

Proverbs in the novels of Wilkie Collins

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I. Introduction

The use of proverbs in works of literature has been of great interest to paremiologists for a long time (see Mieder and Bryan 1996). Most of early publications contain a list of proverbs found in the text, while more recent scholarly works provide useful information about identification and interpretation of proverbial language in the works of literature (Mieder 2008: 27).

In this very article we analyze the forms, meanings and stylistic values of paremias in the works of William Wilkie Collins, an English novelist, playwright, and author of short stories.

II. Main Part

Wilkie Collins (1824–1889) is best known for *The Woman in White*, which inaugurated the sensation novel in the 1860s, and *The Moonstone*, one of the first detective novels. Both novels are characterized by the unique structure. In the preface to the first edition of *The Woman in White*, Wilkie Collins focuses on his decision to play with multiple narrative:

“An experiment is attempted in this novel, which has not (so far as I know) been hitherto tried in fiction. The story of the book is told throughout by the characters of the book. They are all placed in different positions along the chain of events; and they all take the chain up in turn, and carry it on to the end” (Collins 2008b: xiv).

The Woman in White is narrated by eleven people while *The Moonstone* by nine. The narrators have different social, cultural, educational and religious background. We listen to doctors, solicitors, sergeants, housemaids, cooks, and even to the inscription on the tomb, headed “The Narrative of the Tombstone” (Collins 2008b: 409). This polyphonic narrative with multiple central narrators caused the diversity of idioms used in the novels, proverbs inclusive.

The following list shows the proverbs selected for the present study from the two novels under analysis in their base forms:

1. A friend in need is a friend indeed (*The Moonstone*, p. 9).
2. It's an ill bird that fouls its own nest (*The Moonstone*, p.32).
3. Make hay while the sun shines (*The Woman in White*, p.18, *The Moonstone*, p.450).
4. Tastes differ (*The Moonstone*, p.132).
5. When things are at / come to the worst, they're sure to mend (*The Moonstone*, p.197).
6. You might as well whistle jigs to a milestone (*The Moonstone*, p.332).

One thing has to be mentioned in connection with the identification of proverbs in fiction. Sometimes we may deal with phraseological allusion, i.e. an implicit mental reference to the image of a phraseological unit which is represented in discourse by one or more explicit image-bearing components (Naciscione 2001: 108). The question is if it possible to classify image-bearing components as a mere idiom or a proverb with some missing components. A case in

point is the proverb “A friend in need is a friend indeed”, which is shortened to the elements “friend in need” in the novel:

*I have tried that book for years--generally in combination with a pipe of tobacco--and I have found it my **friend in need** in all the necessities of this mortal life (The Moonstone, p.9).*

It is difficult to decide whether we deal with the proverb (a full sentence shortened contextually) or with the idiom “a friend in need” (a non-sentence structure). In this analysis we follow Grzegorz Szpila, Polish linguist and paremiologist, and treat such occurrences as paremic in nature and include the relevant proverb in the analysis (see Szpila 2008).

Looking back at the list of proverb used in the novel we can easily notice that the author employs proverbs infrequently. However, we believe that the lack of proverbs in the novels cannot be a motive for putting them aside as non-paremic.

After the identification of proverbs, it is essential to answer the following questions: Why does the author put the proverb into the mouth of this or that character? Whom is the proverb addressed to? Why is it used in this very context? Does the proverb emerge in its canonical or modified form in the context? How can small changes in the surface structure of the proverbs modify the message meaning of the entire text? The answers to these questions are of much interest not only to paremiologists but literary critics as well.

In this very article we make an attempt to answer these questions in order to find out the paremiological worth of Collins’ works. Our analysis involves the forms, meanings and functions of proverbs. Thus, we integrate the questions of both paremiology and stylistics. According to Szpila, this integrated approach is the basis for paremiostylistics, a study of the stylistic values of proverbs in literary texts (Szpila 2007).

Each instance of proverb use contributes to the meaning of the relevant prose fragment due to the semantics of the proverb itself. Thus, proverbs fulfill semantic functions in the novels.

However, it is claimed that proverbs in the modern age exist primarily in their modified forms (Mieder 1993: 58). Proverbs, having undergone modifications, can acquire new additional shades of meaning. In the case of Wilkie Collins’ novels we can speak mainly of formal contextualized changes, with the meaning of each proverb preserved, for instance:

***I might as well** (as the Irish say) **have whistled jigs to a milestone.** (The Moonstone, p.332)*

The structure of the proverb “You might as well whistle jigs to a milestone” is broken because the parenthesis “as the Irish say” appears in the middle of the proverb. This instantial stylistic pattern is called cleft use and it was first described in phraseology by Naciscione (Naciscione 1976: 112-22).

Still, there are cases when modifications result in significant changes in both the form and meaning of the proverb. Let us illustrate this statement by analyzing the speech of Professor Pesca, the hero of *The Woman in White*.

