

TEXT	'YOU ARE OLD, FATHER WILLIAM' from <i>ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND</i>
AUTHOR	Lewis Carroll
THEMES	Taking care of yourself (unit 6)
VOCABULARY	Physical appearance and character
WRITING	Students write questions and 'silly' answers.
SPEAKING	Students perform their conversations.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (1865) is a world-famous book due to its originality and memorable characters. Lewis Carroll 1832–1898 was a highly intelligent Oxford academic and there are many sections of the book that are more subtle and complex than they may appear at first sight. The poem used here is a parody of a well-known Victorian children's poem: 'The Old Man's Comforts and How He Gained Them' by Robert Southey. The original poem is typical of a kind of moralising, didactic verse which was popular at the time. Children learned these poems by heart and often recited them for adults at dinner parties. It has been argued that Carroll's use of parody in this and other poems in *Alice in Wonderland* are his way of criticising the teaching methods of his day.

WARMER

Find some pictures of children listening or talking to older adults, for example grandparents with grandchildren. Ask students to speculate as to what they might be talking about. Build up a list of suggestions on the board.

ABOUT YOU

If necessary, clarify the meaning of the quotation. Ask for suggestions about why children were considered in this way. You might want to establish that relationships between parents and children were often very formal at this time. Use the questions to extend the warmer topic of conversations and elicit the idea of older people giving advice.

Use the introduction to highlight the idea that Carroll's poem is not a serious poem but a funny re-writing of a poem that children at the time learned at school.

- 1 Ask for suggestions based on his appearance and also the way he behaves. Prompt students if necessary – is he tall/short/friendly/angry, etc? It might be necessary to do some extra work on vocabulary in addition to the glossary (using pictures perhaps) as some less familiar vocabulary is used to create the rhymes – *locks/supple/couple/suet* being the main ones. We know he has white hair, is fat but is very flexible. Apart from that, students should try and imagine how he looks and compare their ideas, even creating a sketch of him. If you think it's useful, you can show them John Tenniel's illustrations for the poem which can be found online.

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Possible answers

- 1 He doesn't think he has a brain, so standing on his head can't hurt him.
- 2 He uses a special ointment to remain supple.
- 3 He has very strong jaws as a result of arguing legal cases with his wife.
- 4 He seems impatient and isn't interested in answering more questions.

VOCABULARY

- 3 As some of the vocabulary is not very common, this exercise exploits some words and phrases for pronunciation practice.

Answers

The words which do NOT rhyme are:

- 1 blow it 2 wear 3 badge 4 years

MIXED ABILITY

Working with rhymes is a good way of focusing on pronunciation. Set weaker students the task of writing down the rhyme word pairs used in the poem (there are sixteen in total) and practise reading them, while stronger students work in pairs and read the poem – one taking the role of Father William and the other the son. They should focus on pronunciation, but encourage them to think about intonation as well.

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Answers

- 1 ointment 2 somersault 3 (Goldi)locks 4 jaws
- 5 (un)commonly ('airs' is not used)

WRITING

- 5 Help students with ideas for questions if necessary or refer them back to their answers to the discussion questions or Warmer. For writing the answers, you might want to highlight the fact that Carroll created 'nonsense' literature and encourage strange, illogical and even contradictory responses. The 'nonsense' aspect of the answers can be very liberating, as any ideas are acceptable within the nonsense context. Freed from topic-relevant lexis, students can draw on their passive or favourite vocabulary to complete the tasks.

SPEAKING

- 6 Give the groups some time to practise their questions and answers – the two students chosen to perform the dialogue should be helped and directed by the others.

MIXED ABILITY

If two strong students are chosen, you can tell them not to read from the page but from memory. The others can then have the role of prompters.