You Are Old, Father William

POEM TEXT

"You are old, Father William," the young man said,
"And your hair has become very white;
And yet you incessantly stand on your head—
Do you think, at your age, it is right?"

"In my youth," Father William replied to his son,
"I feared it might injure the brain;
But, now that I'm perfectly sure I have none,
Why, I do it again and again."

"You are old," said the youth, "as I mentioned before,
And have grown most uncommonly fat;
Yet you turned a back somersault in at the door—
Pray, what is the reason of that?"

"In my youth," said the sage, as he shook his grey locks,
"I kept all my limbs very supple
By the use of this ointment—one shilling the box—
Allow me to sell you a couple?"

"You are old," said the youth, "and your jaws are too weak
For anything tougher than suet;
Yet you finished the goose, with the bones and the beak—
Pray, how did you manage to do it?"

"In my youth," said his father, "I took to the law,
And argued each case with my wife;
And the muscular strength, which it gave to my jaw,
Has lasted the rest of my life."

"You are old," said the youth, "one would hardly suppose
That your eye was as steady as ever;
Yet, you balanced an eel on the end of your nose—
What made you so awfully clever?"

"I have answered three questions, and that is enough,"
Said his father. "Don't give yourself airs!
Do you think I can listen all day to such stuff?
Be off, or I'll kick you down stairs!"

SUMMARY

A young man points out that his father is gray-haired and elderly, yet is constantly doing headstands. He questions whether that's a wise thing for an old man to do.

Father William answers that, when he was young, he was afraid that doing headstands might hurt his brain. But now that he's certain he has no brain, he does them all the time.

The son again tells his dad that he's grown old, and points out that he's also become obese, so he wonders why his dad just made an entrance by doing a backward somersault.

The wise old man shakes his gray hair and replies that, when he was young, he stayed limber by using a medicinal cream on his arms and legs. He offers to sell his son the cream for one shilling (1/20th of a pound) per box.

The son repeats that his dad is old and claims that he can't chew anything tougher than pudding. But he also notes that his dad ate a whole goose—skeleton, beak, and all—and asks how he accomplished that.

His father answers that, as a young man, he practiced law and argued cases before his wife. He claims that this activity permanently beefed up his jaw muscles.

The son says that one would expect a man his dad's age to have weakened eyesight. But he notes that his dad just steadied an eel on the tip of his nose, and wonders how he managed that trick.

Annoyed, Father William says that he's already answered three questions, and that's plenty—his son shouldn't act so superior. He adds that he doesn't have time to listen anymore, and tells his son to go away before he boots him down the stairs.

THEMES

AGE, VITALITY, AND EXUBERANCE

"You Are Old, Father William" is a parody of Robert Southey's "The Old Man's Comforts and How He Gained Them" (1799), a once-popular moralistic poem that urges healthy living, prudence, and piety. Unlike Southey's poem, Carroll's "nonsense" version offers no serious advice on living to a happy, healthy old age. Instead, when asked how he remains so vigorous, Carroll's "Father William" gives answers that are cheerfully ridiculous or cynical. Finally, he silences his son's questions and threatens to boot him down the stairs. Though the poem refuses to provide useful lessons, it delights in its own clownish absurdity, hinting that this kind of attitude

offers a more vibrant life than self-righteous morality.

The poem originally appeared in Carroll's novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*: Alice recites it when trying to recite the Southey poem, and the Caterpillar tells her she's gotten the text "wrong from beginning to end." The poem is framed, then, as an absurd twist on a supposedly serious work.

The poem itself then provides "wrong," nonsensical advice on how the elderly can stay healthy and strong. Unlike the original, in which the young man asks the father how he stays happy as well as healthy, Carroll's questioner asks about absurd feats of strength and dexterity: how Father William does headstands and somersaults, eats a goose whole, and balances an eel on his nose. Father William sounds more like a circus performer than a typical old man, and his achievements are more bizarre than admirable. If the questions are of dubious value, the answers are even less helpful. Father William claims, for example, that he doesn't fear brain injuries because he's brainless, and tries to sell his son a cheap ointment. Ultimately, he refuses to answer further questions and tells his son to go away—not exactly advice the reader can use.

