



Idiomatic Expressions of Epigrams in Aesop's Short Stories

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Abstract

The present study sets out to analyze idiomatic expressions in Aesop's short stories. A broad definition holds that idiom refers to an expression that cannot be understood from the literal meaning of its separated words but that has a separated meaning of its own. Idioms have figurative expressions and meanings that are masterly constructed by their native speakers according to their culture.

Recent years have observed that writers utilize idioms in literature in a high rank of verbal facility that seems it needs to be caught and comprehended what the natives actually say. Accordingly, the study has two goals: first, to arrive at exploring and analyzing the meaning of idiomatic expressions in epigrams of Aesop's short stories; second, to provide a description of idiomatic expressions that interpret syntactic structure, meaning as well as cultural impacts on idioms employed in epigrams of Aesop's short stories.

For analyzing idiomatic expressions in epigrams of Aesop's short stories, this study follows two hypotheses: first, it is complicated to discover a rule reifies all idiomatic expressions in terms of form and structure due to their mercury-like nature; second, it is significant to search for the meaning of idiomatic expressions in their own culture through digging into their origin. Finally, the study reaches a conclusion that two bases are employed in figuring idiomatic expressions in epigrams of Aesop's short stories: linguistics and culture.

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Key Words: Idioms , Figurative language , Epigrams , Aesop's short stories

1. Introduction

The study is linguistic analysis by focusing on the idiomatic expressions of epigrams in Aesop's short stories. Idioms are defined as fixed phrases which contain a number of words carrying meaning that cannot be predicted and understood from the total sum of the meaning of the individual words. Idioms are very useful to the writers who want to catch and use what the natives actually say. Glucksberg (2001, p. 41) argued that "idioms are deeply connected to culture". So and due to the fact that the data of the study is epigrams in Aesop's short stories, epigrams and Aesop's short stories are referred to in the next section.

1.1. Literature Review

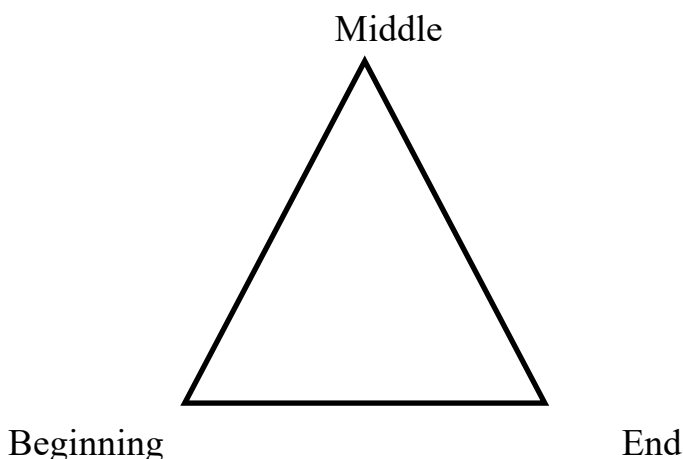
Aesop is a Greek storyteller. He was born a slave but his stories helped him in getting freedom. His stories which are mingling of reality and myths mirror his Greek culture. They have been observed in "tablets written in ancient Sumeria" (Blackham, 1985: 74). Due to their significance, they have passed down for countless generations and in many different languages.

Aesop is known as the father of the folklore-fable during his time. All short stories whether Roman, Greek, or European are contributed to him in which he used the power of speech for mocking as well as impressing his audiences (Meziriac, 1952, p.7). Aesop's short stories are a great source for common idiomatic expressions like *Familiarity Breeds Contempt*, *Sour Grapes*, *A Dog in a Mange*, etc. Through satire and cynicism, or through humor, they teach morality and wisdom, and provide entertainment (James, 1881, p.8-10).

Aesop's short stories came into existence through the four collections by Demetrius of Phaerum around 300 B.C. The basic issue emerged with multiple explanations in 55 A.D. by Phaedrus

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(Perry, 1965, p.12). Essential, Aesop's short stories can be identified in certain themes, certain characters, and under a certain plot which can be classified as follows (Daly, 1961): Themes of the stories are delineated with three: the didactic stories, stories dealing with social cases, and stories related to supernatural. Similarly, the pattern of constructing the plot in the stories consists of three essential elements: Beginning, Middle, and End as illustrated in the figure below:



The plot usually includes a conflict between two forces. Since the plot is clear and simple, the characters in the stories are simple too. Aesop's characters consist of four types: human characters, animal characters, supernatural characters, and personified characters.

