A Horrifying Reversal

The Dislocating Impact of Age Consciousness in "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button"

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Introduction

The rediscovery, and subsequent release of George Romero's public-service film *The Amusement Park* offers a timely reminder of ageism's longevity and of the way that aging in American culture is often paired with Gothic horror. Created in 1973 at the behest of the Lutheran Service Society of Western Pennsylvania – and then rejected because it was too radical – *The Amusement Park* depicts a widespread assault on older Americans by the younger generations – anything from fleecing them out of their once cherished possessions to coercing them into institutions that stigmatize and aggravate their physical incapacities. A metaphor for an uncaring and increasingly bewildering modern America, the amusement park renders its older visitors disoriented and lost, a process that centers on the film's narrator and only professional actor, Lincoln Maazel. This septuagenarian, responsible for communicating the film's central message about age discrimination, is forced to encounter his double – a battered, bloodied, disheveled version of himself that registers the film's many setbacks for its older citizens. Dressed in white, he is both spectral and a prominent victim, for, as Richard Brody notes, the film, and especially its setting, carries the "crucial implication

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that the social isolation of old age endures even in very public spaces" (2021). This estrangement is underscored by a series of "carnivalesque disturbances" (ibid.), Romero (already having directed *Night of the Living Dead* by this point) realizing that "the essence of horror isn't grotesquerie or gore but the sense of a world in dysfunction" (ibid.). Uncomfortable close-ups and jarring sound effects force the viewer to identify with the film's victims, to comprehend the multifarious ways in which an aged body is abused and made to feel superfluous.

This idea of dysfunction is also central to a short story published some 50 years before *The Amusement Park* and also about age or more precisely the, for many, terrifyingly uncontrollable process of aging. F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" (1922), by no means original in its employment of reverse chronology, postulates the frightening coincidence of extreme old age and childhood, playing on fears of congenital abnormality and the horror trope of the monstrous birth; and, in its preoccupation with time and the life course, reflects early 20th-century anxieties about both regulation and age consciousness.[2] As in *The Amusement Park*, the aged body, is viewed as contemptible, but here it is more unmistakably a freak, a *puer senex*, that disgusts and is rejected, its surprising proximity to childhood offering only a reminder of perceived similarities between senility and early infancy.

Often seen as whimsical and labeled by its author as one of his "fantasies" (Fitzgerald 2002: 6), "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" has an underlying gravity that reflects not the euphoria and optimism of the post-World War I years but, instead, a discomfort with the (at the time) recent recognition of life stages and a profound sadness at the loss of a generation of fighting men. And it achieves this in part through a horror pastiche, by embodying age in a way which renders it simultaneously disgusting and absurd because, after all, "Gothic formulas readily produce laughter as abundantly as emotions of terror or horror" (Botting 2014: 174). A diluted form of the "shudder art" (1983: 41) that James B.

2 On the subject of originality, Fitzgerald himself acknowledged that Samuel Butler had already created "an almost identical plot" (Fitzgerald 2002: 7) in his *Notebooks* (1912).

Twitchell sees as an intermittent barometer of society's fears and their resolution, "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" is, I will argue, not only unlike the stories of Fitzgerald's more usual social-realist mode, but also noticeably different from the handful of Gothic tales that feature ghosts or supernatural presences.

The acclaimed 2008 film adaptation of the short story, directed by David Fincher and with a screenplay written by Eric Roth, is also relevant here. Both departing from and extending the original in so many ways, this better-known version of the story nonetheless picks up on the connection between time/age and horror in frame stories that depict the unconscionable loss of life in World War I, and the ecological terror posed by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. In doing so, it highlights the way in which Fitzgerald's story was not simply a piece of escapism, an eccentric speculation but, beneath the sometimes-flippant tone of its narrator, a story borne of uncertainty and fear.