But while Father William isn't helpful in any direct way, he demonstrates great playfulness and vitality—and this, the poem seems to suggest, is a better (or at least more interesting) lesson than a bunch of somber life advice. Again, Carroll's poem parodies Southey's, which advises clean, wise, and godly living. Carroll implicitly rejects these conventional virtues in favor of comic antics. If Father William stands for anything, it's clownish exuberance and large appetites. He seems to love food, conversation (he argues so much that it develops his jaw muscles!), and in his own strange way, life itself.

As an exuberantly funny poet, Carroll seems to promote these kinds of virtues over solemn piety. In the end, Carroll's Father William teaches his son another kind of lesson—by kicking him out after he asks too many questions! The father tells the son not to "give [him]self airs"—act snobbish—and grows impatient with his rational, literal-minded grilling. It's as if he's telling his son to go live life rather than try to figure everything out.

So while the poem is too zany and anarchic to have a straightforward moral, it does convey an infectiously playful attitude. In the true spirit of Wonderland, it favors nonsense over sense and comic wildness over sober restraint.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-32

YOUTHFUL DISRESPECT AND OLD-AGE STEREOTYPES

"You Are Old, Father William" rejects not only pious moralizing but also the idea that the elderly shouldn't be having fun and doing what they want. The son's questions for his father carry an undertone of condescension and disapproval, as if he assumes that the elderly must be frail, feeble, and sheltered. Father William makes these assumptions look ridiculous and finally dismisses his son altogether. In the process, the poem seems to laugh off patronizing attitudes toward senior citizens, suggesting that older people are perfectly capable of living life to the fullest.

The son acts concerned for his father but is really condescending, in the way younger people often are toward seniors. For example, he repeatedly stresses his father's advanced age ("You are old [...] You are old"), gray hair, increased weight, and so on. When his father performs headstands, his son archly asks, "Do you think, at your age, it is right?"—as though there were something a bit distasteful about an older person having so much fun.

Similarly, he frets that his father's "jaws are too weak" to eat a whole goose, even though they clearly aren't. He's describing a stereotype about the old (that they have to stick to softer foods) rather than the reality in front of him. Even when he asks how his father is "clever" enough to balance an eel on his nose, he coats his admiration in condescension: "one would hardly suppose / That your eye was as steady as ever."

Father William's answers can be read as snappy retorts to the son's condescending assumptions. For example, his claim that he does headstands because he has no "brain" to "injure" might sarcastically play off stereotypes of the elderly as feeble-minded. His offer to "sell" his son the muscle ointment he uses suggests that his son could learn a thing or two rather than criticizing his elders' bodies. (Offering to *sell* it to his son is also more stinging and cynical than offering it as a gift.) Eventually, he tells his son not to put on "airs" and sends him off. Again, he's irritated not just at his son's persistent questions but at the patronizing attitude behind them.

In all these ways, the poem seems to mock what might now be called "ageism," and particularly the kind of disdain for older people that parades as concern for their well-being.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-32

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

"You are old, Father William," the young man said,
"And your hair has become very white;
And yet you incessantly stand on your head—
Do you think, at your age, it is right?"

The opening stanza introduces the first speaker in the poem's dialogue. A "young man" addresses a man named "Father

William," bluntly informing him that he's grown "old" and that his hair has turned "very white." Yet, despite his advanced years, Father William "incessantly stand[s] on his head"! In confusion or distaste, the young man asks, "Do you think, at your age, it is right?" In other words, should you *really* be doing acrobatics all the time?

What's going on here? Although most modern audiences won't catch the reference without guidance, Lewis Carroll is parodying—that is, mimicking and poking fun at—a poem that would have been familiar to his original readers. That poem is "The Old Man's Comforts and How He Gained Them" (1799), by Robert Southey, the one-time Poet Laureate of the UK. Southey's poem is serious and moralistic, as this opening excerpt shows:

> You are old, Father William, the young man cried,
> The few locks which are left you are grey;
> You are hale, Father William, a hearty old man,
> Now tell me the reason I pray.
> In the days of my youth, Father William replied,
> I remember'd that youth would fly fast,
> And abused not my health and my vigour at first
> That I never might need them at last.

It's no fun at all, but it was assigned to many schoolchildren of the Victorian period as a lesson in healthy, prudent, pious living. Sometimes students were assigned to memorize and recite the poem. In Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice herself tries to recite it to the Caterpillar—but to her surprise, instead of Southey's original, she stammers out this parody instead.

