How Words Matter

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The most crucial characteristic of any language are the words that embody it and the lexical baggage that words carry. Authors such as Martha Irvine and Gloria Naylor both express their own opinions on how certain words entered their lives, that in turn, caused them to question the purposes of these words and how they changed throughout the generations. Words such as *Queer* and *Nigger* are some of the most controversially oppressive and evolutionary terms used today. Some may say that they are merely just words, but it is understood that these words carry discriminatory connotations and when used in certain situations can arouse anger in others. The history and profane undertone of these words are what make them such an issue today. Naylor and Irvine both battle to understand why these words are such a big issue and how these words have evolved in society throughout the past years. Both authors share a similar understanding, which is that these words are oppressive and that one way to free the public of their unspeakable grasp is to analyze them and come to an understanding of why they have come to be.

Irvine finds the word *Queer* to be a word misrepresented in the present generation due to the previous meaning of the word and how people perceive it today. She interprets, "Something queer is happening to the word 'queer'" (66). Irvine deduces that the meaning of the word *Queer* has taken on a different role in society. It has shifted its meaning from "unusual" and "odd" to referring to the sexuality of a person. This alteration of the meaning has much to do with how people perceive people of different

sexual preferences. In other words, a "straight" person might not understand the reasons why a person is a homosexual or metrosexual, for example, so they will refer to that person as being a *Queer* because in their minds it is "odd" and "unusual" to be anything other than "straight." It is through this ideology that the word *Queer* has taken on a new meaning. Irvine finds it very handy because it can refer to a number of different sexualities and provides a basis for classifying sexuality among people, rather than suggesting taboo. Irvine confirms that the word has been "sneaking into the mainstream – and taking on a hipster edge as a way to describe any sexual orientation beyond straight" (66). So the question to ask is; does the word *Queer* still have the negative connotations it once had? The answer is yes and no, because *Queer* has still maintained a profane embodiment in society, despite the efforts of some people to make the word more mainstream, much how the word *Nigger* has seemed to become a commonly used term among African-Americans, according to Gloria Naylor. However, one must keep in mind that these are still looked at as slurs in modern society and if used in the wrong context could offend the recipient of the word. Therefore, in the interest of safety within society it would be wise to tread lightly when using these terms.

Naylor finds this very same ideological presence exists with the term *Nigger*. Once used as a term to refer to African slaves, it has become an acceptable term used among people of the African-American race. Naylor being an African-American herself was taught by her parents that the word carries an oppressive meaning and that people who use the term in modern times are "Parents who neglect their children, a drunken couple who fought in public, people who simply refuse to look for jobs, those with excessively dirty mouths or unkempt households" (140). In other words, Naylor's family

teaches her that the word *Nigger* is used by those who are unsuccessful and that it's deemed a burden on society. Naylor comes to her own conclusion, that the word itself might have been a term of oppression and belittlement among African slaves; however, it does not carry the same meaning today. She finds that African-Americans adopted the term "to signify the varied and complex human beings they knew themselves to be" (141). Naylor finds that the use of the word today is a way of combating its past and a way of social interaction between people you know. This same ideological usage is what Irvine has also found in the term *Queer*. In order to liberate the people of its negative connotations, one must face it head on. Naylor describes the presence of any demeaning word by stating, "Words themselves are innocuous; it is the consensus that gives them true power" (140). People decide how a word is perceived and whether or not it is offensive and the best way to deem any word acceptable (among some people) would be to use it in order to show the flexibility of how words change, such as the word *Queer* (as well as the word *Nigger* to some extent).

Whether a word is considered obscene or not, depends heavily on the context it is used in, to whom it refers, and how the person or people will perceive that word. We have learned from Naylor and Irvine that there is no constant with language and that with every era comes a new development of words and their meanings. A word's meaning can evolve leaving the word structure the same with an entirely new connotation and a new word can spring up in the vernacular of the youth or others. In the case of the word *Queer*, it is a word that has been around for much longer than people might think, and the meaning of it was once of harmless connotation. However, in today's society that same word takes on a new definition that could be perceived as offensive or in some recent

cases as a grouping of sexualities. This contrast in meaning has much to do with generational use of the word. That is one example of how words evolve via meaning. In the case of Naylor and the word *Nigger*, we see that a derivational form of this word seems to have a cultural acceptance and is a way of combating the past meaning of the word. It finds its roots in the history of many African-American slaves and any other people that might use this word could offend that African-American community today. Both these words have previous histories, but they differ in how people use them and to what extent each word is relevant within society. One must understand that there is an effort to change the offensive meanings of some words in order to create equality, such as in the use of the word *Queer* (However, this does not take away from the negative connotations of the word today), people must also understand that some words are still deemed offensive like the word *Nigger*. It is the responsibility of society to recognize these differences, which is what Naylor and Irvine try to point out.

Each of these terms can be considered inoffensive once we decide to change their meanings, which is what Irvine and Naylor have come to realize. The prejudices of the words *Queer* and *Nigger* seem to have taken different routes in the vernacular of today's society. At one time we could say these two terms were offensive and left it at that, but it seems that these very same words have changed due to the social use of both words. They do still carry negative connotations, but not as they once did before. It is a debatable issue as to whether or not any of these words will lose their profane background. One thing is certain and that is that both words have become somewhat iconic and more meaningful because of their users. Now the word *Queer* can refer to many different sexual preferences among people, and the word *Nigger* can refer to gender and successfulness.

How much more can these words evolve is an on-going journey. The prejudice baggage these words once had is still present in the hushed voices of society, but a new generation of meanings has come upon us. Irvine as well as Naylor has come to realize this and find peace in confirming the evolution of words.

Works Cited

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