

## The World's Rudest Word

[Nan Flory](#) examines the role of the most infamous and taboo word in the English language. Or tried to until the Evening Press took legal advice, and decided we weren't able to print the full uncensored word

Tuesday 14 March 2006

The word of the moment is currently c\*\*\*. One need only refer to the March edition of Vogue and its three-page, Deborah Orr feature on it for confirmation. On campus, the Drama Barn production of Electra prominently featured the word and then there is the recent revelation (it was news to me, at least) that innocent little Grape Lane, in all its El Piano, vegetarian glory, used to be called Grope C\*\*\* Lane – the red light district apparently. It is a word that everybody needs to tackle at some point or another.

I remember the first time I heard the word 'c\*\*\*' or at least was introduced to its existence. My older sister, 11 years my senior, home from university, was discussing swearing. She was saying how she liked it as it was a refreshing, cathartic thing to do when she was pissed off. An aggressive release, but not towards another person, just harmlessly expressing anger, like punching walls without the pain. But, she said, 'I don't much use the c-word, that really means something.' I had no idea what this c-word was, ran through my stock of rude words to no avail. Can't be c\*\*p or c\*\*k, the c-word turned into a mystical holy grail of adult meaning. I was waiting to graduate from f\*\*\* and s\*\*\* and the like on to the big C. Soon, (maybe I watched Trainspotting?) I identified the next three letters. I'm sure I'd probably heard the word before, but without my sister's signposting the seriousness of the syllable, I'd never taken any notice of it. Now, when it came up in films or books, I felt a certain reverence – they're REALLY being rude right now. I still didn't know what it actually meant, however, I just developed an awareness of its status as the rudest word around.

Now, of course, I am aware of c\*\*\*, not only as a swear word, but also as a word for ladies' private parts. A prude at heart, personally, I'm not a user. I don't really say c\*\*\* much at all. I sort of wish I did, but it's a very intimidating word. Using it in any manner is a bold action which immediately draws attention to the speaker – for some, it is a little too hot to handle. I do appreciate the linguistic power 'c\*\*\*' contains, I'm just not confident enough to wield it.

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“Why are c\*\*\*s so much worse than c\*\*ks?”  
”

Separated from what it signifies – female genitalia – the fact that such a weighty word exists is useful. Possibly my favourite line from a movie ever is “Monty, you terrible c\*\*\*” in the cliché student cult classic, *Withnail and I*. The usage there arises out of fear; Withnail is about to wet himself because he thinks he's going to be murdered. His anger and relief when he realises he isn't is so great he has to go beyond regular abuse. The strongest term society can provide him with is 'c\*\*\*', so he uses it – totally apolitically, just because it is the only word with enough status to be capable of expressing his feelings. C\*\*\*'s existence is also a good backdrop to more casual insults – yes I called you a d\*\*\*head, but I didn't call you a c\*\*\* now, did I – like a sort of swearer's safety net which prevents all out war. A tacit agreement exists

in all brawls – you haven't crossed the line until you've called someone a c\*\*\*. The problem with c\*\*\*, however, is that this power is so intimately tied up with its meaning.

C\*\*\*'s etymology is complex and contested. It is suggested that the word comes from various words for woman, for example the the Arabic 'khunt', the Nostratic 'kuni' ('woman'), and the Irish 'cuint'. However, an Indo-European word, 'skeu', which means 'to conceal' may also be related. Then there are similarities with the words for female animals – ku, Frisian for cow – with the Roman for vase, 'cucuteni', or the Middle English 'cunne', knowledge.

Whatever its origins, today it definitely means vagina (just being on the safe side). Feminists' issues with their definitively feminine bits being the most powerful insult in the English language are obvious. Yes, men's privates get taken in vain too – d\*\*\*, c\*\*\*, p\*\*\* etc – but the issue is that those terms are pretty throw away as insults. C\*\*\* is a much bigger deal. It does seem a little unfair; why are c\*\*\*s so much worse than c\*\*ks?

As an enlightened member of society, I think we have to begin taking a stand. We can't just throw it around like we do most other derogatory slang. If you do- if you're a c\*\*\* user- you have to be pretty sure of the company you're in before you launch it into general banter. When 'c\*\*\*' enters an exchange as more than just a signifier, you have to reassess your conversational foundations. It's like you're moving into uncharted territory and you have to be sure everyone is willing to go with you before you try and make the move. Otherwise, it can get messy. Even if you are a tongue-in-cheek c\*\*\* artist, if the people around you aren't on the same wavelength (as I have found out to Nouse's detriment) you can either horrify them with your rudeness, or, perhaps more damagingly, find yourself locked in an ideological battle about whether c\*\*\* should ever be used as an insult at all.

Germaine Greer used to campaigned for the reclaiming of 'c\*\*\*' in much the same way as the gay community did with 'dyke' and 'queer'. Greer encouraged women to use the word as the standard term for vagina, but has since changed her tune. She now thinks that c\*\*\* should be allowed to maintain its power; having c\*\*\* be the strongest word in English writes female authority into the language. In the end, c\*\*\*s are rather essential to life itself – perhaps this is where the word's power originally stems from.