Notice that Carroll preserves some elements of the original, making the parody easier to recognize. His poem, too, begins with "You are old, Father William," a reference to the father's gray/white hair, and an acknowledgment of the old man's vigor. It also borrows Southey's rhymed quatrains and anapestic (da-da-DUM, da-da-DUM) meter.

However, Carroll also makes some important changes. Not only does he turn Father William into a clowning acrobat—comically exaggerating his health and vigor by having him do headstands—he also changes the rhyme scheme from ABCB to ABAB. The second is a little harder to pull off, and also a little more musical, so it's a subtle way of making the poem wittier and more pleasing to the ear. Southey hoped to instruct his young readers; Carroll hoped to entertain them!

LINES 5-8

> *"In my youth," Father William replied to his son,*
> *"I feared it might injure the brain;*
> *But, now that I'm perfectly sure I have none,*
> *Why, I do it again and again."*

This second stanza quotes Father William's first response to "his son." Notice that Carroll's poem clearly establishes a father-son relationship, unlike the Southey poem it parodies. Southey's "young man" *could* be the child of Father William, but more likely, he's a young churchgoer talking to a *priest* named Father William. This would explain why, in the Southey poem, Father William gives such solemn and godly advice.

Carroll's Father William does nothing of the kind. He explains to his son that he does headstands because he no longer fears they'll harm him. Back in his "youth," he feared they would "injure [his] brain," but now he's "perfectly sure" that he has no brain to injure! Unafraid of hurting an empty head, he performs his trick "again and again."

Once again, the language here *starts* by echoing the Southey poem, whose second stanza begins, "In the days of my youth, Father William replied." (Notice the similarity with Carroll's line 5.) But then it takes a turn toward the silly. Father William's remark about his brainlessness is mainly the kind of wacky detail kids enjoy, but there might be another undertone to it as well. Throughout the poem, the son's tone toward his father is somewhat patronizing; he keeps calling his dad "old" and wondering if he should *really* be having all this fun. So the father's retort here might be playing on the stereotype that old people are feeble-minded, senile, etc. In effect, he might be sarcastically saying: *"Since I'm so old, I must be empty-headed, and headstands can't hurt an empty head!"*

LINES 9-12

> *"You are old," said the youth, "as I mentioned before,*
> *And have grown most uncommonly fat;*
> *Yet you turned a back somersault in at the door—*
> *Pray, what is the reason of that?"*

In the third stanza, the son keeps calling attention to his father's old age: "You are old [...] as I mentioned before." Now he adds that his dad is overweight, too: "[You] have grown most uncommonly fat." And yet, defying expectations for a man his age and size, he's just made a spectacularly acrobatic entrance: "turned a back somersault in at the door." In other words, he's burst inside—the two men seem to be at home—by flipping backwards, heels-over-head, either in the air or along the ground. His son is mystified as to how and why his father's done this: "Pray, what is the reason of that?" ("Pray" or "Pray tell" is an old-fashioned way of introducing a question, similar to "Tell me.")

Again, the situation is zany and comic: no one would expect *anyone*, much less an elderly person, to come somersaulting in the door! At the same time, in belaboring his father's age and size, the young man sounds a little rude—as well as presumptuous about what older and larger bodies can and can't do. In the next stanza, Father William seems to take mischievous pride and delight in overturning his son's expectations.

Like the earlier exchange between father and son, this one

seems to play off the first question and answer in Robert Southey's original poem. In other words, Carroll is still parodying the unusual "health" and "vigour" of the original Father William character.

LINES 13-16

"In my youth," said the sage, as he shook his grey locks,
"I kept all my limbs very supple
By the use of this ointment—one shilling the box—
Allow me to sell you a couple?"

In the fourth stanza, Father William answers his son's question about his acrobatics—sort of. His son may have been asking *why* as well as *how* his father somersaulted, but Father William only addresses the *how* part. He claims that he's able to do acrobatics because, "In [his] youth," he used a special "ointment"—a medicinal cream—that kept his body "supple" (limber). He then offers to "sell" his son a "couple" boxes of the ointment at the low, low price of "one shilling [per] box."

Considering that his son has just rudely pointed out his old age and obesity, the old man's response might be read as mischievous or snarky. Ordinarily, a father might offer to *give* his son a cheap muscle cream, not *sell* it—so perhaps Father William is trying to make the best of an insult by turning a small profit off it.

