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The Curious Case of Benjamin Button: Short Story vs. Film

Though the film *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* was based on the short story of the same name written by F. Scott Fitzgerald, the two turned out to be very different. Aside from the fact that Benjamin grew younger as his life progressed, almost everything about the short story was changed in some when when adapted for the big screen, from his birth to his career to his relationship with Daisy. I believe director David Fincher had good reasons for doing this. In the following essay, I will highlight some of these differences and speculate as to why it was Fincher made the modifications he did.

It makes sense to first start with the differences of Benjamin’s birth. Unlike in the movie, in the short story Benjamin’s mother did not die when she gave birth to him and his father did not abandon him. By adding these two things, Fincher was able to highlight how different and unwanted Benjamin was, even by the person who was supposed to love him the most, his parent. It foreshadowed the fact that Benjamin’s life was going to be a difficult and unusual one, not just because of his condition but also because of the way some people would act towards him, and furthermore that his life would be filled with loss. Additionally, it heightened the drama in order to hook viewers from the start. Another difference about Benjamin’s birth was that while in the narrative Fitzgerald chose to have him come out of his mother a talking old man, in the movie he was born as a crying elderly baby. I think that Fincher made this change to make the whole situation a little more believable. It is easier in writing to be a little bit more vague than in movies and to leave thing more open to interpretation. While birthing an old man is in no sense a realistic occurrence, it would certainly be impossible for a woman to carry a full grown man in her stomach, much less to conceive one. This speaks to the nature of both the short story and the film. Fitzgerald wanted his version to be a bit humorous (as evidenced by the way Benjamin heckled his father soon after he exited the womb) while on the other hand Fincher’s goal was to create a drama. It is funny to imagine a woman walking around with a belly the size of an adult male. Fincher did not want this comicality in his creation, thus his reason for changing this part of the tale.

Next I will discuss Benjamin’s romantic relationship (Hildegrade in the short story, Daisy in the movie), or lack thereof. I say this because Fincher’s movie really revolved around the relationship between Daisy and Benjamin, while in Fitzgerald’s original version Hildegrade only represented one of many stages in Benjamin’s life. The contrast begins with the times in which the two met. In the narrative, Benjamin met Hildegrade at a dance when she was 22, while in the film he met her at the nursing home when she was only six. While both were “love-at-first-sight” encounters (at least for Benjamin), the two did not become intimate for a long time in the film, mostly because of the age gap. They also never married, as opposed to in the short story, where the two got engaged just six months after meeting each other. In both the story and the film, the couple split up, though for very different reasons. In the narrative, Benjamin lost interest in Hildegrade, and she did not appreciate his backwards and youthful growth. She moved away to Italy and the two lost contact. Not much of a love story. On the other hand, in the movie the love between Daisy and Benjamin never faltered. Yes, he did leave her, but he left her with her and Caroline’s best interests at heart, not because he became unattracted to her. He knew what was best for the two of them. He knew Caroline needed “a father and not a playmate”, so, in an exceptional show of unselfishness, he told Daisy she would be better off finding a new husband, and took off. This was undoubtedly the most depressing part of the movie. The whole time, I found myself rooting for Daisy and Benjamin, hoping that one day they would finally find themselves together. Then when it seemed like everything was going perfect, reality set in, and it became clear that it was impossible for them to stay with each other as spouses. The relationship between Daisy and Benjamin was pretty much entirely Fincher’s creation, since in the narrative it was not a huge part. He did a great job with it in my opinion. I do not think the movie would have been nearly as successful if the romance had not been changed from the way it was in Fitzgerald’s version.

Lastly, I will briefly review the differences in Benjamin’s career. They did not have a big impact on the main plot between he and Daisy, but they did make the movie a little more intriguing than it would have been had the changes not been made. First of all, in the narrative Benjamin worked for Roger Button and Co., the family business. I think I am in the majority when I say being a boatman is a much more interesting job than a man who works in a button factory. This change was made to make the film more engaging. Similarly, instead of taking up golf after leaving Daisy/Hildegard like he did in the short story, Benjamin traveled the world. Some golf fanatics may disagree, but in my opinion it was much more compelling as a viewer to see all the exotic places Benjamin went in the film than it would have been to watch him fade away on the golf course.

In summary, Fincher’s *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* and Fitzgerald’s were very different in many ways. Most of the changes that were made were necessary in order for the tale to work on the big screen. There are people who prefer the movie and people who prefer the story. In the end though, both conveyed the same message: no matter how life is lived, there will always be tragedies one must suffer through. The only thing one can do is move on.