

Source Annotation: Story 2

"Talk"

**From "The Cow-Tail Switch" and Other West African Stories
(Harold Courlander and George Herzog; Holt, 1947; pp.25-30)
Ashanti (Ghana)**

1. The Story

Age levels:

Young children will enjoy the "silliness" of the humor, while older children and adults will appreciate the punchline. Ellin Greene specifically recommends this tale for "the Family Evening Story Hour".

Sources Recommending:

Greene, Ellin. *Storytelling: Art and Technique*, 3rd ed. p. 310. Greene specifically notes the 1988 reprint ed., but that copy was checked out of the library; I used the 1947 original.

Plot Summary:

A farmer goes to dig up some yams to take to market—when everything around him starts talking at him. The yam wants to be left alone, and when the startled farmer looks around him in bewilderment the dog volunteers to explain what the yam said. When the farmer, now angry, goes to cut a palm branch to whip his dog with, the tree tells him to put the branch down; the branch demands that he set it down softly; and the rock he puts the branch on orders him, "Take that thing off me!"

The frightened farmer then runs toward the village. On the way he meets a fisherman carrying a fishtrap, who scoffs at the farmer's fright—but when the fishtrap asks whether the farmer really did take the branch off the rock, the fisherman throws down his trap and runs with the farmer. They meet a weaver with a bundle of cloth, and the scenario repeats, with the cloth asserting that the weaver would run, too, if it happened to him. The startled weaver joins the other two, and they come upon a man bathing in the river, who joins them when the river itself speaks up to ask, "Wouldn't you do the same?"

The four men then run together to the house of the chief. The chief comes out to hear their complaint, but dismisses them all as foolish trouble-makers. After they are gone, the chief complains to himself about this upsetting nonsense—and his stool agrees with him. "Imagine, a talking yam!"

*Other formats:*1. Audio recording

"Folk Tales from West Africa". Smithsonian/Folkways 7103
Courlander reads five tales from The Cow-Tail Switch, including "Talk".
Recommended by Greene, p.313. Also listed in A Multimedia Approach to
Children's Literature, 3rd ed. (Mary Alice Hunt, ed.; ALA, 1983).

2. Filmstrip

"African Legends and Folktales". CCM Films, 1969; filmstrip and record,
plus teacher's guide. Moses Gunn narrates, with full-color artwork by Jason
Studios. Tales include "The Talking Yam".
Recommended by Hunt, A Multimedia Approach to Children's Literature.

Program use:

"Talk" virtually begs to be acted out. After the first telling, the teller could take the role of the Farmer and then recruit the other cast members from the audience (yam, dog, tree, branch, stone, fisherman, fishtrap, weaver, cloth, bather, river, chief, possibly his servants, and his stool—13 "parts", not counting servants!). This could work especially well in a family hour, with a Daddy or Mommy as the tree, holding a little one as the branch (who is then "cut down" and given to an older sibling or the other parent as the stone), etc. Short of acting out, audience participation moments abound as the story of who said what is repeated several times ("and the stone said:" [cue audience] "GET THAT THING OFF ME!"). After getting everyone rowdy with this one, the teller would want to try to settle things back down with the next poem or tale.

This humorous story would work well both with a "mixed bag" of stories or with an African- (or even Ghanaian-) themed story hour. It would partner neatly with other stories featuring surprising interactions with things one doesn't normally talk with in the real world, such as "The Fisherman's Wife" (with the magic fish or mermaid who grants wishes). "The Singing Tortoise", also in The Cow-Tail Switch, might make a nice follow-up (featuring a "Michigan J. Frog"-style tortoise who only sings for her master), with its slower tempo and more somber ending. Or perhaps a gentle ghost story for the older kids, where the fear (a joke in "Talk") is more genuine.

One can even imagine a Family Hour program of West African tales partnered with poems from Shel Silverstein's Where the Sidewalk Ends. Open with Silverstein's "Magic" ("But all the magic I have known/I've had to make myself"), and Gail Haley's "A Story, A Story" (how Anansi stole the tales from the Sky God); then Mary Joan Gerson's Nigerian "Why the Sky Is Far Away", and Silverstein's "Sky Seasoning"; then Silverstein's "Sleeping Sardines", and "Talk", perhaps followed by Silverstein's "The Bagpipe Who Didn't Say No"; then "The Singing Tortoise", closing with Silverstein's "Forgotten Language" (maybe add in one of Ashley Bryan's Dancing Granny or Beat the Story Drum stories in there, and/or one of Verna Aardema's tales from Misoso).