Notice that line 13 is the one moment in the poem when the speaker injects any kind of description:

> "In my youth," said the sage, as he shook his grey locks,

A "sage" is a wise (usually older) person, and "grey locks" means gray hair. (Carroll borrows this detail from line 2 of the Southey poem he's parodying: "The few locks which are left you are grey.") Apart from this line, all the poem's description occurs through dialogue. The speaker is just a neutral third-person narrator—though in the context of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, it's Alice herself who recites the strange poem, to her own surprise!

LINES 17-20

"You are old," said the youth, "and your jaws are too weak
For anything tougher than suet;
Yet you finished the goose, with the bones and the beak—
Pray, how did you manage to do it?"

Once again, the son repeats that his dad is old—and therefore is, or should be, "weak." He claims that Father William's "jaws are too weak" to chew "anything tougher than suet," meaning a baked pudding containing animal fat. But with some bewilderment, he also notes that his father "finished" eating an entire "goose"—"bones" and "beak" included. (Notice how the alliteration of "bones" and "beak" here draws extra attention to the funny, absurd imagery.) Not only are Father William's jaws not weak, then, they're outrageously strong! The puzzled son asks his dad, "[H]ow did you manage to do it?"

Here, the son's expectations about his father's ability come into direct conflict with reality. He seems to believe that old age, *by definition*, weakens a person's chewing ability, so he's baffled to find that the opposite is true in this case. To be fair, very few elderly people, in real life, would be able to devour a goose whole (though some might!). This reversal of expectations is part of the wild illogic of Carroll's "nonsense" poem. Still, in its zany way, the poem could also be warning against unfair assumptions. Just because *some* old people need to stick to soft foods like "suet" doesn't mean *all* old people do.

LINES 21-24

"In my youth," said his father, "I took to the law,
And argued each case with my wife;
And the muscular strength, which it gave to my jaw,
Has lasted the rest of my life."

In the sixth stanza, Father William provides a quirky explanation for his incredible goose-eating abilities. He claims that, as a young man, he practiced "law," and "argued each case with [his] wife" at home. Already, this is a zany claim: lawyers are supposed to argue cases before *judges*, not with their spouses! Carroll is playfully conflating two kids of "argument" here—*legal* arguments and *marital* arguments—as if they could be one and the same. (Remember, this poem is supposed to be a product of Wonderland, where ordinary rules don't apply.) Father William then explains that all this legal argumentation beefed up his "jaw" muscles, to the point where he could devour geese—skeletons and all—well into old age.

Father William's explanations continue to parody the original Robert Southey poem, in which youthful health, prudence, and piety serve William well in his declining years. Here, it's youthful jabbering, not virtue, that serves William well for "the rest of [his] life"—or at least enables him to do something completely ridiculous. His nonsensical law career is also very much in the spirit of Wonderland; Carroll's *Alice* books consistently mock and satirize laws, rules, and logical constraints of all kinds.

LINES 25-28

"You are old," said the youth, "one would hardly suppose
That your eye was as steady as ever;
Yet, you balanced an eel on the end of your nose—
What made you so awfully clever?"

In the seventh stanza, the son asks one last question about his father's remarkable talents. As usual, his wording sounds tinged with condescension, or even sarcasm:

> "You are old," said the youth, "one would hardly suppose
> That your eye was as steady as ever;

Yet, you balanced an eel on the end of your nose—
What made you so awfully clever?"

After one more repetition of "You are old," he points out another stereotype associated with the elderly: their eyesight is generally weaker than it used to be. Nevertheless, Father William has done something that would seem to require excellent vision, as well as great dexterity: "balanc[ing] an eel on the end of [his] nose." An eel is a long, wriggly fish, so balancing one on the nose would be next to impossible, even for the young. Somehow, Father William has maintained not only the "vigour" of Robert Southey's original character—the one Carroll is parodying—but the agility and visual acuity of a circus performer. And so his son wonders aloud: "What made you so awfully clever?" In other words, how on earth did a man your age get so good at this? (He sounds more skeptical than impressed.)

Readers of the original Southey poem will notice that Carroll's parody is now officially longer than its source, which contains only six stanzas. The son's questions are becoming a little too persistent—which is why Father William loses his patience in the final stanza.

LINES 29-32

"I have answered three questions, and that is enough,"
Said his father. "Don't give yourself airs!
Do you think I can listen all day to such stuff?
Be off, or I'll kick you down stairs!"

