

Analysis of Proverbs in Short Stories –
A Brief Study of *Proverb Stories of Many Lands* by Lucile Berk

Dr. Dipak P. Ganmote

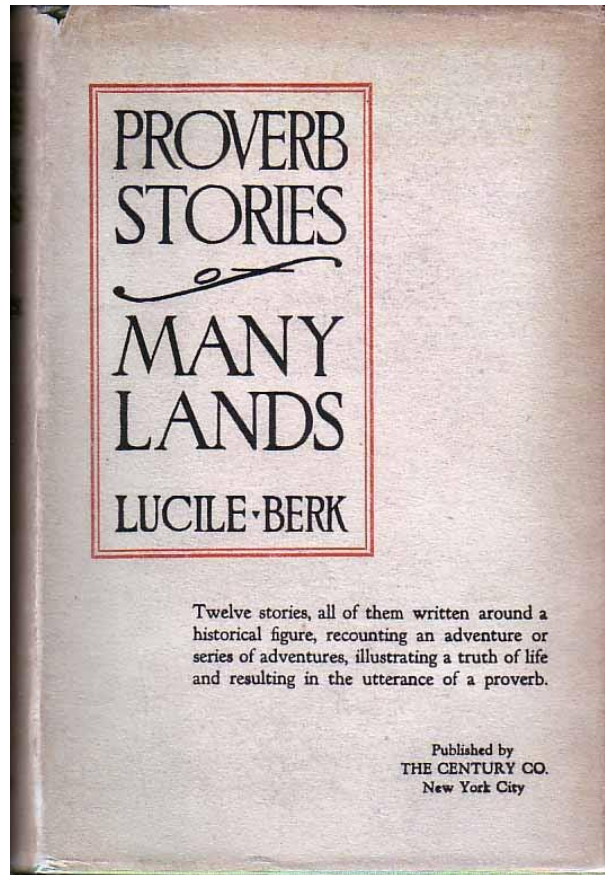
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Courtesy: <https://www.yesterdaysgallery.com/pages/books/18725/lucile-berk/proverb-stories-of-many-lands>

Abstract

The present paper is dedicated to analyzing proverbs in the select short stories. *Proverb Stories of Many Lands* by **Lucile Berk** was selected for this purpose. Analytical method has been

followed. The analytical model includes specific steps, identifying the proverb stated in short stories and describing the context in which the proverbs are used. Thus, the contextualization of proverbs is pointed out by commenting on them. The next step comments on the core elements of the proverb. Whether the elements in the proverbs relate to mythological, cultural, traditional, environmental, or religious aspects is stated. The final step states proverbs' implications through short stories. The advice stated through the stories and proverbs is interpreted at the end of the explanation.

Keywords: Short Stories, Analysis of Proverbs, *Proverb Stories of Many Lands*, Lucile Berk

1.

“He who has a brave heart is prepared for life’s struggles” (Berk 16).

“The hour of danger is the hour of courage” (Berk 17).

The first story, entitled *The Warrior of the Green Twig*, is the story of a prince Amédée of Count Amio of Savoy. His ancestors had a great lineage of bravery in the family. But his cousins taunt him in a cowardly manner, and they nicknamed him “Warrior of the Green Twig” (Berk 06). One day Count Amio fell ill, and every medicine was tried, but nothing improved his condition. It was told that the Count should go on pilgrimage to Rome and then only his condition will improve. The family made arrangements for his voyage. The Count went on his journey, but Amédée felt uneasy in his father’s absence. He daily visited the tallest tower of the castle to look at the way to Rome in the hope of his father’s return, but to his surprise, he saw the enemy’s soldiers. He was afraid, but the old priest reminded him of his great ancestry, and he felt a strange strength within him. He protected his land until his father returned midway through his journey. His father, at this moment, used the above proverbs while describing his courage and bravery. The first proverb is made of “He who has a brave heart”, and “is prepared for life’s struggles”. The second proverb is made of “The hour of danger”, and “is the hour of courage”.

