

A proverb is a traditional saying which offers advice or presents a moral in a short and concise manner.

Proverbs fall readily into three main categories. Those of the first type take the form of abstract statements expressing general truths, such as *Absence makes the heart grow fonder* and *Time is money*. Proverbs of the second type, which include many of the more colourful examples, use specific observations from everyday experience to make a point which is general; for instance, *You can take a horse to the water, but you can't make him drink* and *Don't put all your eggs in one basket*. The third type of proverb comprises sayings from particular areas of traditional wisdom and folklore. In this category are found, for example, the health proverbs *After dinner rest a while, after supper walk a mile* and *Feed a cold and starve a fever*. These are frequently classical maxims rendered into the vernacular. In addition, there are traditional country proverbs which relate to farming, the seasons, and the weather, such as *April showers bring forth May flowers* and *When the wind is in the east, it's neither good for man nor beast*.

It is sometimes said that the proverb is going out of fashion, or that it has become worn out. Such views overlook the fact that while the role of the proverb in English literature has changed, its popularity has remained constant. In medieval times, and even as late as the seventeenth century, proverbs often had the status of universal truths and were used to confirm or refute an argument.

25 Lengthy lists of proverbs were compiled to assist the scholar in
debate; and many sayings from Latin, Greek, and the continental
languages were drafted into English for this purpose. By the
eighteenth century, however, the popularity of the proverb had
declined in the work of educated writers, who began to ridicule it
30 as a vehicle for dull, conventional wisdom.

It is easy to see how proverbs came into disrepute. Seemingly
contradictory proverbs can be paired — *Too many cooks spoil the
broth* with *Many hands make light work*; *Absence makes the heart
grow fonder* with its opposite *Out of sight, out of mind*. Proverbs
35 could thus become an easy object for satire in learned circles, and
are still sometimes frowned upon by the polished stylist. The
proverb has nonetheless retained its popularity as a homely
commentary on life and as a reminder that the wisdom of our
ancestors may still be useful to us today. This shift is reflected in
40 the quotations which accompany the entries in the dictionary:
recent quotations are often taken from the works of minor writers,
or from newspapers and magazines, while earlier quotations are
more frequently from the works of major writers. It is a reflection
of the proverb's vitality that new ones are continually being
45 created as older ones fall into disuse. Surprisingly, neither *A
change is as good as a rest* nor *A trouble shared is a trouble halved*
are recorded before the twentieth century; the popular saying *A
watched pot never boils* first occurs as late as 1848. The computer
world has recently given us a potential classic, *Garbage in,
50 garbage out*, and economics has supplied us with *There's no such*

thing as a free lunch. Proverbs continue — as the early collectors never tired of stating — to provide the sauce to relish the meat of ordinary speech.