II. Poetry

A. From Shel Silverstein's Where the Sidewalk Ends (Harper & Row, 1974).

Recommended by Greene.

"Magic"

Sandra's seen a leprechaun,
Eddie touched a troll,
Laurie danced with witches once,
Charlie found some goblins' gold.
Donald heard a mermaid sing,
Susy spied an elf,
But all the magic I have known
I've had to make myself.
(p.11)

"Sleeping Sardines"

"I'm tired of eating just beans," says I,
So I opened a can of sardines.
But they started to squeak,
"Hey, we're tryin' to sleep.
We were snuggled up tight
Till you let in the light.
You big silly sap, let us finish our nap.
Now close up the lid!"
So that's what I did....
Will somebody please pass the beans?
(p.54)

"Forgotten Language"

Once I spoke the language of the flowers,
Once I understood each word the caterpillar said,
Once I smiled in secret at the gossip of starlings,
And shared a conversation with the housefly in my bed.
Once I heard and answered all the questions of the crickets,
And joined the crying of each falling dying flake of snow,
Once I spoke the language of the flowers....
How did it go?
How did it go?
(p.149)

"The Bagpipe Who Didn't Say No"

It was nine o'clock at midnight at a quarter after three
When a turtle met a bagpipe on the shoreside by the sea,
And the turtle said, "My dearie,
May I sit with you? I'm weary."
And the bagpipe didn't say no.

Said the turtle to the bagpipe, “I have walked this lonely shore,
I have talked to waves and pebbles—but I’ve never loved before.
Will you marry me today, dear?
Is it ‘No’ you’re going to say, dear?”
But the bagpipe didn’t say no.

Said the turtle to his darling, “Please excuse me if I stare,
But you have the plaiddest skin, dear,
And you have the strangest hair.
If I begged you pretty please love,
Could I give you just one squeeze, love?”
And the bagpipe didn’t say no.

Said the turtle to the bagpipe, “Ah, you love me. Then confess!
Let me whisper in your dainty ear and hold you to my chest.”
And he cuddled her and teased her
And so lovingly he squeezed her.
And the bagpipe said, “Aoooga.”

Said the turtle to the bagpipe, “Did you honk or bray or neigh?
For ‘Aoooga’ when you’re kissed is such a heartless thing to say.
Is it that I have offended?
Is that our love is ended?”
And the bagpipe didn’t say no.

Said the turtle to the bagpipe, “Shall I leave you, darling wife?
Shall I waddle off to Woedom? Shall I crawl out of your life?
Shall I move, depart and go, dear—
Oh, I beg you to tell me ‘No,’ dear!”
But the bagpipe didn’t say no.

So the turtle crept off crying and he ne’er came back no more,
And he left the bagpipe laying on that smooth and sandy shore.
And some night when tide is low there,
Just walk up and say, “Hello, there,”
And politely ask the bagpipe if this story’s really so.
I assure you, darling children, that the bagpipe won’t say “No.”
(pp.132-133). *This is one of my favorite Shel Silverstein odes.*

B. From Sing a Song of Popcorn: Every Child’s Book of Poems. Shenk de Regniers, et al. New York: Scholastic Inc., 1988.

Recommended by Greene and Frasier.

These two offer a more thoughtful tone, and address the idea of interacting with entities that don’t normally “speak”. They are also beautiful.

"April Rain Song", by Langston Hughes

Let the rain kiss you.
 Let the rain beat upon your head with silver liquid drops.
 Let the rain sing you a lullaby.
 The rain makes still pools on the sidewalk.
 The rain makes running pools in the gutter.
 The rain plays a little sleep-song on our roof at night.
 And I love the rain.
 (p.20)

"Night Creature", by Lillian Moore

I like
 the quiet breathing
 of the night,

the tree talk
 the wind-swish
 the star light.

Day is glare-y
 Loud
 Scary.
 Day bustles.

Night rustles.
 I like
 night.
 (p.121)

C. From Virginia Tashjian's Juba This and Juba That (Little, 1969).

Recommended by Greene, Frasier—well, by everybody.

This participation poem could be paired with "Talk" as a contrast: when you meet something scary, be scary right back!

