

Name: _____ Class: _____

The Talking Skull

A Fable from Cameroon

By Donna L. Washington
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Donna L. Washington is a professional storyteller, actress, and author. In this fable from Cameroon, a man finds a talking skull and decides to take it to his village. As you read, take notes on what the villagers think about the man in the story.

- [1] Once a man was walking down the road toward his village. He was not paying attention to anything around him. This man considered himself a scholar of life. He was always deep in thought. He liked to think about important things. He did not put his mind to ordinary problems. If it wasn't impossible, or at least very complicated, he didn't care about it at all.

This man spent all day looking out over the ocean, and he only noticed things he thought were useful. He didn't notice the beauty of the ocean. The only things he considered were sharks and shipwrecks. He didn't notice the clear blue sky. He was thinking about all the storms that must have been churning far away. He did not notice the wonderful songs of the birds. He only thought about how many of their nests had been robbed. He didn't notice the playful animals swinging through branches or rustling in the grass. He only wondered whether or not the great cats were on the prowl. That was the kind of man he was.



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As he walked back toward the village that day, he happened to pass a pile of bones. They were bleached white and they gleamed in the bright sun. He stopped and stared down at them. He was the sort of man who would stop to stare down at a pile of bones. The skull on the pile was resting above all the other bones, and it seemed to be watching the man just as intently as he was watching it.

The man reached out and picked up the skull. He held it one way and then another. He looked gravely into the empty eye sockets and said, "What brought you here, brother?"

- [5] "Talking," the skull replied without much interest.

The man was so shocked, he dropped the skull and jumped back. He watched the skull for a few minutes before he managed to stammer out, "You can talk!"

"Yes," said the skull. "Talking is very easy. All you have to do is open up your mouth and out it comes. Talking is easy. Finding something worthwhile to say is not."

The man was amazed. He had never seen a talking skull before, let alone one that could spout such wisdom. "I must take you to the village!" the man exclaimed.

He scooped up the skull and ran as fast as he could. The villagers saw him coming, and a great many of them ran for their homes.

- [10] You see, he was the kind of man who was always getting busy people into useless conversations when there was work to be done. He never seemed to be quiet, and he never spoke about anything anyone ever wanted to hear.

As he entered the village, he called out to his neighbors, "Come quickly! I have something wonderful to show you!" No one came.

The man was so excited that he did not even realize that the few people in sight were moving away from him. "Put down whatever you are doing, everyone! I have a marvelous¹ mystery to show all of you, the likes of which you have never before seen!"

When the man said the word "mystery," you can be sure he got the attention of some of the villagers. They started poking their heads out of their houses. Women left their yams cooking, men put down their digging sticks, and children stopped their playing. They all began to gather around the man.

When he saw that he had everyone's attention, he drew out the skull. He could not have prepared himself for what happened next.

- [15] Everyone stared at the skull for a moment. Then they all started yelling.

"Mama! What is he doing?" cried a little boy.

"How dare you bring that thing here!" his mother howled, waving a spoon.

"Somebody do something!" said another, clutching her child.

"Send him away!" demanded a third mother.

- [20] The men who still had gardening tools in their hands started waving them.

"Move out of the way!" yelled a man with a digging stick.

"Somebody get the chief!" said an old man holding his grandson's hand.

There was so much commotion,² the chief came to see what was happening.

"What is going on?" the chief roared. He was a very orderly chief, and he did not like all this yelling and brandishing³ of gardening tools in the middle of the village.

1. **Marvelous** (*adjective*): causing great wonder
2. **Commotion** (*noun*): a state of confused and noisy disturbance
3. **Brandish** (*verb*): to wave something in a threatening or angry way

[25] All the people were silent except for one villager. He stood up and pointed to the man with the skull.

"This man told us he had something to show us. Then he pulled out that awful skull. We thought he was trying to call the Dark Spirits to the village, and we were trying to stop him."

"Oh," said the chief, eyeing the man with the skull. "And were you going to call Dark Spirits to my village?"

"Certainly not!" the scholar declared, glad that the chief was there. He was sure the chief would understand this intellectual matter.

"Then what were you doing?" the chief asked with curiosity.

