functions were accepted as commonplace facts of life, and the names for them were used as freely as any other word. Any part of the body which was unusually large or small, or unusually coloured, or otherwise remarkable was likely to provide a convenient nickname or surname for its owner. So it is that we find recorded women's names, such as Gunoka Cuntles (1219) and Bele Wydecunthe (1328), and men's names such as Godwin Clawecunte (1066), Simon Sitbithecunte (1167), John Fillecunt (1246) and Robert Clevecunt (1303).<sup>7</sup>

However, at about the end of the 14th century the word, which had been rare in literary sources entirely fell out of polite usage. At about the same time the Norman French title of Count, which sounded very similar to *cunt* was gradually abandoned in favour of the Germanic title of Earl.<sup>8</sup>

Shakespeare never used *cunt*, but his puns on 'constable' and 'country' indicate that he knew the word. Shakespeare puns on cunt in *Twelfth Night*: 'There be her very C's, her U's, and her T's: and thus makes she her great P's.' (Act II, Scene V). Hamlet says to Ophelia 'Do you think I meant country matters?' In *Henry V*, French Queen Katherine is appalled to find that the English pronounce *gown* as if it were the French word *con*. There is a slightly naughty edge to the word in Shakespeare, but no brutality about it.

By the 18th century the word was considered too obscene to be written in full. Francis Grose's *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (1785) links the word to Greek *konnos* and Latin *cunnus*, but prints c\*\*t: instead of the full word. The dictionary entry reads: 'a nasty name for a nasty thing'. Although the word *cunt* was taboo for many years it seems to have become a term of abuse only after 1918. The *Penguin English Dictionary* included it only after 1965. The word is unlikely to be heard on UK TV or radio, and is very rare in British films.

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<sup>7</sup> J. MacDonald, *Dictionary of Obscenity & Taboo* (London, 1988), 35-6; J. Ayto *Dictionary of Word Origins* (London, 1990).

<sup>8</sup> G. Hughes, *Swearing* (Harmondsworth, 1998). 20.

Cockney rhyming slang, however, indicates it quite clearly with phrases like 'a grumble and grunt', and 'a Berkshire hunt'. UK back-slang indicates it with the word *tenuc*. And it is present in the phrase 'See You Next Tuesday'.

The word does not seem to have appeared in any major English language dictionary after 1795, until it was included in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (1961) with the editorial warning 'usu. considered obscene'.

When James Murray started to publish the *OED* he was determined to create a history of the whole accessible language, but felt obliged to leave out 'two famous four letter (sexual) words'. Eric Partridge, who criticised the *OED* for not including either *fuck* or *cunt* did not do much better with his own dictionary. When he included *f\*ck* and *c\*nt*, in his *Dictionary* he employed the asterisk to cover his embarrassment and preserve his modesty, but the result was still a blizzard of complaint from Public Libraries, schools and the Police.<sup>9</sup> And things were no easier in the US, either: when Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* appeared in 1947, he wrote 'fug' instead of fuck.

In 1957, as they prepared the revised edition of the *OED*, Robert W. Burchfield, one of the lexicographer editors, claimed in an article for *The Times Literary Supplement* that the moment was not right for the inclusion of these words - identified in print for the first time as *fuck* and *cunt* - since they raised interesting issues of 'citational authority and editorial propriety'.

It was only with the collapse of the Old Bailey case against the Penguin edition of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* that the words *fuck* and *cunt* were finally allowed into print without the threat of prosecution.<sup>10</sup>

Although many people felt the publication of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* - where *fuck* and *fucking* are used at least 30 times - would at last allow English literature to crash through the 'gentility barrier', de-censorship of the words *fuck* and *cunt* was very uneven. By the end of that year Penguin had sold over 2 million copies and it certainly seemed that the case had cleared the way for the literary use of the word in other books. However, publishers - even serious academic publishers - were very reluctant to use the word. Immediately afterwards *The Observer*, *The Spectator* and *The Guardian* gave accounts of the trial in which they used the word *fuck* in print and were promptly censured by the Press Council. No less than 14 Tory MPs tabled a motion to amend the Queen's Speech to include a prosecution of *The Guardian* for daring to print one of the four letter words mentioned in the trial.

