Isabel Block

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From the Unknown to the Known – Mont 105Q

Professor Little

Memories in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*

Memory is a strange ability. A person can wake up in the morning and eat breakfast, and by dinner already forget what they ate that morning. Yet, the same person might remember what they did on a specific day and time in their life from years past, perhaps even a completely insignificant event. Random memories come to mind, but for what reason? What would life be like without memories? Life without memories would be equivalent to starting each day without an identity. Memories allow people to keep a mental journal of their experiences, whether those experiences be good, bad, significant, trivial. The memories of a single person can be strung together to form their identity. In *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, memories are created, forgotten, and recollected. The role that memory plays in human life and identity can be understood through analysis of the memories of Benjamin, Daisy, and Caroline.

Life without memory would be meaningless. There would be no point in living and experiencing if one were not able to recall anything they have done or seen or felt. Benjamin Button’s story is proof that this is true. Benjamin Button was born physically looking like an old man, and ages backwards. Towards the end of the film, though he looks like a child, he is in fact elderly. Unfortunately, as a result of his old age he suffers from dementia. He says that he felt as if he had lived a whole life, but he could not remember it. Although Benjamin cannot recall his past, he keeps a diary which preserves his memories for him. The diary also allows his daughter, Caroline, and wife, Daisy, to make peace with him.

The diary is a log of all of the memories Benjamin made. The diary includes his experiences as a child growing up in the retirement home. Benjamin also writes about all of the milestones in his coming of age story. The first time he walked, his first job, his first drink, and his first sexual experience. The diary is a log of his growing up. It is a timeline of Benjamin maturing. Some other episodes that Benjamin reminisces about in the diary are his meeting of his biological father for the first time, going into battle in WWII and watching one of his closest companions die of unnatural causes, learning the truth about where he came from, and finding out what happened to his biological mother. All of these times in his life, which in the end are only memories, help him develop and come of age. It tells the story of his childhood all the way up through his old age when he was no longer capable of remembering.

An important aspect of the diary, and what the diary is mostly about, is the memories that Benjamin and Daisy created together. These memories had a huge effect on Benjamin and the person he became. He wrote about the first time he met Daisy. They were at the nursing home in New Orleans when Daisy’s grandmother called her over. Benjamin at the time looked like an eighty-year-old man, but wrote in his journal that he knew from the second he saw Daisy, he knew he loved her. He writes about all of the barriers that stood in their way before they were able to be together. These barriers were her grandmother and the simple fact that not everybody understood or knew about his condition, his looking older, and her being younger. He writes about her beauty when she dances, the accident in Paris, and his strong desire to be with her.

Once they were finally able to be a couple, he wrote about the house they built together, her strength coming out of the accident in Paris, and their trips sailing and watching the sunset. Benjamin tells the story of when the two of them learned that Benjamin’s mother, Queenie, passed away. The two of them went to the funeral together and were there for each other in a time of deep sorrow.

Moving forward, they have a child together. Her name is Caroline. Benjamin put the story of finding out Daisy was pregnant in the diary because this was a glorious memory for him. He wrote about the sacrifices he made in order to provide money for Daisy and Caroline, such as selling his father’s business and selling the sailboat that Benjamin and Daisy enjoyed so much. This is a big milestone for Benjamin. He learns about the importance of having a family and what it means to be a father. However, because of Benjamin’s condition he was forced to leave Daisy and Caroline and let Daisy raise her without him. He could not stay and ask Daisy to raise the both of them. His decision to leave meant that he would never know his daughter, but that his daughter would have a better upbringing.

The diary for Benjamin was a record of all of the memories he would eventually forget because of dementia. The diary also plays a role in Daisy’s life. In the film, Daisy is on her death bed in the hospital with Caroline. She asks Caroline to read the diary to her. She wants to refresh her memory and remember all of the memories that she and Benjamin created together. Benjamin’s memories bring happiness into Daisy’s life when it is near its end. The memories also allow her to understand Benjamin on an emotional level throughout the course of his life. She knows from reading it how much he loved her and Caroline.

Finally, the diary is an opportunity for Daisy to tell her daughter who her real father is. After Benjamin left, Daisy remarried because she knew Caroline needed a father. Caroline grew up thinking that this was her father. She had no reason to think otherwise. As Caroline reads the diary to her mother she realizes that Benjamin was actually her father. Caroline’s idea of her family and where she came from is different because of the diary. Caroline has her own memories of her childhood and her family, and then she finds out that there is this other man who is biologically her father that she never knew. It is likely that this would be upsetting because when Caroline finds out she has no opportunity to ever meet Benjamin, but the diary also contains letter that he wrote to his daughter. She reads the letters in which he writes that he wishes he could have celebrated her birthdays and been the father she needed. This makes her smile because she understands the sacrifice he made to give her a better life. She knows that he thought of her often and cared about her, despite the fact that he could not be her parent. Although Caroline has no memory of Benjamin, she is able to feel a connection to him through the diary he left for her.

Benjamin’s account of his memories as told through Caroline’s reading of his journal gives meaning to the lives of Benjamin, Daisy, and Caroline. Benjamin is able to preserve the moments that he can no longer remember and tell the story of his coming of age through his memories. Daisy is reminded of her deepest, most passionate love while laying on her death bed. She is told the story of their epic love and she is able to pass very ready and happily. Caroline also has a coming of age when she finds out and processes that she has a father other than the one she knew all her life. All three characters grow and mature in the film. These milestones and life markers are meaningful because the characters can remember, retell, and grow from the memories they have made.