The above proverbs teach the human value of courage and bravery. Even the weakest person is capable of showing bravery in a difficult time. A few words of encouragement are sufficient to bring out the courage in the person. Prince Amédée was at first afraid of the approaching enemy army. Still, he was reminded of his ancestors’ bravery, and his brave heart became ready to face the situation. The first proverb teaches us the ethical message that a person with a brave heart can face the most adverse conditions. The second proverb imparts the message

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that the only time to show courage is the time of difficult situations. The story initially exemplifies the character of Amédée as terrified, anxious, and confused. Still, the moment he is reminded of the great gallantry of his ancestors, he becomes confident to face the situation. Thus, the story teaches the moral that one should not lose one's heart in hostile conditions.

2.

“Patience and a Mulberry leaf will make a silk gown” (Berk 34).

The second story, *The Princess and the Worm*, tells the story of Leï-tsu, whom the Chinese revered as superhuman. One of her stories considers her as human as everyone else. She was the daughter of Yu-ch'öng-ki, a district in Kan-su. For a long time, he was childless, and when a daughter was born, there was a wave of happiness in the district of Ch'öng-ki. She was treated like a princess of a nobleman. She enjoyed her life in the open fields but disliked the rainy and winter seasons as she had to lock herself in the house. One day when the frost was about to come, she brought something very carefully into her home. Due to snow, a little bird could not fly, so she kept it near the fireplace. Her servant Shan-ir told her not to bring an unknown bird into the house. Leï-tsu argued with her and told her that she would build a nest for the bird in the house. Thus, every winter, she befriended one or the other animal. One day she brought in a worm. Her servant Shan-ir told her that worms sometimes bite people, so she should not keep them in the house. Leï-tsu observed that the worm ate only the mulberry leaves. Later the worm stopped eating and started covering itself with silk. After the worm completely vanished under the fine silk, Leï-tsu started unwinding the silk to look at it. She wound the silk on a piece of wood. When she unwound the cocoon completely, she found the worm dead. She cried loudly.

Meanwhile, Hién-yüan, a young prince, advised the king to take measures to save the kingdom from enemies. He asked the king for his permission for support. When the king agreed to support him, Leï-tsu also asked if she could come. The prince told her to stay home and help him fight. She asked him how she could help him in the fight. He told her to think hard, and she would come to know. She thought hard, and an idea struck her. She collected the worms and fed them the mulberry leaves. The worms produced the silk, and Leï-tsu made a rope out of the silk. She ordered one of the men to give it to the prince. The prince used the rope to hang the enemy and save his country. Later the prince married Leï-tsu and became the emperor of the kingdom. She did not spend her life idle, but she invented the weaving machine from which she made a silk

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gown for herself. Thus, she became the first person in the kingdom to wear a silk gown with her work. The proverb is made of “Patience and a Mulberry leaf”, and “will make a silk gown”.

The proverb indicates that Lei-tsu’s patience and the mulberry leaves made her a silk gown. She liked the worm so much that it helped her make a rope that helped the prince kill the kingdom’s enemy. As the worm ate mulberry leaves to produce silk, Lei-tsu’s practice of weaving silk resulted in making silk gowns from the finest of silk. Thus, the proverb suggests that the work of patience always leads to discovering the finest thing.

3.

“We cannot sew buttons on their mouths” (Berk 48).

The following story, *The Cake Vendor of Moscow*, recounts the life of a boy called Alexander who worked as a cake vendor. He aspired to be rich, as always desired by every poor person. On a snowy day, he was selling his cakes outside a church when he met a person looking for his servant. He asked Alexander if he had seen his servant standing outside the church, but Alexander told him that he did not see anyone there. Alexander helped the man find the servant, but the servant was not there. The person was new in the vicinity, so he asked Alexander to accompany him to his house and he would pay him some money. Alexander agreed and went along with the person. The person’s name was Monsieur Lefort, and he was a friend of Prince Peter. Monsieur Lefort felt the honesty in Alexander and offered him a job at his palace. Alexander started working for Monsieur Lefort honestly, making the other servants uneasy as Alexander got closer to him. One of the servants, Yuri, harassed him with blows and bitter words. He said something true about his father. This was seen by Monsieur Lefort. He dismissed Yuri from his duties and asked Alexander why he did not report this. Upon this, Alexander used the above proverb. The proverb is made of “we cannot sew buttons”, and “on their mouths”.