[30] "Well," the man said in a pompous⁴ voice, "I was on my way home from the ocean when I came across a pile of bones. On top of the heap was this skull. It spoke to me! I brought it here to share this wonder with the village."

The chief did not look convinced.

"I'll show you," the man said, raising the skull so that it looked at the chief. "Say something to the chief," he commanded.

The skull said nothing. The chief frowned.

"Speak!" the man said. "I command you!"

[35] The skull remained silent. One of the children laughed.

"Speak!" he said. "You must speak!" The man started getting nervous.

The skull said nothing. The man begged and pleaded with the skull. The skull remained silent. The people began to get angry again, and the chief got angry right along with them.

"You are always a troublemaker in my village, and now you come here with this nonsense!" The chief and the people had had enough. They took the skull from the man, found the mound of bones he had taken it from, and put it back there.

That very day the villagers held a meeting with the chief and decided to throw the man out of their village. They watched him collect his few belongings and said to him, "Since you found that skull so much company, why don't you go live with it!"

[40] The man stormed out of the village and down the road to the pile of bones. He picked up the skull. Before he could get one word out of his mouth, the skull said, "Sorry about that."

"What? Now you talk! That is not going to do me much good! Why didn't you say something back in the village?"

4. **Pompous (adjective):** irritatingly self-important; arrogant

"I told you," the skull replied. "It is easy to talk. It is not always easy to find something worthwhile to say."

"You are absolutely unpleasant!" the man screamed. "I don't know what trouble you caused that brought you to this sorry state, but you deserve everything you got!"

"I already told you what got me into trouble," the skull replied. "Talking. Same as you."

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement identifies the theme of the short story?
 - A. You shouldn't think so highly of yourself that you speak when it's not valuable.
 - B. The wisest words often come from the people we least expect to hear them from.
 - C. It is hard to earn back someone's trust after misleading them once.
 - D. Words can be dangerous and cause real harm to others.

2. PART B: Which TWO details from the text best support the answer to Part A?
 - A. "This man spent all day looking out over the ocean, and he only noticed things he thought were useful. He didn't notice the beauty of the ocean." (Paragraph 2)
 - B. "The man was amazed. He had never seen a talking skull before, let alone one that could spout such wisdom." (Paragraph 8)
 - C. "You see, he was the kind of man who was always getting busy people into useless conversations when there was work to be done... and he never spoke about anything anyone ever wanted to hear." (Paragraph 10)
 - D. "'This man told us he had something to show us. Then he pulled out that awful skull. We thought he was trying to call the Dark Spirits to the village, and we were trying to stop him.'" (Paragraph 26)
 - E. "That very day the villagers held a meeting with the chief and decided to throw the man out of their village. They watched him collect his few belongings" (Paragraph 39)
 - F. "'I told you,' the skull replied. 'It is easy to talk. It is not always easy to find something worthwhile to say.'" (Paragraph 42)

3. PART A: How does the man's reputation affect how the villagers treat him?
 - A. The man has told several lies in the past, which makes people suspicious of him.
 - B. The man hasn't taken the time to help the villagers with their problems, which makes them stop asking him questions.
 - C. The man has always spoken thoughtlessly to the villagers, which makes them less likely to believe him.
 - D. The man looks down on the villagers for their beliefs, which discourages them from trusting him.

4. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "When the man said the word 'mystery,' you can be sure he got the attention of some of the villagers. They started poking their heads out of their houses." (Paragraph 13)
 - B. "'Well,' the man said in a pompous voice, 'I was on my way home from the ocean when I came across a pile of bones. On top of the heap was this skull. It spoke to me!'" (Paragraph 30)
 - C. "'You are always a troublemaker in my village, and now you come here with this nonsense!' The chief and the people had had enough." (Paragraph 38)
 - D. "They watched him collect his few belongings and said to him, 'Since you found that skull so much company, why don't you go live with it!'" (Paragraph 39)

5. How does the character of the talking skull reveal the author's point of view in the story?

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. When is it more important to talk, and when is it more important to listen? Cite examples from the text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
2. In the short story, the main character learns that it's better not to speak than to say something unimportant. How do you decide whether or not to say something? How do you determine if your words will negatively affect others or yourself?