

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button: A Psychoanalytic Approach with Reference to Personality Theory

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Abstract - The film *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* an American fantasy romantic drama is set in Baltimore, Maryland during the time of U.S Civil War. The opening scene shows an old woman breathing her last moments in her death bed. There is also a constant alarming arrival of the Hurricane cautioned to the public which in turn reflects the mental trauma of the characters who will be undergoing constant uplifts and breakdowns in their life. The major characters of the film Benjamin Button and Daisy takes us through a roller coaster ride throughout the entire story. The characters become the unconscious voice of the audience. Is it the characters that dive into the psyche of the audience or is it the audience who delve into the mind of the characters becomes the major question? There is a constant throw from one to another. The character Benjamin Button reflects the elements of Personality Traits viz., Id, Ego, Superego. Benjamin Button a young boy carrying an old man's physical appearance with a mind of a pre-teen goes through constant trauma of unexplained mental and physical exploitation. Born with a body aged threescore looking like an old man waiting for his turn while inching his way to the grave, turns strong and young as he grows. With the mental ability of a mere seven-year-old kid he had to pretend to be wee matured old man of seventy.

INTRODUCTION

An American fantasy romantic drama *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* is set in Baltimore, Maryland during the time of U.S Civil War. The opening scene shows an old woman under medication awaiting her last moment in her death bed. There is also a constant alarming arrival of the Hurricane *Katrina* cautioned to the public which in turn reflects the mental trauma of the characters who will be undergoing constant uplifts and breakdowns in their life. The film can be analyzed through a psychoanalytic approach where the audience takes a pensive dive into the minds of the characters swimming through the conscious and the unconscious fears and conflicts that alter their personality.

Psychoanalysis is an analysis of the mind or the psyche. Psychoanalytic Theory is a theory about the organization of a personality which guides psychoanalysis, a clinical method, through personality development. *The Oxford Dictionary* defines it as " A therapeutic method, originated by Sigmund Freud, for treating mental disorders by investigating the interaction of conscious and unconscious elements in the patient's mind and bringing repressed fears and conflicts into the conscious mind." Here, the theory aids in analyzing the characters individually and collectively. The major characters of the film *Benjamin Button* and *Daisy* takes us through a roller coaster ride throughout the entire story. Benjamin Button is a baby born to Mr. Thomas Button who abandons the infant because it was born with the appearance of an elderly man, a disease named as "Progeria" which causes reverse aging. the character Benjamin was born old with the appearance of an elderly man aged seventy and odd but as the years roll he transforms into a young man year after year where he meets people of various kinds.

November 11, 1918 the World War I ends. The war between countries have ended but a new war had begun. A war unseen by human eyes. A war fought within the mind of a young boy for the rest of his life. The war between the body and the mind. The war between the physical maturity and the mental ability. With the mental ability of a mere seven-year-old kid he had to pretend to be wee matured old man of seventy. The film perfectly projects the mental trauma and the suffering the child undergoes at every age. Though his appearance shows him as an old man matured and well acquainted with life, internally, he is still a young boy new to the world who longs to live a simple, normal life like others. growing up in an old age home his childhood teaches him more of aging experience and death.

“Benjamin, we’re meant to lose the people we love. How else would we know how important they are to us?” (Grandma Fuller)

The character *Benjamin Button* reflects the elements of Personality Traits viz., Id, Ego, Superego. Freud's most enduring idea was the human psyche or the personality of an individual. His personality theory structures the psyche into three parts known as "The Tripartite" or "The Id", "The Ego" and "The Superego" respectively.

The Id is known as the primitive component inherited at birth which contains all the biological instinct that include the life instinct, The Eros and Libido, and The Thanatos. The Id operates on the pleasure principle which is impulsive and unconscious part of the human psyche that respond immediately to achieve its demands. Benjamin in an instance in the middle of the night was invited by Daisy to join her in playing under the table when Daisy's grandmother reprimands her and tell Benjamin,

"You should be ashamed of yourself" (Grandma Fuller)

His childhood is being torn here. He is expected to live beyond his age due to his appearance. This incident shows how he struggles to balance his Id and Ego.

The ego is "that part of the Id which has been modified by the direct influence of the external world." (*Freud, 1923, p. 25*). The Ego mediates between the primitive instinct of demand over the external real world.