Change was slow. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* include the word after 1963. *The Random House Dictionary* included *fuck* and *cunt*, only after much soul searching, in 1987.<sup>11</sup> And still the word did not appear in the *OED*. In 1969 the underground magazine *Oz* wrote to the editors of the *OED*

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<sup>9</sup> E. Partridge, *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (London, 1936).

<sup>10</sup> C. H. Rolph (ed.), *The Trial of Lady Chatterley* (Harmondsworth, 1961).

<sup>11</sup> A. Travis, *Bound and Gagged* (London, 2000).

to ask why the word *fuck* did not appear in the dictionary. The reply was that to include such words even in a specialist dictionary was to court arrest and prosecution, but the editors promised the word would be included in the planned Supplement to the *OED* due to appear after 1972. When the word appeared in the second edition of the *OED* (1989), it had a literary pedigree that cited Dunbar, Robert Burns, John Wilmot, Horace Walpole, D. G. Rossetti, D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Henry Miller and Samuel Beckett - and of course the letter that Oz had written to the *OED* asking why the word did not appear in the *OED*. *The Economist* reviewed the 1989 edition of the *OED*, and coyly noticed the inclusion of *fuck* and *cunt*, but referred only to the f-word and the c-word. Although we might have expected the generation of Angry Writers like John Osborne, John Braine, Stan Barstow, Alan Sillitoe and Ted Hughes to make use of the word. But they did not make much use of it at all.

Ken Tynan, best known as a theatre critic and director, was the first to use the word *fuck* on TV during a debate chaired by Robert Robinson, broadcast live on 13 November 1965. Tynan, when asked if he would allow a play which contained sexual intercourse or sexually explicit language to be performed at the National Theatre, replied:

I doubt if there are very many rational people in this world to whom the word 'fuck' is particularly diabolical or revolting or totally forbidden.... I don't think anyone would mind if they heard the word fuck spoken in the theatre.<sup>12</sup>

Many regarded Tynan as particularly bold for daring to break this taboo, but many more did not and the BBC's switchboard was jammed with protests calls for days. *The Daily Express*, amid a barrage of press criticism, said this was 'the bloodiest outrage the country had ever known'. Mary Whitehouse wrote a letter of protest to the Queen, who forwarded the letter to the Attorney General, presumably in the hope that he would investigate the possibility of prosecuting somebody somewhere. Tynan later staged the show *Oh! Calcutta!* which contained mass nudity and simulated intercourse. Between 1969 and 1989, 85 million people saw the show, which rather made his point.

Even though it is now possible to write and print the word without much trouble, there is strong antagonism to the use of the word in the speech of 'polite society'. University College Swansea had a student society in the 1970s dedicated to rock music. It was called the Progressive Hedonists Union for Culture and Creativity - PHUCC for short. It was not unusual to hear variations on the exchange: Q: 'Are you going to the pub tonight?', A: 'No I'm going to PHUCC'. This can perhaps be dismissed as a typical student challenge to authority. However, when, in 1998 French Connection UK produced a popular T-shirt with the letters FCUK it caused howls of protest and thus became even more popular. Indeed the FCUK ad campaign is said

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<sup>12</sup> BBC 3 live debate on BBC TV (13 Nov 1965).

to have increased French Connection profits from £6.5 million per year to £19 million per year.<sup>13</sup>

Although newspapers and TV might still be squeamish, their anguish is largely a ploy, a pretend, aimed at whipping up indignation and controversy in middle-class southern England retirement homes, stirring Mary Whitehouse's National Viewers' and Listeners' Association (founded 1963-64 with the 'Clean Up Television Campaign') to mount yet another embarrassing attempt to hold back the tide of real life. Newspaper concern is not intended to convey genuine shock or outrage. It is mock outrage, a cynical ploy aimed simply at selling more copies.

