The Use of Vulgarity in Storytelling:

Is What's Inappropriate Ever Appropriate?

Annie Sears

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Dr. Dengler/Dr. Fictorie

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My freshman year, I was honored to attend the American College Theatre Festival with Dordt's department. Theatre students from all over the country gather to compete in acting competitions, showcase their work in design expositions, take workshops from professors that are masters in their craft, interview for positions with big theatre companies, and watch award-winning work that other colleges are putting out, which is the aspect of the week that I was most excited for – the magic of sitting with other audience members as lights dim and curtains rise is never lost on me! And in my wide-eyed, innocent anticipation of seeing the shows that were supposedly the best of the year, I didn't anticipate the feelings of dirtiness and the consequent moral struggle forced upon me following each performance.

In one particularly memorable scene, a male high school student seduced his male history teacher, and the scene finished with them making out on top of the teacher's desk. Another scene depicted a rape between ex-lovers, from the dialogue that preceded the incident through the woman being thrown onto the ground while her undergarments were forcibly ripped off. One two-hour, one-woman performance chronicled the true story of a transgender woman, vulnerably performed by the woman herself. Many if not most performances included f-bomb after f-bomb or crude joke after crude joke. These experiences made me uncomfortable in the moment, and they still make me uncomfortable when I recall them now. I can't un-see or un-hear them, and I can't quite understand why only scenes with such taboo subject matter were deemed the best of the best, why only the actors with the audacity to seek and find shock-factor were rewarded, or why this vulgar art was presented without warning audience members what they were about to view or giving them context for the selected scenes.

As an English major who writes stories with authentic characters in them and as a theatre major who hopes to play a plethora of authentic characters throughout her career, my experience

at ACTF pushed me to answer one of the most important questions all Christian artists must grapple with: When is it God-honoring and, therefore, permissible and beneficial to use vulgarity in storytelling? If the goal of storytelling is to move an audience, an audience must be able to relate. In turn, stories must retain some, honest semblance of reality. And if many aspects of reality are honestly dark and honestly dirty, then some darkness and dirtiness must weave its way into storytelling for a story to be powerful. But what are the criteria for whether I can write vulgarity into my short story, whether I can play a character that speaks vulgarly, whether I can watch a movie that includes vulgarity? Is there a line between hearing/watching/reading vulgarity played out and living it personally? If so, how fine is that line and how should a Christian walk it?

Some would argue that no such line exists, that these questions are non-issues, that any sort of vulgarity is permissible so long as it's honest and realistic. Others would also argue that no such line exists, but argue different implications for that same claim. Many Christians hold that any vulgarity portrayed in a novel, on a screen, in song lyrics, etc. is sinful. By this line of thought, it's impossible "to appreciate whatever good is in [a story if one must] wade through a cesspool of sin to find the jewels" (Godawa 32). In turn, any novel with a curse word, any movie that includes onscreen or off-screen theft, and any love-song that makes an explicit or implied sexual reference is off limits, as Christians must follow Paul's advice to the Philippians without deviation: "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (4:8, *ESV*). If these are the only things permissible to dwell upon, and if no leniency exists, anything less than Paul's biblical standard must be avoided at all costs, both when Christians choose stories to read/watch and when

Christians are writing their own stories, since "we are responsible for the words we write" and perform, even if written or performed as another character (Ramm).

Personally, I have trouble applying this no-vulgarity-whatsoever line of thinking. What about Victor Hugo's literary and musical masterpiece *Les Miserables*? This piece is intentionally riddled with Christian values, as its core is Jean Valjean's transformation story. Valjean is a convicted felon, deserving of death. Yet, after a priest mimics God's grace by showing Valjean grace, Valjean finds forgiveness in Christ and adopts a new identity, all the while growing more and more Christ-like in offering work to needy women, in helping to care for one of these particularly downtrodden women, in adopting this woman's daughter upon her mother's death, thereby saving her from the prostitution industry that claimed her mother, and in loving his new daughter with his whole heart just as Christ loved those he rescued from their undesirable fates. This story in all its retellings is full of really big, really valuable jewels. Yet, it includes murder. It includes suicide. It includes excessive alcohol consumption. It includes thievery. It includes child abuse. It includes violence and lots of blood. It includes prostitution and, consequently, scantily clad women. So must this gospel-saturated story be avoided at all costs because it's not perfectly wholesome? I don't think so.

