Nine Nasty Words

What’s in it for me? An excellent history of bad words.

Swear words, sailor talk, curses, and expletives. Everyone knows there are certain words and phrases that pack a particularly powerful punch. But how did these words gain their potency, and why do they still shock so many? These blinks delve into the curious world of profanity by examining the origins of a few of our most forbidden words. Drawing on the linguistic expertise of John McWhorter, this tour of taboo vocab examines words like fuck, shit, bitch, and hell through a historical, sociological, and political lens. In the end, you’ll gain a new appreciation for our risqué and ribald language. A quick warning: These blinks contain highly offensive language. Please take care. In these blinks, you’ll learn

how hell lost its heat; that a slur in the US is a meal in the UK; and which career earns you the name Mr. Fuckbutter.

Damn and hell began as sinful and became secular.

There’s a long-standing Hollywood legend about the film Gone with the Wind. The story goes that the film’s producer, David Selznick, received a heavy fine when the movie was released. You see, at the film’s climax, the leading star, Clark Gable, utters the now-classic line “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn.” The rumor is that back in 1939 damn was such a shocking word that allowing it on screen was tantamount to a crime. So Selznick had to pay up. But this just isn’t true. In reality, while damn and its compatriot word hell were both considered bawdy, neither was actually banned. In fact, they were treated as acceptable forms of profanity – a distinction they still hold today. The key message here is: Damn and hell began as sinful and became secular. In today’s pantheon of taboo words, damn and hell hold a curious place. While these two expletives are absolutely considered among the four-letter terms we label profane, they nonetheless feel a bit tame. This isn’t a recent development, either. Even by the 1900s, both expletives were used regularly and rarely met with more than mild and perfunctory disapproval. Yet this wasn’t always the case. Travel back a few hundred years and these words would feel more provocative. In Europe during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Christian doctrine reigned supreme. Pious followers of the faith were careful to abide by the Second Commandment, which forbids taking the Lord’s name “in vain.” Pledging a trivial oath in the name of God or Jesus was strictly discouraged, which is why there’s a taboo around so-called swear words like Oh God or For God’s sake! Moreover, this prohibition extended to cursing people or things in the name of God. Asking the Lord to condemn, or damn, a given frustration was a serious breach of decorum. This injunction also extended to the word hell, as this was the expected destination for any soul God would damn. So, while an especially pissed peasant might be tempted to shout, “God damn you to hell!” such a phrase carried a seriously sinful weight. Of course, over time the religious connotations of these words began to fade, and their usage crept into everyday language. Damn and its cousin goddamn became so common that Joan of Arc even referred to the English people as “Goddams” for their frequent use of the phrase. For its part, hell became just another

interjection, such as in the phrases What the hell? and Hell, why not?

The origins of fuck as profanity remain shrouded in mystery.

In the 1930s, the lexicographer Allen Walker Read declared that fuck carried the deepest stigma of any word in the English language. And it's true. In the early twentieth century, the so-called f-word had a notorious aura of transgression. But in the Middle Ages, things were different. Official records from the eleventh and twelfth centuries speak of upstanding citizens such as Roger Fuckbythenavel, Simon Fuckbutter, and, of course, the honorable Henry Fuckbeggar, a prized member of Edward I's inner circle. So, were these names vulgar at the time? Not exactly. While Mr. Fuckbutter was indeed a dairyman, the fuck in his name didn't imply any untoward relationship with his products. Back then, fuck was just another word. The key message here is: The origins of fuck as profanity remain shrouded in mystery. Today, we use fuck for all manner of explicit and emphatic declarations, from the angry "Fuck you!" to the confused "What the fuck?" Most prominently, we use it as a coarse and vulgar synonym for the conjugal act. However, despite the word's seeming ubiquity, there's no clear explanation of when this word acquired its sexual usage or even its true linguistic origin. Still, we can speculate. One school of thought argues that fuck derives from the old German word ficken, which once meant "to rub." This makes some phonic sense, as words with similar sounds often share similar meanings. So, just as glimmer, glint, and glow all have to do with light, German "fi" words often connote repetitive movement – for instance, fick meaning "to move back and forth." So perhaps fick slowly morphed into fuck while still describing a certain repetative action. But, alas, fuck appears so early in English that this origin is unlikely. A more feasible hypothesis suggests the f-bomb comes from the now-archaic Norwegian word: fukka. This word shared a very similar meaning to today's fuck and could have easily been imported to the British Isles during the Viking invasions of the ninth century. Afterward, it may have briefly shed its direct sexual overtones for a few centuries before returning to its roots. Still, a mystery remains as to why fuck overcame other words as the choice verb for intercourse. After all, Middle English also featured the words swive, sard, and dight, all of which denoted sex. Here, the sound could have played a key role. With its strong vowel sound punctuated with a hearty, crackling k finale, fuck may just be a more fun word to say. Even today, a quick "fuck!" remains a choice exclamation.

