



Evaluating an Argument – “You Are Old, Father William” Grade Six

In the poem “You Are Old, Father William” by Lewis Carroll, the first speaker and the second (a father and his son) are exchanging conflicting views. Read the poem carefully. It is written in question-and-answer format. For each stanza, a paraphrase written in simplified language is supplied. After reading both the original and the paraphrase, answer the questions that accompany them in order to determine the purpose of each speaker and to evaluate how effectively each speaker accomplishes his purpose through the use of language.

‘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 the first stanza, the speaker states that Father William is old and that he has white hair. He asks him why he constantly stands on his head.)

‘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.’

(We learn that the questioner is Father William’s son. Father William’s answer to the question in the first stanza is that when he was younger he thought he might hurt his brain if he stood on his head, but now he knows he has no brain so he does it repeatedly.)

‘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?’

(The son repeats his statement that Father William is old, adds to it the statement that he is extremely fat, and asks why his father is still doing gymnastics.)

1. What is implied about people who are old or who have white hair?

2. How does Father William use humor to react playfully to his son’s criticism?

3. What is the effect of the son’s repetition of his statement?

4. a. What is the effect of the son’s statement that his father is “excessively fat”?

b. How would you feel about the son’s remarks at this point if you were his father?



‘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.’

(The father replies that when he was younger he used a cream that kept his arms and legs flexible and offers to sell his son a couple of boxes of the cream.)

‘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?’

(The son repeats, once again, his statement that Father William is old and adds to it the statement that his father’s teeth and jaws are too feeble to eat anything except fat. Then he asks his father how he was able to finish all of the goose they ate at dinner, including the tough parts which usually are not eaten.)

‘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.’

(Father William replies that he had been a lawyer when he was younger and that, far from being weak, his jaws were exercised by arguing all of his law cases twice – once for practice with his wife, and once before the court. He does not mention eating, but emphasizes the fact that he uses his strong jaws for effective talking.)

5. What does the father imply about his son’s physical condition by offering to sell him the cream?

6. What criticism is the son making by reminding his father that he has gobbled up all of the goose?

7. What is the effect of Father William’s reminding his son that he is a lawyer?

8. What implied statement is he making about himself by saying that he uses his strong jaws to talk, not to eat?

‘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?’

(The young man once again points out that his father is old and that his eyesight should be weak by now. He asks his father how he balances an eel on the end of his nose and how he got to be so smart.)

‘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 downstairs!’

(Father William says that three questions are enough for him to answer and criticizes his son for “giving himself airs,” or being self-important and conceited. He says he doesn’t have time to listen to his son’s nonsense and tells him to leave or he will kick him down the stairs.)

9. What qualities of an eel are similar to those of Father William?
10. Is the young man being serious or sarcastic when he asks his father how he got to be so smart?
11. What is Father William’s attitude towards his son’s questions at the beginning of the poem?
12. What is his attitude at the end of the poem?
13. What assertion (main point) is the son making about his father?
14. What counterargument is offered by the father?
15. What is the purpose of the son in asking the questions he does?
16. Who is the more effective speaker? Who wins the battle of wits?