I know that, in watching *Les Mis* and in experiencing the story time and time again, I've better grasped the Gospel. In seeing the contrast between Javert and Valjean, I see the difference between trying to control one's own life by one's own sense of justice and releasing control to the one who is justice. In listening to each ballad, I'm moved to tears because I can resonate with Fantine's abuse, though she wanted only to love her child. My heart breaks because I can resonate with Eponine's desire for a love that will never be reciprocated. These characters are real to me, and I'm able to relate to them so realistically because they are presented fully,

retaining both their mistakes and their good intents. And without the dirt and the darkness, these characters wouldn't be human enough to communicate their stories in a way that touches audience members instead of merely entertaining them. Without the impurity included in the plotline, this story wouldn't retain any of its power. Some honest darkness is necessary to tell ultimately uplifting stories with long-lasting impacts on audience hearts and minds.

Thus, the vulgarity-is-never-beneficial argument doesn't stand. So what does? Some would argue that, so long as the vulgarity isn't ultimately glorified, so long as the vulgarity is corrected at some point throughout the story, it's entirely appropriate and beneficial to include instances of darkness and dirtiness in narrative art. In this view – let's term it the redemptive position – so long as the grime surrounding the jewels is cleaned off before story's end, any vulgarity is permissible and beneficial. The nature of the vulgarity's presentation rather than the nature of the vulgarity itself is key. So long as "the depiction of man's inhumanity toward man repulses, rather than entertains, and points toward redemption from such evil," the use of such vulgarity is certainly God-honoring, as it enhances the contrast between a fallen worldview and a Christ-centered one (Godawa 33). According to this understanding, one must be familiar with evil itself to truly understand the scope of Christ's redemption.

The Bible itself seems to fit perfectly into this redemptive view. The most epic, most God-sanctioned narrative of all time, after all, is undeniably full of vulgarity. The book of Judges involves all sorts of malicious plotting and stabbing and poisoning and vomiting and excrement and dying and reveling in these so-called victories, no matter how gory. Song of Solomon, a book that is often overlooked in the pulpit, is full of explicit, erotic references to sexual organs; even if these referenced are intended to give language to the perfect love Christ feels for his church, they are sexually charged, nonetheless (Godawa 38). Both the Old and New Testament

also contain their fair share of vulgar language, from King Rehoboam insulting his father's genitalia in the Old Testament to Paul making jokes about circumcision in his New Testament letter to the Galatians (Godawa 39). There are also Jesus' own parables, in which a man is beaten, stripped, and left on the side of the road, in which a younger brother goes and squanders his money with women and gambling (Godawa 42).

And this is the Bible. This is the only God-breathed text as acknowledged among the worldwide Christian church. This is the narrative that best explains the human experience, the narrative that is chock-full of honest truth. And this book doesn't shy away from extreme vulgarity, vulgarity similar to that found in modern storytelling. Instead, through the nature of the stories it tells, the Bible asserts that "pointing out wrong is part of dwelling on what is right, exposing lies is part of dwelling on the truth, revealing cowardice is part of dwelling on the honorable, and uncovering corruption is part of dwelling on the pure" (Godawa 47). God didn't intend for this vulgarity to litter our reality, but since it does, he uses it to highlight his goodness.