Taboos around shit closely parallel our society's relationship with shame.

On the surface, science and shit are almost diametrically opposed. While the former describes the rigorous process of using empirical data to understand the world, the latter refers to a more base biological function. Yet these two terms share a common origin. Millennia ago, a language spoken in what is now Ukraine had the word skei, meaning "to cut off" or "slice." Over time, skei spread around Europe. Latin speakers adopted it as sci, which came to be the root of "to know," as one gained knowledge by cutting up the world for analysis. Thus, science. Meanwhile, Old English speakers absorbed skei as scit, and used it to describe the physical act of separating excrement from the body. As centuries passed, the word evolved, and scit became the shit we now

know today. The key message here is: Taboos around shit closely parallel our society's relationship with shame. Way back around the year 1000, the word shit, and its related variant shitte, did not shock or offend. And why would it? Back then, society was largely agrarian and communal. Given these conditions, it made very little sense to be squeamish about naming an act one witnessed daily from both livestock and fellow villagers. Remember, at this time taboos were more concerned with holy scripture than with lowly bodily functions. However, the Protestant Reformation flipped this dynamic. This religious sea change stressed individual purity and reclassified the body as a shameful and sinful earthly vessel. On top of this, technological progress and increased material wealth meant more people had better housing and more access to privacy. These two forces combined to make physical processes, like shitting, all the more stigmatized. And so shit became taboo. The word became profane, and the action was not even spoken of in polite society. For centuries, defecation could only be slyly alluded to or named with clinical terms such as feces. In fact, the s-word didn't even appear in Webster's New World Dictionary until the 1970s. Yet, despite this censure, shit survived. This is partially because excrement itself is a powerful concept. Human waste conjures so many associations that a word like shit has real utility. Filth is both abject and unwanted, which allows us to dismiss something undesirable as shitty. Defecation is also an unavoidable fact of life – it is true and authentic in some way. And so we admire the real shit. The turns of phrase are truly endless.

Our anatomical terms are either playful, prurient, or prejudiced.

Flip on the radio and it won't be long until you hear some libertine MC or lascivious diva extolling the virtues of a certain body part. Some will cheekily declare that "baby's got back," while others will simply explicitly direct you to "shake your ass." Of course, this freewheeling appreciation of the ass is relatively new. Even a mere century ago, people would go to great lengths to avoid uttering the word ass. More prim speakers might gesture vaguely to backsides or rumps, opt for the sartorial term seat, or, if especially cultured, revert to foreign vocabulary like the French derrière. As of late, our uptightness about ass has become more relaxed. Though, when it comes to anatomy, we're still quite modest in naming our reproductive organs. The key message here is: Our anatomical terms are either playful, prurient, or prejudiced. For English speakers, there's a strange gap in our anatomical vocabulary. When we speak of reproductive organs, we must choose between highly clinical terms like penis and vagina, or opt for a bevvy of alternatives. These tend to either come across as childish, as with vajayjay and pee-pee, or as overtly vulgar, as is the case with dick or pussy. It seems that we have no neutral term like we do for, say, hands or feet. This dilemma has its roots in the cultural mores of the post-Renaissance era. Here again, a new emphasis on bodily shame pushed nearly all words relating to sexual organs into the realm of vulgarity. So, while both dick and pussy were in common use, their meanings began to take on a more transgressive hue near the beginning of the 1600s. In fact, by 1691, both words appear in Wit and Mirth, a collection of bawdy poetry rife with sexual slang and double entendre. In today's English, these terms still carry a light pejorative meaning. Early on, dick could refer to just any old fellow – same as with today's guy or dude – but it slowly acquired a harsher tone. Today, a dick is exclusively a guy with a bad attitude. Similarly, pussy held an almost affectionate connotation as a general term of endearment. Yet, through homophobia and misogyny, it has acquired a second meaning related to being weak or cowardly. However, neither word is so reviled as another slang term for vagina, the so-