Age Consciousness

The transition to a life of increasing age consciousness at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th has been well documented, not least by the social historian Howard Chudacoff in his book *How Old Are You? Age Consciousness in American Culture* (1989). In a range of areas and ways, Chudacoff explains, Americans became more aware of distinct phases of life and, consequently, of peer groups, "institutionalized transitions […] replacing rites of passage and regularizing the process of role assumption" (1989: 27). An improvement in survival rates facilitated this, but the impact of the Industrial Revolution was also considerable. The new machine age brought with it a demand for greater productivity and a concomitant acceptance that those in what were considered their advanced years could contribute little and had to be removed from the workforce. The establishment of retirement, part of a newly separate period of senescence, was complemented at the other end of the age spectrum by the creation of the branch of pediatric medicine, the formal recognition of adolescence and, following the extension of edu-

cational provision to the young, greater differentiation between school year groups, culminating in the creation of the junior high school. Beyond school, societies and organizations like the YMCA cemented the idea that the young had their own spheres of interest that required their own time and space; they could no longer be lumped together with adults in an attempt to accelerate their development and propel them into the world of work. Time, too, took on a whole new meaning. The increased regulation of working hours inevitably affected leisure time, more people relying on clocks and watches to set their routines than on daylight hours. And the passing of extended periods of time was marked by the more frequent observance and celebration of birthdays and other anniversaries.

Fundamental shifts in concepts of age and time were, then, altering the lives of individuals and the American population as a whole. While these changes lent greater clarity to the life cycle, a reassuring sense of shared experiences between peers for some, there was also the more unavoidable realization that a life was being measured in terms of usefulness and that its final phase could, with little state aid for the elderly, be precarious. Additionally, the way in which the phase of senescence had been determined by medical practitioners – by emphasizing the inevitability of ever worsening physical infirmities and the probability of mental decline – meant that the respect older Americans had previously commanded was being challenged, making way, certainly by the post-World War 1 years, for the veneration of youth. As Kirk Curnutt explains, "the 1920s associated maturation with decline and fretted over what experiences could render one 'old'" (2007: 30). F. Scott Fitzgerald was at the center of this – fretting, yes, but also riding high on the wave of his youthful celebrity and creating characters for whom the pursuit of hedonism was a natural affirmation of their immature outlooks. For, "age was his chief index of integrity" (ibid: 29) and a constant reference point in Fitzgerald's frequently overlapping life and fiction.

Outside of "Benjamin Button," the Fitzgerald story most concerned with age consciousness and the policing of age-appropriate behavior is arguably "At Your Age". Published in 1929, this often overlooked tale of a middle-aged man, Tom Squires, and his on-off relationship with a much

younger woman, Annie Lorry, perfectly captures the conflict between societal prejudices to age difference and the individual's fluctuating belief in both his own vitality and his ability to offer experience and protection as a compensation for lost youth. The very title of the story implies that there is something undignified in an older man's pursuit of youthful relationships, and yet Tom seems unable to help himself as his first encounter with a blonde sales assistant in a drugstore, through to his reunion with Annie after a brief separation, shows. Moreover, following the aforementioned emphasis on productivity, the protagonist views his life in phases and with cut-off points: "'In ten years I'll be sixty, and then no youth, no beauty for me ever any more'" (Fitzgerald 1989: 486). Like a working life, his romantic career will cease at a precise point, leaving him dead to anything he values. As Tom sets about exploiting this last lease of romantic life to the full, "relishing the very terminology of young romance" (ibid: 490), Fitzgerald uses the seasons to show not a late blooming but a desperate clinging to a prolonged winter. It is already summer when Annie's inevitable drift towards more youthful companions occurs and Tom has his epiphany: "Tom realized with a shock that he and her mother were people of the same age looking at a person of another." (ibid: 493) The pursuit of youth has blinded him to the obvious, and the age consciousness of the time has left him looking foolish. Tom's only consolation is now nostalgia: returning to his childhood haunts, as he does at the end of the story, and locking in the memory of his three months with Annie Lorry – proof that he has been "used up a little" (ibid: 494) before death.

"At Your Age" is not a Gothic story but it satirizes the way that society views significant age difference in romantic/sexual relationships as monstrous, and its very precise classifications indicate just how far age awareness had permeated the population. Tom Squires is only fifty, but, with "his cheeks a little leathery and veined" (ibid: 487), he cuts a lonely figure, despite the considerable wealth he has accrued since the war and his earlier reputation as a highly eligible socialite. And it is this isolation that Fitzgerald exposes so poignantly in the brief final section of "At Your Age," conceding, as he does, the idea that there is a "penalty for age's unforgivable sin – refusing to die" (ibid: 494).