Professor Pesca is one of those caricatures of foreigners in fiction, who often misuse idioms or overuse them. From the novel we learn that in earlier times he worked in the University of Padua, and then he left Italy for political reasons. He is obsessed with the idea to show gratitude to Great Britain for affording him an asylum. Therefore he starts to turn himself into an Englishman. However, his efforts are doomed to failure, especially his attempts to reproduce

English idioms. Having picked up some colloquial English expressions, “he scattered them about over his conversation whenever they happened to occur to him, turning them, in his high relish for their sound and his general ignorance of their sense, into compound words and repetitions of his own, and always running them into each other, as if they consisted of one long syllable” (p.12). For example, Pesca peppers his conversation with exclamations of “Deuce-what-the-deuce!” and “my-soul-bless-my soul!”:

Now mind! I teach the sublime Dante to the young Misses, and ah!—my-soul-bless-my-soul!—it is not in human language to say how the sublime Dante puzzles the pretty heads of all three! (p.12)

*Can your friend produce testimonials—letters that speak to his character?’ I wave my hand negligently. ‘Letters?’ I say. ‘Ha! my-soul-bless-my-soul! I should think so, indeed!’ (p.14)
Walter, my dear good friend—deuce-what-the-deuce!—for the first time in my life I have not eyes enough in my head to look, and wonder at you!’ (p.17)*

Very often, idioms in his speech are introduced by exclamations “English phrase”, “English phrase again—ha!”, or “English proverb”, for instance:

I address myself to the mighty merchant, and I say (English phrase) ‘Dear sir, I have the man! The first and foremost drawing-master of the world! Recommend him by the post to-night, and send him off, bag and baggage (English phrase again—ha!), send him off, bag and baggage, by the train to-morrow!’ (p.13)

*Go, my friend! **When your sun shines in Cumberland** (English proverb), in the name of heaven make your hay. Marry one of the two young Misses; become Honourable Hartright, MP; and when you are on the top of the ladder, remember that Pesca, at the bottom, has done it all!* (p.18)

The last very example is particularly interesting because in this very case a proverb fulfills not only semantic, but pragmatic and stylistic functions.

The old expression “Make hay while the sun shines” dates back many centuries, and has changed little in form. The proverb was first recorded in John Heywood’s *Dialogue of Proverbs* (1546): *Whan the sunne shinth make hay* (Manser 2007: 180). However, Professor Pesca easily changes it in his speech.

Let me explain the context first. Professor Pesca gives advice to his young friend Walter Hartright. Walter gets a job in the estate in Cumberland on Pesca’s recommendation. Walter has to instruct two young nieces of an old Frederick Fairlie, Esquire, in the art of painting. Pesca sees this position as highly beneficial to Walter since he, being a handsome young man, can easily make one of the nieces fall in love with him and marry him later.

As concern modifications, first, the fact that Walter Hartright gets a job in Cumberland explains the insertion of the components “in Cumberland” to the first part of the proverb: “**When your sun shines in Cumberland ... make your hay**”. Second, the proverb is split up in two by the word combination “English proverb”, which suggests that Professor Pesca is incredibly glad of being able to employ another English expression in his speech. Third, the second part of the proverb is preceded with other instantial components “in the name of heaven” (an emphatic phraseological unit adds force to Pesca’s words). Fourth, we can notice inversion: the interchange of the position of two parts of the complex sentence. Fifth, phraseological units “at the top of the ladder” and “at the bottom [of the ladder]” stand in the finale of his passionate speech.

A humorous effect is achieved by such a cluster of modifications. We see Pesca's inability to achieve the Englishness he strives for. But his attempts to use English idioms, made with an ardent Italian nature, encourage the reader to view Pesca as a comic hero.

However, not only Pesca's overuse of idioms helps readers to understand his personality better. Equally important is the absence of any idioms in the second part of the novel when Pesca again gets into the centre of the mystery connected with the woman in white. It is startling that we do not find his much-loved "Deuce-what-the-deuce!" or "my-soul-bless-my soul!" or any other phraseological units (proverbs inclusive). We get to know that Pesca can easily speak normal English without any mistakes. In the end it turns out that Pesca's harmless eccentricity is a mere performance. In reality he is a member of a secret revolutionary society called "Brotherhood"¹.

As a result, both the overuse of idioms (proverbs inclusive) and the sudden absence of them are aimed at giving the indirect characterization of the hero. Szpila mentions: "Some proverbs expressing general truths characterise the philosophy of the speakers, constituting part of their knowledge of the world as well as expressing what they think about how things are and what to do with them. Such proverbs will perform a macrofunction as they belong to the global characterizations of the speakers" (Szpila 2008).

Let me illustrate this phenomenon by analyzing one more character, the narrator of the novel *The Moonstone*, Gabriel Betteredge.

