

On the Disillusionment of Life in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*

WANG Lin^{[a],*}

^[a]Guangdong Teachers' College of Foreign Language and Arts, China.
*Corresponding author.

Received 5 July 2021; accepted 1 September 2021
Published online 26 October 2021

Abstract

The short story *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, written by the famous American writer Fitzgerald, tells the story of the main character Button, who was born as an old man and then became more and more younger in reverse. Through the analysis of Button's peculiar life experience, this paper shows the uncertainty of life, the selfishness and indifference of human nature and the disillusionment of Button's life caused by the omnipresent threat of death.

Key words: Fitzgerald; *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*; Reverse growth; Life disillusionment

Wang, L. (2021). On the Disillusionment of Life in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. *Canadian Social Science*, 17(5), 45-48. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/12357>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/12357>

F·Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940) is widely known as the spokesman of the "Jazz Age" in America. Although he died at the age of forty-four, he left four classic novellas, *This Side of Paradise*, *The Beautiful and Damned*, *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender is the Night*. These novels have been widely disseminated in China and are very popular among readers. In addition, he has written more than 160 short stories, with vivid plots and profound meanings. These works truly depict the great social, economic, political, and cultural changes in the United States after World War I, and reproduce to the fullest extent what serious spiritual crisis was hidden under the surface of the prosperous material life and the prevalence of consumerism. At present, China's academic circles have paid much attention to Fitzgerald's novellas while they

have always neglected his short stories. In fact, a number of Fitzgerald's short stories can be considered as excellent works of art, such as *Babylon Revisited* and *The Diamond as Big as the Ritz*. Among the huge number of short stories, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* is one of the brilliant pearls that deserve to be appreciated.

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button was written in 1922 and later included in the short story collection *Tales of the Jazz Age*. The short story shows the uncertainty of life, the selfishness and indifference of human nature and the omnipresent threat of death through the peculiar and unpredictable reverse growth experience of the main character Benjamin Button, all of which are the important reasons for the disillusionment of his life.

DISILLUSIONMENT OF LIFE CAUSED BY THE IMPERMANENCE OF LIFE

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button is a short story with a very peculiar plot. The main character, Benjamin Button, was born in a wealthy merchant family in 1860. His family enjoyed an important economic and social status. When he was born, his father was very excited and he rushed to the hospital to welcome his birth. But what was unexpected was that when Button was born, he looked like an old man about seventy years old. His sparse hair was almost white, and from his chin dripped along smoke-colored beard, with thinning hair, gray, dull eyes, and a comical moustache on his chin. His father was frightened and couldn't help trembling. The doctors and the nurses also urged him to take this abnormal "old baby" away from the hospital as quickly as possible because they all felt very nervous and scared.

From the moment of his birth, Button's unusual and helpless life had begun. His old and ugly appearance not only made his father feel unaccepted but also feel disgusted. When he was sent to the kindergarten at the age of 5, he could not show the same interest in activities

such as “the art of pasting green paper on orange paper, of weaving colored maps and manufacturing eternal cardboard necklaces” (Fitzgerald, 1922, p.11) as other children.

At the age of 12, he found himself become younger. His hair turned from white to iron-gray, the wrinkles on his face became fewer and fewer. Besides, his muscle became stronger and his skin turned to be smoother. He was even no longer hunchbacked. Such kind of discovery made him feel uneasy.