In the final stanza, Father William puts a stop to his son's questions. The reader never learns how he managed to balance an eel on the tip of his nose, because he tells his son off. In doing so, he breaks the poem's pattern of repetition, abandoning the "In my youth" formula that his previous answers have followed:

"I have answered three questions, and that is enough,"
Said his father. "Don't give yourself airs!
Do you think I can listen all day to such stuff?
Be off, or I'll kick you down stairs!"

"Don't give yourself airs" means "Don't act superior," so the father seems to find his son's questions condescending and presumptuous. (He may also be reacting to the hint of sarcasm in his son's question: "What made you so awfully clever?") By now, it's hard to blame him for getting annoyed: his son has called him "old" four times, pointed out his "very white" hair and "uncommonly fat" physique, and implied that a man his age should have vision and dental problems. His son seems to think he ought to be at death's door—but he's clearly enjoying life! In fact, he seems more vigorous than his son, who can't understand how he "manage[s]" his extreme feats, much less his "reason" for doing them.

After the fourth question, Father William blurts that he has no desire to keep listening to "such stuff." (Here, "stuff" can have its usual meaning, but it can also mean "nonsense" or "rubbish.") He warns his son to leave the room, or else "I'll kick you down stairs!" Unlike the Robert Southey poem Carroll is parodying—which ends with a pious lesson, and contains no friction between the "young man" and Father William—Carroll's poem ends on a note of discord, and has no apparent moral at all. Still, it offers an implied lesson in respecting one's elders, and it suggests that old age and wild fun aren't necessarily at odds.

POETIC DEVICES

REPETITION

The poem uses a simple, repetitive, question-and-answer structure. For example, every other stanza begins with "You are old" (usually "'You are old,' said the youth"), as the son sets up another question for his elderly father. The third line of each of these stanzas begins with "And yet you" or "Yet you," as the son points out his father's unexpected behavior. In turn, the father's responses always begin with "In my youth" (at least until the final stanza, when he refuses to answer any more questions).

These elements are borrowed, with small modifications, from Robert Southey's "The Old Man's Comforts and How He Gained Them," which Carroll's poem parodies. They help ground Carroll's parody in its source material, making it funnier to its original audience (Victorian-era schoolkids, many of whom would have known the Southey poem). Carroll's poem also contains a few subtler repetitions, such as the phrase "again and again" in line 8. Both Southey and Carroll were writing with an eye toward younger readers and knew that heavy repetition makes poetry easier for kids to follow, enjoy, and memorize. The recurring phrases in "You Are Old, Father William" have helped the poem lodge in many readers' memories, from 1865 to the present day. (Its sense of humor has helped, too—whereas the humorless Southey poem has largely been forgotten!)

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "'You are old,"
- **Line 2:** "And"
- **Line 3:** "And," "yet you"
- **Line 5:** "'In my youth,'"
- **Line 8:** "again," "again"
- **Line 9:** "'You are old," said the youth,"
- **Line 11:** "Yet you"
- **Line 13:** "'In my youth,'"
- **Line 17:** "'You are old," said the youth,"
- **Line 19:** "Yet you"
- **Line 21:** "'In my youth,'" "said his father,"

- **Line 22:** "And"
- **Line 23:** "And"
- **Line 25:** ""You are old," said the youth,"
- **Line 27:** "Yet, you"
- **Line 30:** "Said his father."

ALLITERATION

"You Are Old, Father William" is sprinkled throughout with alliteration. Besides the various repetitions of "Yet you," alliterative words and phrases occur in lines 13-14 ("locks [...] limbs"), line 19 ("bones [...] beak"), line 24 ("lasted [...] life"), line 25 ("one would"), and line 31 ("such stuff"). Most of these alliterative syllables are also metrically stressed, so alliteration, in these cases, accentuates the poem's rhythm. This type of accentuation can make the meter easier for young readers to follow, and it makes the poem as a whole more fun to read and hear.

The poem Carroll is parodying, which was also geared toward younger readers, contains a fair amount of alliteration as well (in lines like "The few locks which are left you are grey"). By using this technique in his own poem, Carroll makes the parody more recognizable and effective, capturing some of the sounds of Southey's original while playfully distorting his meaning.