And because these instances of darkness ultimately serve a redemptive purpose, the vulgarity included in the biblical narrative is never glorified. It's told truthfully, oftentimes including stomach-churning details, but never in a light that celebrates the sin. For example, Israel is equated to a prostitute over and over again throughout the Old Testament, selling herself to false Gods and enjoying it. This is a vulgar image in and of itself, but more than once, God takes this comparison a step further. Ezekiel 16 is a particularly poignant passage. Following a graphic description of Israel's whorings, as she was "spreading her legs to any passerby" (25, *ESV*), God makes clear that these actions are not permissible:

> I will gather all your lovers with whom you took pleasure, all those you loved and all those you hated. I will gather them against you from every side and will

> uncover your nakedness to them, that they may see all your nakedness… And I will give you into their hands, and they shall throw down your vaulted chamber and break down your lofty places. They shall strip you of your clothes and take your beautiful jewels and leave you naked and bare… I will make you stop playing the whore, and you shall also give payment no more. (37-39, 41, *ESV*)

Here, God is calling his people a whore, threatening to strip her naked and reveal her genitals to all those she has been prostituting herself to. He will purposely shame her because, as his child, she has ruined her father's reputation; she has carried his name into an unholy place. The vulgarity is included graphically, but it is not enticing.

Neither is the non-metaphorical vulgarity in the Bible ever glorified. David, for example, was a "man after God's own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14*, ESV*), yet he had an affair with Bathsheba that kept getting worse and worse the longer he drew it out. This story and all its dirty details are included in the biblical narrative, but its inclusion doesn't commend David for his sins. In fact, after chronicling the entire story, 1 Samuel 11:27 reads, "But the thing David had done displeased the Lord." Further, like the whore Israel, David's guilt is uncovered when the prophet Nathan rebukes David for his misdeeds. This story proves that even those who are closest to God engage with darkness, and even for those who are closest to God, the darkness is not permissible or beneficial. This story proves that there is hope and there is grace, even in the midst of vulgarity.

In the Bible, vulgarity is never presented apart from hope. This truth is more important than the fact that vulgarity, though included, is always condemned. Without hope, the Bible's theme is reduced to: "Yep, we're all sinful people marinating in a sinful world. We can't really avoid the darkness, but we're supposed to try. And when we fail, we'll be shamed because

darkness isn't glorifying to God." When this honest vulgarity is paired with the promise of the Messiah and of the New Earth to come, though, the theme changes to: "Yep, we're all sinful people marinating in a sinful world, but it's not going to be this way forever. We will mess up, and we will deserve to be shamed for our mistakes, but redemption is possible and, in turn, we have infinite second chances to cling to what is good in the midst of all that is evil." When vulgarity is paired with hope, we become "prisoners of hope," bound to the understanding that vulgarity is certainly evil, but that good can come from being exposed to it because God has chosen to work redemption that way (Zechariah 9:12, *ESV*).

For the most part, I agree with his redemptive approach to narrative vulgarity, as it allows for honest and consequently relatable characters and plotlines without allowing for the perpetuation of unnecessary vulgarity. However, many who hold this view would argue that the redemption and the hope must be explicit in the story for it to truly be considered redemptive. In other words, a sinful character must repent of his sin and turn over a new leaf, so to speak, before the curtains close or the credits roll. This is how the Bible approaches the situation, and it's how many modern Christian books and movies approach it too. *To Save a Life* comes to mind, as does *God's Not Dead*. Edmund in Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia* is another example, as is Scrooge from Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. *Blue Like Jazz* is another perfect example, as it honestly presents a college students struggle to grapple with hypocrisy in the church, ultimately ending with his acceptance that, though hypocrisy exists, it isn't okay; he then works to remedy that by dressing as a priest and apologizing on behalf of Christianity to all those who come confess to him. While I appreciate each of these stories, and while I'd go far enough to say that I love some of them, I don't think that every story needs to turn a complete 180 degrees to prove redemptive.

