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People Should Not Dread Old Age

F. Scott Fitzgerald was inspired to write the short story ‘The Curious Case of Benjamin Button’ when he read this famous quote by Mark Twain, “Life would be infinitely happier if we could only be born at the age of eighty and gradually approach eighteen”. Mark Twain is saying that people would be so much happier with life if they lived it backwards like Benjamin Button because the hardest part of life would come first, and people would end their lives in youthful bliss. This is disproved in Fitzgerald’s short story. Benjamin Button is born as an old man mentally and physically. He does not enjoy playing with toys as a ‘child’, he would rather smoke cigars and read encyclopedias. When he is young in years, he prefers to educate himself, and he likes just sitting back and reflecting on the world. As his life progresses he becomes more agile, more carefree, and he focuses more on living in the now. Superficially, it seems like Benjamin saves the best part of life for last, but when analyzed on a deeper level it is evident that this is not the case. His lifestyle is a lot lonelier and filled with much more heartbreak than someone might initially guess. He does not gain respect in society as he grows older, he loses it. He does not gradually come to understand what life is about, he becomes more confused by it. Most importantly, he is not able to form lasting connections with anyone because he is not able to evolve with them. As they are all evolving, growing, learning, and facing the world together, he is devolving, and, as said before, becoming more oblivious to the world around him. ‘The Curious Case of Benjamin Button’ proves that not only is life worth living after eighteen, the best is yet to come.

There are a lot of hard parts about growing older, but one of the good parts is that people have more respect in general for the elderly. It’s natural. They have been around longer, odds are they have a better idea of what they are doing than the people who have been around for less time. When a person gets older, people acknowledge and respect their opinions more. This is not the case for Benjamin Button. He enlisted in the military when he was technically in his thirties, but physically in his fifties. He fought in the Spanish-American War, quickly escalated to the rank of lieutenant-colonel, and gained honor and respect from his fellow soldiers. Years later when the United States enters World War I, he is called back to duty as a general. When he shows up nobody believes that he is the actual General Benjamin Button because he appears to be sixteen years of age and they have him registered as being closer to sixty. His subordinates laugh at him and his superiors call his son, Roscoe, to come pick him up and bring him home. He was ready to lead his troops into battle. He has gone through war before, unlike many of his fellow soldiers. He knows what it takes, but nobody cares because he looks sixteen. As a physical sixteen year old he is free from many of the responsibilities that come with being sixty, but that is not necessarily a good thing because now, with sixty years of life experience under his belt, not only is he ready for these responsibilities, he wants them. People often say that young people take their carefree lives for granted, but here F. Scott Fitzgerald is pointing out that as Benjamin is maturing and gaining life experience people are expecting less from him. He is ready to lead, he is ready to share his life experiences, but nobody is interested in listening to him. This kind of lifestyle is not rewarding or peaceful, it’s just frustrating.

Mark Twain wrote the quote mentioned earlier in the final years of his life. He was reflecting back on his past and looking back on the things he wished he could do again or the things he regretted not doing. This line probably came to mind because he thought it would be nice to end life living in the moment, as a children do, instead of ending life pensively and quietly reflecting on the past, as old people do. Reflecting on the past can be painful, but Benjamin is also missing out on a beautiful thing. He cannot, at the end of it all, reflect on the all the good times and the bad times came together to make him the person he is today. At the end, Benjamin is physically and mentally a child. He is not haunted by dreams of the past, but also he cannot remember “the wild charge at the head of his men up San Juan Hill; the first years of his marriage when he worked late into the summer dusk down in the busy city for young Hildegarde whom he loved; the days before that when he sat smoking far into the night in the gloomy old Button house on Monroe Street with his grandfather-all these had faded like unsubstantial dreams from his mind as though they had never been”. He forgets all the pain and regret of his life and lives contentedly in the present, but that means he is also giving up all the good memories. Is that worth it? Perhaps Benjamin has forgotten any mistakes or regrets in his past, but once people get to his age they realize how unimportant all those things really are, and they just treasure the good times. Benjamin cannot do that. When he is enlisted in kindergarten, he enjoys it because that is where he is at mentally, but when the other kids talk about what they will do when they grow up, “a shadow would cross his little face as if in a dim, childish way he realized that those were things in which he was never to share”. He cannot look back on his life and think about what it all means, but he also cannot look forward to the future. He is in this depressing middle ground where he really has nothing to look forward to. People say that when a person hits a certain age, their best years are behind them, but that’s just not true. Every stage of life has its ups and downs. Even though when people get older life starts slowing down, it is exciting to be able to have the time, perspective, and wisdom to look back, reflect on it all, and put it all together. That is how a person’s life should wrap up, not in a nursery playing absent mindedly with blocks and toy trucks.

Benjamin is a very successful, popular, and well-liked person in Baltimore society, but he could not be any more alone. He has no one who he is sincerely close to. All of Benjamin’s relationships with other people fail because of his reverse-aging. He falls out of love with his wife Hildegarde because she gets older, more tired, and she eventually wants to spend all her time tranquilly at home, while he always wants to go out on the town. They cannot grow old together because when she wants to retire and go vacation somewhere, Benjamin wants to go to college. His aging also causes a huge divide between Benjamin and his son Roscoe. Roscoe gradually has to take on a more paternal role in the relationship to the point where he has to sign his own father up for kindergarten. He does not respect his father. In fact, he resents his father for his aging and frequently refers to him as a “red-blooded he-man”, as if his aging was a lifestyle choice he made. Nobody understands Benjamin. They actually blame him for how he is aging, and he is often shamed for it. He never makes any real connections with anyone, and he ends his life very alone. So maybe it is nice to be Benjamin when he is the best looking youth at the ball at age sixty, or to when he is the star of Harvard’s football team at seventy, but it really is not much of a life because he’s alone through it all.

This backwards lifestyle seems nice when considering what it would mean physically; people would get stronger, more agile, and healthier as time went on. I am a person in the prime of my youth and it is somewhat depressing to think that everything goes downhill from here. It’s comforting when you are growing up to know that every day you are growing bigger, stronger, and healthier, but then when you finally peak and realize you will never be taller, healthier, or stronger than you are now, the horizon looks bleak. However, there is so much more to growing older than just what it means physically. Throughout life people gain experience, wisdom, empathy, and they grow to understand the world around them. Everyone starts as blissfully ignorant children and grows to become appreciative of the world around them. It is a long, gradual, but beautiful learning process that every person goes through in life. Everyone goes through this process together, evolves with those around them, and forms deep bonds with these people because of what they have gone through together. Fitzgerald’s story shows that life is about gaining wisdom and forming connections with other people; the glory days of youth are not the peak of a person’s life.