Note that there's some internal consonance in the poem as well: "incessantly stand," "most uncommonly," "limbs very supple," and so on. As with the poem's use of alliteration, this consonance makes the verse more musical and memorable for readers.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "yet you"
- **Line 11:** "Yet you"
- **Line 13:** "said," "sage," "locks"
- **Line 14:** "limbs," "supple"
- **Line 19:** "Yet you," "bones," "beak"
- **Line 24:** "lasted," "life"
- **Line 25:** "one would," "suppose"
- **Line 26:** "steady"
- **Line 27:** "Yet, you"
- **Line 31:** "such stuff"

ASSONANCE

Along with alliteration, the poem is full of lively assonance. Listen to the repeating sounds in lines 2-3, for example:

> "And your hair has become very white;
> And yet you incessantly stand on your head—

Line 2 contains a partial internal rhyme between "hair" and "very," while the first two stresses in the following line land on short /e/ sounds. When assonance coincides with metrical stress in this way, the meter becomes a little easier to hear—a helpful effect in a poem geared toward younger readers, who may still be learning how poetry works.

Other assonant words and phrases in the poem include "grown most" (line 10), "sage"/"grey" (line 13), "Has lasted" (line 24), and "steady"/"ever" (line 26). These little musical touches make the poem pleasurable to read and hear (for readers of all ages!). Line 31 contains both short /i/ and short /u/ assonance:

> Do you think I can listen all day to such stuff?

Assonance makes those last two words more emphatic (both be read as stressed syllables), thereby underscoring the father's disdain for his son's presumptuous questions.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "hair," "very"
- **Line 3:** "yet," "incessantly"
- **Line 10:** "grown most"
- **Line 13:** "sage," "grey"
- **Line 24:** "Has lasted"
- **Line 26:** "steady," "ever"
- **Line 31:** "think," "listen," "such stuff"

DIALOGUE

The entire poem consists of an extended dialogue between Father William and his son. This dialogue takes a question-and-answer format, with the son asking how his elderly dad manages to perform wild acrobatic feats, and his dad giving a series of outlandish answers. Their exchange parodies the dialogue in Robert Southey's original "Father William" poem, in which the father gives serious answers to the young man's questions about staying healthy and happy. More generally, question-and-answer dialogue is a common feature of traditional English language ballads ("Lord Randall" being a famous example), and both Southey's and Carroll's poems participate in this tradition.

Carroll's dialogue is not only more absurd than Southey's, but it's also a little longer. The Southey poem has six stanzas, whereas Carroll's has eight. This is because, in Carroll's version, the son asks an additional question—this time describing a feat that would be impossible for nearly anyone, much less an old man ("balanc[ing] an eel on the end of your nose"). At this point, Father William decides he's had "enough" and shuts the dialogue (and poem) down. The extra, unanswered question takes the comedy a little further over the top, and adds to the sense that the son's logical-minded questioning has become excessive. There's no use trying to find logic in Carroll's Wonderland!

Where Dialogue appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-32

IMAGERY

One of the most memorable features of the poem is its silly, outlandish imagery. Just as in the poem Carroll is parodying, Father William is described as having "locks" of "grey" or "white" hair: a sign of his old age. But there the similarities between the two poems end! Unlike in the original, Carroll's Father William does headstands, turns "back somersault[s]" despite his huge size, and eats an entire goose, right down to the "bones and the beak." He also has "supple" arms and legs, thanks to his favorite muscle ointment, and a well-developed "jaw." For his final trick, he "balance[s] an eel"—a long and wriggly fish—"on the end of [his] nose."

These images are bizarre, lively, and highly visual (although the reader is welcome to imagine the *taste* of that goose as well). They're absurd in a way that's meant to appeal to children—and they've succeeded on that front for over 150 years.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** ""And your hair has become very white;"
- **Line 3:** "And yet you incessantly stand on your head—"
- **Line 10:** "And have grown most uncommonly fat;"
- **Line 11:** "Yet you turned a back somersault in at the door—"
- **Line 13:** "as he shook his grey locks,"
- **Line 14:** ""I kept all my limbs very supple"
- **Line 19:** "Yet you finished the goose, with the bones and the beak—"
- **Line 23:** "And the muscular strength, which it gave to my jaw,"
- **Line 27:** "Yet, you balanced an eel on the end of your nose—"

VOCABULARY

Incessantly (Line 3) - Constantly.

Back somersault (Line 11) - An acrobatic backwards flip performed in the air or along the ground.

Supple (Line 14) - Limber and flexible.

Ointment (Line 15) - A medicinal cream.