Until recently *fuck* never featured in Newspapers. In 1988, when Mike Gatting, captain of the England cricket team called Pakistani umpire Shakoor Rana a 'fucking cheating cunt' during the Faisalabad Test, only *The Independent* had the nerve to print the comment without asterisks. This prompted Kelvin McKenzie, editor of *The Sun*, to complain to the Press Council that *The Independent* had printed a 'nasty' word and lowered the tone of British journalism. It was not the word *fuck* he was complaining about though. And *The Financial Times* made newspaper publishing history in November 2000 when, alone among British newspapers, it allowed the f-word to appear on its front page, above the fold, as part of a story about George Bush Jnr and his Presidential electoral campaign. The paper's Washington correspondent said that the presidential race was so close the Bush camp was operating what it called 'a DFIU strategy - Don't Fuck It Up'. The following Friday the paper printed a reader's letter complaining of 'a decline in journalistic standards'.

We are still wary about using the word. With exception of Martin Amis's *Success* (1978), where the word figures prominently and James Kelman's Booker Prize winning *How Late it Was How Late* (1994), which used *fuck* an estimated 4,000 times, most of the successful 'literary novels' and most of the books on the Booker and Whitbread short-lists over the last thirty years, make so little use of the word they could just have easily appeared before the *Lady Chatterley* trial. It seems that poets, rather than novelists, have made most effective literary use of the word. The word figures prominently in librarian Philip Larkin's *Selected Letters* (1992) and it was he who produced somewhere around 1971 the memorable, chilling lines:

They fuck you up, your mom and dad.  
They may not mean to, but they do.<sup>14</sup>

And of course it has made an appearance in poetry, though the repeated use of *fuck* in Tony Harrison's poem *V*, and his televised reading of the poem created a major scandal.<sup>15</sup> The revised *OED* has begun to provide us with historical examples including: 'fuck the dog' (1910) meaning to bungle or

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<sup>13</sup> *Shopology*, BBC2, 9 Sept 2001.

<sup>14</sup> P. Larkin, 'This Be the Verse' *Collected Poems* (London, 1971).

<sup>15</sup> Tony Harrison, *V* (London Weekend TV 1987); Tony Harrison, *v. and other poems* (sound cassette, Harmondsworth, 1987).



make a complete mess, and 'fuck me' shoes (ankle-strap, wedge-heeled shoes dating from the 1980s). But if the OED is serious about updating entries it would now have to include examples from David Mamet, David Holbrook, Joan Didion, Athol Fugard and Peter Carey.<sup>16</sup>

Rap music makes great use of the f-word, but on radio it is always beeped out. However, when Tupac Shakur said to Biggie Smalls, 'I beeped you wife you big fat mother beeper!' in a record entitled *Hit 'em up*, Biggie Smalls understood the beeps perfectly and went out and shot Tupac Shakur. Although the word still does not figure in TV news bulletins, when John McEnroe told the umpire at the 1990 Australian Open Tennis Championship to 'fuck off', and was seen and heard doing it live by millions watching TV. The word has also begun to appear in book titles. In November 2000 I counted 18 titles in print with the words *fuck* or *fucking* in the title - *Fucking, Fucking Martin*, and Mark Ravenhill's play *Fucking and Shopping*. I also noted one Australian gay publishing house called 'Fuckadilia'. The word also figures increasingly in films like *The Commitments* (1991), *Trainspotting* (1996), *Do the Right Thing* (1989), *Pulp Fiction* (1996), *The Full Monty* (1997) and *The Big Lebowski* (1998). The opening line of the highly successful *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) is: 'Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fucking fuck'. Clearly the word *fuck* is pretty much everywhere, as it probably has been for centuries, and there is nothing much that moral campaigners can do about it. Technology has seen to that.

Without doubt *fuck* is one of the most versatile words in the English language. It is possible now to fill several pages with examples of the word and its possible applications. In late Middle English *fuck* was probably only used as a verb, but now it has developed in all directions. It now has several possible meanings: copulate, copulate with, ruin, spoil, exhaust, wear out, to fool about, to mess around, to go away, to make off, to spoil, mess up, emotionally disturb, to blunder, to fail, to make a serious error, to bungle. Of the 10 major swear words in English, it is the only one that can be used in all 8 grammatical categories. It can be a verb, an adjective, a transitive verb or an intransitive verb, and by its stress, intonation, position in a sentence, and in combination with varying prepositions it can be used to convey a multitude of feelings: *fuck up, fuck around, fuck off, fucking A, fucking Ada*<sup>17</sup>, *I'm fucked off, fucked if I know, fuck me, fuck this, fuck you, fuck it. I'll do it my fucking self. I know fuck all about it. He fucking did it. Who the fuck are you? We got really fucked on that deal. O fuck it. That's fucked it. Fuck off! Who can fucking follow that? He fucks up everything. Up your fucking arse, mate. Who do you think you fucking are. Do it your fucking self. Who fucking did that?*<sup>18</sup> In fact it is possible to make a complete sentence with very little else: *Fuck! The fucking fucker's fucking fucked.*<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Examples from: *The Oxford Interactive Encyclopaedia* (1997).