Aesop's stories embody unique epigrams common in the history of mankind. It is very hard to give a specific definition for an epigram because any epigram may be classified as a poem, song, or elegy. However, as a form of ancient art, epigram is "a rhetorical device that is a memorable, brief, interesting, and surprising satirical statement". It is derived from the Greek word *epigramma*, i.e. "inscription," or "to inscribe." The definition of epigram may extend to include "ingenious or witty statements" ("Literary Devices: Definition and Examples of Literary Terms").

Epigrams can be traced in all genres of literature since its emergence at the hands of Greeks. They were used in poetry.

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Martialis, the Latin poet, was the father of epigrams. John Donne also used epigrams in his poetry. In "Hero and Leander", he wrote: "Both robb'd of air, we both lie in one ground/ Both whom one fire had burnt, one water drown'd". Through this epigram, he helped to answer the question: How can a man die by both water and fire? It conveys a satirical goal ("Examples of Epigrams"). Epigrams can be seen in novels too. For instance in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: "The only difference between a caprice and a lifelong passion that the caprice lasts a little longer." This epigram, which contains the element of surprise and contradiction, argues that those who declare that something may last long seem to forget that claim and the opposite happens ("Literary Devices: Definition and Examples of Literary Terms"). In drama, there are examples of epigrams, but the most known one is William Shakespeare's Hamlet: "To be or not to be, that is the question". Here the epigram refers to the life and death issues ("What is an Epigram? Definition and Examples of Epigrams"). However the genre, epigrams are used to comment on social, political, religious, or economic issues either through satire, humor, or direct statements to leave impression for humans; and epigrams in Aesop's short stories are no exceptional. They are used to express follies and truths about humans in a witty manner.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Mainstream linguistic theories have considered figurative language as a problematic case. However, figurative language still opens a new window towards new perceptions in the field of the human language. Though figurative language is widely used in literature, it is still arduous to differentiate between its literal and non-literal expressions. One category in figurative language is idiomatic expressions. It is broadly accepted that idioms are hard to comprehend. Crystal (1995: 163) presents one view on idioms and defines them as having two prime characteristics. First, the meanings of the individual words in the expression cannot be used to understand the meaning of the expression altogether. Second, the expression is also fixed both in terms of its grammar and its

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lexicality. For example, the words in the expression *raining cats and dogs* cannot be placed in another order, or be changed to synonyms, without losing idiomaticity in the process. For native speakers, the ability to discern between the literal meaning and the possible implied meaning behind an expression often seems to happen almost automatically. Another problem area lies in the fact that it seems rather toilsome to reach a general, more in-depth definition and categorization of idioms as scholars have debated what kind of expressions that should be covered under the term (Mustonen, 2010:29). Consequently, there is a gap between the written words of the idioms and their dictionary interpretations that this study seeks to fill it through analyzing idiomatic expressions in Aesop's short stories.

1.3. Aims of the Study

Regarding to the above mentioned problems, the aim of this study is to probed how idiomatic expressions are used in epigrams of Aesop's short stories and what effects they have on the reading of the short story, from the point of view of a reader. To pursue these aims, this study is an attempt to get insight into how idioms can be used for different purposes in a text and what impact they can have on its language.

1.4. Hypotheses of the Study

The hypothesis is that gaining knowledge about the usage of idiomatic expressions, for example through fiction, might be beneficial for people's general language use.