Shilling (Line 15) - A former UK coin worth 1/20th of a pound.

Suet (Line 18) - Beef, lamb, or mutton fat, often used in baked puddings.

Airs (Line 30) - Pretensions. To "give yourself airs" is to act snobbish.

Stuff (Line 31) - Can imply "rubbish" or "nonsense" (as in the old phrase "Stuff and nonsense!").

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

The poem is a kind of narrative ballad: it unfolds in short, rhymed quatrains (four-line stanzas) that tell a story. It includes dialogue in a question-and-answer format, which is also a common feature of traditional ballads. But where a typical ballad would use an iambic meter (da-DUM, da-DUM rhythm) and ABCB rhyme scheme, this one has an anapestic meter (da-da-DUM, da-da-DUM) and ABAB rhyme scheme.

The poem is, of course, also a parody of Robert Southey's "The Old Man's Comforts and How He Gained Them." Carroll's poem borrows its meter from Southey's, while the ABAB rhyme scheme is Carroll's addition; it makes his poem a bit more musical and fun to hear than the Southey, which rhymes ABCB.

Here's Southy's opening stanza, for comparison:

> You are old, Father William, the young man cried,
> The few locks which are left you are grey;
> You are hale, Father William, a hearty old man,
> Now tell me the reason I pray.

Though Southey's poem isn't funny, it, too, was intended for younger readers, as a kind of moral lesson—and it was often assigned to Victorian schoolchildren as a recitation piece. This is why the Caterpillar calls on Alice to recite it in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.

METER

The poem is written in alternating lines of anapestic tetrameter and anapestic trimeter. An *anapest* is a metrical foot with two unstressed syllables followed by one stressed syllable, while *tetrameter* and *trimeter* indicate that there are four and three feet per line, respectively. As such, the basic rhythm of the poem goes like this: da-da-DUM, da-da-DUM, da-da-DUM, da-da-DUM, / da-da-DUM, da-da-DUM, da-da-DUM. Readers can hear this rhythm clearly in lines 29-30, for example:

> "I have an- | swered three ques- | tions, and that | is enough,"
> Said his fa- | ther. "Don't give | yourself airs!

As in nearly all metrical poems, there are some variations. For example, it's common to drop an unstressed syllable at the beginning of an anapestic line, creating a "headless" line. Readers can hear this effect in line 3, whose first foot ("And yet") contains just one unstressed syllable.

In general, though, Carroll keeps the meter smooth throughout. This waltzing, swinging rhythm is a staple of children's poetry,

including light verse like Carroll's. Some other examples of anapestic poetry written for children include Edward Lear's limericks, Dr. Seuss's *The Cat in the Hat*, and Clement Clarke Moore's "A Visit from St. Nicholas" (a.k.a. "'Twas the Night Before Christmas").

RHYME SCHEME

The poem is written in quatrains that rhyme ABAB. This rhyme scheme contrasts slightly with that of the Robert Southey poem Carroll is parodying (see the Form section), which rhymes ABCB. Carroll's rhyme scheme is a little harder to pull off, and also a little more musical, so it adds an extra component of wit and fun to a poem designed to appeal to kids.

All of the rhymes here are *full* or *exact* rhymes ("said"/"head," "white"/"right," etc.), as is usually the case in Carroll's poetry. This pattern makes the poem especially witty and ear-pleasing, while also adding an element of logic and order to a poem about zany nonsense. (This tension between opposites enhances the comedy: the poetry *sounds* like it's on its best behavior, but it describes an old man who's doing acrobatics rather than acting dignified.) Full rhymes in a regular scheme are also the easiest for children to hear and follow.

SPEAKER

The poem has a third-person speaker, a nameless narrator who recounts the dialogue between Father William and his son. This speaker is barely noticeable at all, except when injecting a bit of commentary in line 13:

> "In my youth," said the sage, as he shook his grey locks,

Here, the speaker praises Father William (a "sage" is a wise older person) and describes him shaking his head (with its "locks" of "grey" hair), possibly after finishing a headstand. Otherwise, the poem is dominated by its two characters' voices.

As featured in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, however, the poem has another kind of speaker—Alice herself! The little girl tries to recite Robert Southey's "The Old Man's Comforts and How He Gained Them" (a poem she might have memorized for school), only to recite this silly parody version instead. Through the magic of Wonderland, what's intended as a serious, moralistic poem turns into a zany comedy.