<sup>17</sup> Ian Dury recorded a song called 'Fucking Ada' on *Laughter*, Stiff Records (1980), also available on: Ian Dury, *Sex & Drugs & Rock & Roll*, Demon Records (1987).

<sup>18</sup> This list is drawn from: *The Longman's Dictionary of Contemporary English* (London, 1995) *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (Oxford, 1980).

<sup>19</sup> C. Tighe, 'Crazy Eddie & the Teaching Machine', *Citi-Zine* (Citi-Zine Collective: Derby) June 2010.

In US military circles you might also come across the word *snafu*, meaning *Situation Normal All Fucked Up*; the word *fubar* meaning *fucked up beyond all recognition*, appears extensively as a running joke in *Saving Private Ryan*. Derby even has a café called *foobar*. The word *fubb*, meaning *fucked up beyond belief* is also common in American English. An interesting development in the use of the word was highlighted in the film *Pretty Woman* (1990) where Julia Roberts, playing a prostitute, tells her boyfriend, who got rich as a financial asset stripper, that: 'We both fuck people for money'. Up to this time fucking was something men did or which was done to women. Now, it seems, women are doing it too. The word has made the change from being an intransitive verb for both sexes and a transitive verb only when applied to men, into being an intransitive and a transitive verb for both sexes.

Although the word, and those heard using it, are often deemed 'crude' it is possible to make witty and humorous literary use of it. Again it is the poets who lead the way. Nigel Jenkins, for example, a wry observer of street life in South Wales, scores telling satirical points in his poem 'The Language of Love'

walking down this fuckin street  
I spies this fuckin bar  
& feeling fuckin thirsty  
I goes in for a fuckin jar

it's pretty fuckin lonely  
for Friday fuckin night  
me & this fuckin woman  
the only fuckers in sight

so I buys meself a fuckin pint  
& her a fuckin stout  
& we drinks for fuckin hours  
till they kicks us fuckin out

then we takes a fuckin taxi  
to this block of fuckin flats  
& we rolls inter her pad  
as pissed as fuckin rats

what next? you're fuckin thinking  
well yes of fuckin course  
we took at last to her fuckin bed  
& had sexual intercourse<sup>20</sup>

T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* may still dominate contemporary English poetry, but in place of Eliot's lofty intellectual lament for the decline of culture in the face of the masses, John Cooper Clarke's poem 'Evidently Chicken Town', an

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<sup>20</sup> N. Jenkins, *Acts of Union: Selected Poems 1974-89* (Llandysul, 1990).

equally bleak and desperate portrait, has an overwhelming sense of cumulative grief and frustration at living in the wasteland. This grimly realistic poem, although it depicted the UK in the late 1970s, proved to be a predictive anthem for the post-industrial era of the 1980s and 1990s:

the fucking cops are fucking keen  
to fucking keep it fucking clean  
the fucking chief's a fucking swine  
who fucking draws the fucking line  
at fucking fun and fucking games  
the fucking kids he fucking blames  
are nowhere to be fucking found  
anywhere in chicken town

the fucking scene is fucking sad  
the fucking news is fucking bad  
the fucking weed is fucking turf  
the fucking speed is fucking surf  
the fucking folks are fucking daft  
don't make me fucking laff  
it fucking hurts to look around  
everywhere in chicken town

the fucking train is fucking late  
you fucking wait you fucking wait  
you're fucking lost and fucking found  
stuck in fucking chicken town

the fucking view is fucking vile  
for fucking miles and fucking miles  
the fucking babies make you fucking cry  
the fucking flowers fucking die  
the fucking food is fucking muck  
the fucking drains are fucking fucked  
the colour scheme is fucking brown  
everywhere in chicken town