The proverb expresses the inability of a person to keep others quiet. When Alexander was working with Monsieur Lefort, he was helped in learning. This made Yuri: a head serving-man, unhappy. Yuri knew that Alexander’s father was a tinker and belonged to a needy family, so he tormented Alexander physically and mentally. The patience endured by Alexander is the human quality reflected in the proverb that expresses that we cannot keep others quiet. It is better to let them say whatever they want and continue our duty. When Monsieur Lefort witnessed this harassment, he asked Alexander why he did not complain. He told him that he could not stop them

from saying something about him. The proverb in the story teaches us that we cannot make people quiet as they will talk about us either on our face or behind our back. It is better to continue our work and pay no attention to what others say. In this way, the proverb hints at a human quality of neglecting the bad things as it is always said that ignorance is bliss.

4.

“Toil does not come to help the idle” (Berk 71).

The story of *Cornelia of the Seven Hills* uses the above proverb at the end. The story begins with the celebration of the victory of Publius Cornelius Scipio. He returned after sixteen years of war. His children were looking at their father for the first time. The queen’s child asked her why she trembled. She told him that her husband had returned from the long war and wished he would not leave them again. The king had brought the riches from Carthage along with the war prisoners. All the people mocked the procession. At the parade’s end, a black woman was dragging her child. Everyone was mocking them, but only one girl among the crowd felt pity for them. It was Cornelia who felt sympathy for the slave child. The king came to his palace and offered the gifts he brought for his family. He wanted to see what his children chose for themselves. The king’s son asked his permission to accompany him in the next war, and his daughter asked for his permission to have a servant. The king asked her why she needed a servant. Cornelia told her father that she wanted a companion to play with and learn together. Thus, she asked for the girl she saw in the procession. Her mother also asked for a housemaid. She asked for the mother of the girl. Thus, the woman and her girl became the servants of the king’s family. The slave girl was named Raffa, who learned from her master, the king’s daughter. Cornelia had another responsibility on her shoulder as her mother died while delivering her third child. She had to look after her little sister. While learning under the philosopher Ennius, Cornelia met a handsome Roman captain Tiberius, and they fell in love. However, Cornelia’s father and Tiberius were enemies, so there was hardly any chance of their marriage.

In time, Cornelia’s father became weak, and his enemies plotted against him and made Tiberius the king. Cornelia told Tiberius to persuade people to release her father, and he succeeded. Her father died, and with the help of other relatives, she married Tiberius. She bore three children whom she taught by herself. Unfortunately, her husband also died, and many marriage proposals arrived, but she remained loyal to her husband and raised her children. She always quoted her

children the above proverb. The proverb is made of “Toil does not come”, and “to help the idle”. The proverb indicates that if Cornelia had been idle, she might not have reached where she was. People built her monument when she died, and it showed that she had received great admiration from the people for her work. Thus, the proverb suggests that hardworking people receive great honour, and idle people achieve nothing.

5.

“Keep company with good men and you will increase their number”

(Berk 111).

The story *The Voice of Pietro in the Crowd* narrates the story of a boy called Simone. He lived with his grandfather in the city of Genoa in Italy and did not go out of his mansion for many days. He was put under Padre Luigi for education to become a good man. After his tenth birthday, he was allowed to go out in the city. His grandfather accompanied him. He roamed around and saw Pietro with the other two boys in the street playing the game of warfare. Pietro was the dirtiest and messiest among the three. One day Genoa was attacked by the enemy, but people protected their land. His grandfather advised Simone to be in the company of good men. The days pass by, and Simone becomes an adult. He wanted to be a merchant, though no one in his family had been into this business. There was political unrest in Genoa as the foreign powers occupied it, and soon control was regained by the people. To end the political turmoil in Genoa, people revolted against the electors, and Pietro led them to choose Simone, their leader. People wanted Simone to be their leader, and he became the Duke of Genoa. He chose his ministers very carefully, as advised by his grandfather in the form of the above proverb. The proverb is made of “keep company with good men”, and “you will increase their number”.

Simone led Genoa as the Duke for several years, but treacherous people killed him. The advice given by Simone’s grandfather proves to be helpful for him as the people of Genoa remembered him six hundred years after his death. Simone was not allowed to go outside his grandfather’s mansion until he turned ten. Even he was accompanied by his grandfather when he roamed around Genoa. He was under the tutelage of Padre Luigi to become a good citizen. Another character Pietro initially appeared to be mean, but later, he raised his voice for Genoa’s betterment. He made the citizens of Genoa elect Simone as their Duke. Simone also remembered the advice given by his grandfather to be in the company of good people and increase their number. The story

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informs an essential human value of being in the company of good people. Simone stayed in the company of his grandfather and Padre Luigi and became a good person. As a result, he was revered by the people of Genoa. Similarly, Pietro became a good person who made others choose Simone to be their Duke who ruled Genoa better. Thus, the story teaches the importance of the company of good people.

