

Copyright © 2004 by Katherine Padilla. This article is published by **Novaun Novels** at www.zerosilver.com and licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 2.5 License](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5). To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5>. This document may be reproduced for personal non-commercial use as long as the text is not altered in any way and the byline and copyright notice are included on every copy.

WHOLESOME LITERATURE—THE INTELLIGENT CHOICE

This text was adapted from a literary spotlight that was presented at Homemaking Night in the Mt. Airy Ward, Frederick Maryland Stake on February 13, 1997.

We're all concerned about the powerful influence of the media. We rarely sit through a general conference without hearing the Brethren counsel us on what our standards should be. Even as a young woman I tried to follow the counsel of the Brethren in this matter, both in my reading and writing. The prophet of my youth was Spencer W. Kimball, and he gave some blunt counsel concerning foul language:

I lately picked up a book, widely circulated, highly recommended, a best-seller, and my blood ran cold at the profane and vulgar conversations therein, and I cringed as the characters used in an ugly way the sacred names of Deity. Why? Why do authors sell themselves so cheaply and desecrate their God-given talents? Why do they profane and curse? Why do they take in their unholy lips and run through their sacrilegious pens the names of their own Creator, the holy names of their Redeemer? Why do they ignore his positive command? . . .

The Lord has told us that we are accountable for indecent language. You don't ever use any indecent language, do you? That would be a disgrace. Indecency that is designed to impress will only depress the hearers as well as the person who utters the indecency. If mankind could but come to see indecency as an indication of weakness, not strength and not manhood, as stupidity and not sophistication, then he would come to see more clearly the strength of Jesus Christ, the most honest and decent individual that ever lived on the face of the earth.¹

¹ Spencer W. Kimball, "President Kimball Speaks Out on Profanity," *Ensign*, February 1981, p. 3.

I took counsel like this very seriously, so it should be no surprise that I was often disturbed by some of the excuses used by the so-called experts to defend literary garbage. I still remember sitting in a creative writing class and having the teacher tell us that a scene involving men playing cards wouldn't be realistic if it didn't contain profanity. This teacher explained that if we, as writers, wanted our stories to be plausible and correct, we should be willing to include profanity in such a scene.

Despite what my teacher said, I knew that it would be wrong for me to ever write a scene containing profanity. Even so, these kinds of questions went through my head: Is it possible to write realistically about difficult topics without disregarding the counsel of our Church leaders? If I follow the standards of the Church in my writing, will my work suffer artistically because I'm not able to tell the complete truth? If I follow the standards, will I forever be doomed to read only books that present a sugar-coated view of reality?

Many years ago, at the encouragement of my husband, I began reading the classics of fiction. The second or third book I read was Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. It is difficult for me to express the powerful experience I had reading this book. Tolstoy, an artist in every sense of the word, took a difficult subject, adultery, and wrote about it so realistically that I was able to feel the horror and degradation of it, and he was able to accomplish this without one sex scene. In fact, I don't even think he showed Anna and Wronsky exchange a kiss on the lips. Not only that, but this very long novel, which in my copy has 807 pages, achieves a striking level of reality without using more than a handful of bad words, and those are mild by modern standards.

After that experience, no writer, no critic, no reader, and no teacher could ever again disarm me with the claim that if a writer wants to write truthfully and realistically, he must be willing to include vulgar language and explicit scenes when the situation demands it. I knew the opposite was true. I knew that a writer would be able to write more realistically and truthfully if he left those things out. Why? Because these foul elements are *never necessary* in a work that sincerely seeks to dramatize truth. To include them not only adds an unwholesome element to the piece, it violates one of the cardinal rules of fiction writing, which is that every word, detail, and scene in a literary work should contribute to the development of its plot and theme. Anything that doesn't contribute to the development

of the story obscures the true point of the piece, resulting in a story that is less clear, less unified, and therefore less polished and powerful than it could have been.