“Life can only be understood looking backward. It must be lived forward.” (Benjamin Button)

This so much reveals the entire content of the plot line to the audience at the beginning. When Benjamin gifts Daisy a flower bouquet for her stunning performance in ballet dance, he was invited by her to join them in a party host in celebration. Being addressed as the Daisy's grandmother's friend by one of her friend and seeing Daisy dance with the other folks Benjamin's jealousy kicks in. Although his instinct urges him to react to the situation he collects himself together and walks out quietly. This instance shows how the Ego of Benjamin controls him over his Id instinct. According to Freud the Ego is "like a man on horseback, who has to hold in check the superior strength of the horse (The Id)." (*Freud, 1923, p.15*)

The Superego incorporates the values and morals learned from the parents and the others which normally develop during the phallic stage (Age 3-5). Benjamin learns his morality values from Queenie, the

nurse of the Old Age Home. Queenie is found to be a woman of high spirit and extremely pious. She takes her adopted son Benjamin Button to a preacher to pray for her son and also for a baby for which she's been waiting for a real long time. Late she was gifted with a girl child and says that the Lord had heard their prayers. When she takes Benjamin as an infant from the porch of the nursing home she says "You are as ugly as an old pot, but still a child of God" (Queenie)

This explains her intense faith on god and her belief on miracle because she keeps saying

“You never know what's coming for you.” (Queenie)

She also determines to make Benjamin understand that he is not just an ordinary child instead he is a miracle from God who is special and unique in every way possible. These personality traits together make one formed human being.

Is it the characters that dive into the psyche of the audience or is it the audience who delve into the mind of the characters becomes the major question? There is a constant throw from one to another. The characters become the unconscious voice of the audience. Benjamin Button a young boy carrying an old man's physical appearance with a mind of a pre-teen goes through constant trauma of unexplained mental, emotional and physical exploitation. He can be seen as a confused teen who undergoes an intense identity crisis. He moves to work in a tugboat captained by Mike Clark. Though his sexual attraction on women grew more and more his love for Daisy remains the same.

Birth and Death is a part of life. A person is determined to die the moment he is born into the world. From the first breath until his last breath every individual in this world each second is inching their way towards the grave in which they rest in eternal peace. This is the underlined universal truth of every creation. Born with a body aged eighty, looking like an old man waiting for his turn while inching his way to the grave, turns strong and young as he grows. Not many are born old and die young. Those who do witness death for the rest of their life. Though some might consider aging as a curse on oneself while trying to turn back time resulting in vain, the main character Benjamin Button of the film walks in the opposite direction.

One might consider becoming young as you grow old as a boon or a blessing but one should be strong

enough to witness the death of the loved ones as you walk away from it.

“She taught me to play the piano, and what it meant to miss somebody.” (Benjamin Button)

"Things were becomin' different for me. My hair had very little grey and grew like weeds. My senses of smell was keener, my hearin' more acute. I could walk further and faster, while everybody else was agin', I was gettin' younger... all alone!" (Benjamin Button)

"Would you still love me if I were old and saggy?" (Daisy)

"Would you still love ME if I were young and had acne? When I'm afraid of what's under the stairs? Or if I end up wetting the bed?" (Benjamin Button)

The uncertainty on life and love dawns on Benjamin. It pushes him to the edge where he decides to walk away from the woman he loves and his daughter Caroline. His uncertainty whether he would be a perfect father forces him to leave.

"You were right; I couldn't have raised both of you. I am weak." (Daisy)

Benjamin lives a life of scattered emotions and unexplainable trauma while Daisy lives an unrealistic life until she realizes her place in the design. Screenplay writer Michael Green puts forth as "the fractured soul." The pride was shattered when she was met with an accident where her leg got twisted and she can no longer dance the way she would. She was lost and confused until she started her own dance studio training young girls for ballet. The studio was not only a place for training but also the closed mind of Daisy after Benjamin abandoned her and her daughter. She was left unaided and helpless. That is when she meets and exchanges vows with a widower who looks after Caroline as his own. Daisy meets Benjamin in the same dance studio years later. The building remains the same but the minds of the people have changed and life has to move on. This incident reminds of the quote by Benjamin Button when he returns to his home to Queenie after his service in the U.S. Navy at the end of the World War II.

“It’s a funny thing coming home. Nothing changes. Everything looks the same, feels the same, even smells the same. You realize what’s changed, is you.” (Benjamin Button)

Here, it is not just Benjamin who has changed but people he loved too.

The film is not only about a single boy and his endeavor against all odds but also carries a social

image upon itself. The old Daisy in her death bed in the hospital awaiting her last moment replenishes her memories as she requests her daughter Caroline to read Benjamin's diary. Moments earlier to that, she narrates a story of the Clock designed by Mr. Gateau best clockmaker hired by the train station. The clock ran backwards to which the entire public was shocked. Mr. Gateau says that he made this clock in memorial of his son and the others who dies in the World War I. This clock not only remains as a memorial for the dead soldiers but also an unrealistic wish wishing for them to come back and live their un-lived life. This clock ironically represents the major character Benjamin Button whose life runs in reverse. Years later in 2002, the reverse clock was replaced by a digital clock. The final scene of the film ends with Benjamin's voice narrating about the people he knew and loved and that there is a purpose for everyone who were brought into the world. The clever portrayal of the clock at the beginning of the story and towards the end gives the story a complete incompleteness.

"Some people were born to sit by a river, some to be struck by lightning, some have the ear for music, some are artists, some swim, some know buttons, some know Shakespeare, some are mothers and some people dance." (Benjamin Button)

REFERENCE

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