Echoes of the Gothic

Fitzgerald's Gothicism mainly stems from his use of ghosts, supernatural presences, and unnerving settings in the later sections of his narratives. "The Ice Palace" (1920) and "A Short Trip Home" (1927), for example, explore familiar themes of romance and social class before abruptly shifting into scenes of terror, bewilderment, and spectral possession. "One Trip Abroad" (1930), a story of gradual dissipation and boredom away from America, takes an eerie turn in its final paragraphs as its central characters, Nicole and Nelson Kelly, realize that the shadowy couple they have intermittently seen throughout the story are their doppelgängers, confirming both their togetherness and their social isolation. The Gothic impulse is restrained in all of these stories and yet it can make the writing seem forced, as if a final effect or scene is trying to surprise or shock the reader almost at the expense of narrative coherence. Preferring the wider, catch-all term of "fantasy," many of Fitzgerald's critics have, according to Derek Lee, "ignored these works or regarded them as side experiments in didacticism, allegory, and nonsense, rather than as a serious aesthetic strategy" (2018: 126). Lee himself tries to resurrect Fitzgerald's "latent supernaturalism" (ibid.) in the belief that it is entirely consistent with the influence of various forms of Romanticism on the writer and with the purpose of revealing "the social excesses of modernity" (ibid: 133). If Fitzgerald's Gothic stories are clichéd or over the top, it is, he maintains, because the form demands them to be, the logical conclusion of this being the denouement of "One Trip Abroad" in which "the corruption of a Romantic ideal into Gothic blight is so excessive and lurid that only a supernatural epiphany can rectify what standard didactic storytelling cannot" (ibid.).

Though he considers Gothic elements in the longer fiction – *This Side of Paradise* (1920) and *Tender is the Night* (1934) – Lee overlooks "Benjamin Button," only noting Kim Sasser's magic-realist reading of this story which brings together irony and horror. Sasser herself acknowledges that "Benjamin Button" has "a peculiarly ambiguous relationship with literary classification" (2010: 181), hence her willingness to find connections between the various genres of American fable, fairy tale, fantasy,

and satire. Magic realism, Sasser argues, provides a single framework for the interpretation of a story that carries no authorial comment on its supernatural events. Ultimately, though, Fitzgerald's social critique lies behind the story's playfulness, his target being, according to Sasser, the upper class and its obsession with reputation. While we might expect characters, including his parents, to be "absolutely dismayed at Benjamin's ontology" (Sasser 2010: 196), they are, instead, worried about how his inexplicable abnormality could derail their success and blemish their status within the upper echelons of Baltimore society in which the story is set. This highly plausible reading of the text means that the reverse chronology of Benjamin's life is an implicit questioning of Neoliberalist progress: social complacency might be concealing the fact that advancement is, in truth, a form of regression. Yet the parity Sasser finds between technique and purpose does not explain the value of time and age per se, only the ways they symbolize the failures of the most socially privileged.

Fitzgerald's own account of the origins of "Benjamin Button" would seem to support both an attack on social pretension and a questioning of the different life stages. In *Tales of the Jazz Age*, he admitted that the story "was inspired by a remark of Mark Twain's to the effect that it was a pity that the best part of life came at the beginning and the worst part at the end" (Fitzgerald 2002: 7). A humorist known for his witty remarks and opposition to discrimination and inequality, Twain seems to be highlighting a curious given and a manmade injustice. Even from his 19th-century perspective, he can surely see beyond biological decline to society's stigmatizing of those no longer automatically respected for their experience and acquired wisdom.

Fitzgerald converts this prejudice into horror, albeit with a light touch that suggests perversity and freakishness rather than genuine supernatural eeriness. The uncanny spectrality of the Gothic stories mentioned above is supplanted by a cringeworthy corporeality in "Benjamin Button," by – following Xavier Aldana Reyes's recent redefinition of the term – a form of body horror. Expanding its usual designation of extreme mutilation in splatter movies and splatterpunk, Aldana Reyes proposes five distinct, but potentially overlapping, forms of body horror,

the grotesque being one of these and the most pertinent here. This variation of the subgenre is, according to the critic, "productively separated from other manifestations of body horror because its 'monstrous' bodies are intelligibly human, their 'otherness' a gross extension or exaggeration of the normative body" (2022: 112). As we will see, a character like Benjamin Button is abject rather than abhuman, his "gross extension" being the oscillating captivity of youth and age in respectively contrasting bodies, a violation of natural laws that is bizarre and puzzling rather than fantastic or supernatural.

