Frank Sommers 2/26/16

Prof. Little MONT 105Q

Curious Case of Life

In American society today, there is a strong emphasis placed upon the idea that we have the freedom to live our lives however we desire. When really thinking about this idea of independence, however, one can see that every person’s life is structured the same. You are born as a baby dependent upon someone else, you mature and become more independent, and then you slowly become dependent upon someone else again as you grow old. Mark Twain promotes an idea where if this structure of life were to be reversed, we would become infinitely happier. As seen in “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button,” living life in reverse brings about many challenges which would persuade someone to oppose Twain’s idea. Despite these challenges, I personally agree with this statement for several reasons as multiple positive opportunities would arise throughout the course of a person’s lifetime. If we were to live our lives in reverse to the natural order of time, our physical condition would not impede upon our ability to fulfill these opportunities in the journey of our lives.

Mark Twain writes that “Life would be infinitely happier if we could only be born at the age of eighty and gradually approach eighteen.” Twain is ultimately saying that if a man could have the wisdom he has at age eighty and the physical ability that he has at age eighteen, he would be much happier in life. Twain believes that the benefits of the youth are wasted on the youth. When you grow older and wiser, you are able to make smarter decisions and better choices but begin to lose the physical ability to perform certain tasks. Costly mistakes that are made by eighteen year olds could be easily avoided if life were reversed. Twain believes wisdom which would be accumulated over eighty years of life could be applied to your eighteen-year-old self when you are physically in the prime of your life.

I believe the film “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button,” opposes Twain’s quote about life to a certain extent. One example in which the film disagrees with Twain’s quote is how Benjamin does not die at age eighteen. Ben does end up living to age zero and goes through several pains which the elderly go through, such as dementia. The film makers did not agree with Twain on the idea that everyone would end up dying at age eighteen. They believed those final eighteen years would be lived out if one’s life were to be reversed, contrary to Twain’s idea of reversed life structure. In relation to Twain’s quote, Ben does not end up living a happier life than he would have if he went through the normal structure of life due to the challenges he faces from age eighteen to zero. Another example in which the film contrasts with Twain’s quote is I believe Twain is referring to all of humanity living life in reverse, not just one person. Benjamin was living a life of reversed time within a world of forward moving time. Just as it is in society today, everybody wants to fit in. Ben did not necessarily have a happier life by living backwards because he did not fit in. While everyone aged normally he had to deal with the abnormality of getting younger. Ben’s curve of life did not match up with everyone else’s curve of life, with of course the exception of a couple of years where there was a crossover. This would cause Ben unhappiness at the beginning of his life and again towards the end of his life. Specifically, in regards to Ben’s love Daisy. When they first met he was “too old” for Daisy and then later on in his life Ben was “too young” for Daisy. This caused Ben a great deal of unhappiness due to the fact that he was the only one living life in reverse.

I do, on the other hand, also believe the film “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button,” accurately portrays Twain’s quote to a certain extent. Benjamin is born with the physical traits of an eighty-year-old and the intelligence level of a baby. Twain is saying that if we could physically age backwards but continue to mentally age forwards we would be infinitely happier. Benjamin does just this and gets physically younger as his life progresses and matures mentally. Yes, Ben did have the struggle with loving his wife Daisy and raising his child, however, had everyone been living in reverse as well, Ben would have been a happier man. He gained a better sense of love and matured intellectually as his life went on. By the time he reached his physical prime of his twenties, Benjamin also had a greater level of intelligence and made better decisions. For example, Ben made the smart decision to leave Daisy so she wouldn’t have to raise two children by herself as Ben grew back into a child. Another reason in which the film compares to Twain’s quote is Ben continued to improve physically each and every day. Rather than Ben watching as his body decayed, he was eager and happy to get up everyday and check his physical improvement. This is a direct example of Ben becoming happier as his life moved in reverse to the natural order of time.

In general, I believe that if you took a survey asking the freshman on campus if they would be happy with their lives ending tomorrow, a strong majority would end up selecting “no.” This would lead one to believe that Twain was wrong in his idea about living life in reverse. However, Twain is not saying that each person will only live eighteen years of life and then pass away. Twain is simply stating that we would be happier if we lived our full lives, just in reverse order. We would still be able to experience love and happiness as our lives ran their courses. For me personally, ending my life with the intellect and experience of my eighty-year-old self and having the physical ability of my eighteen-year-old self would lead me to have a happier life. I would not be missing out on finding love nor would I be excluded from learning important life lessons, but rather would experience these moments while progressively feeling better about my physical self. Living life in reverse also would not prevent me from experiencing loss and pain that comes with living life normally. As seen in “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button,” Ben had been living his life in reverse but had experienced the hardship of having his heart broken by Elizabeth. Benjamin also learns his lesson about alcohol the hard way just as many young teenagers do. Just as Benjamin lived his life in reverse and was able to experience the fullness of life and everything that comes along with it, so would anyone else living in reverse.

Not to place a damper on things but it is a fact that no matter which direction we age, we are all headed to the same place in the end. On a tombstone, there are two years and a little dash in between separating these two years. It is this little dash that accounts for our entire life’s journey. Whether or not those years were reversed, flipped, or altered simply does not matter because it is that one little dash that shows who we are. “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button” is a great parallel to the Core Human Questions Cluster theme. How then shall we live, when the journey is more important than the destination? How then shall we live, when that one little dash means more than the numbers alongside it? Although I do agree with Twain and believe one’s life would be happier if we aged backwards, the real substance of one’s life still depends on what they do while they are traveling through their journey of life. As Benjamin traveled through the journey of his life, his final destination was the same as everyone else’s. It was his actions in between his birth and death that really shaped his story.

I originally believed “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button” was too long and several scenes could have been excluded by the director. However, after discussing the film in class and with the guest speakers from Professor Vineberg’s class, I have experienced a change of heart. I specifically argued that Elizabeth and Benjamin’s love scene could have been removed entirely. Looking at that scene now, it was a huge part of Benjamin’s life. Benjamin had fallen in love for the first time when he was with Elizabeth and in the end she threw his heart into the trash. Heartbreak is something almost everyone will experience within their lifetime. Just because Benjamin was living his life in reverse does not mean that he was exempt from these pains in life which ultimately complete one’s life as well. This was a crucial point in the coming of age of Ben as he began to realize life was not perfect all the time.