When Benjamin was 18, he looked like a man in his early fifties. When he enrolled at Yale, he was considered a lunatic and was kicked out of the school, because nobody could believe a fifty-year-old person was a freshman. Later, a young girl named Hildegard chose to marry him. The next 15 years went on quite smoothly: he had a son, ran the family business very well and he even doubled the family fortune. Later, he joined the army and was promoted. But what happened next was an unpleasant subject. First, there was already a clear rift between the increasingly young man and his visibly aging wife. He began to look down upon his wife and gradually resented her. He disliked her aging appearance and was thirsty for gaiety outside. When he was 50 and his physical age was 20, he enrolled in Harvard, the same school from which his son had graduated ten years earlier. As a freshman, he performed well in the football team but felt weak in his junior year, and became too thin to participate in the team in his senior year. In addition, he felt increasingly difficult to master what he learnt academically. By the time he returned home with a Harvard diploma, his wife had moved to Italy because she had lost the courage to live with him when the gap between them had become insurmountable. At the same time, he couldn't be accepted by his son when he looked like a teenager, while his son looked more like a father. In 1917, when his actual age was 57 and his physical age was only a teenager, he received a commission from his army and was told that he had been promoted to Brigadier General because of his outstanding performance in the Spanish-American War. But when he was mad with joy and returned to his army with his commission letter, his identity was doubted by the leader. The disappointed man had no choice but to cry and was taken back home by his son. After that, his grandson was born, and slowly he found himself becoming the same as his grandson in every way. His son sent them both to kindergarten together, but when his grandson left kindergarten to go to the elementary school, he became smaller and smaller, and later turned to be a small baby, forgetting everything that had happened to him in the past, and finally became a mass of nothingness. The story ended with such kind of description: “Then it was all dark, and his white crib and the dim faces that moved above him, and the warm sweet aroma of the milk, faded out altogether from his mind.” (Fitzgerald, 1922, p.28)

Button was not only like an old man when he was born, but also had the thoughts and emotions that old people had. What was even more incredible was that his whole life had been developing in the opposite direction and this growth process that defied the laws of nature set him apart from the people around him. For this unique life experience, Button did not complain about God's unfairness, did not cry pessimistically and desperately. Instead, he calmly accepted his fate and worked hard throughout his life to do everything well, such as entering a prestigious university, running the family business, fighting bravely at the front, and writing the work of *History of the American Civil War*. But no matter how outstanding and excellent he was, he encountered people's weird eyes wherever he went. What waited for him was only people's sarcasm, ridicule, blow and doubt. People even thought his reverse growth was a sin, a wrong and even an evil choice. They isolated themselves from him, cursed him and regarded him as a grotesque. In fact, Button was very ignorant because he could not decide his own fate at all.

Fitzgerald said in a note that the inspiration of writing *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* came from a remark by Mark Twain. Mark Twain once said, “It is a pity that the best part of life comes at the beginning, and the worst part at the end” (Wu, 2006, p.259). But in this story, it can be seen that the whole life of Button was unfortunate. He did not receive the blessings he deserved at birth, did not enjoy a happy, joyful life as a child, and throughout his life, he was unable to choose his own destiny, unable to move from childhood to middle age and then to old age like everyone else. From his birth like an old man to his unconscious brain death like a baby, Button's special life made him feel extremely lonely, miserable, painful and helpless that no one else could ever experience.

Although Button's peculiar life is purely fictional, it will still resonate with a large number of readers, because many people's lives have been disillusioned by the uncontrollable life. When Fitzgerald created *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* in 1922, the World War I had just ended. The war greatly influenced Fitzgerald and people in his age and made them feel that life was very fragile and their lives could be taken away at any moment by the inhuman war. Fitzgerald had joined the army, and although he did not go abroad to fight in the war, he was extremely concerned about the people's lives in the war. He was deeply aware of the harsh reality that was how the lives of many of the young men who went off to war were changed and completely destroyed by the war. The cruel war not only made the soldiers suffer physical pain, but also left a heavy psychological shadow on them and on their family members. The war destroyed their aspirations for a better life in the future and left them with extreme pain, confusion and disillusionment. People at that time had a strong sense of uncertainty because they recognized

clearly that they were just like could not determine their own life and existence. Fitzgerald captured people's psychology and wrote the story with the character who also could not determine his own destiny.

