

You are old, Father William



In this extract from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice has just told the caterpillar that because her adventures have been so confusing she is finding it difficult to remember things. The caterpillar responds by asking her to recite a poem – and this is the one she chooses.

“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?”

5 “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.”

10 “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?”

15 “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.”

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?”

“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.”

25 “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?”

30 “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!”



From *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*
 Lewis Carroll (1832–1898)

- 1 What relation is the young man to Father William?

- 2 What visible sign of old age is referred to in the first verse?

- 3 The word ‘incessantly’ means _____.
- 4 Describe the rhyming pattern of the poem.

- 5 When Father William was young he rubbed ointment into his limbs, and this kept them supple.
 - a) The word ‘supple’ means _____.
 - b) As a result, what was Father William able to do in old age?

- 6 a) What is ‘suet’? Use a dictionary to check your answer.

- b) Why might suet be particularly suitable for an old man to eat?

- 7 What parts of a goose did Father William eat that were unusual?

- 8 a) Who is referred to as a ‘sage’?

- b) What kind of person would be described as a sage?

- 9 Which question went unanswered?

1 mark

1 mark

1 mark

1 mark

1 mark

1 mark

1 mark

1 mark

1 mark

1 mark

1 mark

1 mark