What does this mean to us as readers? It means that the most intelligent, artistic books—in the heavenly sense—will not contain inappropriate material. It means that as writers, every time we throw in a bad word or an explicit scene, we’re lowering the true literary quality of our work. It’s as simple as that. We don’t have to feel as if we’re missing something if we choose not to read unwholesome books that our carnal society considers great art, and we certainly don’t have to feel bad if we choose not to participate in trashy entertainment.

I’m going to examine four areas of concern and explain why standards regarding them make good literary sense. My focus will be on fiction, but my comments apply to most types of non-fiction too.

Immoral Subjects and Themes

The terms “subject” and “theme” are often interchanged and incorrectly defined. To avoid material that contains immoral subjects and themes, we have to know what the words mean, and we have to know how to identify them in the things we read.

Determining the subject of a work is usually easy. It’s what the book is *about*. Often the title will refer to the book’s major subject. Some books have the Library of Congress information printed below the copyright notice. It will also tell you the major subjects.

The theme is what the book *says*. A long work, such as a novel, will not only have one predominant theme, but will usually have many other themes as well that speak on a variety of different subjects. The theme of a story is an observation about life, a verdict. The best themes will be insightful, universal, and true. An immoral theme is simply one that in some way condones or promotes immorality. In essence, an immoral theme is a statement about life that is a lie.

Consider the subject adultery. Since adultery is a heinous sin, it is not a pleasant subject, but a book dealing with it isn’t necessarily unwholesome. Whether the work is wholesome or not depends a great deal on the theme—what does the book *say* about

adultery? A possible true theme about this subject, dramatized in great works of literature such as *Anna Karenina* and *The Scarlet Letter*, could be: “Adultery destroys relationships and makes everyone involved miserable.” Another true theme, found in the story of King David, could be: “Committing adultery can lead to more reprehensible sins.” Still another true theme might be: “When an adulterer chooses the long, difficult road of repentance, his peace of mind will be restored and family relationships can be healed.”

Possible immoral themes, found in many books being published these days, include: “Adultery can be glamorous, exciting, and fulfilling,” and “Adultery can shake a marriage up and actually *strengthen* it, making the whole family much happier than it would have been had it never happened,” and “Committing adultery is perfectly acceptable if your spouse is a jerk.” Sometimes the immoral themes are subtle: “Romance with a person who isn’t the spouse is perfectly acceptable if your spouse is a jerk as long as no sex is involved.”

Often we accept material that contains immoral themes because it “doesn’t show anything.” This is a dangerous practice. Let’s be honest with ourselves. If this kind of material disgusted us, we would never read it. We wouldn’t want to. More often than not, however, we come away from literature of this type thinking that the immoral act in the story wasn’t really so bad. Perhaps we even think that, given the circumstances of the story, it was almost justified. Any material that would persuade us, Latter-saint women who are committed to living a moral lifestyle, into believing these lies, even for a moment, has a tremendous deal of evil power!

Sometimes I run across books that have what I consider double-standard themes. An immoral act occurs. The character somehow acknowledges the fact that what he did was wrong. He may even feel a little guilty. Even so, I, as a reader, may come away from the book feeling glad the immoral act happened. Or I may come away from it feeling that what happened wasn’t so bad. Or I may come away from it confused, wondering what the book is really saying. I believe books with double-standard themes are written by two basic groups of people—writers who are trying to write about moral people but do not, themselves, live a moral lifestyle and writers who believe intellectually that immorality is wrong, but deep down, they don’t feel it’s that bad. In both cases, a moral appearance

conflicts with an immoral essence, resulting in an underlying hypocrisy that weakens the work and affects the reader at a subconscious level.

For this reason, we should be careful when analyzing a work of literature not to rely completely on what we know of the author's character in deciding whether the book meets our standards or not. People who share our moral standards and even our particular religious beliefs may write books that contain immoral themes and other foul elements, and writers who are trapped in a destructive lifestyle are sometimes lucid enough in their perspective and honest enough in their execution of the material that they write amazingly truthful books. A good example of the latter type of literature is *The Great Gatsby*, by F. Scott Fitzgerald. A piece of literature has a way of unmasking its writer and revealing what he truly believes—not what he *thinks* he believes. When all is said and done, the work will speak for itself far more forcefully than the writer can ever speak for it.