6.

“But the fruit that can fall without shaking Indeed is too mellow for me”

(Berk 128).

The story *Lady Mary Shakes the Tree* is about a girl named Lady Mary. Her father, the Earl of Kingston, was careless about his children after the death of Lady Mary’s mother. Lady Mary’s father had a huge library in the house. She was fond of books. After some days, she was sent to her maternal grandmother Mrs. Elizabeth Pierrepont who was also rich and fond of reading. When Lady Mary felt bored, she would pick up a book from the shelf and start reading. Whenever she found a letter difficult, she would ask her grandmother. She learned to read by herself. Bishop Burnet visited Mrs. Elizabeth Pierrepont and asked Lady Mary to say something. At that point, Mrs. Elizabeth Pierrepont told him that she was not taught, but to their surprise, Lady Mary recited some lines of the poem from the book she read. At the age of eight, Lady Mary returned to her father. Her father was involved in a political group with many noble members. She accompanied her father to the Kit-Cat Club. Lady Mary won everyone’s heart with her wisdom, but one person was yet to be satisfied. Mr. Addison later confronted that she had already won his heart, but he did not praise someone easily. This moment afterward, Lady Mary became famous in the club. She learned Latin and started composing literary works. In one of her poems called *The Answer*, she wrote the above proverb. The proverb is made of “but the fruit that can fall without shaking”, and “indeed is too mellow for me”.

The proverb indicates that something which is easily achieved does not have any value. In the story, Lady Mary acquired intelligence through her whole-hearted efforts to learn to read from her early childhood to learn Latin in adulthood. She also became a poet and a story writer. After doing all these things, she was admired by the people in the club as intelligent. She even fell in love with her friend’s brother Mr. Wortley Montagu. Mr. Wortley Montagu also fell in love with Lady Mary due to her intelligence. Yet, their union did not happen quickly as Lady Mary’s father

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refused his proposal. Therefore, they eloped and got married. This indicates that without much effort, one cannot enjoy the result. The proverb at large gives us the ethical message that something easily achieved is not worthy. One has to toil hard to enjoy the result. Thus, the story helps us understand the importance of hard work in human life.

7.

“A fable is a bridge which leads to truth” (Berk 150).

The story *The Black Camel* makes use of the above proverb. It tells the story of a caravan travelling through the desert. Ten people were travelling in the caravan. One was the caravan leader called Keerah, another two were his relatives, and the rest were the enslaved people that Keerah had bought. Among these seven people, five were men, and two were women. When the caravan stopped at the outskirts of the city to which they were travelling, an enslaved person named Anka's wife gave birth to a boy who was black, and at the same time, a camel gave birth to a black camel. Keerah saw it and named the boy a black camel. Thus, they were taken to the town and employed in the service of the Sheik Rejmaá. When the boy turned twelve, he was assigned his first duty of tending a herd of camels. Everyone forgot his real name Lokman and everyone called him a black camel. As Lokman watched his herd, he developed his own little stories about animals.

One day Keerah had to go on a business tour as told by the Sheik, so he ordered his slave to get some camels from Lokman. When the enslaved person reached the spot where Lokman was tending his camels, he heard Lokman telling a story similar to a real-life incident that Keerah's brother performed. Keerah's brother came to him many times and stole his goats. He asked Lokman how he knew about the story. He told him that he had devised the story. One day Keerah's brother came to visit him. The enslaved person told Keerah that Lokman's stories would entertain his brother, so he asked Lokman to tell a story. Lokman told some stories in the feast related to Keerah's brother directly, and Lokman told the meaning of the stories in the face of Keerah's brother. The next day, Keerah's brother went away, taking with him nothing. Later, Keerah became old, and Lokman became the master of the servants. He served the Sheik and his business. He was sent on a long journey with goods to sell to Jerusalem one day. One of the servants of king David heard Lokman telling a story. King David summoned Lokman to listen to his stories. He told David a couple of stories by which the king became happy. King David asked him a question as to why all of his stories are in the form of fables. Lokman answered his question by quoting the above

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proverb. The proverb is made of “a fable is a bridge”, and “which leads to truth”. The proverb indicates that the stories told by Lokman relate to real-life incidents and the listeners agree with it. Therefore, it is true that a fable is a way that leads to truth in general.

