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The Timeless Art of Aging

In *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, the idea of a man aging in reverse while simultaneously trying to fit into the world is illustrated through Benjamin’s elaborate love story. Even with his peculiar condition, Benjamin Button succeeds at fitting into the world in his own way. He falls in love, and among other things, experiences the many aspects of life that people ordinarily encounter. Mark Twain’s quote on aging in this opposite way expresses the common opinion of this hypothetical situation. He explains that happiness comes with this direction of aging, claiming that “life would be infinitely happier…” This quote, however, does not appropriately summarize life with this inverted aging process. Life in reverse may contain similar peaks and milestones to life in its typical direction, but it does not necessarily result in a happier life.

 The inversion of aging does not change the milestones and peaks of life. A person living in this reversed state still experiences many of the important parts of life in the correct order and at the correct age; even Benjamin reaches certain milestones at the appropriate age. Although he is not at an appropriate ‘physical’ age, his ‘mental’ age is comparable to that of a regular person. Benjamin has his first job, first sexual experience, first love, and first heart break all at age appropriate times. Even having a child and temporarily settling down happens at an acceptable point in his life. For Benjamin, this switching of the aging process only affects the way he ages, not the progression of events in his life. Although completely reversed, his life essentially flows the same way. The point that diverges, however, is when Benjamin realizes that his life will not end at age eighteen like Twain’s quote predicts. He would have to go through the period of early growth, only in reverse; he would get smaller, less focused, less intelligent, and more uncontrollable. At this point it becomes clear to Benjamin, his friends, and his family that just like every other person, his life is going to end. Even with the reversal of age, this seemingly perfect life full of typical human experiences inevitably approaches an end.

The idea of a person who ages in reverse makes sense; the separate aging processes have a remarkable number of similarities. In a standard life, a person progressively becomes stronger as he or she reaches adulthood; in reverse, a person becomes younger while simultaneously gaining strength. In each case, the person gets gradually stronger until eventually getting weaker when reaching old age, or young age. Focusing on the similarities between milestones of each life, this seemingly perfect overlap of forward and reverse aging makes sense. It seems rational because so many parts of Benjamin’s hypothetical story are fairly similar to what many people experience in their own lives. He may be aging in reverse, but time is still moving forward and life is still going on.

 Many negative effects accompany life in reverse. Benjamin’s condition results in exposure to negative aspects of life that should not be encountered until adulthood. In Benjamin’s case, he is exposed to death at the beginning of his life; he grows up dealing with it as a frequent encounter. In a typical person’s life, this morose aspects occurs much later. A person is generally more experienced, mature, and responsible, allowing them to understand how to better cope with loss and pain. Benjamin grows up with limited knowledge of death, and learns by experiencing it second-hand. Along with early exposure to death, Benjamin is introduced to solitary periods in his life too early. Humans are social beings and therefore enjoy the company of others, but Benjamin does not have age appropriate friends. Because he is unlike other children, Benjamin often finds himself cast aside from the society he should be a part of. He is unable to connect with people his age because of his uncommon characteristics. He is forced to spend long periods of time alone because that is the negative aspect of the way he is subject to live. This early exposure is a negative side effect of life in reverse; some of the bad parts of life are introduced too early.

 When aging in reverse, all the negative aspects of life still remain. Benjamin has to journey on his own from the known to the unknown, fall in love and get his heart broken, lose friends and family members, and even endure being alone. Benjamin has to go from a place of comfort, familiarity, and safety, to begin a new journey, without anyone’s help. One of the scariest parts of life is the stage of ‘becoming an adult.’ Like everyone else, Benjamin reaches the point where he must go on his own into the unknown world. After working his first job, Benjamin joins the military and experiences more of the hardships of life. He sees the horrors that accompany war like so many other young adults do. Also, like many others in the world, he falls in love and has his heart broken a number of times. Benjamin experiences the pain of dealing with a broken heart. Along with this, Benjamin spends time alone at many points throughout his life. Every person’s life contains times when he or she must be alone, perhaps against their desires. In Benjamin’s case, he spends more than his fair share of moments alone. All the parts of life that are hard, that bring pain and suffering, still exist in this backwards life. Inverting the aging process does not stop someone from experiencing pain, from losing loved ones, and from having to be alone.

 Benjamin, just like every other human being, experiences some type of pain in his life. The reversal of aging is not the avoidance of suffering in a person’s life. In Mark Twain’s quote, the idea of reversing the way he ages is actually a way of expressing his desire to stop time, to stop aging any further than he already has. Twain was at an age where he knew death was approaching and was suggesting that if he could do it all over again in reverse he would live a much happier life. With this being said, starting life at an old age and living it in reverse is much different than aging in reverse after living a complete life. No one wants to accept the inevitability of death, as morbid as this thought may be. In the eyes of an old man, however, reversing time seems appealing; but once this idea is better understood, a life of aging in reverse seems more ordinary than extraordinary. No matter which way the aging process works, it is still not possible to stop growing older, or younger, altogether. A man aging in reverse is subject to the same troubles that accompany a man living an average life.

Seeing Benjamin’s life of aging in reverse can teach a person about the many important aspects of life. True happiness is found in the smaller moments of life: the smiles to a loved one, the lesson from a friend. Once a person accepts the inevitability of death and begins to live life in the moment, he is able to see the beauty in each day. Benjamin Button teaches the viewer that a person should live in the moment, recognize the world around them, try new things, and experience all that they can. The movie shows the viewer that life is special, and aging in reverse will not stop a person from getting older. It ultimately begs the questions: ‘how then shall we live?’ To answer this, one can look to Benjamin’s reflection toward the end of his life:

For what it's worth: it's never too late or, in my case, too early to be whoever you want to be. There's no time limit, stop whenever you want. You can change or stay the same, there are no rules to this thing. We can make the best or the worst of it. I hope you make the best of it. And I hope you see things that startle you. I hope you feel things you never felt before. I hope you meet people with a different point of view. I hope you live a life you're proud of. If you find that you're not, I hope you have the strength to start all over again.

He is saying that at any point in life, there is always a choice to change paths, to walk the road less traveled, to reach out to someone new. There is nothing preventing a person from restarting or changing any aspect of his life. Benjamin wants the viewer to understand that life is about moments, experiences, and relationships. His experience of a reversed life doesn’t change the way he understood life; he experiences many of the same things most other people do. Ultimately, Benjamin Button teaches the viewer to live in the moment, seize the day, and make a life worth living.