Along with moral themes, immoral themes, and double-standard themes, there is one other type of theme I've encountered in my reading—the all-inclusive theme. This is a theme that, at its most fundamental level, says, “Truth is relative and there are many paths to success and happiness.” I'm sure that many authors who write with this theme truly believe it. Others are seeking to illuminate truth by exploring the lives of characters who have varying and often contrary points of view. I believe, however, that most writers who use this approach are attempting to cater their stories to the largest group possible so that they will sell more books.

The all-inclusive theme is perhaps the most difficult one to analyze because it's such a chameleon. My own opinion is that, while a well-written book containing an all-inclusive theme will never be as powerful as a comparable book with an unequivocally moral theme, it isn't necessarily a book that deserves an automatic rejection. Whether a book of this type strikes us as being wholesome or not will depend a great deal on which of its characters we most identify with.

The best way I can think of to explain what I mean is to give you an example. The novel *Lost Horizon* by James Hilton contains an all-inclusive theme. The so-called paradise it describes, Shangri-La, seeks to accommodate all types of people with a wide range of value systems. This quality, by itself, isn't necessarily a bad thing—the United States is, after all, built on similar principles—but while Shangri-La has many wonderful

qualities, there are immoral traditions at work there also. Had I identified primarily with the viewpoint character, a man who came to regard Shangri-La as the community of his dreams, I probably would have rejected the novel as being immoral. The character I identified with most, however, was a woman so unhappy with her role in Shangri-La that she was willing to risk death to break away from it. Had I been that woman, I would have been unhappy also, so the book rang true to me. In providing the disenchanted woman's storyline, the author gave me and other readers wary of Shangri-La an escape route, so to speak. A reader doesn't have to accept Shangri-La as an ideal society to accept the book.

I think the key to judging a book's theme is self-honesty, coupled with adherence to the standards and truth we possess. When determining whether the literary work in question contains an immoral theme, we can ask ourselves questions such as these:

1. If a primary character engages in sexual relations outside of marriage, does he experience any guilt?
2. Whether he feels guilty or not, does he experience adverse consequences because of what he did?
3. Does his act affect the people around him and society in general in a negative way?
4. If an immoral act is a part of the plot, do I come away from it disgusted? Or do I come away from it feeling glad it happened? Do I come away from it feeling that, while not a good thing, it wasn't so bad?
5. Is a main character in *any way* romantically involved with a person other than the spouse? If so, do I come away from the story feeling this was a bad thing, even if no sex was involved and even if the spouse is a jerk?
6. Does the work contain characters that are involved in homosexuality? If so, is homosexuality always portrayed as immoral?

When deciding whether a book contains objectionable subject matter, we might ask ourselves:

1. Does the work contain toilet humor?

2. Does it contain sexual humor?
3. Does it seem to wallow in filthiness?
4. Is there some point to the book? Or is it simply a romp in darkness?
5. Even if the events of the book are often tragic and the natural consequences of sin are shown, does the book contain hope or some kind of enlightenment?
6. Does the book contain any redeemable, likeable characters?
7. Do I come away from the book feeling titillated, polluted, or morally confused?

Most of us think of great art as being a thing of beauty. If great art is synonymous with beauty, can literature that is drowning in darkness and filthiness ever be considered great art? And can a work of literature ever truly be great if it teaches lies? Only in a society that considers filthiness and falsehood to be things of beauty and values them more than cleanliness and truth. Too often, however, we accept immoral literature because it's so well written, but if we examine the issue logically, we'll have to conclude that clever style and masterful technique won't make a book that tells lies and exudes darkness any more digestible than rotten food served at a beautifully set table.

Foul Language

The most common reason writers give for using profanity and other foul language in their writing and readers and critics give for allowing it is realism. This argument, however, is just plain silly. Whether the work is realistic or not has nothing to do with the foul language it may contain. A novel like *The Grapes of Wrath* would be just as realistic if the profanity were stripped from it, and a book like *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* will never be realistic, no matter how much foul language someone might try to add to it.

