Life

Every part of life is precious. Life and those things found in it are valuable because they are either temporary or limited. Throughout the entire film, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, there is the constant reminder that “nothing lasts forever” whether it be through Benjamin Button’s loss of relationships, family or life. As everything is temporary or limited, we must value things for what they are, and not for what they will be. It is for this very reason that I disagree with Mark Twain when he says that life would be happier if we could begin at eighty years old and slowly progress to 18 years old. In wishing to progress to 18 years old, it appears that Twain assumes that at 18 years old we are the best time of our lives. However, to live and age in that way is to live unfulfilled life, and as the film shows, Benjamin Button’s life declined as he got younger, both for himself and for others. *Every* part of one’s life journey is important and any part of one’s life can be rewarding, and the best opportunity to live that fulfilled and happy life is to age normally.

Nothing lasts forever. This fact is frightening for all, but is also essential in teaching everyone the value of life and all that comes with it. *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* helps us realize just that. Benjamin begins his life as an old man, therefore he is raised amongst old people. Unfortunately, while he is just beginning his life, they are all ending theirs, therefore, as Benjamin says, “Death was a common visitor.” Benjamin sees dozens of people come and go, including many he comes to know as family. These experiences are a big burden for Benjamin but also a valuable one. Through these losses, his mother, Queeny, helps him understand the value of others when she says, “We are meant to lose people we love. How else would we know how much we love them?” As the plot unfolds, this theme continues when Benjamin loses his biological father, Thomas, and then Queeny herself. Every time he loses someone in his life, he realizes their previous value to him. He also initially loses the love of his life, Daisy, when he fails to bring her back with him when they meet in New York. This was also a loss for Daisy herself, and only once she loses Benjamin at this point does she realize how valuable he is to her life, thus prompting her to come back to him later on in the film. It is at this point that Benjamin says to Daisy, “I was thinking how nothing lasts,” clearly revealing that his unique life experience taught him the ephemeral nature of all things, most significantly life and all its stages. Even Daisy, who initially claims that “Some things last,” in response to Benjamin’s aforementioned statement, gains her own experiences and understanding overtime, and in her turn also solemnly states that “Nothing lasts.” We all come to learn the same things, but, as in the case of Benjamin and Daisy, sometimes we take different roads to do so.

Life itself is valuable, and so its stages. Therefore only when every stage of one’s life is properly valued by an individual can one’s life be both properly fulfilled and happy. Twain fails to take this idea into account. Twain claims that “Life would be infinitely happier if we could only be born at the age of eighty and gradually approach eighteen.” First of all, there is a clear bias present. Twain wrote this quote near the end of his life, when his physical health was most likely deteriorating, prompting thoughts of death and a general reflection of his life. Naturally, being near-death, Twain could only dream of reversing his current situation and going back to his younger years, which he likely thought were the best years of life. In other words, he believed that life would be best if we progressed toward what he considered the best part of our lives, rather than aging normally where we begin at the best and go on from there. However, Twain makes a great assumption, that our younger years are our best years.

Twain’s greatest assumption is also the greatest flaw in his idea. What he would claim to be the “best” part of one’s life, from the teenaged years into the twenties and thirties, may not actually be the most rewarding or fulfilling time of one’s life. This point is clearly supported by the life of Benjamin Button. For Benjamin Button, his physically young years are not the best years of his life at all. Benjamin reaches the top of his life’s arc in his forties, when he and Daisy are together, they have not yet had a child and his family responsibilities are limited because they have all passed away. However, as he gets younger, he realizes that he cannot be Caroline’s active father or else he will soon become another child Daisy will be forced to care for. Therefore he leaves his daughter and his wife, both depriving himself of his only family and the opportunity to raise a child. At that point, his life is so full of conflicting memories of loss, love, pain and happiness that he is no longer in his emotional prime. To make it worse, as he gets even younger he begins to forget Daisy and her value to his life, creating a depressing situation for both himself and Daisy. In short, the “best” time of one’s life varies for every individual, but typically it is associated with one’s best *emotional* state, and the happiest overall life is the one where that positive emotional state can be sustained or revived to make every part of life worth living.

Even if Twain’s great assumption were true, that the best stage of everyone’s life *is* one’s physically young years, then Twain’s belief that life would be happier faces another problem. The problem is that if we all knowingly live toward what we expect to be the best part of our lives, that risks to cause a devaluation of any and all experiences before that point. We may get impatient with our current life situation if we believe that better is to come, or fail to dedicate the proper time and attention to developing and fulfilling our lives before that point.

Aging normally is the most effective way to live life to the fullest and achieve the greatest happiness. First of all, when one ages normally, there is a comfortable amount of uncertainty as to when one will die, preventing one from feeling that life is a “countdown” to death. In other words, while a normally aging person may know that life does not last forever, that person can never know *exactly* at what age they will die. That uncertainty allows one to entertain the idea that life is eternal, allowing one to live in comfort rather than dread. When one ages in reverse, the end point is known concretely: one will die as a baby, as is shown in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, and no amount of imagination can prevent that knowledge from having a psychological effect on that person or others. It is clear, as we see Daisy’s dread magnify near the end of the film, that this knowledge that Benjamin is getting closer and closer to death as he gets younger and younger is taking an emotional toll on her. She knows when he is to die and all she can do is wait. Second of all, for a normally aging person, one’s later years allows time for reflection on one’s life experiences up to that point, and an accompanying opportunity to makes one’s life complete and fulfilled if it is not already. Reflection is often essential to human life, whether one is young or old. For example, Daisy’s time of reflection in the hospital of her own life as Caroline reads Benjamin’s diary is essential to her personal fulfillment, and it is important to note that she lets go of her life only *after* the Benjamin’s story comes to an end and her reflection is complete. If life goes in the direction that Twain would like it to, then people may get impatient to get to their “prime,” and would possibly waste the beginning of one’s life and thus have little to reflect and build upon later in life.

This time after one’s “prime” is also a time to complete what was never finished or started in one’s life. This life lesson, “it is never too late to start over,” is clearly articulated in the film. This optimism is essential to all life because everyone makes mistakes and has regrets. A lack of optimism to move on from such mistakes and regrets would result in an unproductive society than forever dwells in the past and does not build toward the future. This optimism also helps everyone realize that nothing in life is set in stone and things can always change. A prime example of this idea in the film concerns Benjamin’s first love, Elizabeth. As she herself recalls, she failed to swim across the English Channel as a young woman, and she did not have the courage to try again. However, decades later, in her *sixties*, she builds up the courage to try again and she is successful. Her accomplishment clearly reveals that it is certainly never too late for anyone to do anything they wish to do in life. As she herself says, “I suppose…anything is possible.” She achieved fulfillment and gave herself value later in life by completing what she started. Benjamin, in contrast, as someone who ages in reverse, has little to build upon after he leaves Daisy and Caroline. As Benjamin says at the beginning of the film, “All I have is my story,” and as he became younger, even if he wished to reflect on his life he physically could not, therefore the accompanying possibility to build upon his life also became impossible. Any and every part of one’s life can be given value, though one must be in a position to make that happen, Elizabeth was in that position, Benjamin was not.

Every life is short and comes to an end. It is often for these very reasons that we try to find the best way to achieve the greatest fulfillment and happiness in our lives. Twain suggests that the greatest happiness would come if we aged in reverse, as Benjamin Button does. However, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* brings to light the emotional challenges of aging in reverse and the value of aging normally for the progressive fulfillment of our lives through reflection and a positive mindset. Therefore, while progressing toward one’s physical prime may appear beneficial on the surface, true happiness is more surely found in progressing toward one’s emotional prime.