DISILLUSIONMENT OF LIFE CAUSED BY THE SELFISHNESS OF HUMAN NATURE

Mark Twain has a very famous saying that "Life would be infinitely happier if we could only be born at the age of eighty and gradually approach eighteen." Benjamin Button really had experienced such kind of reverse life, but he didn't feel happy at all. Instead, this unusual life experience put him under tremendous ideological pressure, and what was even more unbearable was that all the people living around him showed extreme disgust and indifference to his existence.

Button was born in an aristocratic private hospital, where he was delivered by Dr. Keene, a private doctor who had been a physician to the family for 40 years. But when Dr. Keene saw that Button was born with the appearance of an ugly old man, he was so shocked and angry that he shouted to Button's father, Roger Button, "I'll ask you to go and see for yourself. Outrageous!" (Fitzgerald, 1922, p.4). "Do you imagine a case like this will help my professional reputation? One more would ruin me—ruin anybody." (Fitzgerald, 1922, p.4). "What's more, you can go and see for yourself. And get another doctor. I brought you into the world, young man, and I've been physician to your family for forty years, but I'm through with you! I don't want to see you or any of your relatives ever again! Good-bye!" (Fitzgerald, 1922, p.4). For this experienced doctor of high status, delivering such odd "old baby" was a great shame and insult. He believed that such a terrible newly-born monster would damage his career and ruin his reputation.

When Roger Button tried to ask a nurse about the status of his child, the nurse looked at him with contempt and said "Very well! But if you knew what a state it's put us all in this morning! It's perfectly outrageous! The hospital will never have a ghost of a reputation after---" (Fitzgerald, 1922, p.5). When confronted with weird Button, the doctor and the nurse did not try to examine him and explain the cause for it from a medical point of view. They also did not think about how to guide Button's parents to take care of this strange old child from the perspective of the specialists. Instead, what they minded was how the birth of the child would affect their personal development and the reputation of the hospital.

What was even more disappointing was that when faced with such a freak, the father, Roger Button, was so irritated that the cool perspiration redoubled on his forehead. He first questioned whether that was some ghastly hospital joke, then burst out "Where in God's name did you come from? Who are you?". When the

nurse said severely "You're wrong. Mr. Button. This is your child, and you'll have to make the best of it. We're going to ask you to take him home with you as soon as possible--sometime to-day", (Fitzgerald, 1922, p.6). Roger Button still found it hard to believe this brutal reality. He was terrified when it was confirmed that the monster in front of him was just his own son. He didn't know how to deal with the surprising inquiries and contemptuous looks of others. He imagined a picture of himself that he walked through the crowded streets of the city with this appalling apparition stalking by his side. For a dark instant Mr. Button wished passionately that his son was a black so that he could sell him in the slave market. In order to save some self-esteem, he tried to dress his baby like a child: he asked the tailors to customize him with a very large boy's suit, cut off his long and awful beard, dyed his white hair brown. But no matter how hard he tried to dress his son, he could not change the remaining brush of scraggly hair, the watery eyes, the ancient teeth. He was so old and strange that the baby-sitter the family had previously hired just had one look at him and angrily quit her job. Whether it was Button's father connected by blood, or the doctors and nurses at the hospital, or the hired baby sitter, no one was willing to communicate with Button patiently, listen to the innermost thoughts of this weird old child, or tell him what the world he came into was like, what kind of environment he lived in, what kind of family and neighbors he had. They just disliked him and ignored him. Despite the fact that he was born as an old man, his father Roger Button still bought him the toys that other babies liked to play with and sent him to kindergarten, even though he had no interest in the life in the kindergarten.

It was unfortunate for Button to be born as an old man. What's more, in his life, he would feel the indifference of human nature at all times. When he was admitted to Yale University at the age of 18, no one would believe that a middle-aged elderly man would be one of their students. They regarded him as a dangerous lunatic and rudely told him to get out of school. This world-famous university was supposed to be full of humanism, but both students and teachers mocked him that he pretended to be a college student and slipped into Yale University. And even the old professors' wives ran shouting after the procession, and scolded him as the wandering Jew and satirized him for "infant prodigy".

