

# Persuasive Speech on *Godfather Death*

## Introduction to the Speech

### Attention

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 folk tale, *Godfather Death*.

### Purpose

The purpose of this presentation is to explore the symbolic function of death within the context of the folk tale, and to argue that the significance of life cannot, ultimately, be determined without facing death. In other words, to explain the paradox that...

*Death gives life its value.*

### Preview

To do this, I will summarize the story, describe its history and origin, consider an alternative interpretation, and argue the point that...

*Life has no value in the absence of death.*

## Body of the Speech

### Summary

Godfather Death begins with a poor man whose wife has just given birth to their 13<sup>th</sup> 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 is killed, from Friedrich Gustav Schilling's *Neue Abendgenossen* (New Evening Pleasures).

## 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.

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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."

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

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

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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*.

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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.

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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.

### **Interpretation**

Equally valid, and not incompatible with this conclusion is the suggestion that the ultimate value of life cannot be determined without death.

Death is the counterweight to life. It makes life seem ephemeral and, thus, precious. Therefore, the true value of life exists in equal proportion to the terror of its absence.

Just as light requires darkness, so too does life require death.

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Imagine for a moment that you are immortal...

At first, it may seem wonderful, but that's because we take our mortality for granted to the extent that we can't even see its value.

In Greek mythology, the immortal Gods of Olympus are described as static creatures. Immortals can't experience milestones. Because they can't age, they can't mature. Most importantly, they can't gain perspective on their lives because they are incapable of changing.

It is only through the threat of impending demise that we can actually know ourselves, and be fully human.

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Returning to the context of Godfather Death, consider the fact that, without death, there is no resolution to the story, there is no lesson to learn, and there is no value system.

The father chose death as godfather to his son because “death treats everyone equally,” but when the son grows up and, through his godfather’s gift, becomes a famous doctor, his first instinct is to treat people unequally.

Without death (as in the earlier versions of the story) the folk tale lacks any semblance of value and collapses into total insignificance.

### **Conclusion**

In the course of this presentation, I’ve explored the historical context and symbolic meaning of death in the classic folk tale: Godfather Death.

While there are other possible interpretations, one theme of central importance is, ironically, the essential function of death in establishing the value of life.

End.