Fitzgerald's story takes the simple but unexpected conceit of a life lived backwards, one which begins inauspiciously in 1860 and ends quietly in 1930, Benjamin Button having become a baby with little sense of the world around him. At each stage, this trajectory records how Benjamin is out of step with those who should be his peers. He is, for example, chased out of Yale by hordes of mocking students who view his attempted registration as an act of willful lunacy. Similarly, his army commission is greeted with incredulity at every turn, from the military outfitter to the colonel who sends him home. Usually, Benjamin is a hapless victim, visibly too old or too young for a situation, but in his married life we see how age first works to his advantage and then how he responds to its negative signs, having been infected by society's assumptions and prejudices with regard to age discrepancies. Benjamin marries Hildegarde Moncrief who is "beautiful as sin" (Fitzgerald 2002: 182) and the daughter of General Moncrief. While Annie Lorry seems merely to accept the temporary affections of Tom Squires in "At Your Age," Hildegarde offers a very full justification of her attraction to mature, fifty-year-old men: "'You're just the romantic age,' she continued – 'fifty. Twenty-five is too worldly-wise; thirty is apt to be pale from overwork; forty is the age of long stories that take a whole cigar to tell; sixty is – oh, sixty is too near seventy; but fifty is the mellow age. I love fifty.'" (ibid: 183) The irony that Benjamin is only twenty at this point is not lost on either him or the reader. Nevertheless, Hildegarde's classification flies in the face of convention as the extraordinary public and media outcry at their engagement proves. And it is not reciprocated by Benjamin himself. Predictably, he loses interest is his wife, finding her physically and behaviorally dull

and his home a stifling prison from which he must escape. Once Benjamin's champion, Hildegarde drifts out of the story and has no part in his second childhood.

Monstrous Beginnings

Fitzgerald's narrator employs the opening section of his story to suggest the monstrously unnatural and to satirize the quintessential Gothic birth. The split between home and a more public space, one which the story consistently makes, underscores the idea that there is a proper, natural place for childbirth (although this may change over time) and that the Buttons have injudiciously ignored this. Moreover, home, where the birth should have occurred, is then, following the instructions of the nurse, to be a site of concealment and privacy in contradistinction to the openness and visibility of the medical establishment. Benjamin is a monstrous mistake that needs to be hidden away but not destroyed: "'This is your child, and you'll have to make the best of it'" (ibid: 172–3), the nurse comments somewhat accusingly. Yet Benjamin has, of course, to be transported home and this provokes further horror, this time in the mind of his father: "A grotesque picture formed itself with dreadful clarity before the eyes of the tortured man – a picture of himself walking through the crowded streets of the city with this appalling apparition stalking by his side." (ibid: 173) Following the lead of the physician and nurse, Roger Button internalizes a sense of both shame and outrage; his own son, for whom he has harbored lofty aspirations like a Yale education, is an aged doppelgänger, part of a Gothic nightmare built on the inseparability of public scorn and abnormality ("appalling," "stalking").

A cluster of references to time – "As long ago as 1860," "fifty years ahead of style," "one day in the summer of 1860," "this anachronism" (ibid: 169) – knits together chronology and the unusual, both distancing us from the events (supposedly occurring 60 years before the story is written) and drawing us into a world where time is a new imperative. The narrator, rooted in the chronopolitics of 1922, is, understandably in a reverse fictional biography, preoccupied with sequencing and correlating

Benjamin's actual age with his physical one. This continues throughout the story's eleven sections, but is especially noticeable at the beginning where time, abnormality, and reputation/status coalesce to create overwhelming feelings of disgust and anger. As a first-time father, Roger Button is understandably nervous.[3] His apprehension is heightened, however, by the family physician, Dr Keene, who is first glimpsed "rubbing his hands together with a washing movement" (ibid.). Physically and metaphorically abnegating his Hippocratic responsibility, the doctor, like the nurse Roger subsequently encounters, is moved to irritation and a feeling of being unfairly imposed upon. The tone is one of humor, created by "a satirical-comedic [narrative] voice" (Curnutt et al 2009: 5), exasperated comments, quizzical facial expressions, and even slapstick in the form of a basin slipping out of the nurse's hands and dropping down the stairs, yet the language also captures a sense of effrontery and horror. The doctor is, as befits the story's title, initially noted as having "a curious expression" and as "throwing a curious glance" (ibid: 170), as if his own demeanor has been upset by the unprecedented birth over which he has presided. This, though, soon gives way to "a perfect passion of irritation" (ibid: 170) and a feeling of indignation (the blustered "outrageous" is echoed by the nurse, ibid: 170 and 171).