called c-word. While its origins remain murky, it has developed into a seriously offensive term. This is due to its chronic use as a means to reduce women to their sexual organs. Today, it stands as one of the last words in American English that can truly offend many. We'll examine another forbidden word in the next blink.

The N-word holds a particularly complex place in American culture.

In 2006, comedian Michael Richards was riding high off the success of Seinfeld, in which he played the lovable oaf Kramer. However, all his accumulated goodwill could not withstand one seriously dismal stand-up performance. What happened was this: While on stage, Richards attempted to dispatch a heckler by delivering a caustic riff. In an unhinged and horrid retort, he repeatedly said the N-word. Yes, that N-word. Afterward, the comedian apologized and tried to mitigate the outburst as a joke gone horribly wrong. The public was unforgiving, and the incident essentially ended his career. Clearly, in a world filled with supposedly off-limits words, this specific profanity stands out from the rest as particularly offensive. Yet, even in the slur, there is nuance. The key message here is: The N-word holds a particularly complex place in American culture. The N-word was not always so offensive as to require delicate euphemism. The term originally comes from niger, the Latin word for black, and was brought to English sometime in the 1500s through the Spanish cognate negro. For a time, the word was commonly used to refer to anyone of dark complexion, usually with no special malice. Period writings use the word as casually as we would use the phrase "soccer mom." The word's pejorative inflection arrived in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when racial hierarchy became an entrenched aspect of society. The word appeared frequently in everything from political speech to children's rhymes. Even as the civil-rights movement eroded open bigotry, the word still appeared in sitcoms as late as the 1970s. In the late '90s, public sentiment finally rendered the word so toxic that the phrase "the N-word" became common parlance. Well, common parlance for some people. In the Black community, the N-word is still used in full, often with the hard R ending dropped in favor of an open A. This in-group usage of the word is usually deemed acceptable, as those uttering it have borne the brunt of actual racism. Even so, this distinction isn't solid. Some Black thinkers wish the word would disappear entirely, while some non-Black people feel oddly – and, many argue, inappropriately – drawn to the term due to pop culture. The N-word will likely remain part of our language, though its use is always shifting. Lately, linguists note that the soft-A variant is increasingly used to describe nonhuman nouns such as objects or animals. This flexibility shows how even the most marked words are still living, evolving, and changing meaning.

The f-word followed a long and winding path to become the f-slur.

It's often said that the United States and the United Kingdom are two countries separated by a common language. While both nations predominantly use English, there remain major differences in how that tongue is wielded. Americans ride the elevator, while Brits ascend in lifts, for instance. Perhaps the strangest example of this divide is the varied meaning of the f-word. No, not the four-letter f-bomb that we discussed in blink 2 – the other f-word. In the UK, this word is on the menu – it refers to a dish of