Gabriel Betteredge is a faithful old steward of the Verinder household, an estate in the mid-nineteenth century Yorkshire, England. Although he describes himself as "a sleepy old man" (p.21) and "not an interesting object" (p.21), he is interesting from the paremiological point of view. Betteredge loves enriching his speech with proverbs, for example:

It's an ill bird, they say, that fouls its own nest. I look on the noble family of the Herncastles as being my nest... (p.32)

I might as well (as the Irish say) have whistled jigs to a milestone. (p.332)

When things are at the worst, they're sure to mend. Things can't be much worse, Mr. Franklin, than they are now. (p.197)

*Released from examination, Mr. Franklin (still sticking to the helpless view of our difficulty) whispered to me: "That man will be of no earthly use to us. Superintendent Seegrave is an ass." Released in his turn, Mr. Godfrey whispered to me: " Evidently a most competent person. Betteredge, I have the greatest faith in him!" **Many men, many opinions**, as one of the ancients said before my time (p.93).*

As concern the last extract, it is necessary to mention that Terence (185-159BC), Roman author of comedies, is the ancient responsible for providing Betteredge with his "Many men, many opinions" bromide. The line comes from *Phornio* (161 BC): "Quot hominess, tot sententæ" (line 454) (Collins/Farmer 1999: 144). The usage of an aphorism may be a hint that Betteredge is a well-read person.

¹ "The Brotherhood" is a fiction organization placed contemporaneously with, and similarly featured as, the Carbonari, a secret society of revolutionary Italian patriots founded in early 19th-century Italy. Lyn Pykett suspects that the prototype for Professor Pesca was Gabriele Rossetti, who was a member of the Carbonari, as well as an Italian teacher resident in London during the 1840s (Pykett 2005: 163).

Also, Gabriel Betteredge eagerly quotes Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, for instance:

Today we love what tomorrow we hate (p.13).

Fear of danger is ten thousand times more terrifying than danger itself (p.180).

As concerns *Crusoe*, Gabriel Betteredge says:

You are not to take it, if you please, as the saying of an ignorant man, when I express my opinion that such a book as ROBINSON CRUSOE never was written, and never will be written again. I have tried that book for years--generally in combination with a pipe of tobacco--and I have found it my friend in need in all the necessities of this mortal life. When my spirits are bad--ROBINSON CRUSOE. When I want advice--ROBINSON CRUSOE. In past times when my wife plagued me; in present times when I have had a drop too much--ROBINSON CRUSOE. I have worn out six stout ROBINSON CRUSOES with hard work in my service. On my lady's last birthday she gave me a seventh. I took a drop too much on the strength of it; and ROBINSON CRUSOE put me right again. Price four shillings and sixpence, bound in blue, with a picture into the bargain" (p.9).

This extract is only one out of eight Betteredge's discourses on the merits of *Robinson Crusoe*. *Crusoe* is his "friend in need" (p.9); those who do not "believe" in it are men of little "faith" (p.81). Open *Robinson Crusoe* at random (Betteredge affirms) and you will find the "prophetic" enlightenment you seek (p.442). The above mentioned quotations represent these prophetic enlightenments given by the book. Many literary critics emphasize the parallel made by Collins between Robinson Crusoe and the Bible (see Marsh 1998; Bertsch 2004): using a book to tell the future is called "bibliomancy," and usually it's applied to a holy text like the Bible. The usage of quotations from *Robinson Crusoe* also stresses its similarity to the Bible: it is well known that the Bible is one of the main sources of proverbs.

Another peculiarity of Gabriel Betteredge is that he readily shares with the reader his own words of wisdom, for example:

A drop of tea is to a woman's tongue what a drop of oil is to a wasting lamp (p.126).

Whatever happens in a house, robbery or murder, it doesn't matter, you must have your breakfast (p.89).

Every human institution (Justice included) will stretch a little, if you only pull it the right way (p.91).

The first example can be called a quasi-proverb because the form of the sentence maintains some typical stylistic features of proverbs, such as parallelism and rhyme (see Arora 1984). Also, like most proverbs it is based on a metaphor (see Mieder 2008).

From our point of view, there is a trace of didacticism in Betteredge's speech when he uses such a number of proverbs. An elderly man often addresses Franklin Blake, a young man whom he treats as if he were his son. Betteredge remembers him as "the nicest boy that ever spun a top or broke a window" (p.15). The boy grew up but Betteredge still tries to instruct him, especially about women. Blake, himself, identifies Betteredge's opinions as "the philosophy of the Betteredge school" (p.322).

Thus, in the case of Betteredge, Collins' choice of proverbs is not random. Betteredge's deployment of proverbs reveals his personality. It means that proverbs serve in a novel macrofunction: they refer to the content of the whole work.

III. Concluding remarks

Wilkie Collins' deployment of paremias in his novels is obviously intentional. The author skillfully plays with their form and meaning. As a rule proverbs are used to serve the purpose of characterization of the characters, their behaviour and interactions. Proverbs refer to both local and global portions of the text.

The analysis can serve as a point of reference both in further studies of Collins' deployment of proverbs (as well as phraseological units) and in comparative examinations of different writers.

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