Dialog

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Most stories deal with people, and one of the surefire activities of people is that of talking and of making conversation. It follows that in most stories there is dialog. Sometimes stories are largely dialog; my own stories almost always are. For that reason, when I think of the art of writing (which isn't often, I must admit) I tend to think of dialog.

In the Romantic period of literature in the first part of the nineteenth century, the style of dialog tended to be elaborate and adorned. Authors used their full vocabulary and had their characters speak ornately.

I remember when I was very young and first read Charles Dickens's Nicholas Nickleby. How I loved the conversation. The funny passages were very funny to me, though I had trouble with John Browdie's thick Yorkshire accent (something his beloved Matilda, brought up under similar conditions, lacked, for some reason). What I loved even more, though, was the ornamentation-the way everyone "spoke like a book."

Thus, consider the scene in which Nicholas Nickleby confronts his villainous Uncle Ralph. Nicholas's virtuous and beautiful sister, Kate, who has been listening to Ralph's false version of events, which make out Nicholas to have been doing wrong, cries out wildly to her brother, "Refute these calumnies..."

Of course, I had to look up "refute" and "calumny" in the dictionary, but that meant I had learned two useful words. I also had never heard any seventeen-year-old girl of my acquaintance use those words, but that just showed me how superior the characters in the book were, and that filled me with satisfaction.

It's easy to laugh at the books of that era and to point out that no one really talks that way. But then, do you suppose people in Shakespeare's time went around casually speaking in iambic pentameter?

Still, don't you want literature to improve on nature? Sure you do. When you go to the movies, the hero and heroine don't look like the people you see in the streets, do they? Of course not. They look like movie stars. The characters in fiction are better looking, stronger, braver, more ingenious and clever than anyone you are likely to meet, so why shouldn't they speak hetter, too?

And yet there are values in realism--in making people look, and sound, and act like real people.

For instance, back in 1919, some of the players on the pennantwinning Chicago White Sox were accused of accepting money from gamblers to throw the World Series (the so-called "Black Sox scandal") and were barred from baseball for life as a result. At the trial, a young lad is supposed to have followed his idol, the greatest of the accused, Shoeless Joe Jackson, and to have cried out in anguish, "Say it ain't so, Joe."

That is a deathless cry that can't be tampered with. It is unthinkable to have the boy say, "Refute these calumnies, Joseph," even though that's what he means. Any writer who tried to improve matters in that fashion would, and should, be lynched at once. I doubt that anyone would, or should, even change it to "Say it isn't so, Joe."

For that matter, you couldn't possibly have had Kate Nickleby cry out to her brother,

"Say it ain't so, Nick."

Of course, during much of history most people were illiterate and the reading of books was very much confined to the few who were educated and scholarly. Such books of fiction as existed

were supposed to "improve the mind" or risk being regarded as works of the devil.

It was only gradually, as mass education began to flourish, that books began to deal with ordinary people. Of course, Shakespeare had his clowns and Dickens had his Sam Wellers, and in both cases, dialog was used that mangled the English language to some extent--but that was intended as humor. The audience was expected to laugh uproariously at these representatives of the lower classes.

As far as I know, the first book that was written entirely and seriously in substandard English and which was a great work of literature nevertheless (or even, possibly, to some extent because of it) was Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn, which was published in 1884. Huck Finn is himself the narrator, and he is made to speak as an uneducated backwoods boy would speak--if he happened to be a literary genius. That is, Twain used the dialect of an uneducated boy, but he put together sentences and paragraphs like a master.

The book was extremely popular when it came out because its realism made it incredibly effective--but it was also extremely controversial, as all sorts of fat heads inveighed against it because it didn't use proper English.

And yet, even so, Mark Twain had to draw the line, too, as did all writers until the present generation.

People, all sorts of people, use vulgarisms as a matter of course. I remember my days in the Army when it was impossible to hear a single sentence in which the common word for sexual intercourse was not used as an all-purpose adjective. Later, after I had gotten out of the Army, I lived on a street along which young boys and girls walked to the local junior high school in the morning, and back again in the evening, and their shouted conversations brought back memories of my barracks days with nauseating clarity.

Yet could writers reproduce that aspect of common speech? Of course not. For that reason, Huck Finn was always saying

that something was "blamed" annoying, "blamed" this, "blamed" that. You can bet that the least he was really saying was "damned."

A whole set of euphemisms was developed and placed in the mouths of characters who wouldn't, in real life, have been caught dead saying them. Think of all the "dad-blameds," and "goldameds," and "consameds" we have seen in print and heard in the movies. To be sure, youngsters say them as a matter of caution, for they would probably he punished (if of "good family") by their parents if caught using the terms they had heard said parents use. (Don't let your hearts bleed for the kids, for when they grow up they will beat up their kids for the same crime.)

For the last few decades, however, it has become permissible to use all the vulgarisms freely and many writers have availed themselves of the new freedom to lend an air of further realism to their dialog. What's more, they are apt to resent bitterly any suggestion that this habit be modified or that some non-vulgar expression be substituted.

In fact, one sees a curious reversal now. A writer must withstand a certain criticism if he does not make use of said vulgarisms.

Once when I read a series of letters by science fiction writers in which such terms were used freely, and frequently, I wrote a response that made what seemed to me to be an obvious point. In it, I said something like this:

Ordinary people, who are not well educated and who lack a large working vocabulary, are limited in their ability to lend force to their statements. In their search for force, they must therefore make use of vulgarisms which serve, through their shock value, hut which, through overuse, quickly lose whatever force they have, so that the purpose of the use is defeated.

Writers, on the other hand, have (it is to be presumed) the full and magnificent vocabulary of the English language at their disposal. They can say anything they want with whatever intensity of invective they require in a thousand different ways without ever once deviating from full respectability of utterance. They have,

therefore, no need to trespass upon the usages of the ignorant and forlorn, and to steal their tattered expressions as substitutes for the language of Shakespeare and Milton.

All I got for my pains were a few comments to the effect that there must be something seriously wrong with me.

Nevertheless, it is my contention that dialog is realistic when, and only when, it reflects the situation as you describe it and when it produces the effect you wish to produce.

At rather rare intervals, I will make use of dialect. I will have someone speak as a Brooklyn-bred person would (that is, as I myself do, in my hours of ease), or insert Yiddishisms here and there, if it serves a purpose. I may even try to make up a dialect, as I did in Foundation's Edge, if it plays an important part in the development of the story. Mostly, however, I do not.

The characters in my stories (almost without exception) are pictured as being well educated and highly intelligent. It is natural, therefore, for them to make use of a wide vocabulary and to speak precisely and grammatically, even though I try not to fall into the ornateness of the Romantic era.

And, as a matter of quixotic principle, I try to avoid expletives, even mild ones, when I can.--But other writers, of course, may do as they please.

Afterword: There is a top-ranking science fiction writer who seems constitutionally incapable of not using vulgarisms, even when this makes serious trouble for him with important businessmen he is dealing with. I once tried to make peace on his behalf by saying, "When he says to you-- -- --, that's lust his way of saying, 'Hello, how are you?'" The person I was talking to, however, refused to be appeased.