"Explicit Content and LDS Authors"

DISCOVERING EXPLICIT CONTENT

The high moral standard of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints encourages members to elude the evil with which the world is being consumed. How then, do authors, who explore reality using fictitious characters and societies, represent evil in their work? Certain LDS authors prefer not to use explicit content, however, other LDS authors incorporate such things as foul language, sexual scenes, and violence to advance the plot and further character development. Examination into the reasons why these two parties subsist illuminates the affect that religious beliefs have on their work. A consideration for this discussion is the fact that the audience for most LDS authors is made up primarily of LDS readers who share the same religious convictions. Decisions are made about what content is written and what is left out because members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints believe, "If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things" (Smith). This standard specifies how church members flock to the good in life and the inverse; members flee from all things that denote explicit themes or content. Another element is the goal that dedicated authors wish to portray the truth. Truth based on current trends, values held by society, and also truth stemming from the author's thoughts and feelings. Authors reflect that perception and can be offensive or enhance the verisimilitude for the reader. Therefore, evaluation into these features exposes why some authors focus more on their target audience and holding to their religious convictions, while others focus on the verisimilitude of the experience for the reader.

DEFINING EXPLICIT CONTENT

For clarification, the term explicit content refers specifically to foul language. Inclusion of this content in media causes members of the LDS faith to avoid certain music, movies, and books. Therefore, readers must wonder why some LDS writers include explicit content in their work. To illustrate, science fiction writer, Orson Scott Card (see figure one), portrays a futuristic military school filled with the best and brightest children the world has to offer. The children in *Ender's Game* use language that would be common in modern adult military institutions. In a mocking tone a boy exclaims, "Shit talking, shit talking, shit talking!" (Card 75). Contrast with another LDS writer, James Dashner, writer of juvenile fiction such as, *The Maze Runner,* introduces readers to a post apocalyptic world where a group of teenage boys is trapped inside a deadly maze. Dashner, preferring to invent replacement swear words, does not use today's common profanities, rather, his characters express their negativity using words like "shuck face," "shank," or "clunk" (Fogarty). These examples demonstrate the difference in the mindset that exists among authors. Authors have the option to include profanities or to make up alternatives. They can also mention that a sexual act occurred or show the act happen. Explicit content upsets some readers, yet does not bother others. Understanding what explicit content is and how it is used aids readers to understand the reasons behind the choices that authors make.

Figure 1. Photograph of author Orson Scott Card. Author page Amazon.com.

       To further comprehend this topic an idea from Orson Scott Card displays the reasons why explicit content is used. Card presented three ways that evil is included in fiction while speaking to an audience at BYU Provo: 1) evil depicted in fiction, 2) evil advocated in fiction, and 3) evil enacted by fiction. The separation of the ways that evil exists in fiction creates different categories for explicit content to fall into. Is profanity simply being depicted? Is it being said in an appropriate setting by an appropriate character? These are situations in which evil is depicted by fiction. For evil to be advocated in fiction a story must encourage such behavior in our personal lives. The enactment of evil by fiction is when the evil leaves the pages and is emulated through people's behavior in real life. Explicit content can be used in the proper manner. There is a way to depict evil without advocating or enacting that same evil. Card declares that evil is necessary in fiction, "Evil is more entertaining than unrelenting goodness because any

depiction of life without evil is a lie." Card is expressing that the verisimilitude that evil brings to fiction is what makes fiction realistic. Evil exists in our reality and to form a realistic reading experience there needs to be elements of that evil on the page. The author has the duty to skillfully choose how to present that evil to the reader.

EXPANDING PERSONAL VIEWS

Personally, I am fine with explicit content in my novels **if** it serves the purpose of enhancing the verisimilitude of the work. If the author is going to engage in shock value or to be derogative I will shut the novel and return it to the library. I connected deeply with *Ender's Game* because I was surrounded by foul language at the age of 6, the age of Ender, and even more when I was the age of Dashner's characters. Not having teenagers swear did not seem real to me. I agree with Jack Harrell, Ph.D. at BYU-Idaho, who said in an essay, "I believe we need to be more honest about the sins and shortcomings among us." I am aware that sin and evil is part of what goes on in real life. My reading is not for escapism, I read to vicariously experience a part or time of the world. The more real the experience is, the better. A genuine reading experience is always preferred and one way authors develop that through the use of language.

A second reason why I accept explicit content in novels is because reading is a personal experience. The book and I connect on a personal level and no one around knows what is going on in the pages. In the end I am able to censor what the author is telling and ultimately close the book if the content does not sit well with me. When facing explicit content in movies or music however, the experience becomes more social. Blasting music or watching a movie broadcasts that content for everyone in the room to experience. That then takes into account the feelings and thoughts of everyone else

exposed. Could this offend them? Are they uncomfortable? That is the stream of consciousness that occurs when expletives are found in a movie or music being experienced in a group. No longer do I have the power to silently cast the word or scene aside, no, now the whole room is privy to what is taking place. The privacy of the event allows for the reader to skip over the scene or abandon the read. Therefore, while reading a book it is easier to manage the explicit content than when it occurs in a movie or in music.