Yes, literature at its best will simulate real life, but it is still a mere simulation, a condensed, carefully constructed one. Producing well-written literature, even the most realistic kind, *requires* writers to painstakingly select and arrange the details they will use. In their work they constantly sacrifice perfect accuracy for dramatic effect and smoothness

of presentation. Even when creating novels around real people and events, writers will make up episodes and characters and often even reorganize events.

Dialogue in particular is contrived. If dialogue were a true reflection of the way people talk, no one would read fiction because it would be too boring. Writers use pieces of conversation to advance the story, then discard all else. Characters get directly to the point, rarely talk at the same time, and don't repeat the things they say unless the author wants to paint the character as indecisive, rude, or absent-minded. Even then, if the author's competent at all, he'll be careful not to drag the dialogue out too much or do anything bizarre because he won't want to confuse or bore his reader.

Any type of writing that doesn't require complete accuracy in every single little detail certainly doesn't require profanity or any other foul element. Readers have no more need to experience what comes out of a character's mouth in the way of foul language than he needs to know every type of food and drink that goes into the character's mouth over the time span of the story.

Authors often use foul language to create vulgar characters, but even that weakens the writing. After all, modern "good guys" swear and a person doesn't have to be foul-mouthed to be a boor. Readers who aren't offended by the vulgarity probably won't think there's anything wrong with it and won't get the point, and those who are offended by it won't want to read the story at all or will be so bothered by the vulgarity that they, too, will miss the point. Other literary techniques give more life to characterization—tone and speed of the voice, unique sentence structures, mannerisms, facial expressions, the subjects of the character's speech, his treatment of other people, his vocabulary (minus the bad words!) and the way he uses language, the reactions of the other characters to him.

Underlying the foul language in a story are the fundamental character traits that are important. If we were to examine a story full of foul language, we could ask: Why does this character swear? Does he have a temper? Is she being rude? Is he showing off? Is she uneducated and unable to communicate in a refined way? Did his parents yell at him when he was a child? Is she just trying to fit in? If the motivations for the foul language are discernable in the story, they would be *more* discernable if the distracting language were removed. If no motivations are evident, and the characters swear simply because people swear, the work in question isn't literature—it's litter.

Let's face reality for a moment. Most fiction published doesn't claim to be a true representation of life. It's escapism—melodrama. So why is our society so determined to tolerate, and in many cases even encourage, fictional swearing in the name of realism? My own opinion is that our vulgar, profane culture is trying to rationalize away its sins. We can either fall into that rationalization trap ourselves, or we can stand immovable in the truth that we possess.

Nudity and Sex

I think it would be helpful to begin by explaining what it means to depict nudity or sex. When we're watching a movie, it's usually obvious when we're viewing a scene of this type. Such a scene in a book may not be as obvious, but determining whether it's a depiction or not is just as simple.

Reading, "She took off her clothes," is quite a different experience than reading a scene that describes what is under the clothes. Similarly, a sexual encounter enacted "on stage" or in the presence of the reader produces far different sensations than one that is merely suggested. Whether I watch a depiction of nudity or sex on the screen or read it in a book, an image is being put into my mind.

People in favor of literary depictions of nudity and sex often try to confuse and paralyze us with this argument: "Since violence is bad and the human body is beautiful, why is our society so willing to tolerate depictions of violence in the media while it remains so uncomfortable with depictions of nudity and sex? Shouldn't it be the other way around? When are we going to stop being so prudish?"

Violence *is* bad and the human body *is* beautiful, but that's beside the point. Depictions of nudity/sex and violence are completely separate issues and should be treated as such. The difference between them boils down to the principle of modesty. We are taught that we are the children of God, that we're created in His image, and that our bodies are temples and are, therefore, sacred and should be kept private. If we really believe these things, then *of course* we're uncomfortable with depictions of nudity and sex. Reading such a scene or seeing it on the screen strikes us as being a desecration and, in most cases,

a perversion also, akin to what we would feel if we were to see graffiti smeared all over the temple.

