

Informative Speech on *Godfather Death*

Introduction to the Speech

Attention

You may recall the age-old latin proverb: *Sum quod eris, fui quod sis.*

Translated to English, it means something like: *As you are now, I once was. As I am now, you will someday be.*

Variations of this phrase are sometimes seen on tombs and grave markers.

But I first heard of it as a little boy from my own Grandfather, who has been dead now for almost a decade.

When I think of it now I have a mixed feeling of both comfort and foreboding.

There is an anonymous poetic verse that reads as follows:

Forebear and cast an eye.

As you are now, so once was I,

As I am now, so shall ye be.

Prepare to die and follow me.

This short poem is an ideal way for me to introduce the topic of my presentation today, which is:

The classic folktale, *Godfather Death*.

As we approach Halloween, or Samhain, as it was called by the pagans of ancient Europe, we may reflect upon death because it is the time of year that symbolizes death.

Purpose

The purpose of this presentation is to provide a historical context for Godfather Death by exploring its origins and interpretations.

Preview

To do this, I will first summarize the story, before describing its history and origin. Then, I will conclude by providing an example of scholarship about *Godfather Death* that explores its application to the “end of life process.”

Body of the Speech

Summary

Godfather Death begins with a poor man whose wife has just given birth to their 13th child.

Because he cannot afford to feed the child, the man decides to go out and find a Godfather who will look after him.

After passing up offers from God and the Devil, the man chooses *Death* as the Godfather, because he treats everyone equally.

When the boy has grown, Godfather Death returns and offers him the gift of being a great doctor, so long as the boy obeys a simple rule: when death appears standing at a patient's head, he may administer herbs that will heal the patient, but if he appears standing at the patient's feet, he must say that no cure is possible and let death claim his victim.

Before long, the boy becomes a famous doctor and he's called to the king, who has fallen ill.

Death stands at the king's feet, but rather than letting the king die, he turns the body around.

Death warns him never to do that again, but when the king's daughter gets sick and the king offers her in marriage to the one who can save her, the doctor uses the same trick.

This time, death brings him underground to where all the life-candles of humanity are and extinguishes the young doctor's life candle, so that he falls to the ground, dead.

History

According to the Grimms' annotations, the story of Godfather Death originates in the German *Bundesstaat* (state) of Hessen.

Hessen is located in southwestern/central Germany and is one of sixteen federal states.

The oldest known printed version of the story comes from the late middle-ages in the form of a *Meistergesang* (musical poem) by Hans Sachs in 1553.

It is interesting to note, however, that in the oral tradition, Godfather Death concludes only with a stern warning, and not with the death of the young doctor.

The Grimms took their ending, in which the young doctor's life is actually taken, from Friedrich Gustav Schilling's *Neue Abendgenossen* (New Evening Pleasures).

But in another version of the story found in Wolt's *Hausmärchen*, the physician ultimately outwits death.

Other historical versions of Godfather Death occur in Johannes Prätorius' *Glückstopf* (1669) and Jacob Ayrer's theatrical piece, *The Peasant and his Godfather, Death.*"

Literature Review

In his classic book, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, Bruno Bettelheim suggests that fairy tales serve a practical purpose in preparing children for adolescence and adulthood.

Christel and David Lukoff (2011) take a similar approach to folk and fairy tales, but at the far end of life's journey, instead.

In their article, *Spiritual Care at the End of Life: How Folktales Can Guide Us*, they suggest folktales fulfill important therapeutic functions during the "end of life process."

Kenneth Doka's (1993) proposes a list of three concerns people face at the end of their lives:

1. To find meaning in their lives.
2. To die appropriately, and...
3. To find hope that extends beyond the grave.

The authors analyzed hundreds of folktales and selected several that correspond to these specific concerns. Godfather Death was among the few that were selected...

Godfather Death is used as an allegory for confronting the difficult question of how to die appropriately.

It's noted that death comes in the form of a family member (a God-parent) and is a teacher and a healer in the story.

But death cannot be tricked or cheated in the Grimm's version of the tale.

Death always has his due and there will come a time for each of us that we should stop running and simply accept death.

Lukoff & Lukoff seize on “turning the bed around” as a metaphor for the painful and undignified conditions we’re willing to subject ourselves and others to simply to avoid death, despite our awareness of its ultimate inevitability.

Conclusion

In this speech I’ve sought to provide a context for the *Godfather Death* folktale by exploring its origin and interpretation.

There are many possible interpretations to any folktale, but the value of any interpretation is proportionate to how well it may be used to clarify understanding and reduce human suffering.

To that extent, I find the interpretation offered above by Lukoff and Lukoff to be of great value.

End.