8.

“Give your son luck and throw him into the sea” (Berk 161/174).

The story of *The Godchild of the Sea* exemplifies the above proverb. The story is about Spanish adventurers. It tells the adventures of Vicente along with Columbus. Before the birth of Vicente, his mother, Señora Maria, had two sons, and her husband was a fearless sailor. He returned from his voyage taken to far lands, and when he set himself again on another voyage, he took with him his two sons. Señora Maria became hopeless when the ships belonging to her husband did not return after seven weeks. In addition, she gave birth to her third child. She called her sister-in-law Señora Joanna to accompany her. Señora Joanna consoled her that her brother would return. Señora Maria’s husband returned, but he lost his other ships in the storm. He felt humiliated when he came home only with two ships after losing his wealth. In addition, when he came to know that he has a third child at home, he repented that the child should have been a girl as he has only two ships to be given to his first two children. His sister heard him saying it and told him that he is a Pinzón, the descendent of the great sailors, and he would make a great sailor without his father’s help. She quoted the above proverb in her firm belief that the child has a sailor’s blood in his veins. The proverb is made of “give your son luck”, and “throw him into the sea”. If his father gives him his luck and throws him into the sea, he will become a great sailor. The proverb indicates that the child would become a great sailor. The story goes further, and Vicente proves himself a great sailor than his elder brothers. He was taken by his aunt and educated about geography. Thus, he became a learned person. When he returned home, his father gave him his ship, which he took along with the fleet of Columbus and successfully returned. Thus, he turned out to be the best sailor. The proverb suggests that a person’s inborn qualities take him to the point he deserves.

9.

“The Lotus, wherever it grows, is beautiful and pure” (Berk 182/194).

The proverb finds its place in the story *The Lotus Flower of the Jumna*. The story is about a basket floating in the water of the river Jumna. Kites and the vultures had their keen eyes on the

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basket, and lions were standing on the banks of the river. The lion could not dare to swim and pounce on the basket out of his fear of water. The kites and the vultures did not swoop on it as they never touched a living prey. The basket floated further with the fast current of the river. The basket contained a baby girl that an unknown person left in devotion to God. When the basket arrived in the city of Agra, a Hindu woman worshipping in the river found the basket. When she saw the little girl, she became happy. She took the basket to her mistress, thinking she would grow her. She took the girl very carefully and brought her to her mistress. The mistress had lost her child, and she was weeping in grief. The Hindu woman held the girl to her mistress, and she thought that her child had been restored to life by the woman. She took the girl from her and thanked her, but the woman told her that the girl had been rescued from the river. She understood that the child was a Hindu girl, and she was a Muslim woman. She questioned the woman how she could take a Hindu child. The woman told her about the concept of the Hindu religion in the form of the above proverb. The proverb is made of “the Lotus, wherever it grows”, and “is beautiful and pure”. The proverb indicates that though the baby girl is Hindu, she would prosper anywhere. As the flower of the lotus grows in mud, people consider it beautiful and pure; in the same manner, the baby girl would grow beautiful and pure irrespective of her parentage. The story goes further, and the girl became a famous empress and a king’s beloved wife. Thus, the proverb suggests that a person with inborn quality does not lose it irrespective of the circumstances.

10.

**“For those that fly may fight again,
Which he can never do that’s slain” (Berk 210/220).**

The proverb is used in the story *The Long Hunter Lifts his Gun*. The story is about a fighter called Ben Cleveland. He became a hunter with the skills he received from his father, John Cleveland. Once he was left alone in the house, three robbers came home. They were about to steal the things in the house. However, Ben made them run away with the point of a hunting gun. Thus, he received his gun to use at the time of necessity. After being an unsuccessful farmer, Ben decided to accompany his father-in-law, Mr. Graves, in establishing a stock farm. Mr. Graves had many enslaved people, so Ben got enough time to try his hunting skills. Along with Daniel Boone, Ben went on a hunting expedition to Kentucky, but soon they were caught by the Cherokee Indians and stripped of all their belongings. Ben became uneasy and told himself that he had been spared to