Moreover, there are two essential hypotheses, first, it is complicated to discover a rule reifies all idiomatic expressions in terms of form and structure due to their mercury-like nature; second, it is significant to search for the meaning of idiomatic expressions in their own culture through digging into their origin.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Idioms: Defined

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As a colourful aspect of a language, idioms have been largely studied to underlie its several meanings. Richards and Schmidt (2002:246) define an idiom as: "an expression which functions as a single unit and whose meaning cannot be worked out from its separate parts". Every language has some phrases or sentences that cannot be understood literally. Even if we know the meaning of all the words in a phrase and understand the grammar completely, the meaning of the phrase may still be confusing. Many clichés, proverbs, slang phrases, phrasal verbs and common sayings pose this kind of problem. Phrases or sentences of this type are usually said to be idiomatic (Spears: 1991: xiv). Idiomatic expressions can deliver a literal meaning that people need to know their meaning in order to be able to comprehend mental images produced from the idiomatic expressions. According to Manser (1992:74), idioms provide an opaque connection between the surface sense of the words and their individual meaning. Language is not merely a combination of words in the sense that by collecting their total meaning the significance of the whole phrase can be guessed. Idioms are also defined as fixed phrases, which contain a number of words carrying a meaning that cannot be predicted and understood from the meaning of its components. Arnold mentions that (1995:62) We can consider idioms as distinctive and colourful expressions, which have no literal meaning.

Linguistically speaking, idioms are defined as "multi-word lexemes, whose meaning is not a compositional function of the meaning of the component words" Idioms can be regarded as semi-fixed collocation and have a metaphorical meaning, which makes our writing very rich, colorful and interesting. They are commonly used in English textbooks, movies, songs, and in the titles of articles. Idioms convey a distinct meaning without the necessary application of the grammatical rules, while the meaning that is carried by the individual words of those idioms does not provide us with any clue to guess the meaning of the whole idiom.

According to McCarthy & O'Dell (2003:91) there are some main characteristics of idioms:

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- 1- There are many idioms that are connected with the parts of our body, like eyes, hands, heads, etc.
- 2-Idioms are used in telling stories, in commenting, and when voicing opinion.
- 3-Idioms carry their own meaning and explanation.
- 4-The main function of idioms is to paraphrase what is going on, and what is being said.
- 5-Idioms are very useful and interesting in the text of Horoscopes, because it carries more than one meaning, so the readers interpret them in different ways.

In idioms, compositeness or fixedness means that the individual lexical units of these expressions are usually set and cannot easily be replaced or substituted for. Idioms such as off the deep end, odds and ends, and making out like bandits are all examples of such fixed expressions (attested in MICASE). Institutionalization refers to the conventionalization of what was initially an ad hoc, novel expression (Fernando, 1996 :32), resulting in its currency and acceptance among the wider discourse community rather than by a small sub-community. Semantic opacity indicates that the meaning of such expressions is not transparent based on the sum of their constituent parts. For example, the individual words in the idioms tongue in cheek, on the ball, and put a spin on it provide no clues to their composite meaning.

2.2. Features of Body Parts Idioms

Idiomatic expressions can be diagnosed by some properties that are extracted from its practical use in variable discourse. The features that are set below are extracted from their usual using in discourse. Fernando (1996:30) argues that idioms and idiomaticity are not identical despite their close relations. All idioms naturally indicate idiomaticity but all word combinations that show idiomaticity are not idioms. He gives examples of word combinations, such as catch a bus/ a tram and black / strong coffee,

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which indicate idiomaticity but are not idioms since they are quite unrestricted in their variations. Baker (1992:63) considers idioms as fixed expressions and as a different category under the multiword units. Baker believes that idiomatic expressions are “frozen patterns of language which allow little or no variation in form, and in the case of idioms, often carry meanings which cannot be deduced from their individual components. Mantyla (2004:35) mentions five features which are considered when characterizing idioms.

