

# A Jungian Analysis of Ageing in the Movie : *The Curious Case Of Benjamin Button*

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## **Abstract**

David Fincher's 2008 movie *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, loosely based on F. Scott Fitzgerald's short story of the same name, traces the fictitious story of 'Benjamin' born with the physique of an old man who undergoes 'reverse aging' in the course of his life. The protagonist, contrary to normal human beings, is seen to apprehend the fact that his physical self gets younger when he grows old. The concept of 'staying young' is a beauty standard that people around the globe have maintained at all times. But in Benjamin's case, he dreads 'youth' since the younger he looks, the older he gets. The paper is an attempt to explore the struggles of the protagonist in embracing his physical self and mental age simultaneously despite his abnormalities and to study his aging process in the light of Jungian psychoanalysis stressing on the concept of 'individuation' and the idea of 'healthy aging'. The psyche of the protagonist is implored according to Jung's ideas of analytical psychology, a holistic approach regarding the development of the psyche, throwing light into the character's acceptance of the different stages of his life by undergoing the process of 'individuation'. Ultimately; both, the characters aging normally as well as the peculiar protagonist who undergoes reverse aging, are seen to be embracing 'death' - the inevitable truth.

Key words: Youth, Reverse aging, Jungian, Analytical psychology, holistic, Individuation, psyche

In today's world, the human race is obsessed with the idea of 'staying young'. For accomplishing it, people are ready to go under the knife innumerable times. Virtually, every public figure, from politicians to actors to TV talking heads have had "work" done to their face or body. It's all about the look and the image, not about the experience and wisdom behind the eyes. With enough money, we can create a whole new person out of ourselves. We live in a society where

beauty is defined by one's youthfulness. In this context, the movie *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* is a contradiction since, in it, the condition of growing younger is being dreaded by the protagonist because the younger he looks, the older he gets and his mental age is not keeping up with his physical age. Along with studying the protagonist's struggle to embrace his physical self, the paper analyses the psyche of the character by applying Jungian psychoanalysis and attempts to examine whether the ageing process of Benjamin was successful or not.

*The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* is an American romantic fantasy drama film directed by David Fincher. The screenplay is written by Eric Roth and Robin Swicord and the movie casts the film stars 'Brad Pitt' as the protagonist and 'Cate Blanchett' as the love interest throughout his life. The film received thirteen Academy Award nominations, including Best Picture, Best Director for Fincher, Best Actor for Pitt and Best Supporting Actress for Taraji P. Henson; and another three for Best Art Direction, Best Makeup, and Best Visual Effects. Based loosely on F. Scott Fitzgerald's short story of the same name, the movie *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* traces the story of Benjamin who is born with a peculiar condition which makes him age in reverse. Blaming him for his mother's death at childbirth and considering him a monster because of his physical condition, he is abandoned by his father and later grows up in an old-age home. In his teens when he is able to walk fairly enough, he embarks on different journeys and has

varied experiences and meets different people and lives in different conditions. The story of his life forms the crux of the movie.

The director, in the movie, is trying to portray how the society gives too much importance to physical beauty through Benjamin's story. Even though he is a toddler, nobody plays with him since he is seen 'old'. We see Benjamin longing to play with them but he is physically unfit for it and struggles to maintain his physical and mental age simultaneously. People treat him like an old man and the first person to treat him differently was Daisy who was then a ten year old girl. Only she understood Benjamin's inner self and they played together like normal children. When Benjamin tells Daisy that he is not really as old as he looks, Daisy tells him: 'You don't seem like an old person...' This shows that despite his physical self of an old man, Daisy has managed to understand him. Another character who understands Benjamin's inner-self is Elizabeth with whom he has an affair in the earlier stage of his life. For Benjamin, Youth, even though it boosts his confidence in the beginning, turns out to be a nightmare. Even though he is happy that he is getting younger, he understands that he is getting older mentally. In one instance he says: "While everybody else was aging... I was getting younger... all alone...". In another instance, while the woman who taught him the piano was cutting his hair, she tells him that she feels sorry for him since he would have to watch all his loved ones die before his eyes. It is only at that moment that Benjamin realizes this truth and he keeps quiet. The words of the woman instill fear in his mind. We can see the horrifying dread in his words and the condition he is going through. 'Youthfulness', a phenomenon which everybody craves for, becomes the villain in Benjamin's case. As he grows to the size of a toddler, he is diagnosed with 'Dementia'. This shows that getting younger is not everything that is needed for life. Physical youth has nothing to do with successful aging.

Carl Jung can be regarded as a founder of the psychology of adult development and ageing.