the fucking pubs are fucking dull  
the fucking clubs are fucking full  
of fucking girls and fucking guys  
with fucking murder in their eyes  
a fucking bloke is fucking stabbed  
waiting for a fucking cab  
you fucking stay at fucking home  
the fucking neighbours fucking moan  
keep the fucking racket down  
this is fucking chicken town

the fucking train is fucking late  
you fucking wait you fucking wait

you're fucking lost and fucking found  
stuck in fucking chicken town

the fucking pies are fucking old  
the fucking chips are fucking cold  
the fucking beer is fucking flat  
the fucking flats have fucking rats  
the fucking clocks are fucking wrong  
the fucking days are fucking long  
it fucking gets you fucking down  
evidently chicken town<sup>21</sup>

To rewrite either of these poems without the word *fucking* would be pointless. They cannot exist without the word; the word is part of the point they are making. CBS records proved this when they released a record of 'Evidently Chickentown' substituting the word 'bloody'. The poem became a tame, dull, inoffensive, pointless creation.<sup>22</sup>

Sex and body parts are no longer the issues they once were. The issues that concern most young people now are racism, employment, drugs and gun culture. And our swear words reflect this shift. The British Standards Council conducted a poll in which they asked members of the public to rate swear words according to whether they were 'very severe'. Their resulting league table of bad language clearly indicates a significant shift in usage. *Fuck*, which for centuries had maintained lead position as one of the two most offensive words in the language, appeared to have slipped to third on a very long list. Though interestingly, it appeared at number one as part of a different taboo.<sup>23</sup>

<i>Motherfucker</i>	82%
<i>Cunt</i>	81%
<i>Fuck</i>	75%
<i>Wanker</i>	41%
<i>Bastard</i>	37%
<i>Twat</i>	34%
<i>Bollocks</i>	32%
<i>Prick</i>	31%
<i>Shag</i>	31%
<i>Arsehole</i>	26%
<i>Piss off</i>	25%
<i>Whore</i>	23%
<i>Shit</i>	18%
<i>Slag</i>	17%

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<sup>21</sup> John Cooper Clarke, *Ten Years in an Open Necked Shirt* (London, 1983). There were several versions of this idea in poetry before John Cooper Clark made it his own. See: Martin Page (ed.), *Kiss Me Goodnight, Sergeant Major: The Songs and Ballads of World War II* (London, 1973).

<sup>22</sup> John Cooper Clarke, *snap, crackle (&) bop* (CBS Records, London, 1980).

<sup>23</sup> *Total Film* 38 (March 2000), 13. This list agrees broadly with the findings of the British Broadcasting Standards Authority report: A. M. Hargreave (ed.), *A Matter of Manners? The Limits of Broadcasting Language* (London, 1991).

<i>Dickhead</i>	16%
<i>Arse</i>	14%
<i>Bugger</i>	13%
<i>Balls</i>	13%
<i>Sodding</i>	12%
<i>Tits</i>	11%
<i>Crap</i>	8%
<i>Tart</i>	6%
<i>Bloody</i>	5%

But even this may be changing. It must be said that while almost all swear words and taboo words are used to express a range of emotion from mild frustration to boiling violent rage, they do not necessarily make any precise sense. While ‘fuck off’ makes perfect sense as a wish/instruction, ‘get fucked’ or ‘fucking hell!’ and the insult ‘motherfucker’ (even with its reference to the taboo of incest) have all become so general as to be almost meaningless. A phrase like ‘We beat the fuck out of him’, while graphic on one level does not display any precise meaning. The word *fuck* has been used so frequently by British football fans that in France they are often referred to as ‘les fuckoff’.

It is possible that Madonna, when she avoided the electronic bleeper to use the word ‘motherfucker’ in her live TV speech at the Turner Prize Awards in December 2001, thought she was using the most offensive word currently available. However, instead of shock and outrage, most people were merely puzzled as to why she had used the word at all since it did not seem to have any content or purpose in her award speech, and clearly referred to something that had recently upset her: whatever it was the reference was not clear to her audience. One journalist wrote:

...once more we’re left at a loss as to what she was trying to say... Are the motherfuckers her foes (perhaps those unimpressed by the Turner Prize contenders) or her friends (those artists with ‘something to say’ and ‘the balls to say it’)? Maybe in the heady, arty moment, she hardly knew herself.<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps the more general point is that while the exact meaning of these words may be difficult to identify, not everybody finds them totally offensive. On the other hand it is clear that after the first three words on the list there is a huge drop in the percentages, indicating that although things are changing these words still occupy a category of taboo that places them way out ahead of their nearest rivals. It is also interesting to note that none of the words on the *Total Film* list are blasphemous or religious: another important social shift.