2.3. Grammatical and Syntactic Restrictions of Idioms

According to Baker (1992: 163) the grammatical and syntactic restrictions of idioms should be taken into account since they may affect the degree of idiomaticity of lexical items and remove the figurativeness of idiomatic expressions, which is the most important feature of idioms:

a) Addition: adding the adverb *very* to the adjective red in red herring affects its figurative meaning (**Very red herring**).

b) Deletion: deleting any word from an idiomatic expression would alter its meaning or idiomatic sense. For example, deleting the adjective **sweet** from the expression **have a sweet tooth** would change the meaning.

c) Substitution: we cannot replace any words in idioms even if those words are synonyms. For example, in the long and short of it the adjective long cannot be substituted by adjective tall despite the fact that they have nearly the same meaning.

d) Modification: any change in the grammatical structure of an idiom will alter its meaning. For instance, the expression stock, barrel, and lock is not idiomatic because the order of the items in the expression lock, stock, and barrel has been altered.

e) Comparative: adding the comparative suffix 'er' to the adjectives in idiomatic expressions such as be in hot water changes the conventional sense of the idiom (be in trouble).

f) Passive: changing the passive form into active will damage the figurative meaning of many idioms. The expression they spilled the

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beans is idiomatic while its passive form some beans were spilled has a completely different meaning.

2.4. Classifications of Idioms

According to the semantic and syntactic points of view, Makkai (1972:45) divides idioms into two categories:

1. Idioms of Encoding: idioms of encoding are those idiosyncratic lexical combinations that have transparent meaning involving collocational preferences and restrictions, exemplified by **at** in he drove **at** 70 B.M.

2. Idioms of decoding: idioms of decoding refer to those non - identifiable and misleading lexical expressions whose interpretations could not be comprehended on the basis of only learned linguistic conventions. In other words, the meaning of decoding idioms is not predicable. Expressions such as **beat about the bush and fly off the handle** are examples of this type of idioms. Idioms of decoding are classified into lexemic and **Sememic** idioms (Makkai, 1972:179):

A. Lexemic idioms

- a) Phrasal verbs: e.g., to come up with, to take part in.
- b) Tournures (turns of phrase): e.g., fly off the handle, kick the bucket.
- c) Irreversible binomials: e.g., paper and salt, coffee and cream.
- d) Phrasal compounds: e.g., black ice, black board.
- e) Incorporating verbs: e.g., man-handle.
- f) Pseudo-idioms: e.g., spick and span, kit and kin.

B. Sememic idioms

Usually convey pragmatic meanings related to a particular culture. They include:

a) Proverbs: e.g., A bird in hand is worth two in the bush.

b) Familiar quotations: e.g., Not a mouse stirring.

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- c) **'First base 'idioms:** associated with a national game like baseball, e.g., have two strikes against one, never to get to first base.
- d) **Idioms of 'institutionalized politeness':** such as may I?
- e) **Idioms of 'institutionalized greeting':** e.g., How do you do? , So long.
- f) **Idioms of 'institutionalized understatement':** e.g., I wasn't too crazy about him.
- g) **Idioms of 'institutionalized hyperbole':** e.g., He won't even lift a finger.

The degree of 'idiomaticity' that an idiom carries is the most important feature based on which different scholars and linguists have classified idioms. Moon (1996 :97) classifies idioms based on ' the spectrum of idiomaticity':

1- Transparent- opaque idioms

a. **Transparent idioms:** Transparent idioms are those idioms which are easy to comprehend and translate and their meaning can be derived from the meanings of their constituent parts, as in:

1.Back and forth

2. Fight a losing battle.

b. **semi- transparent idioms:** Idioms that usually have metaphorical meaning and their constituent parts have a little role in comprehending the whole meaning of the expression. e.g. *Break the ice* (to reveal the tension).

c. **semi- opaque idioms:** The group of idioms whose figurative meaning is not related to the meanings of their constituent words. In other words, the idiomatic expression is separated in two parts; a part with literal meaning, and the other part with a figurative meaning. e.g. *To know the rope* (to know how a particular job should be done).

2. Opaque idioms:

Opaque idioms are the most difficult type of idioms, because the literal meanings of their parts have little to do with the actual sense of idioms; that is, the meaning of an opaque idiom cannot be derived

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from the meanings of its individual parts because there are items which have cultural references, as in:

1. To burn one's boat (to make retreat impossible).

2. Spill the beans (to reveal a secret).

McCarty and O'Dell (2003: 6) make a syntactic classification of English idioms according to their possible combination:

a) verb+ object / complement: (and or adverbial) e.g., kill two birds with one stone (achieve two aims with a single action or at the same time).

b) Prepositional phrase: e.g., in the blink of an eye (in an extremely short time).

c) Compound: e.g., a bone of contention (a subject about which there is disagreement).

d) Smile (as + adjective + as or like + a noun): e.g., as dry as a bone (very dry indeed).

e) Binominal (word + and + word): e.g., rough and ready, (crude and lacking sophistication).

f) Trinomial (word + word + and +word): e.g., cool, calm and collected (relaxed, in control, not nervous).

g) Whole clause or sentence: e.g., to cut a long story short (to get to the point of what one is saying quickly).