Parodying the foundational Gothic birth, that of the creature in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Fitzgerald emphasizes a nascent hostility to old age and an increasing anxiety about aging into irrelevance in the 1920s sensibility. Where Victor Frankenstein is crushed by "the accomplishment of my toils" (Shelley 1996: 34), an unsightly and apparently lifeless Adam that symbolizes both the scientist's misguided overreaching, the "ardour that far exceeded moderation" (ibid.), and genuine 19th-century fears about infant mortality and congenitally cursed children, Roger Button, enjoying the highest of social and financial privileges, is made to feel that a much longed for parenthood is a cruel joke. Personal shame engenders the instinct to reject, even to walk away. Incredibly, Frankenstein interprets a detaining hand as an act of aggression and

3 The birth of the Fitzgeralds' first and only child, Frances Scott (Scottie), on October 26, 1921, is often overlooked in relation to this story.

takes "refuge in the court-yard belonging to the house which I inhabited" (ibid: 35) – noticeably not a bona fide home, either, and a symbol of the scientist's repudiation of domesticity. Mary Shelley leaves us in little doubt that he is attempting to extricate himself from a problem – "the demoniacal corpse to which I had so miserably given life" (ibid.) – of his own creation. Similarly, Roger Button, solely influenced by the physician's disbelief and anger, is reluctant to go to the hospital and only mounts its steps with "the greatest difficulty" (Fitzgerald 2002: 170–1).

Both writers use attempts at speech as a means of reinforcing strangeness and to insist on their thematic concerns. Frankenstein's creature, born without the power of recognizable language, nevertheless opens his jaws and mutters "some inarticulate sounds" (Shelley 1996: 35) accompanied by a grin that "wrinkled his cheeks" (ibid.). With less conviction, we are told that "he might have spoken, but I did not hear" (ibid.). Fear and the father's determination to reject combine to nullify communication, no matter how unintelligible. Later, of course, in his own narrative, we learn how articulate the Noble Savage has become as he locates and expounds, with admirable honesty and sensitivity, on the trauma of being spurned by a parent. Here, though, the uncertainty of communication seems more attributable to Frankenstein's unwillingness to allow the creature a voice which might assert his humanity; and to a conviction that this travesty of a creation is innately malevolent as evidenced by the grin that noticeably wrinkles an already unsightly appearance. The seeds of revenge and destruction, important themes in *Frankenstein*, are already sown in these quick, judgemental encounters.

In Fitzgerald's story, Benjamin disarms – and makes a comic situation still more absurd – by speaking assuredly of the indignities he has encountered already: the interminable howling of babies and the inadequate blanket in which he has been swaddled. Though his voice is "cracked and ancient" (Fitzgerald 2002: 172), Benjamin is able to repeatedly express the stereotypical impatience of an older person in an unfamiliar milieu. Humorously unexpected and lucid, his objections allude to an increasing separation according to age – in particular, perhaps, the growing tendency to place older citizens in poorhouses or the relatively few nursing homes that existed when Fitzgerald wrote the

story. Further, Benjamin's unwelcome presence in the hospital indicates an increasing discomfort with age in a period, the 1920s, when youth was garnering so much appeal; and his desire to extract himself and have his comforts and frailties at least recognized points to the more visible age stratification affecting American lives from approximately 1850 onwards.

The speech, or attempted speech, of a newborn is, by definition, unnerving, further reminding the reader of the simultaneity of age and extreme youth, and of the conspicuous absence of innocence. Labeled an "imposter" (ibid.) by his father, Benjamin is no changeling, the presence of which can be attributed to supernatural factors; rather, he is, as the nurse confirms, Mr Button's burden, and, more figuratively, the focus of anxieties about time's new importance and how it was profoundly continuing to redraw intergenerational relationships in the early part of the 20th century.

Losing a Generation

Mark Twain's fanciful invitation to rearrange the life cycle so that we can better enjoy our advanced years takes on new meaning in the aftermath of World War I. The immediate relief at the cessation of hostilities was qualified by dislocation and uncertainty: the realization that the war signified an irrevocable break with the past. Unofficially, Fitzgerald became part of the Lost Generation, one of a group of writers, that included Ernest Hemingway and Gertrude Stein, whose work reflected the vacuum and indirection at the heart of Western culture. Unable to imagine the full carnage of war, Fitzgerald "concentrates on the bitter peace" (Meredith 2004: 165), especially, as James H. Meredith notes, in another story from *Tales of the Jazz Age*, "May Day" (1920), nominally about "prosperity impending" (Fitzgerald 2002: 61) but actually concerned with the aggression that war has "unleashed at home" (Meredith 2004: 176).