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fight again. He decided to fight again and retrieve his horse and the gun his father had given to him. He went back to the Cherokee Indian and got his horse and the gun back. He came back to North Carolina and never went hunting in Kentucky. The British were extracting unjust taxes from them; thus, the Tory and the Whig groups were formed. Many men turned towards Ben as their leader and fought with the Tory loyalists. Ben and his men successfully pushed the British army towards the south. One of their commanders, colonel Ferguson, threatened them with war, and he decided to attack them. Ben shot them by forming four different groups of his men. While fighting with them, sometimes he ordered his men to retreat and reminded them of the above proverb. The proverb is made of “for those that fly may fight again”, and “which he can never do that’s slain”.

The proverb indicates that if Ben and his men retreat and save themselves, they can come back and fight again, but they will surely die if they do not retreat. Thus, he trained his men in one of the most successful war tactics. The proverb, therefore, suggests that if a fighter can save himself during a fight, he has a chance to come back, fight and defeat his enemy, but if he does not retreat, he may indeed get caught and die. Ben used the same tactics and defeated commander Colonel Ferguson.

11.

“Make haste slowly” (Berk 250).

The last of the stories, *The Cannon-Balls of the Alkmaar*, uses the above proverb. The story is about a girl named Grietje who carries milk to her house daily to make cheese. It was her daily routine, but she did not come home one day. She collected milk and saw Spanish ships surrounding her village Alkmaar to attack. Her grandfather was a chemist who tried different types of experiments. He was the one who invented the explosive, which burned down his house and made him live in a hut in the forest. After Grietje saw the Spanish ships, she asked her grandfather for help. She explained everything, and he thought to help her as Alkmaar was under threat. He told her to be patient. He told her to make haste slowly. She delivered the milk to her grandfather daily, and he made round black polished cheese with his experiments. One day he called her and asked her to take the sack carefully. He told her not to tell anyone what she had witnessed in his hut. When they reached the walls of Alkmaar, they were questioned by the Spanish soldiers about their purpose in visiting the general. He told them that he was an enemy of Alkmaar and wished to present to the general his inventions. They allowed him to meet the general. The general demanded

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to see what he had brought. He showed him the fireball which he invented. The general tested it, and it worked. The grandfather used Grietje's dog to drag the cart from that time onwards. One day Grietje saw a strange man sitting on the banks of a canal. He asked Grietje about Grietje's grandfather. She took him to her grandfather's home. When he heard what Grietje and her grandfather planned, he consented to help them as he was also a victim of the Spanish invasion of his country. One day the grandfather received a letter that the general had summoned him. The grandfather doubted if the Spanish had discovered his trick. The Spanish general told him that his bombs were ineffective as the wall had not fallen. The grandfather asked his permission to demonstrate how to use the bombs.

One day the Alkmaar soldiers opened the gates and came out. The Spanish thought that they surrendered, but the Alkmaar soldiers were armed. They attacked the Spanish soldiers, and there was confusion. The cannonballs were set by Spanish soldiers and shot at the Alkmaar soldiers, but they turned out to be cheese. Thus, they understood that Grietje and her grandfather fooled them. Grietje told her father that their secret had been opened. He asked her to escape as they planned. As for her grandfather, he remained in the hut. In the evening, the Alkmaar soldiers came, took him to his home, and rewarded him for his service to Alkmaar. Thus, the story ended with the above proverb, which Grietje's grandfather told her. The proverb is made of "Make haste", and "slowly". The proverb indicates that Grietje and her grandfather slowly made efforts to save Alkmaar from Spanish soldiers. If they had made hurried decisions to help their town, they would have failed, but as the proverb suggested, they made their haste slowly and won the war.

To Conclude

Compared to Fables and Parables, these short fiction forms are lengthy and need more explanation on the background information of the proverbs. It becomes challenging to get to the proverb's meaning unless one reads the complete story. While analyzing the stories and the proverbs, it is observed that the story cannot be summarized in its corresponding proverb entirely because the proverb means something else, and the contextual story depicts something else. Thus, the interdependence of the stories and the proverbs is not evident. In some cases, the proverbs

could be understood only in specific contexts without understanding the entire story. Still, in other cases, the whole story indirectly became the context of the proverb.

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