TV still seems to maintain an absolute ban on use of the word *cunt*, but most channels now allow *fuck* to go un-beeped in films after the 9-o-clock watershed. Although programmes like *Coronation Street*, *East Enders*, *London’s Burning*, *The Bill* and *Brookside* go to great lengths to look and sound authentic, their authenticity does not stretch to using the word *fuck*.

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<sup>24</sup> J. Mullan, ‘Mama Mia!’ *The Guardian* (12 December 2001), 23.

TV's ban on the use of the word outside films and before the watershed reduced Channel 4's *A Brief History of the F-Word* to a long and rather pointless parade of bleeps.<sup>25</sup> But Chris Evans got around this by titling his early evening show *TFI Friday*: it is difficult to believe that controllers were unaware that the initials stood for Thank Fuck it's Friday. The British Board of Film Classification, recognising sociolinguistic change, has acknowledged it can no longer effectively police language in film. BBFC guidelines now state:

Many people are offended, some of them deeply, by bad language, including the use of expletives with a religious association. The extent of that offence varies according to age, background and beliefs. Different groups (for example, a minority ethnic community) have their own, separate standards of acceptability. Additionally, the severity of any particular word or expression will depend upon the context within which it is used. For these reasons, it is impossible to set out comprehensive lists of acceptable words or expressions which will satisfy all sections of the public. The advice at different classification levels, therefore, provides general guidance with reference to specific terms only where there is a reasonable consensus of opinion.<sup>26</sup>

The word fuck is now so common in plays, films and books that when Mark Ravenhill's play *Totally Over You* was produced at the National Theatre in 2003 as part of the longer term schools connections Project, there was a complaint from a teacher in the audience:

My kids want to say fuck and there aren't any fucks in the play. When we do the play can we, you know, add in some fucks?<sup>27</sup>

In the US, Freedom of Speech is guaranteed under the First Amendment to the Constitution, but whether you could say 'Fuck the draft' in public was an issue that took a ruling by the Supreme Court to establish. You can: it is official.<sup>28</sup> But while the newspapers and TV are clearly still struggling with the word, public attitudes to these words are constantly shifting. In 2002 the BBFC decided to give Ken Loach's film *Sweet Sixteen* an '18' certificate rather than offer general release because of the constant use of fuck and repeated 'aggressive' use of the '-word'.<sup>29</sup> And while fuck was accepted as an official Scrabble word in 1992, in the US the word has since been withdrawn from the official game word list.<sup>30</sup>

However, the forces of conservative reaction, and in particular those of the fundamentalist and evangelical religious outlook, have not gone away. When the BBC broadcast *Jerry Springer: The Opera* Christian demonstrators gathered outside the studios and the BBC switchboard received 45,000 calls and email messages (mostly with US addresses) before the programme had

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<sup>25</sup> *A Brief History of the F-Word*, Channel 4, 29 May 2000.

<sup>26</sup> 'BBFC Guidelines', [www.bbfc.co.uk](http://www.bbfc.co.uk).

<sup>27</sup> Mark Ravenhill, 'Freak Show', *The Guardian* (15 July 2003), 14.

<sup>28</sup> The case of *Cohen v the State of California*, 1971.

<sup>29</sup> P. Laverty, 'A word with the Censor', *The Guardian* (30 September 2002).