This sensitivity for sacred things is a good trait to have; don't ever let anyone persuade you into feeling otherwise. The prophet Jacob in the Book of Mormon, when reprimanding many of the men of his time, said this:

And also it grieveth me that I must use so much boldness of speech concerning you, before your wives and your children, many of whose feelings are exceedingly tender and chaste and delicate before God, which thing is pleasing unto God;²

The world may label a “tender and chaste and delicate” woman a prude, but we who know better have a superior word—*lady*.

While depictions of violence can certainly be unwholesome, they don't, unless they involve sex, violate the principle of modesty. So no, a person who accepts some violent content and is, at the same time, uncomfortable with depictions of nudity and sex is no more a prude than a person who prefers to use a dressing room to try on clothing at a department store or who avoids peering into his neighbor's undraped window.

Many writers include sex scenes in their books, some graphic and some only describing the emotions of the characters. Sex scenes, graphic or not, always leave me feeling polluted. Writers of such scenes claim they are necessary for “artistic expression,” and literary critics condone them, as long as they flow naturally from the story, developing a character or the plot. After all, their *intent* isn't to arouse lustful feelings in the reader (which, even from a worldly point of view, would make the work erotica or maybe even pornography); the intent is to define the character. “Artistic expression” is another empty argument.

Writers often claim a sex scene is essential to the plot and must, therefore, be included. In my experience writing, a truly essential scene is rare—the point can nearly always be made in some other way. I also know how easy it is for a writer to manipulate a story to make a scene seem as if it is essential, and I'm also painfully aware of how difficult it can be to open one's mind to *all* of the possibilities inherent in a story idea. We

² Jacob 2:7.

writers are so often bound by our own experiences and perspective, and in our writing we use techniques we have often observed, techniques that feel comfortable to us.

Whatever a writer intends to express in a sexual scene can always be expressed better in other ways, whether it be physical attraction between a man and woman that comes about from love, whether it be emotional intimacy, or whether it be lust or manipulation. If you think about it, all of these qualities will manifest themselves in other aspects of the relationship—the bedroom is only a small part of it. Tolstoy understood this truth and used it in his writing, which is why *Anna Karenina* is such a powerful book.

Charlotte Bronte understood it too and was, therefore, able to write the most passionate love story I've ever read: *Jane Eyre*. In fact, I've never read another love story that even comes close. What techniques did Charlotte Bronte use to create such a passionate, yet wholesome story? She made Jane and Rochester come alive! There are only so many ways to write, "They touched, they embraced, they kissed." Unique, passionate scenes grow from the deep feelings of the characters. Jane and Rochester were presented as complex human beings and the reader feels with them. Not only that, but Bronte presented their relationship on all of its levels—spiritual, social, emotional, intellectual, as well physical.

Focusing on these other aspects of the relationship will always result in the more effective expression of lust, manipulation, emotional intimacy, or physical attraction in love, because then the emphasis is on the intellectual, emotional, and spiritual sides of the relationship—too much physical emphasis is distracting, because it appeals to an erotic sense in the reader instead of to an emotional one. Of course, it's much easier to write one intense, titillating scene than it is to portray a relationship on all of these other levels, but the writers who do it are offering their readers poison instead of a feast, and the readers who partake of these poor counterfeits of true passion leave the table sick instead of satisfied.

If, in your reading, you do run across a scene depicting nudity or sex that appears to be an essential element of the plot, then the subject matter and/or theme of the book is probably inappropriate. In the case of a scene where the essential information has something to do with the sex act itself, then the *subject matter* in question violates the

principle of modesty, even if the theme of the story is a true one. At the other extreme, a piece that condones or glorifies sin may require foul elements to make its point.

When deciding whether a book contains depictions of nudity and sex and treats the topic of sexuality in an unwholesome manner, we should ask ourselves these questions:

1. Does the book contain scenes that put images of nudity into my mind?
2. Does it contain scenes that put images of sexual encounters into my mind?
3. Does the material treat the topic of sexuality in a modest, moral fashion or do I come away from it feeling polluted, titillated, or abnormally curious about matters that should remain veiled?