Published just four years after the end of the Great War, "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" mentions three conflicts – the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, and World War I – but at no point does the

story explicitly gauge the toll these take on American life. The Civil War, ostensibly the reason for transporting us back to 1860, creates a minor subtext of slavery and difference. The war preoccupies Baltimore society at a time when awkward questions might be asked about the Buttons' progeny that would affect their standing. It also clarifies Roger Button's glib racism as, speculating on a journey of shame past the slave market, he expresses the wish of "a dark instant" (Fitzgerald 2002: 173) that his son was black. Benjamin's bravery and rapid promotion during the Spanish-American War of 1898 lead to his World War 1 call-up and a prized commission as brigadier-general. At this point, though, Benjamin's younger physical age makes his authority preposterous and he is literally stripped of his uniform.

The character's motivation for, and non-participation in, the Great War parallels Fitzgerald's own experience. Just as Benjamin views combat as a means of escaping his suffocating home life (especially his marriage), so Fitzgerald willingly enlisted to avoid further failure at Princeton. The novelist was about to depart for France when the war ended, denying him the heroism he also sought. It seems likely, though, that, following his experiences at various training camps, Fitzgerald would have proved a less than competent officer. Jeffrey Meyers, one of his biographers, talks of a military life characterized by "escapades and disasters" (2000: 39), and, more damningly, spells out the writer's ignorance: "Fitzgerald, who was extremely self-absorbed, had no serious interest in or understanding of the greatest historical event of his lifetime: World War 1." (2000: 34) Meyers refers, by way of support, to the strikingly brief section labeled "Historical" in the second chapter of the loosely autobiographical *This Side of Paradise* where the narrator's "studied indifference" (2000: 34) to what he dismisses as "an amusing melodrama" (Fitzgerald 1995: 58) is all too apparent.

Though "Benjamin Button" glosses World War I, it does so because its protagonist's physical and chronological age are both outside of the parameters set for active service and not because the war is either too irrelevant or too horrific to contemplate. Yet the conjunction of war and age is a moot one: a youthful generation was decimated by the bloodiest and most protracted of conflicts. A life lived in reverse, one that has

the good fortune to elude the horrific (predominantly European) sacrifice, approaches and harnesses youth in the face of historical inevitability and, in the process, once again indirectly highlights the salience of time and age differentiation. Behind Fitzgerald's fantastical premise is a desire to privilege youth but also to reverse history itself.

This is something that assumes a more romantic dimension four years later in *The Great Gatsby* where the deluded hero believes not only that time can be reversed – to a point preceding Daisy's marriage to Tom Buchanan – but also that he can create a facsimile of the past. Indeed, even in a state of heightened anxiety, Gatsby symbolically controls time, catching Nick Carraway's mantelpiece clock during his awkward first reunion with Daisy. Of more direct relevance here, though, is David Fincher's film adaptation of "Benjamin Button" which completely alters the timeframe of Fitzgerald's story. The Armistice that signaled the end of Fitzgerald's own military pretensions becomes the commencement of Benjamin's initially inauspicious life, and celebratory fireworks light up the night sky as Mr Button first runs to the birth of his child (in the family home, not a hospital) and then seeks a means of disposing of him. The end of World War I is the distraction the Civil War provides in Fitzgerald's story, except here almost no one at this point knows of Benjamin's existence and the viewer has not even been privileged with a glimpse of the baby hidden by its blanket. It is not an ironic counterpoint to disappointment and death (Mrs Button dies in childbirth) because of the film's other frame story: the building of a new train station, complete with a new clock, in New Orleans (where this version of the story is set) also in 1918.[4] Mr Gateau, blind but the greatest horologist in the South and still grieving the death of his son in the war, creates a timepiece that moves backwards to resurrect a generation of young men: "I made it that way … so that perhaps the boys that we lost in the war might stand and come home again …" (Roth 2008: 40). Granting his wish, this story subsequently includes footage of ammunition leaving soldiers' bodies and returning to weapons – proof that art can salvage life and manipulate

4 This story is narrated by Daisy, Benjamin's former lover, before Caroline, their daughter, reads Benjamin's journal and before we, in turn, hear his voiceover.

time in the way that Twain theorized and Fitzgerald realized in his short story. The practicality of timekeeping in the modern age, as necessary at a train terminus as anywhere else, is juxtaposed with a fantasy that encapsulates one man's grief and a nation's loss. The element of horror that the original short story circumvented by having Benjamin miss the war is manifest here and compounded by the reaction of the gathered crowd. Instead of being moved by Mr Gateau's story, the people do not know how to react, caught as they are between respect for the dead and outrage that the new clock does not function properly. In this way, then, Roth and Fincher are able to tease out of Fitzgerald's story the writer's critique of the hegemonic centrality of time and his unstated lament for a lost generation of men for whom youth was barely experienced.