EXAMINING AUTHORS' OPINIONS

Analyzing LDS authors' thoughts provide understanding as to why they include or avoid explicit content. Each author is unique and personal beliefs about this topic vary. Gerald Lund, LDS author of *The Work and the Glory*, quotes Arthur Henry King, speaking about LDS authors, when talking to *Mormon Artist*, "They need not write especially on Mormon subjects, though the treatment will be inescapably Mormon if they are true Mormons" (qtd. in Du Plessis). What King means is that LDS authors have the freedom to explore many ideas but the way they handle them will be as an LDS member. Thus, authors devoted to their faith keep explicit content separate from their writing. Brandon Sanderson, author of the *Mistborn* series, said in an interview with Nathan Morris, "My values shape who I am and what I determine to be important." As a practicing LDS, Sanderson's beliefs govern the person he is and what he does. His writing is not preachy nor does he present explicit content to his readers. His faith motivates him to portray the good in the world. Similarly, Tracy Hickman, author of *Sojourner Tales* and several *Dragonlance* novels, told Michael Young, "The gospel is my life; I write my life; ergo, my writing is a reflection of my faith." Hickman stands by

his faith as he writes and his writing reflects that faith. Faith is a compelling force, which enters their writing. Orson Scott Card is quoted by Michael Collings, speaking on the influence of religion in his works, "I present Mormon theology most eloquently when I do not speak *about* it at all… Expressions of faith, unconsciously placed within a story, are the most powerful messages an author can give" (Collings 44). Card is reflecting that, though religious topics are not discussed directly, they are powerful and come from the author's testimony. The positive influence that religion has on authors is an indication of how it then affects their decision of what to write. These authors' faith runs into their writing, not by preaching, rather through how they shape their content.

Discussion of the idea to use alternative expletives leads back to James Dashner and overlaps with Brandon Sanderson. The use of alternate expletives is a way to include the same tone without harsh swear words. Dashner gives reasoning behind his choice in an interview with blogger, Mignon Fogarty. Dashner explains, "I didn't want them running around saying, 'Oh, gee darn golly, here comes a Griever!' I also didn't want to limit the schools and libraries that would be carrying the books." Dashner's reasons for his word choice explain why alternatives are so prevalent is his books. The need to have some curse word is due to the situation of his characters. Yet, keeping his target audience in mind required him to come up with different words that still convey the feeling to the reader.

Another LDS author who enlists the use of alternate expletives is Brandon Sanderson. His reasons, "I feel that curses in-world help with the sense of immersion. Some readers also preferred it because of their dislike of our-world cursing." Sanderson feels that readers immerse more into the reading experience when the language of the

fictitious world is consistent. Therefore, not only does Sanderson avoid unwanted

expletives, he is also able to craft a better reading experience and keeps his readers

involved in the fictitious world. Had he not used alternate expletives the reader may be

less immersed when an expletive is used. Both authors have created alternate expletives

in attempt to satisfy their target audience, allowing the dialogue to have a serious tone yet

allow for young readers to still enjoy. Although the authors do not list religious reasons

for creating alternatives, as shown before, religion influences them. Therefore, the use of

alternate expletives is a way to produce negative dialogue and still appeal to a target

audience

CONSIDERING OPPOSING VIEWS

Regarding what authors have stated about their beliefs, the opposition states that

not including expletives weakens the verisimilitude of a work. Reality emulated through

fiction includes profanity in dialogue. Hard to find is a sailor who does not have a filthy

mouth. If one is written speaking like a saint, realism is destroyed. One blogger for

Millenial Star, Jettboy, writes about the quality of works that portray a false reality,

"There is nothing scandalous or sensationalistic in the writing. It's clean, dependable, and

predictable. Any serious reader automatically finds it stifling and boring. The protagonist

doesn't have any real conflict to overcome." To engage a reader, a work must represent a

reality that is true. Clean or innocent writing does not keep the reader involved. This is a

negative effect of writing without verisimilitude. Furthermore, an article published

in *New York Times* discusses why Mormon authors tend to write for young adults. Mark

Oppenheimer states, "Mormons can thus save their morals and their book sales too."

Oppenheimer points out that by avoiding explicit content LDS authors reach their target

audience, which is mainly LDS. Thus, opposition addresses the fact that writing without explicit content detracts from the realistic experiences readers demand from authors. Excluding that content also satisfies the audience that appreciates the clean works that some LDS authors produce.