Two years later, Button fell in love with a young girl, Hildegard and they quickly got married. The reason why she chose to marry Button despite all the pressure was that she believed that young men were idiotic and a man older than her could take good care of her. She wanted to be looked after very well by an older man instead of caring for the others. Hildegard's selfishness destined their marriage to be unhappy. As she was getting older and Button getting younger, the gap between them became larger and larger. When Hildegard scolded him for

deliberately doing things in a wrong way and choosing to become younger and younger, Button suddenly felt a sense of sadness inside. Unable to be understood by anyone, he began to indulge himself and danced with the prettiest of the young married women. After that, Hildegard chose to move away from Button and settled in a foreign country. She knew very well that if she continued to live with her husband, she would have to take care of him, even like a mother caring for her son or a grandmother taking care of her grandson, because he was not only getting younger but gradually grew to be very weak and incapable like a child.

Button's father and his wife were very cold and selfish, and they could not respect and accept Button's unique existence, let alone understand the loneliness and pains in his heart. What was even more sorrowful is that when his son Button gradually became younger than him, Button was forced to call him "uncle" in public places instead of calling him his name. His son even directly asked him to stop the trick of becoming younger. "You'd better not go on with this business much longer. You better pull up short. You better—you better". "You better turn right around and start back the other way. This has gone too far to be a joke. It isn't funny any longer. You—you behave yourself!" (Fitzgerald, 1922, p.24). When Button was disgusted, blamed and criticized by his son for no reason, he looked at his son with tears in his eyes.

Throughout his whole life, Button never met a person who truly cared for him, understood him, and was willing to accept his unique state of life. Faced with his weird existence, everyone around him considered how it would affect his or her own dignity, image and interest. The coldness and indifference of human nature made Button's life more unfortunate and heavier. In the course of his 70 years of life, Button seemed to have no expectations of the family affection and love. When he became very young, he was also unable to recall anyone worthy of his missing, which was not only because he had lost the ability to remember, but also because there was no one worth remembering.

CONCLUSION

Many critics believe that Fitzgerald wrote the short stories just for earning money. The writer himself also humbly

compared his short stories published in the fashion magazines to "trash" and his behavior of doing that to "an old bitch". However, in fact, many of Fitzgerald's short stories are as excellent as *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, which have the exquisite conception, unique structure and rich connotation. His short stories not only reflect the noisy, frenetic, luxurious American life of the 1920s, but also externalize the complexity of human nature, and present the impermanence and nihilism of life in an artistic way, which is exactly the reason why Fitzgerald's short stories are still popular among readers one hundred years later.

Fitzgerald himself once called *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* as the "funniest story ever written"¹. In fact, reading the story, the readers cannot have a lot of fun and pleasure. On the contrary, they will feel heavy-hearted and depressed.

In 2008, the movie *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* directed by David Fincher was released, which was just adapted from the short story of the same name written by F. Scott Fitzgerald. The movie is a huge success and has won thirteen Academy Award nominations. But it is very easy to find the great differences between the movie and the original short story. One noticeable difference is that the movie has changed the main theme from the disillusionment of life conveyed in the original story to the eternity of love and the pursuit of meaning of life. Such kind of change of course can make the audience look at the world and the people around them positively and give them a lot of inspiration and encourage them to pursue the beautiful things and true love no matter what will happen to them in their life. No matter such kind of adaptation is worse or better, the wide release of the movie can arouse more readers' interest to find the story *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* and read it carefully. Thus, this short story can still be a brilliant star twinkling in contemporary readers' heart.

REFERENCES

- Fitzgerald, F. S. (1922). *The curious case of Benjamin Button*. Retrieved from <http://www.gutenberg.org>.
- Wu, J. G. (2006). *Fitzgerald research* (p.259). Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

¹ <https://www.shmoop.com/study-guides/literature/curious-case-benjamin-button/analysis/three-act-play>