



Not Dead Yet, Lily?

Word Work

1. 1 Swear Words

In a short time the *bloodys* had given way to *hells*, and the *hells* to *damns* - but getting into *fucks* had been her big breakthrough. It was after the postman went by a couple of days ago: *No letters, well fuck him!* she'd thought

1.1 As should be clear from the text, in her 'journey' of discovering the pleasures of using bad language, she travelled from mild words (that probably would upset nobody) through slightly stronger expressions to a word that is almost guaranteed to upset people.

Different people react in different ways to the apparent power of a word. For example, some people might think that 'bloody' was stronger than either 'hell' or 'damn' while others might disagree. Here is some information about the words for you to draw your own conclusions:

bloody has no obvious meaning or description as a swearword

hell as a swearword indicates how awful something is (i.e 'this is hell')

damn literally 'condemn to hell' but mainly used as a swear word

fuck have sexual intercourse (with)

Strong swearwords, like 'fuck', are very likely to cause offence or thought to be shocking if used in the wrong context or situation. As different people have different concepts of when (if ever) it is acceptable to swear, using swearwords to gain the effect you want is a very difficult thing to achieve. In all languages, effective use of swearwords is a cultural minefield. You are best advised not to attempt to use them.

1.2 Most swearwords are flexible in their use and are frequently found as both adjectives and intensifying adverbs:

"The bloody postman is late again"
"The postman is bloody late again"
"The postman is bloody awful at his job."

They are the only words in the language that can be used in this flexible way.

The word 'fuck' is especially flexible, and can be heard to be used as a verb and a noun as well:

"Fuck me, the fucking little fucker has fucked off with my fucking keys."

Some people use swearwords not to convey the force of meaning that the word might imply, but simply as discourse markers to punctuate speech. In these cases the words have no real meaning.

Language Note

The Efficacy of Swearing

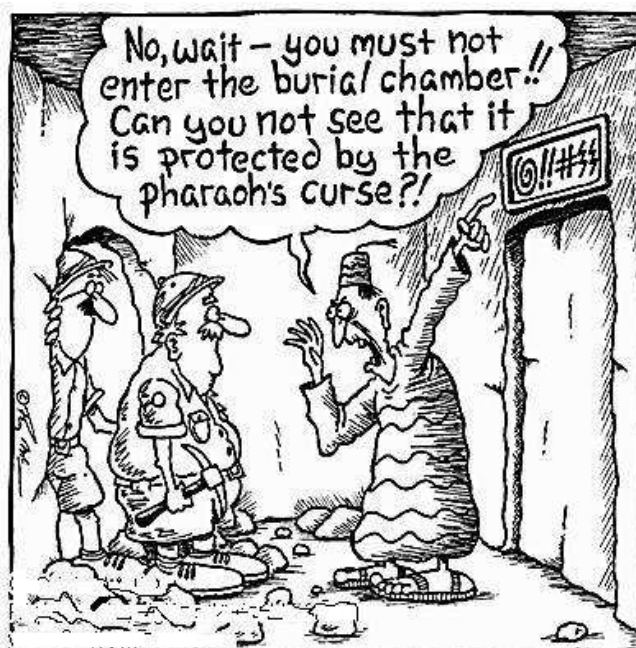
Now for breakfast, she'd thought, breakfast, bloody breakfast. As she pulled on her dressing-gown she'd started muttering to herself:

'Bloody breakfast, bloody, bloody, bloody, bloody breakfast.'

It felt good, stimulating. Like a vigorous marching tune in her head. There she stood in front of the mirror: a kindly-looking, white-haired, elderly woman, frail but dignified - those were no doubt the sorts of words her neighbours used when talking about her — and all the time behind the benevolent smile she was hammering out full-force, 'BLOODY, BLOODY, BLOODY, BLOODY breakfast.' Then she'd grinned to herself — and she'd not done that in months.

The important message here is that Lily felt good after swearing. Perhaps it is no coincidence that another word for 'swearing' in English is 'cursing', which conjures up images of magic and spells. The magic of words and their ability to make a difference.....

It is also worth noting that 'to swear' can also mean to take a solemn oath or commitment. When people appear before a judge in court they 'swear' to tell the truth, but they aren't expected to curse (that would not help their case!). Clearly the double meanings of these interconnected words are complicated and can cause confusion to the language learner.



2. -ing clauses for emphasis

Stopping herself in time from getting too loud, she really didn't want to share these words.

Taking a good grip of the stem with both hands, feet braced for the effort, she closed her eyes for the Big Tug.

Feeling a bit tired after all that digging, she might just have a short nap now — while she was in the mood.

By putting the -ing form of the verb at the beginning of the sentence, the author is able to achieve greater effect and emphasis on the action. Compare the following sentences:

Lily attracted attention by clanging the spade.
Clanging the spade, Lily gained attention.

Lily felt better after swearing about her breakfast.
Swearing about her breakfast, Lily felt better.

Questions: a) What happened to the preposition? B) What happens to the punctuation?

Exercises.

1. Make these sentences more emphatic by reversing the clauses.

1. She stood in the airless room gasping for breath.

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2. She pulled on her dressing gown as she was muttering to herself.

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3. The Macdonalds talked together crouching around their patio table.

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4. Leaning towards the bush, she smelled its perfume.

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5. Pretending to be deaf, she ignored him.

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2. Now make 3 sentences which start with an -ing clause based on events in the story.

1.

2.

3.