Furthermore, the opposition states that an author needs to include truth in the work. Being true to reality and to one's self are essential to provide a realistic experience. Religion is not the sum of a person; more defines a person than their belief in a higher being or an afterlife. John Updike, poet and author, said, "Since [the author's] words enter into another's brain in silence and intimacy, [the author] should be as honest and explicit as we are with ourselves" (Lerner). This exemplifies how being true to one's self through writing is essential. If thoughts reflect themselves in writing, pages echo what flows through the mind. That sense of realism connects a reader to the author as the author's tone and syntax are absorbed. Therefore, if an author lives devoted to the gospel the thoughts of that author would be pure and thus reflected in writing. On the other hand, the work of an author who is not devout would include more explicit content. Orson Scott Card speaks on the matter, "I am a two-headed animal…I couldn't escape the Latter-day Saint view of good and evil if I tried… I have found it impossible to write well without dealing directly with evil, without portraying it in my work." Card has lost jobs because he took a stand for his beliefs yet his fiction contains explicit content; truly a "two-headed animal." He lives his beliefs but is not ignorant to the fact that evil exists in the world and is therefore reflected in his work. Authors walk a fine line between what is real and what their beliefs compel them to feel. An author who wants to be true to them self allows thoughts to flow organically to the page, whether influenced by religion or not.

Authors acknowledge that religion has its place, yet the truth of reality must be honored.

EXAMINING IMPACT ON READERS

Readers of fiction drink in the words of authors for two purposes, to escape reality or to perpetuate a realistic experience. Should readers have to avoid the explicit content that is included in books? Perhaps a reader picks up a book with the goal to escape the dark and dank world that we live in only to find, splattered in the pages, vulgarity and sexual situations. That reader can as easily close the book as turn off a song with similar things represented. The reader always has a right to close the book and put it away. However, a reader who prefers to continue to experience reality, in a different time or place, appreciates the verisimilitude that explicit content adds because our world is explicit and vile at times. While interviewing Jack Harrell, he offered his thoughts on the realistic, "I want to have a vicarious experience." This vicariousness comes from the realism that authors write into their books. Harrell gave an example of realism considering the concept of explicit content. He expressed, that to be realistic the right person has to say the right word and at times that word is explicit. A construction worker who bangs his thumb will likely say something vulgar. That makes the reading experience realistic. This sometimes causes confusion in readers because of a misinterpretation as to why that word is chosen. Card clarifies, "They do not know how to tell the difference between an evil book and a good book that depicts evil." Card illustrates that readers, at times, are unsure of what is going on in novels. Readers' response to evil can cause authors to cut all evil from future novels. This is the problem that occurs when writing does not engage the reader in a true experience. It is not real, mature readers disengage, parents lap up these clean books for their children and the

cycle continues. Realism is an essential part of fiction that the correct use of language enhances. The vicarious experience that readers have is heightened when authors include these factors with skill and restraint.

Another impact explicit content has on readers is when explicit content is not used to enhance reality but rather as a shock to the reader. Reality, though often mundane, can still be startling at times. Authors misuse explicit content when hoping to shock the reader with what is going on. If a book is littered with profanities and sexual content a reader may be turned away if there is no reason for the excessive amount of explicit content. The excessiveness could be the author hoping to catch the reader off guard and use that as a story telling device to shock readers. Harrell commented on this point as well, stating, "Every story needs a moral, and if that moral is enhanced through using expletives in a work, that's fine. But sometimes people use them too much and it comes across as derogative and offensive." The excessive use of expletives takes away value from the story if not used to develop it. Harrell added, "Swears don't make something art, they also don't make something not art." There is a time and place for profanities in literature. A careful author sculpts and crafts each line down to the choice of individual words. If the right word for a scene is a profanity then an author committed to telling the truth will use a swear. That is the decision that the author makes and one that religious beliefs influence.

CLOSING THE BOOK

Religious beliefs cause individuals to live standards of behavior. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints helps its member avoid the negative influence that much of the media has. As writers in the LDS faith grow more popular, it raises the question if explicit content, foul language and sexual situations, finds its way into their work. Personally, explicit content is acceptable when adding to the verisimilitude of the piece. Also, it is easy to close a book because of the nature of the personal experience that occurs while reading, though explicit content in music and movies is tricky because it can bother a group of people who experience it simultaneously. Many LDS authors stand firmly behind their beliefs and do not include explicit content in their work. If an expletive could be used, many authors invent a set of alternative expletives to not offend their target audience.

The decision between creating a realistic experience for readers and perpetuating their faith is a decision LDS authors come to. Authors who feel it is their duty to tell the truth need to realize that at times the best word suited for a situation is profane, that is the world we live in. Considering the reader's point of view, they read to escape reality or to experience an aspect of reality they cannot. For those desiring escapism, alternative expletives are the go-to option. Yet, those readers desiring a perpetuated realistic experience understand that explicit content is part of that experience. Authors need to be careful that the use of explicit content does not go too far to offend or disengage a reader. If explicit content is not used with restraint and class, the experience becomes negative and offensive. Thus, the use of explicit content does have merit in literature. It enhances a

realistic reading experience for those who seek it. Some LDS authors choose not to include it because their beliefs compel them not to, while others feel that explicit content is a part of life that fiction must reflect. Therefore, the reader is the final judge who closes the book if explicit content is too much or keeps reading if the reading experience is enhanced through skillful inclusion.

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