Extreme Violence

Physical emphasis is too distracting in the presentation of violence also. The blood and gore will never have the lasting impact on a reader that honest exploration of all the social, emotional, and psychological effects of violence on society, the victim, the victim's family, the perpetrator's family, and the perpetrator himself.

Think of this: How many of us have known a person who was a victim of a violent crime? Have read a true account? Were we there when this violent event occurred? Probably not. We don't need all the gory details to feel the horror of it. The person's life is a testimony to the cruelty of what he experienced.

Perhaps the best example of this comes from the life of the Savior Himself. In the New Testament, four different writers record the accounts of His suffering in Gethsemane and on the cross, and yet not one of these writers presented the story in an explicit way, and *they didn't need to*. The restrained, tasteful accounts we have give us what we need to know, and I doubt any of us can read those chapters and not grieve. Did we watch from heaven? Somehow, I think these were events most of us couldn't bear to watch. We were all crying two years ago in a visiting teaching convention where we saw it on a video. As necessary as His suffering was, it was also heartbreaking. If our sensitivities are in the right place, it *should* be difficult for us to read or watch such scenes.

The Lord is very concerned about our emotional health and doesn't want us to take into our minds material that is excessively violent, even when that material is a factual rendition of something that really happened. We know this from what we are taught in the Book of Mormon. The prophet Mormon, when recording the events surrounding the destruction of his civilization said this:

And now behold, I, Mormon, do not desire to harrow up the souls of men in casting before them such an awful scene of blood and carnage as was laid before mine eyes; but I . . . write a small abridgment, daring not to give a full account of the things which I have seen, *because of the commandment which I have received*, and also that ye might not have too great sorrow because of the wickedness of this people.³

Even the Old Testament, as frank as it is, doesn't even come close to giving us the blood and gore so often found in modern books and movies. If the scriptures—the truest books on this earth—can describe violent events without explicitness, then certainly fictional stories ought to be able to do so also, even those that claim to be dealing with “true” events.

To determine whether a literary work is too violent, we can ask ourselves questions like these:

1. How many violent acts occur within the scope of the work? Do I come away from it feeling the number is excessive?
2. If a violent act occurs, is compassion shown for the victim, even if the victim is an enemy? Or do the so-called “good guys” take delight in killing?
3. If a violent act occurs, is it shown to have tragic effects on the perpetrator, the victim, those close to the perpetrator and victim, and society in general? Is violence always shown as evil?
4. When a violent act occurs “on stage,” does it show more than just a little blood? Or does it focus on the gory details? Does the description seem gratuitous?

³ Mormon 5:8-9. Italics added.

For a perfect example of a literary work that deals with violent events in a moral, tasteful way, we can look again to Leo Tolstoy and his epic *War and Peace*. Many educated people consider *War and Peace* the greatest work of fiction ever written; it is certainly one of the most complex. Interestingly enough, this novel also contains a scene with men playing cards—a significant scene in the book where one of the main characters gambles away a huge amount of money, a mistake that worsens his family’s financial problems.⁴ Somehow Tolstoy managed to paint a vivid picture of what happened during that card game without using one vulgar word! Had I been familiar with *War and Peace* as a young woman, I wouldn’t have been so disturbed by what my creative writing teacher taught.

God is holy. The human body is holy. Human life is holy. Literature (unless it is scripture) is not holy; it is merely a creation of human beings, a tool of communication. It exists to serve us; we don’t exist to serve it. We can use this powerful tool to celebrate true holiness or to desecrate it. Which path we choose will play a large role in determining what kind of person we’ll become.

When we read books that are truthful and intelligent, we’ll become more knowledgeable. As we choose literature that reveres holy things, we’ll refine our sensibilities and become more spiritually perceptive. While we stand by our commitment to choose fiction that promotes chastity and other virtues, we gain confidence in our own beliefs and become more assertive. As we work to eliminate foul language from our minds and seek out language that edifies, our command of the language increases and we become more articulate.

I’ve just described a woman who is knowledgeable, sensitive, perceptive, confident, assertive, and articulate. Isn’t that the kind of woman we all want to be?

⁴ See Book 4, Chapters 13 and 14.