<sup>30</sup> *Chambers' Official Scrabble Words* (London, 1992); *The Oxford Interactive Encyclopaedia* (1997).

even been shown, complaining at the opera's use of the figure of Christ and at the massive use of the 'f word and the c word'. Significantly the BBC received only a further 900 calls after the broadcast, and, possibly for the first time in its history, the BBC also received 500 calls supporting the broadcast.<sup>31</sup>

Under the leadership of President George Bush Jnr, the forces of evangelical and fundamentalist reaction have surged forward again in the US. Complaints by various moral 'majority organizations', and a 'massive coordinated and determined campaign' against broadcast indecency have meant that complaints to the Federal Communications Commission (headed by Michael Powell, son of Secretary of State Colin Powell) have increased from 350 in 2001 to 14,000 in 2002, 240,000 in 2003 and reached over 1,000,000 in 2004. Among the early targets of complaint was U2 rock star Bono, who during his acceptance speech at the 2003 Golden Globe Awards said: 'This is really, really fucking brilliant'. Another target was Spielberg's film *Saving Private Ryan*, dropped by 66 US cinemas because of concerns about its 'explicit language'. In 2005 rock band Motley Crue were also on the FCC hit-list after Vince Neil wished fellow band member 'Happy fucking New Year' during the NBC New Year TV show.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Charlie Brooke, 'Screen Burn', *The Guardian Guide* (15-21 January 2005), 52.

<sup>32</sup> D. Glaister, 'Wives or Sluts? US viewers in love-hate match with TV hit', and: 'F-Word and Fines: Keeping the Screens Clean', *The Guardian* (15 January 2005).

## Follow-up Work

Often we know very little about the history, meaning and content of the particular words that make up our language – particularly the ‘bad language’. But information is available. So, use this opportunity. Look at the words listed below – if you find a word too offensive or difficult, simply move on to the next one.

Taboo	Sarong	Toboggan	Shawl
Denigrate	Alcove	Tattoo	Abattoir
Doo-lally	Loofah	Bagel	Typhoon
(Doolalley etc)	Yacht	Juggernaut	Pundit
Nitty-gritty	Muster	Basket	Barbecue
Nigger	Ukulele	Bog	Tundra
Niggardly	Chocolate	Budgerigar	Walkabout
Manure	Intelligentsia	Scoff	Husky
Rape	Almanac	Eisteddfod	Catamaran
Bungalow	Slogan	Commando	
Robot	Reservoir	Anorak	
Potato	Hussar	Ketchup	

Look up the words on the list in several dictionaries and language reference texts. These words have been chosen carefully. Some of them are what linguists call *taboo words*, others appear to be inoffensive, but have a hidden aspect to them. Some just have an unusual history. A few words on this list you may not be able to find in the dictionaries at all. Ask yourself why this might be. Start by looking in the following books but don't confine yourself to them. Explore!

J. Ayto, *Dictionary of Word Origins*

G. Chantrell (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Word Histories*

J. Green (ed.), *Cassell Dictionary of Slang*

G. Hughes, *Swearing*

J. MacDonald, *Dictionary of Obscenity & Taboo*

J. McWhorter, *The Power of Babel: A Natural History of Languages*

*The Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles* (also available on the Internet).

*The Oxford Dictionary of Word Histories*

E. Partridge, *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English*

E. Partridge, *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*

J. Willinsky, *Empire of Words: The Reign of the OED*

In what ways does the origin and history of words relate to issue of the writer's responsibility? Remember you are looking at these words as *writer* and exploring the idea of *writing* and *responsibility*, so for each word find out:

- Where these words came from
- What they originally meant
- What meanings they have acquired
- How their meanings have changed
- Under what circumstances these words might have been loaned into English



- What was the root or the earliest meaning of the word?
- Is the word 'native' to English, and if not, when did it arrive in English - and why?
- List the dates and changes in the historical meaning of the word
- List the related words and phrases derived from this word
- Are the spelling and pronunciation of this word important or just confusing?
- Are current meanings recorded in the dictionary and what does this word mean now?
- Is use of this word on the street different from its dictionary use?
- Is the word taboo and if so, was it always taboo?
- Why is it taboo?
- What taboos, if any, does this word and its dictionary entry reveal?
- Why would a writer use a taboo word?
- Can you imagine literary circumstances where you might use such a word?
- Were there any words you could not find in the dictionaries? Ask yourself why you could not find these particular words?
- Are there other words that interest you? Use this opportunity to look them up too.

Now ask yourself:

- How is this topic relevant to the theme of Responsibility?
- As writers, do we really need to know anything about the history of words and language?
- Is it sufficient that we just speak the language?
- Why do you think it might be important for a writer to know about the origins and history of word?