2.5. Cognitive Strategies of Interpreting Idioms

According to Manser (1992: 65), idioms and their interpreting depend on conceptual theory, which is developed by the cognitive linguists who are concerned with the fact that our thinking in idiom interpretation is metaphorical and that is reflected in its use . The explanation of idioms is rendered in terms of three cognitive strategies:

1-Conceptual metaphor,

2-General conventional knowledge, and

3-Metonymies.

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Conceptual metaphors and metonymies are the cognitive devices which provide a link between the concrete knowledge of the world people hold in their memory and the figurative meaning of a given idiom. The general conventional knowledge refers to all the information that people have about the world around them, it is somehow unconscious, because people do not recall the general conventional when they are speaking, thus the process is usually done unconsciously. That shows when a number of people share the same experience in life or the same culture. Those who share the same stories, traditions, and experiences can understand and interpret them easily rather than those who are not native speaker. That is because people of the same culture share the same images that are stored in their memory and that are gathered through their life (Fernando,1996 :122).

Idioms seem to be difficult lexical items to interpret, but if we look at the conceptual metaphors which underlie idioms, we will be much closer to understand them. It is indicated that conceptual thinking of understanding idioms is like a vehicle which connects the literal meaning of the words to their idiomatic meaning. Thus, with idioms that revolve round "head" native speakers are able to infer the idiomatic meaning because they subconsciously know what the word "head" means. So the process of interpreting idioms is conducted successfully when the three cognitive strategies, i.e. conventional knowledge, conceptual metaphors and metonymies are at work. Those can easily simplify most of the inferences about the meaning of idiomatic expressions. Another factor that helps us to understand and infer idioms, is "context" in the sense that the surrounding co-text has a strong effect on what we think the word means. Context helps to interpret the meaning of idiomatic phrases. We cannot infer the meaning of an idiom unless we know the context by which we can comprehend the total meaning. Context is very important for the interpretation of literal language and more important to interpret idioms, which have figurative meaning. Palmer (1981: 43) argues that misinformation and confusion often result from our inability to infer the meanings of idioms, which are

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contextually misplaced. Idioms have function in human discourse. Idioms focus on the message content including actions. Idioms are interactional including greetings and farewells so that they can secure the cohesion of discourse. The discorsal cohesion seems to rely semantically on idioms. People use idiomatic expressions in order to express their opinion, feeling, emotions, and evaluation of events, agreement with or rejection of, other people's statements. Those expressions also show whether this message can be understood, and predicted or not. Although idioms behave as semantic units, their syntactic behavior poses problems. Thus, the sentence "he kick the bucketed yesterday" sounds awkward. Thus the only correct form of past tense is "kicked the bucket", so we cannot consider an idiom like a single word but they are sequence of grammatical words.

2.6. Idioms and Culture

It has been affirmed by scholars and researchers the influence of culture on idioms and metaphors significantly. Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 12) state how idioms and metaphors are related to culture: "a culture may be thought of as providing, among other things, a pool of available metaphors for making sense of reality" and so "to live by a metaphor is to have your reality structured by that metaphor and to base your perceptions and actions upon that structuring of reality". Allen mentions that (1972:76) an idiom is generally a colloquial metaphor. It is a term that requires some foundational knowledge, information, or experience, to use only within a culture where the insider parties must have common reference. Idioms are not considered a part of the language, but rather a part of the culture. As cultures are typically localized, idioms are often not useful outside of their local physical context. Thus, the insiders of a community cannot decode idioms that are related to different linguistic community. But in spite of the gap that exists between cultures, some idioms can be more universally used than others, and can be easily translated (*Todd*, 1986:90). This is the fact of the cultural influence on guessing idioms. Some linguists claim that idioms that are concerned with the human body parts can be guessed

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more easily because human beings regardless of their cultures are familiar with the functions of their body parts.