"Adventures of Isabel", by Ogden Nash

Isabel met an enormous bear.
 Isabel, Isabel didn't care;
 The bear was hungry, the bear was ravenous,
 The bear's mouth was cruel and cavernous.
 The bear said, Isabel, glad to meet you,
 How do, Isabel, now I'll eat you!
Refrain: Isabel, Isabel, didn't worry,
 Isabel didn't scream or scurry.
 She washed her hands and she straightened her hair up,
 Then Isabel quietly ate the bear up.

Once in a night as black as pitch
 Isabel met a wicked witch.
 The witch's face was cross and wrinkled,
 The witch's gums with teeth were sprinkled.
 Ho ho, Isabel! the old witch crowed,
 I'll turn you into an ugly toad!

Refrain

She showed no rage and she showed no rancor,
 But she turned the witch into milk and drank her.
 (p.32)

D. From The Scott, Foresman Anthology of Children's Literature. Zena Sutherland et al. Glenview, Ill.: 1984.

Recommended by Frasier; standard reference.

"The Six Badgers", by Robert Graves

As I was a-hoeing, a-hoeing my lands,
 Six badgers walked up, with white wands in their hands.
 They formed a ring round me and, bowing, they said:
 "Hurry home, Farmer George, for the table is spread!
 There's pie in the oven, there's beef on the plate:
 Hurry home, Farmer George, if you would not be late!"

So homeward went I, but could not understand
 Why six fine dog-badgers with white wands in hand
 Should seek me out hoeing, and bow in a ring,
 And all to inform me so common a thing!
 (pp. 80-81)

"Table and the Chair", by Edward Lear

I

Said the Table to the Chair,
 "You can hardly be aware
 How I suffer from the heat
 And from chilblains on my feet.
 If we took a little walk,
 We might have a little talk;
 Pray let us take the air,"
 Said the Table to the Chair.

II

Said the Chair unto the Table,
 "Now, you *know* we are not able:
 How foolishly you talk.

When you know we *cannot* walk!"
Said the Table with a sigh,
"It can do no harm to try.
I've as many legs as you:
Why can't we walk on two?"

III

So they both went slowly down,
And walked about the town
With a cheerful bumpy sound
As they toddled round and round;
And everybody cried,
As they hastened to their side,
"See! the Table and the Chair
Have come out to take the air!"

IV

But in going down an alley,
To a castle in a valley,
They completely lost their way,
And wandered all the day;
Till, to see them safely back,
They paid a Ducky-quack,
And a Beetle, and a Mouse,
Who took them to their house.

V

Then they whispered to each other,
"O delightful little brother,
What a lovely walk we've taken!
Let us dine on beans and bacon."
So the Ducky and the leetle
Brownny-Mousy and the Beetle
Dined, and danced upon their heads
Till they toddled to their beds.
(pp.77-78)

Story Card

Title: “Talk”

Author: told to Harold Courlander by an Ashanti man in Nigeria

Source: *The Cow-Tail Switch and Other West African Stories*, by Harold Courlander and George Herzog. New York: Holt, 1949 (re-released 1988). 25-29.

Running time: 5-6 minutes (practiced aloud)

Characters: Farmer, yam, dog, palm tree, palm branch, stone; Fisherman, fishtrap; Weaver, bundle of cloth; Bather, river; Chief, stool (servants)

Scenes: Farmer’s field; road to village; ford of river; chief’s house.

Synopsis: A farmer goes to dig up some yams to take to market—when his yam says to leave him alone, and the dog explains what the yam said. The now-angry farmer starts to cut off a palm branch to whip his dog, when the tree tells him to put the branch down, the branch tells him to do it gently, and when he sets the branch on a stone the stone cries out, “Take that thing off me!”. The farmer runs off toward the village. He meets a fisherman with a fishtrap, who scoffs at his fright—until the fishtrap asks, “Did he take it off the stone?” The fisherman throws down the talkative trap and joins the farmer in running toward the village. They meet a weaver with a bundle of cloth, who scoffs—until his cloth says, “You’d run too!”. He joins them in running. They come to the river, and meet a man bathing—who joins them when the river asks, “wouldn’t you run?” They run to the chief’s house. The chief hears their story, and he dismisses it and them as fantastical. After they go, he complains to himself that this kind of thing upsets the community—and his stool agrees with him: “Imagine, a talking yam!”

Phrases: Yam: “Well, at last you’re here. You never weeded me, but now you come around with your digging stick. Go away and leave me alone!”

Stool: “Fantastic, isn’t it?” his stool said. “Imagine that, a talking yam!”

Audience: young children for silliness, elementary to middle grades for verbal humor—good for mixed groups and family hours.