SETTING

The poem doesn't contain much in terms setting description, but it seems to take place in Father William's home. His son most likely lives in the same house, though he could just be visiting.

In line 11, the son mentions that Father William has come somersaulting "in at the door." Later, in line 19, the son mentions that his father "finished the goose," apparently at the dinner table. Finally, in line 32, Father William threatens to kick his son "down stairs," with the authority of someone who owns the place. All this makes it sound like these two are conducting their dialogue in an upstairs room in a family home. The setting doesn't add much to the meaning of the poem, but it does suggest that this is partly a poem about family, or the age-old friction between fathers and sons.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

"You Are Old, Father William" is a parody of Robert Southey's 1799 didactic poem "The Old Man's Comforts and How He Gained Them." It appears in the fifth chapter of Lewis Carroll's classic children's book *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865; often called simply *Alice in Wonderland*). Though little remembered today, Southey's poem was once commonly assigned to Victorian schoolchildren, and in the Carroll book, Alice tries dutifully to recite it to the Caterpillar. But it comes out all "wrong," as things tend to do in Wonderland. Instead of Southey's poem about staying healthy, focusing on the future, and honoring God, Alice recites this absurd exchange between a quizzical son and a somersaulting father.

The poem also falls under the category of *nonsense literature*. Broadly, nonsense literature is characterized by whimsical humor, eccentric characters, and the use of poetic elements that both facilitate and hinder meaning. For example, while this poem is a kind of narrative ballad with a strict meter and rhyme scheme, the actions it describes are extremely silly—even random-seeming. Like the son in the poem, rational-minded readers may be left scratching their heads at Father William's behavior. Other readers will just laugh at his clowning and give up on trying to make it all make sense.

Along with his contemporary Edward Lear, Carroll pioneered the nonsense genre in the mid-1800s. While Carroll is famous for his nonsensical stories and poems in the Alice books, Lear is best known for his limericks and brief narrative poems ("The Owl and the Pussy-Cat," "The Duck and the Kangaroo," etc.).

One notable poet influenced by Carroll and Lear was T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), who is associated with the 20th-century modernist tradition rather than nonsense poetry. (Though his book of verse for children, *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, remains popular.) In a lecture titled "The Music of Poetry," Eliot claimed of Carroll and Lear that their poetry was "not a vacuity of sense; it is a parody of sense, and that is the sense of it."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Lewis Carroll (1832-1898) wrote in mid-19th-century England, during the Victorian era (1837-1901). This was a time of rapidly accumulating wealth and economic progress, as a result of both the British Empire's colonial expansion and the Industrial Revolution. Population increased almost everywhere in the British Isles (except in Ireland during the Great Famine), and London became a booming metropolis. Conditions for the working class, however, remained awful. Many poorer people, including children, worked long hours in unsanitary factories and mines, which were often breeding grounds for infectious diseases.

Although literature thrived thanks to the general increase in wealth and population, much of it focused on the social problems connected to both, particularly income inequality and the widening gap between social classes. The idea that literature could include nonsensical humor was still a foreign concept to many people, yet it was in the realm of whimsy and laughter that Carroll thrived—perhaps partly in reaction to the struggles of the time.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Reading of the Poem — Listen to a reading of "You Are Old, Father William" (complete with silly voices). (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ys8mdoINiOQ)
- The Poem in Context — Read the poem as it appears in Chapter 5 of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, along with John Tenniel's famous illustrations. (https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Alice%27s_Adventures_in_Wonderland_%281866%29/Chapter_5)
- The Song Set to Music — Listen to They Might Be Giants's musical adaptation of the poem. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NA9LP7m2XI8)
- The Source of the Parody — Read Robert Southey's "The Old Man's Comforts and How He Gained Them" (1799), the poem that "You Are Old, Father William" parodies. (https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Old_Man%27s_Comforts_and_How_He_Gained_Them)
- The Poet's Life and Work — Read a biography of Carroll via the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/lewis-carroll)

LITCHARTS ON OTHER LEWIS CARROLL POEMS

- Jabberwocky

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Allen, Austin. "*You Are Old, Father William.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 3 Oct 2022. Web. 13 Jan 2023.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Allen, Austin. "*You Are Old, Father William.*" LitCharts LLC, October 3, 2022. Retrieved January 13, 2023. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/lewis-carroll/you-are-old-father-william.