African Proverbs

Literary Focus

Proverb

A **proverb** is a concise saying that expresses a common human truth or experience. Proverbs are usually intended to convey accumulated cultural wisdom and experience, advising people about common human failings, such as greed, stupidity, procrastination, and gullibility. Proverbs are often witty and full of wordplay, incorporating such literary elements as **metaphor** ("An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure"), **alliteration** ("He who laughs last laughs best"), **parallelism** ("Where there's a will, there's a way"), and **rhyme** ("When the cat's away, the mice will play").

Background

In cultures that value oral literature, proverbs function as the distilled essence of a people's values and knowledge. For many African cultures, proverbs are far more than quaint old sayings; they are tools of argument and debate. Proverbs are used to settle legal disputes, resolve ethical problems, and teach children the philosophy of their people. They represent a poetic form that uses few words to achieve great depth of meaning. Because proverbs often contain puns, rhymes, and clever allusions, they also provide sheer entertainment and enjoyment.

Speakers who know and use proverbs have power within the community; their eloquence makes others want to listen to them, and their ability to apply the proverbs to appropriate circumstances demonstrates an understanding of social and political realities. More than one modern African leader has turned to the wisdom of proverbs in order to affirm decisions and to gain popular support and respect.

For each of the following proverbs, decide the meaning or message the saying is meant to convey. Then note the specific literary elements the proverb incorporates.

Rain beats a leopard's skin, but it does not wash out the spots.

Hunger is felt by a slave and hunger is felt by a king.

What is bad luck for one man is good luck for another.

He who asks questions, cannot avoid the answers.

Rain does not fall on one roof alone.

What is said over the dead lion's body, could not be said to him alive.

Great events may stem from words of no importance.

No matter how long the night, the day is sure to come.

—Ashanti

-Cameroon

You cannot build a house for last year's summer.

The fool is thirsty in the midst of water.

What one hopes for is always better than what one has.

One camel does not make fun of the other camel's hump.

When a needle falls into a deep well, many people will look into the well, but few will be ready to go down after it.

If you climb up a tree, you must climb down the same tree.

Quarrels end, but words once spoken never die.

He who is being carried does not realize how far the town is.

When the mouse laughs at the cat, there is a hole nearby.

When you know who his friend is, you know who he is.

Even an ant may harm an elephant.

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-Ethiopia

-Nigeria

—Zululand

—Sierra Leone

-Ethiopia (the Oromo)

—Senegal