Eve Ensler, author of the Vagina Monologues is also an advocate of female ownership of the word c\*\*\*. Her work, recently performed on campus in honour of International Women's Day, includes an orgasmic celebration of the sexiness of c\*\*\*s – both the things themselves and the sound of the word. She wants women to improve their relationships with c\*\*\*s and use their power rather than be scared of them.

In their own quest to reclaim 'c\*\*\*', some friends went to Argos to try and get necklaces made with c\*\*\* pendants – like the 'Carrie' one in Sex and the City, but with c\*\*\* on it instead. The idea being that by confronting the world with a bold, glitzy love of the word and its literal meaning, its threat to femininity is removed. Argos refused to make them, claiming the service only covered proper names. Disappointing feminist values there, but seemingly a widely held view. There is other merchandise of empowerment on offer, however. A quick search on Amazon.com comes up with the c\*\*\* colouring book – apparently you can even make them into puppets.

Another way of tackling the issue is to bring it down to the same level as other rude words. Remove the added kick it has by using it all the time, not saving it up for when you really want to hit out. If c\*\*\* becomes only as insulting as d\*\*k or even b\*\*b then the issue is solved. Janet Street-Porter is an advocate of this method, using the word to describe pretty much everything and everyone at some point in time. Taking the secrecy and taboo away from c\*\*\*, sterilising the whispered 'c-word' and making its power a manifestation of pure femininity is a much more constructive use of its linguistic stature. Instead of trying to separate it from its literal meaning, the two should embrace and dispell any negative connotations.

We shall have to find some other really, really insulting word, something totally asexual perhaps, something which doesn't mean anything at all; a sort of guttural noise that you can't even spell. C\*\*\*'s power should be put to good use, not abused by violent football hooligans. Maybe we should introduce some sort of qualification, a test you have to pass before you can use the word.




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## 10 comments

james bond

23 May '08 at 7:43 pm

your gays

[▲ Report](#)

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Andrea

8 Sep '15 at 10:28 am

Ruuude

[▲ Report](#)

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Molly Meldrum

9 Apr '09 at 5:41 am

hmhhh...so?

[▲ Report](#)

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Jason Rose

9 Apr '09 at 11:15 am

“an Indo-European word, ‘skeu’, which means ‘to conceal’ may also be related”

...

The three words that mean ‘woman’ actually sound like the end product, so surely they’re a much better bet? Why would it be a word for “conceal” or “knowledge”? :-\

Also, I still don’t really get the feminist attitude to the word. It is just a word that happens to be the worst swear word, really, but the majority of swear words are regarding genitals or sex in general. Excluding the word in question, c\*\*k, t\*t, w\*\*\*\*r and the like are often much of a muchness. And right alongside them is the word in question’s partner in crime t\*\*t... and it’s used in the modern world as much of a muchness with the others I’ve mentioned. And f\*\*k is one notch above them all. The etymology of why they have become a hierarchy in that order is beyond me but I don’t really know why it is that important an issue – nobody uses it as a patriarchal thing, it’s not something like “chairman” that could validly be said to have an effect, so why is this so important?

To suggest “harnessing its power” and using it a lot is typical of Greer, perhaps the world’s most damaging figure to feminism; all it does is make people less polite, less subtle and recommends swearing more. It’s like suggesting that people use the word f\*\*k instead of sexual intercourse because of the power that it holds. That’s STUPID – use other words, be free with sexuality, talk about female genitalia all you want but why do you have to use swear words to do so? I don’t think that I would talk about c\*\*ks with my doctor but I think that rather I would use the penis. Because it’s the proper word.

Good article though. I just hate Greer and this entire situation is beyond me.

[▲ Report](#)

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Lucy

6 Apr '16 at 7:27 pm

“perhaps the world’s most damaging figure to feminism”

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Have you heard of second-wave feminism???

[Report](#)

Micheal Bohmer

9 Jan '10 at 5:59 am

I agree with Jason – great article. I can't understand the reasons for the offensive power of the word either but it's there alright. I am rather free with language myself but rarely use the word. I don't know why but it just sounds filthy to my ear even when I say it to myself. I know for me it's not that the word represents vagina, because I have no problem with any of the other vulgar slang for vagina such as t\*\*t. Most of the people I know are the same; They have no problem using f\*\*k or s\*\*t or d\*\*khead but rarely, if ever use the word c\*\*t and when they do you know they mean it. Thanks again for the article. I'll visit this site again.

[Report](#)

Chloe Turner

19 Aug '13 at 12:37 pm

Ok I read this and I only made this search 'The Worlds Rudest Word' because I wasn't sure, but I have heard this word and many others too.

[Report](#)

Silvana

7 Oct '15 at 11:54 am

That's a sensible answer to a chgaeInling question

[Report](#)

Alisha Kamil

19 Aug '13 at 12:46 pm

Hi, ok the only reason I`m posting is because I don`t understand why everyone says the swear words on hear as f\*\*\* when instead you can say fuck. Yeah I know you all must think thats a bumb idea.

[Report](#)

Anonymous

20 Jul '18 at 9:37 am

oh

[Report](#)

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