

Notes on Peculiar Differences between American and English Use of a Pejorative
By Jeffery Greb

We Americans are united in agreement that just about the worst thing to call someone is a cunt, but the English embrace no such anathema. The possibilities implied by this contrast deserve more scrutiny.

First, why might we spurn this word used as an epithet given, by definition, such a word should be disparaging in nature? The male correlatives are used without pause; no one thinks twice before calling a man a prick or a dick. Is the repudiation of cunt related to gender? The argument could be made that in a culture that objectifies women calling a woman by the most intimate of female body parts would be greeted by the strongest of censures; however, this position is weakened by the reality that no such disapprobation exists for words related to breast. In fact, to call someone a boob is considered the mildest of rebukes (and tit is close behind). The ubiquitous ass (while not exclusively female, ass carries different feminine connotations) is even uttered in church. So if related to gender, the relation to function must also carry weight.

In England the epithet cunt carries, at times, benign, even humorous, overtones. (Of course, almost any word can be made more biting by delivery.) Cunt conveys a sense of goofiness (“a silly cunt”) or of familiarity. From whence this cultural divide? The English are not historically known for their feminism (Henry VIII?), although their famous stiff-upper-lip-stoicism may obscure the depths of their misogyny. (To be fair, they have accepted women in positions of power for longer than we, but we are as yet a young country.)

(Aside – London, 400+ years ago: Lady shall I lie in your lap? /No, my lord. /I mean, my head upon your lap? /Ay, my lord. /Do you think I mean country matters? /I think nothing, my lord. /That’s a fair thought to lie between a maid’s legs.)

The likelihood that time alone is the deciding factor seems low. What additional difference might hold relevance? For instance, what role might religion play? The English did eventually rid themselves of those pesky Puritans, transporting them to the colonies now our home. While

Puritans championed some trappings of equality under the guise that none but god knew the elected, they also carried the club of witch at the ready should some poor midwife lose her place. Besides, allowing women to learn to read had no relation to the Puritans' greatest fear: sex and the connected punishment for the first woman's transgression: menstruation. (Remember: The first sin was that of knowledge, of trying to be more like god, a god in whose image *man* was created, a god whose defining attribute is the power of creation, the power of the female.) The Puritans' puritanical rejection of their sexuality coupled with their innate misogyny lead to the American phenomenon of banishing cunt while embracing prick.

So far this rumination has focused on cunt as an epithet, but what about using cunt to describe itself? Being called a cunt is one thing, using cunt as a colloquialism for a body part is different. Many women do not want their cunts called cunts. The reason cannot be the glottal Anglo-Saxon nature of the word, not with cock, dick, and prick around. Yet for the same women pussy is perfectly acceptable even with pussy's negative associations with fear and weakness. What gives? Cunt is no uglier than cock; why the difference? Why do women use cunt when they want to be really dirty?

If the English also avoid cunt in the literal sense, I do not know; I only know cunt's use by D. H. Lawrence was not the main objection; rather, the objection was to writing about sex so openly for public consumption. (So much for being rid of those Puritans!)

Language is strange enough; it is a wonder we can talk at all.