

Круглый стол
«ЛИНГВИСТИЧЕСКИЕ, ДИДАКТИЧЕСКИЕ
И КУЛЬТУРОЛОГИЧЕСКИЕ АСПЕКТЫ ДИСЦИПЛИН
ПРОФЕССИОНАЛЬНО-ОРИЕНТИРОВАННОГО МОДУЛЯ»

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THE USE AND FUNCTION OF PROVERBIAL LANGUAGE
IN LITERATURE

Proverbs are found in almost all cultures. They capture the heart of human experience and suggest a lot about people's cultural values. Proverbs are one of the oldest literary forms and over time some have lost their meaning, some have been misused, some have migrated to other countries, some have been deliberately transformed. Is the proverb still respected nowadays in our technological society or is it out of season? Although the use of proverbial language was at its height in the distant past, a number of contemporary language scholars have investigated proverbial usage of authors in all kinds of literature such as poems, prose fiction, drama, which has revived interest in proverbial wisdom as a reflection of culture. Pondering the use of proverbs in short fiction raises the question of where exactly they are encountered and what purpose they serve.

Proverbs can sometimes be found in the titles of fictional works, and *Human Is* by Philip Dick is a good example of that. The story has a futuristic setting and gives the reader some glimpses of what Terran society is like. The protagonist Jill Herrick has a cruel husband who is only interested in his research. Despite being a human being, Lester is really inhuman. He is inconsiderate, cruel and mean. One day he goes to Rexor IV and comes back a different man. The Rexorian Lester is kind, romantic and polite. In other words, he is human by our standards. It turns out that he is not Lester but a Rexorian infiltrator. Jill feels quite happy with the new version of her husband, but the authorities suspect that Lester is not Lester, so she has to appear in court to testify. In this crucial scene Jill feigns ignorance and the couple leave the courtroom hand in hand. The title *Human Is (as human does)* echoes the proverb *Handsome is as handsome does*. It means that what you do is more important than what you look like. The title is not a complete version of the proverb; it is a mere allusion, which is common as titles in literature do not usually take the form of a complete sentence. The author Philip Dick wrote about the story later: "To me, this story states my early conclusions as to what is human. It is not what you look like, or what planet you were born on. It's how kind you are. The quality of kindness, to me, distinguishes us from rocks and sticks and metal, and will forever, whatever shape we take, wherever we go, whatever we become." The literary work is entitled proverbially to reinforce this idea.

Proverbial wisdom can also be incorporated into characters' speech. There is a proverb used by one of the characters in David Leavitt's *Gravity*. It is a moving

story which was written in an epoch of AIDS. Its two main characters include a young man called Theo who knows he is dying and his mother Sylvia who takes care of him. Theo's state is deteriorating, and it takes its toll on his mood. Sylvia encourages Theo to go out with her as if to assure him that he is still alive. Like the force of gravity mentioned in the title she pulls him back to life. In one of the scenes, Sylvia says: *You live and learn*. Theo responds to it by saying: *You live*. Judging by the response, he seems to be full of bitterness and resentment. From this exchange, not only do we see that proverbs are not outdated and can still be used naturally in an ordinary conversation, which fiction often tries to copy, but they also perform a special function in the literary work – addressing the theme of life and death and making the reader painfully aware of the character's state of mind.

Graham Greene's story *I Spy*, however, seems to overshadow the previous one as its characters use four proverbs, though the story is barely two pages long. The story is set in England, in wartime. It has some autobiographical touches as it reflects the writer's distant relationship with his father and the fact that he was constantly bullied at school because his father was the Headmaster. *I Spy* is an example of a story of initiation and shows how its protagonist Charlie comes to the realization that he is very much like his father. According to the story, one of the things they have in common is the use of proverbs to fortify themselves. The son gives himself some courage by muttering that he *may as well be hung for a sheep*, which is part of the proverb *As well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb*. Likewise, the boy's father uses several proverbs as a form of encouragement. They include incomplete versions of the two proverbs *A stitch in time saves nine* and *While there is life there is hope*. Charlie's father also says in the story: *Never do today what you can put off till tomorrow*. It can be classified as an anti-proverb or a deliberate proverb transformation. The use of proverbial language in this case highlights the likenesses between the two characters, which contributes to characterization.

Finally, we can encounter some pearls of wisdom at the very end of literary works. One of James Thurber's brilliantly satirical fables *The Shrike and the Chipmunks* is a good illustration of this. In the story the female chipmunk urges her husband to be a hardworking early riser only to be later rewarded with death. Thurber converts *Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise* into *Early to rise and early to bed makes a man healthy and wealthy and dead*. Thurber's moral tag takes the format of an anti-proverb. The author relies on the reader's being familiar with the original version in order to come up with a mocking comment. By using the archetypal images of the nagging wife and the hapless husband Thurber subverts the idea that being hardworking and organized pays off.

It seems that proverbial language has been put to good use by writers – it can highlight the message, increase credibility, reinforce characterization or help them establish a certain tone. Can teachers leverage it to bolster students' knowledge? It makes sense to teach students at least the most common proverbs, without overloading them. Students can be asked about their equivalents in their mother

tongue or some other languages they speak. As it was mentioned above, proverbs play an important role in cultural literacy; hence, teaching proverbs will increase students' cultural sensitivity. It stands to reason that it is important to deal with proverbial language in the context which it crops up in. It is also a good idea to use proverbs naturally in class. Even if your students become none the wiser for it and may not ever use the proverbs taught, they may one day need to understand them.