Born in 1918 in Fincher's film, Benjamin Button simultaneously connotes, in his aged incarnation, the unattainable life beyond youth for so many World War I soldiers and the bewilderment of the postwar years – a pervasive disenchantment that Fitzgerald felt more acutely than the horrors of the war itself and which, of course, was most powerfully captured by T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, published in the same year as the original short story. Fincher's film, though, neither begins with Benjamin's birth nor concludes with his death. Instead, advancing events to just before the film's creation, we follow the dying moments of Benjamin's former lover, Daisy, as she lies in a New Orleans hospital bed while Hurricane Katrina rages outside. Daisy's death is a formality but what is less certain is whether, as the custodian of Benjamin's story, she will survive its retelling.

Katrina echoes the tempestuous, action-packed life at the center of the film. It further justifies the switch in setting from antebellum Baltimore in the story to post-World War 1 New Orleans in the film. Aside from the dramatic tension it brings, the hurricane's main function, however, seems to be to offer some larger correlative – ecological, climatic – to the extraordinary events of the protagonist's life. Apocalyptic, the freakish storm tears apart a world that has ignored climate change, a city that has become complacent about flood defences, and a nation dismissive of social/racial inequality. Though the characters in this frame story – Daisy, Caroline (Daisy and Benjamin's daughter), and

Dorothy Baker (a care worker) – have little sense of the hurricane's full impact, the way in which it will strengthen further beyond the running television news reports in the background, the privileged viewer knows the likelihood of evacuation, the huge death toll, and the magnitude of a salvage operation that will, in time, effectively see the city reborn. It is a horror narrative that complements the unpalatability of Benjamin's birth and his initial warehousing in a home for the elderly; it is also a lugubrious counterpoint to the tender but doomed love story that emerges as the central focus of the film – a very different relationship to the faltering marriage of Benjamin and Hildegarde in the original story.

In another respect, too, the environmental disaster is a tenuous link to Benjamin's life or, rather, the end of it. Both story and film move swiftly through the final years, arriving at an uncomfortable predicament pairing youth and memory loss. In the story this is not explicitly dementia, more the welcome departure of "troublesome memories" (Fitzgerald 2002: 194) and then the lyrical fading of "unsubstantial dreams from his mind as though they had never been" (ibid: 195). In the film, though, this fortuitous release is made more painful by Daisy's visits to a young Benjamin clearly living with the early stages of dementia. The viewer witnesses his destitution (he has been found living in a condemned building), incapacity, and seeping memories via another person, namely the love of Benjamin's life who, in a neat twist, has temporarily become the mother he never had. In the story, by contrast, Nana, a nursemaid, is now "the center of his tiny world" (ibid: 194), but she has not been mentioned before and the narrator continues to focus on Benjamin rather than give us access to her thoughts. Crucially, the film suggests that, old or young, dementia may be an inevitable final stage, ultimately an aphasia that connects youth and age.[5] The concurrent hurricane underscores the popular fear that aging and the neurological diseases that might be associated with it have become so visible in the 21st century that they warrant alarmist Gothic language and meteorological metaphors – silver tsunami, silent killer, Alzheimer's epidemic, for example.

5 The screenplay makes this explicit when Benjamin is described as "like an eight year old, or an old man old with onset Alzheimer's" (Roth 2008: 203).

Conclusion: "What horrible mishap had occurred?"

On a personal level, the polarization of youth and old age left F. Scott Fitzgerald in a double bind. The "enculturated pursuit of youth" (Curnutt 2002: 30) afforded a tremendous sense of well-being alongside commercial opportunities: the chance to spin further a youthful credo to like-minded consumers.[6] Equally, its brevity – youth appeared to be more compressed than ever – was destabilizing amidst a lingering sense that, for all their vital presence in the music, fashion, and social mores of the time, the young still had to defer to their *betters*. In the same year that "Benjamin Button" was published, 1922, Fitzgerald penned an article for *American Magazine* in which he confessed to an age-induced vulnerability or over sensitivity. "What I Think and Feel at 25" is written with a tongue-in-cheek tone but, nonetheless, it registers both pessimism and resentment that seniors run the world and do so with the "ponderous but shallow convictions" (Fitzgerald 2005: 25) of their heightened wisdom and experience.