3. Results and Data Analysis

3.1. Overview

In order to prove the previous theoretical area, this section provides a detailed analysis which has been applied to some idiomatic expressions which are epigrams in "The Picture of Nature".

3.2. Material

The epigrams that are used in this study as data are as follows:

1-Little friends may prove great friends.(Acheson,2017:13).

2-Destroy the seed of evil ,or it will grow up to your ruin.(Acheson,2017: 14).

3- Much outcry ,little outcome.(Acheson,2017: 17).

4-Better beans and bacon in peace than cake and ale in fear.(Acheson,2017:9).

5-Beware lest you lose the substance by grasping at the shadow.(Acheson,2017:4).

3.3. Analysis of the Material

Under this section, each of the epigrams is given its idiomatic meaning in the following diagram.

Idiom	Idiomatic Meaning
1-Little friends may prove great friends	When someone has good little friends but they equal few friends in their works and situations.
2-Destroy seed of evil	Seed of evil means the root of a bad relation with others.
3-Much outcry ,little outcome	It refers to difficulties of work in mountains in contract with little outcome.
4-Better beans and bacon in	Be sober

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peace than cake and ale in fear.	
5-Beware lest you lose the substance by grasping at the shadow	Lose good chance

4. Conclusion

Through the analysis of the selected data, the study has arrived at the following conclusions:

1. Idioms are indispensable parts of language that have more than one meaning depending on the context in which they occur.
2. English is a language particularly rich in idioms, those modes of expression peculiar to a language (or a dialect) which frequently defy logical and grammatical rules.
3. Without idioms, English would lose much of its variety and humor both in speech and writing.
4. The use of idioms in short stories has a great influence in the meaning, because it could be one of the ways to give better conditions to improve communicative skill in the daily context.
5. Idioms are distinctive and colourful expressions which have no literal meaning but have idiomatic meaning. Linguistically speaking, idioms are defined as "multiword lexemes", whose meaning is not a compositional function of the meaning of the component words. In spite of all the research done in this area, there is no complete guide to the large number of phrases that are peculiar to everyday conversation.
6. Idioms are the important parts of all languages and our everyday language use. They can be said to add an extra layer in languages as they have a figurative meaning that is often very different from the definition of their individual words that is found in dictionaries and other types of reference material.
7. It is difficult to separate idioms from culture.

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Any idiom, whatever type it is, is perplexing. Its real meaning is not what it appears to be on the surface. Idioms provide an opaque connection between the surface sense of the words and their real individual meaning and it is this feature what makes an idiom difficult to understand and it is this feature what has made about half of the sample of this study fails to guess and use the right position to give the right meaning.

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Appendix

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1-Just then the little Mouse happened to pass by, and seeing the sad plight in which the Lion was ,went up to him and soon gnawed away the ropes that bound the king of the Beasts .'Was I not right?' said the Little Mouse

Little friends may prove great friends

2-The birds paid no heed to the Swallow's words ,and by and by the hemp grew up and was made into cord, and the cords nets were made ,and may a bird that had despised the Swallow's advice was caught in nets made out of that very hemp .'What did I tell you?' said the Swallow.

Destroy the seed of evil, or it will grow up to your ruin.

3-At last ,and at last .a teeny ,tiny mouse poked its little head and bristles out of the gap and came running down towards them ,and ever after they used to say:

Much outcry ,little outcome

4-Just at that moment the door flew open .in came two huge mastiffs and the two mice had to scamper down and run off. 'Good –By. Cousin ,said the Country Mouse ,What ! going so soon ? sais the other. Yes, He replied'

"Better beans and bacon in peace than cakes and ale in fear

5- Thinking it was another dog with another dog with another piece of meat ,he made up his mind to have that also. So he made a snap at the shadow in the water ,but as he opened his mouth the piece of meat fell out ,dropped into the water and was never seen more.

"Beware lest you lose the substance by gasping at the shadow "