chopped pork wrapped in bacon. And, if you wanted to have a smoke after the meal, you might also use a shortened version of this word to refer to your cigarette. Meanwhile, in the United States, the term carries a different weight. Here, the same word is a disparaging name for homosexual men – one so offensvie that it's prudent to render it as the f-slur. The key message here is: The f-word followed a long and winding path to become the f-slur. The folk etymology of the f-slur is mildly absurd, yet entirely true. The word did indeed refer to a bundle of sticks. It makes its first written appearance way back in 1312, in a document listing a dead man's possessions. Since then, it crops up to describe all manner of bundles, both literal and metaphorical. To wit, in 1742 the English writer Horace Walpole offered his friend "my [f-word] of compliments." The word's use as a slur emerged in the US in the later half of the 1800s. It arrived at this meaning through the military. When armies conscripted untrained soldiers, these men were called f-words, for they were as useful as a uniform packed with sticks. This gave room for the f-slur to describe any man of little or no value. Soon, the word was also used to insult women. And, of course, once a term is associated with women, men will use it to disparage each other's masculinity. So, just as sissy, nancy, and queen all became a synonym for homosexual, so did the f-slur. And it remained a dismissive insult well into the twenty-first century. As of late, some of the LGBTQ+ community have reappropriated the term for their own use, but to many it still carries a sting. In contrast is the lesbian equivalent, dyke. The origins of this word remain obscure – though some fancifully argue it derives from bulldyke, a butchered pronunciation of the Celtic warrior queen Boudica. Fun, but unlikely. Either way, dyke never picked up a reputation as hateful as the f-slur and is thus more commonly tossed around with levity and affection.

The word bitch shows the myriad ways profane words can change over time.

The year is 1397. Somewhere in the British Isles, a pregnant dog gives birth to a litter of puppies. Unfortunately, the young pups are all blind. A local scribe records the event in the town's annals. Dutifully, he notes, "the bytche bringeth forth blynde whelpes." Around the same time period, a stage play features two women in a heated argument. One leading lady dismisses the other with a biting remark. She ruefully asks, "Whom calleste thou queine, skabde biche?" Or, as we would say, "Who are you calling queen, miserable bitch?" It seems that even nearly a millennium ago the word bitch was already playing multiple roles. So, it's no surprise that today this particular profanity enjoys a remarkable range of meanings. The key message here is: The word bitch shows the myriad ways profane words can change over time. The word bitch derives from the Old English word bicge, which, despite its spelling, shared a similar pronunciation with our contemporary profanity. The term originally meant female dog, though records indicate it also had currency as a gendered insult. Calling a woman a bitch unfavorably implied she was as wanton and promiscuous as a hound. Thus, the dig efficiently drew on both religious notions of chastity and good old body shame. As time progressed, though, the term expanded its meaning in that curious way profanity often does. Before long, bitch didn't just apply to unruly women. It was abstracted to describe any troublesome or loathsome object, idea, or process. A car could be a bitch to steer; a series of annoying complaints could be bitching; or, as Samuel Beckett wrote in Waiting for Godot, life itself could be a bitch ("That's how it is on this bitch of an earth"). Of course, as a gendered smear, bitch also carries chauvinistic notions of hierarchy. For instance, in prison, a man who is sexually subservient to his cellmate is called a bitch.

Likewise, a dominant member of a group may refer to their lackeys as their bitches. Yet this later usage can often come with great affection – one can easily imagine a young person greeting a mixed-gender gathering with a hearty “Hello, my bitches!” A truly versatile word, bitch has really drifted from its strictly pejorative past. It can be a positive adjective – an exceptionally cool party could be described as bitchin’. Or it can even be a pronoun – recently, rapper Cardi B tweeted “A bitch is scared,” meaning “I am afraid.” As these examples demonstrate, profanity isn’t a stable category. What may offend our ears today could easily be proper speech for future generations.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that: Words we consider profane often have long and complex histories. Many so-called swear words such as damn and hell have their roots in religious doctrine, while others such as fuck, shit, and ass draw their strength from notions of propriety and body shame. Many of the terms we find most offensive today, such as the N-word and the f-word, are off-limits for their histories as discriminatory slurs. None of these taboos are permanent, though – and many are likely to change as language evolves. Got any frickin' feedback? We’d love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to with Nine Nasty Words as the subject line and share your thoughts!