Neither pure whimsy nor a fictional representation of Fitzgerald's views, "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" is an amusement park of sorts, a hall of distorting mirrors through which its protagonist is ridiculed and rejected for his asynchronous existence, for his inability to integrate consistently and meaningfully into the spheres of public and private life. Perplexed in the extreme – "What horrible mishap had occurred?", "Where in God's name did you come from?" (ibid: 170 and 172) – Benjamin's father even imputes that supernatural forces must have been at play that would utterly justify the abdication of parenthood, although this, as we have noted, is somewhat misjudged. Given no diagnostic explanation for Benjamin's strange condition, we nonetheless recognize that the entrapment of extreme youth within extreme age is not so much

6 Fitzgerald's understanding of his market is evident in a letter of May 11, 1922 to his editor, Maxwell Perkins. Of *Tales of the Jazz Age*, he confidently asserts: "It will be bought by *my own personal public* [original emphasis] – that is, by the countless flappers and college kids who think I am a sort of oracle (Fitzgerald 1964: 158).

a depiction of the "outright fantastic" as a means of contemplating that which might more prosaically "threaten to exceed and transform the apparently inviolable cohesion of our physical state" (Aldana Reyes 2022: 112 and 107).

While it is true, as Scott Ortolano contends, that, despite aspersions and handicaps, Benjamin finds a way to get on, to become "a kind of proto-businessman… an embodiment of the efficient business ideology that was driving the economic production of the 1920s" (2012: 133), this means of surmounting alterity is necessarily evanescent, a passing consolation in the inexorable passage of time towards youth and extinction. On attaining extreme infancy, Benjamin enjoys a tranquility of not remembering, the words "no," "not," and "nothing" (Fitzgerald 2002: 195) creating a rhythm, a lullaby of calming absence. His enterprise and his wartime bravery fall away as easily as if they had never been, making his biography a fable, a passage of years without enduring legacy. His end is a harmonious one sharply at odds with the panic and anger that accompanied his birth, but his physical youth has, finally, been no more rewarding than that of his shocking maturity. As Rachael McLennan notes, the story (unlike its film treatment) "withholds happy resolutions and is unsparing in its treatment of Benjamin" (2014: 642).

The protagonist is, as the full title of the story and film would suggest, a curiosity: a medical/psychological conundrum or a mystery to be solved. For all the personal involvement its biography-cum-case study seems to invite, however, "Benjamin Button" dramatizes more allegorically the way in which time, the aging process, and age stratification have altered priorities, bringing about a realignment of households, schools, workplaces, and a rethinking of peer-group relationships – a cultural shift from a time, before 1850, when "age was more a biological phenomenon than a social attribute" (Chudacoff 1989: 9). Benjamin's dislocation registers the confusion of a period, in the 1920s, when thoughts of longevity and the promise of youth were compromised by the two great killers of the preceding years: the Great War and the Great Influenza Epidemic; it also acknowledges retrospectively the more accelerated journey to modernity, with all its exigencies, that transformed the second half of the 19th century.

David Fincher and Eric Roth move beyond this pivotal period in their film adaptation, stretching Benjamin Button's life across the still more rapidly evolving 20th century, a time in which largely uncontested and embedded age classifications have arguably created a greater chasm between old age and youth. Certainly, the film's casting and special effects, emphasizing a physical beauty in Benjamin that is nowhere present in the story, would seem to valorize the latter in much the same way that Fitzgerald and popular American culture did in the 1920s. Despite this, Eric Roth's screenplay also reaches for a moral message beneath its surface texture, trying to locate an overarching significance to the mishap that is Benjamin's life. Its regrettably anodyne and "folksy maxim" (Curnutt et al 2009: 7) – steered towards an audience largely unfamiliar with Fitzgerald's story – that life, however experienced, is about controlling time and destiny to ensure optimum fulfillment, only serves to underline the importance of the original Benjamin's true historicity, the horror of his victimhood in an age when life stages in America "were being defined with near-clinical precision" (Chudacoff 1989: 52).

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