Four-Letter Words Can Hurt You

"Four-Letter Words Can Hurt You" first appeared in The New York Times and was later published in Redbook. In arguing against the "earthly, gut-honest" language often preferred by her students, Lawrence also provides a thoughtful, even scholarly, extended definition of "obscenity" itself. To accomplish her purpose, the author makes use of several other patterns as well.

Why should any words be called obscene? Don't they all describe natural human functions? Am I trying to tell them, my students demand, that the "strong, earthy, gut-honest" — or, if they are fans of Norman Mailer, the "rich, liberating, existential" — language they use to describe sexual activity isn't preferable to "phony-sounding, middle-class words like 'intercourse' and 'copulate'?" "Cop You Late!" they say with fancy inflections and gagging grimaces. "Now, what is that supposed to mean?"

Well, what is it supposed to mean? And why indeed should one group of words describing human functions and human organs be acceptable in ordinary conversation and another, describing presumably the same organs and functions, be tabooed — so much so, in fact, that some of these words still cannot appear in print in many parts of the English-speaking world?

The argument that these taboos exist only because of "sexual hangups" (middle-class, middle-age, feminist), or even that they are a result of class oppression (the contempt of the Norman conquerors for the language of their Anglo-Saxon serfs), ignores a much more likely explanation, it seems to me, and that is the sources and functions of the words themselves.

The best known of the tabooed sexual verbs, for example, comes from the German ficken, meaning "to strike"; combined according to Partridge's etymological dictionary Origins, with the Latin sexual verb futuere: associated in turn with the Latin fistis, "a staff or cudgel"; the Celtic buc, "a point, hence to pierce"; the Irish bot, "the male member"; the Latin batture, "to beat"; the Gaelic baith, "a cudgeller"; the Early Irish bualaim, "I strike"; and so forth. It is one of what etymologists sometimes called "the sadistic group of words for the man's part in copulation."

The brutality of this word, then, and its equivalents ("screw," "bang," etc.), is not an illusion of the middle class or a crotchet of Women's Liberation. In their origins and imagery these words carry undeniably painful, if not sadistic, implications, the object of which is almost always female. Consider, for example, what a "screw" actually does to the wood it penetrates; what a painful, even muti-lating, activity this kind of analogy suggests. "Screw" is particularly interesting in this context, since the noun, according to Partridge, comes from words meaning "groove," "nut," "ditch," "breeding sow," "screwfula" and "swelling," while the verb, besides its explicit imagery, has antecedent associations to "write on," "scratch," "scarify," and so forth — a revealing fusion of a mechanical or painful action with an obviously denigrated object.
Not all obscene words, of course, are as implicitly sadistic or
denigrating to women as these, but all that I know seem to serve a
similar purpose: to reduce the human organism (especially the
female organism) and human functions (especially sexual and
procreative) to their least organic, most mechanical dimension; to
substitute a trivializing or deforming resemblance for the complex
human reality of what is being described.

Taboosed male descriptors, when they are not openly denigrat-
ing to women, often serve to divorce a male organ or function from
any significant interaction with the female. Take the word "testes,"
for example, suggesting "witnesses" (from the Latin testis) to the
sexual and procreative strengths of the male organ; and the obscene
counterpart of this word, which suggests little more than a mecha-
nical shape. Or compare almost any of the "rich," "liberating" sexual
verbs, so fashionable today among male writers, with that much-
derived Latin word "copulate" ("to bind or join together") or even
that Anglo-Saxon phrase (which seems to have had no trouble
surviving the Norman Conquest) "make love."

How arrogantly self-involved the tabooed words seem in com-
parison to either of the other terms, and how contemptuous of the
female partner. Understandably so, of course, if she is only a
"skirt," a "broad," a "chick," a "pussycat" or a "piece." If she is, in
other words no more than her skirt, or what her skirt conceals; no
more than a breeder, or the broadest part of her; no more than a
piece of a human being or a "piece of tail."

The most severely tabooed of all the female descriptors, in-
cidentally, are those like a "piece of tail," which suggests (either
explicitly or through antecedents) that there is no significant dif-
ference between the female channel through which we are all con-
ceived and born and the anal outlet common to both sexes — a
distinction that pornographers have always enjoyed obscuring.

This effort to deny women their biological identity, their indi-
viduality, their humanness, is such an important aspect of obscene
language that one can only marvel at how seldom, in an era preoc-
cupied with definitions of obscenity, this fact is brought to our at-
tention. One problem, of course, is that many of the people in the best
position to do this (critics, teachers, writers) are so reluctant today to
admit that they are angered or shocked by obscenity. Bored, maybe,
unimpressed, aesthetically displeased, but — no matter how brutal
or denigrating the material — never angered, never shocked.

And yet how eloquently angered, how piously shocked many
of these same people become if denigrating language is used about
any minority group other than women; if the obscenities are racial or
ethnic, that is, rather than sexual. Words like "coon," "kike,"
"spic," "wop," after all, deform identity, deny individuality and
humanness in almost exactly the same way that sexual vulgarisms
and obscenities do.

No one that I know, least of all my students, would fail to
question the values of a society whose literature and entertainment
rested heavily on racial or ethnic pejoratives. Are the values of a
society whose literature and entertainment rest as heavily as ours on
sexual pejoratives any less questionable?