In my opinion, *The Great Gatsby* is a story riddled with appropriate, well-used vulgarity, yet none of the characters change throughout the course of the story. Fitzgerald was capturing the essence of the 1920's in a short novel, and he couldn't do so without depicting the carelessness and the moral looseness with which people lived their lives. Thus, the story is littered with lust, sex, drug trade, illegal business deals, violence, murder, blood, secrecy, lies, etc. because, without these vulgar elements and the way the main characters respond so irreverently and the self-absorbed attitude attributed to rich 1920's folks not have been communicated in full. And even though none of the characters ever repent of their carelessness, as Gatsby dies still pursuing a married woman worthy of jail time and Daisy flees from her crimes without thinking twice about how her absence will affect anyone but herself, their sin isn't glorified; rather, it's depicted as an honest symptom of their human brokenness that, though somewhat unavoidable, is never permissible.

And even though the story ends without any of the characters altering their vices, the unsatisfying and abrupt ending does enough to condemn the careless lifestyle and inspire hope within the readers, all culminated in the eloquent final lines: "Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that is no matter. For tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms further, and one fine morning… So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past" (Fitzgerald 180). This quote is first an accurate description of the way that Gatsby lived his life: full of hope that the past could become the present could become the future. Additionally, this quote is an accurate description of the human condition, as we cannot help but hope and cannot help but cling to the good we've experienced. And because this final statement is so true, it provokes a profound sense of beauty within the reader, first spurring him or her to appreciate the good of the novel

and then to appreciate the good of pasts and presents, aware that clinging to them too tightly with result in peril as it did for Gatsby. The redemptive hope wasn't present for any of the characters, but it is present for the reader, which is far more important.

John Green's *The Fault in our Stars* is another story that, in my opinion, approached vulgarity well, particularly in its use of profanity. Hazel Grace is usually very clean-mouthed, as she's a well-read college student with the capability to find the most precise words to express her thoughts. When Peter Van Houten is rude beyond excuse though, ridiculing Hazel's childlike fascination with his characters and her cancer-ridden body, Hazel responds with an f-bomb. Because Hazel has been so sweet throughout the entire movie, this line comes as a shock to everyone – fellow fictional characters and nonfiction audience members alike. Yet the line was not included solely for shock-value, but primarily because no other words could honestly express how flabbergasted Hazel was by Van Houten's inhumanity. Van Houten had crushed Hazel's dreams, rendering her unable to find footing on the ground she had known before he shattered it. Not long after she leaves Van Houten's house, Hazel apologizes for her language. Augustus, however, assures her that no other words could have been so creative. So, although the curse word is praised rather than condemned, because Hazel used this word to truly express her hurt and because Green didn't write it in solely to surprise readers, this is an instance of an f-bomb used well, an f-bomb used to condemn the more offensive vulgarity of Van Houten's irreverence. This use of the f-bomb spurrs audience members to hope, to cheer on Hazel's side because she was still pursuing truth and goodness by rejecting Van Houten's own vulgarity with a little bit of her out-of-character vulgarity.

Shock-value is never enough of a rational behind including vulgarity in a story, nor is humor. The scenes I saw at ACTF didn't grasp this, which is why many of them left me feeling

sick. If these scenes had presented brokenness in context, they could have proved very powerful, worthwhile pieces of narrative art. If these scenes had presented brokenness for the sake of contrasting it to hope, they could have proved very truth-furthering, God-glorifying scenes. Instead, these scenes' lack of context, their lack of hope, and their this-is-okay approach to vulgarity did nothing to make these scenes into good stories or good art. Ultimately, in the words of artist and pastor Erwin McManus, "Great art not only tells the truth, but elevates the human spirit by pointing to beauty and hope." When vulgarity is used to contrast and heighten the hope truthfully, then God is glorified and what's inappropriate has been used appropriately. Christians need not run from all vulgarity, neither in the stories we intake or the stories we create – if that were the case, we would have to reject even our Holy Book. Instead, we need to run towards the good, recognizing that it can be found even in the midst of the our vulgar world, that it can sometimes be found even in artful storytelling that employs vulgarity. And in this pursuit, we are always hoping for and expecting the good to come, the day when we won't need to contrast good with vulgarity to understand how good good can be.

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