Psychoanalysis is a set of psychological theories and therapeutic methods which have their origin in the work and theories of Sigmund Freud. Jung who initially worked with fellow psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud later took different paths, with the former disagreeing with Freud's emphasis on the influence of biological factors such as libido on human behavior and personality. Instead, Jung looked at areas of the mind that constitute the psyche, and the manners in which they influenced one another. Jung proposed that our personality develops over a lifetime and is composed of an unconscious that consists of two layers. The first layer called the personal unconscious, essentially the same as Freud's version of the unconscious, contains personal memories which we are unaware of possessing, often as a result of repression. The second is the collective unconscious, a level of unconscious shared with the members of the human species that comprises the latent memories of our ancestral and evolutionary past; 'The form of the world into which a person is born is already inborn in him, as a virtual image' (Jung, 1953, p. 188). According to Jung, the human mind has inborn characteristics "imprinted" on it as a result of evolution. He called these ancestral memories and images 'archetypes'. For Jung, the primitive past becomes the basis of the human psyche, directing and influencing the present behavior.

With growth in age, individuals begin to reflect on their beliefs and life accomplishments. "A succinct definition of Analytical Psychology is that the human psyche moves toward reaching the state of being what one was meant to become, that one achieves a resolution of opposing forces, drives, attitudes, etc. within oneself and begins to understand the meaning of one's life. The application of Analytical Psychology deals with human psyche (which includes consciousness and the personal and the collective unconscious) as an inherent urge toward wholeness, i.e., to reach the state of being what one was meant to become" (Whitmont & Kaufman, 1973, p. 116). According to Carl Jung, Individuation is a process of psychological differentiation and development of consciousness,

having for its goal the development of the individual personality. Generally,, it is the process by which individual beings are formed and differentiated; and particularly, it is the development of the psychological individual as a being distinct from the general, collective psychology. By transforming one's personality to reach a higher level of consciousness, self-realized Individuals become aware of their unique innate potentials, that which distinguishes them from the collective i.e. the others. Besides achieving physical and mental health, people who have advanced towards individuation tend to become harmonious, mature and responsible.

Jung believed that by attaining the qualities of an archetype from the collective unconscious, we repress those attributes of our true self which do not conform to the archetypes. To achieve individuation and bring out our true self, he claimed that we must 'integrate' them by allowing them to surface from the shadow and coexist with the ego or true self. Individuation has a holistic healing effect on a person, mentally and physically. The individual, who is the indivisible whole being, is made complete when he accepts and integrates all aspects of his personality, realizing in the process that contradictions are complements. Benjamin is a strong character who always keeps an open mind and uses each encounter as an opportunity to soften his heart. He makes the best of bad situations and does not allow them to depress himself. He demonstrates an equanimity that enables him to handle failure and success, defeat and victory, with calm. One of his favourite mantras is "You never know what's coming for you." It is best to see everything as a mystery that need not be solved or explained and we have to just live in the present moment and relish what it presents you. A sense of keen observation and wonder is a trademark of Benjamin's personality. As a man-child in the house for the elderly, he listens to the house breathing. As a child-man he enjoys the start of the day looking out over the water just like his father did. Benjamin learns how to let go and not to cling to anyone: "We are meant to lose the people we

love. How else would we know how much they meant to us?" From the beginning to the end, this character tries to be himself, accepting his flaws and celebrating his strengths as a human being: "It's never too late or too early to be whoever you want to be."

According to Jung, one ages successfully when he/she accepts the past, adapts to physical decline, and copes with the loss of significant others. Benjamin, even though he has this peculiar physical condition, does not stop believing in himself or remains depressed. Thus, we can say that he has undergone the process of individuation by accepting every stage of his life and living them to the fullest. He overcomes his drawback by moving forward in life with determination. With his physical condition, he did not hesitate to have relationships with women. His first affair was with Elizabeth Abbott who was in her forties, the wife of Walter Abbott -Chief Minister of the British Trade Mission in Murmansk. Then he had many affairs with different women but he found his true love in his childhood friend, Daisy. People like Elizabeth and Daisy, his foster mother Queenie and his friend Mr. Oti understand his inner self thus identifying his true beauty. Queenie accepted him when even his father abandoned him. A difficulty which Benjamin faced is that he is not compatible with his lovers in terms of both maturity and physicality at the same time. Taking the case of Elizabeth, he was physically middle-aged but in reality in his twenties. Whereas with Daisy, he was comparably equal and both were in their forties but only at a particular point in life. In the end of the movie, we see him leaving Daisy and their child to lead a different life. He also does not get a chance to see his daughter's growth. Benjamin's dreading of his growing younger reaches at its peak during this time when he realises he will not be able to live with Daisy and their child. He tells Daisy: "I want to be father... not a little brother... I do not want to be picked up from elementary school by my kid... I do not want anyone babysitting me..." Even though he is unable to live with Daisy and the child for the rest of his life and moves on to lead a different life, he has lived every stage of his life to the fullest.

Against the widely held belief that events of decisive importance for the formation of an individual's personality occur only within the first two decades of life, Jung recognized that momentous psychological changes can happen during the second half of life as well. Later years of one's life are often a time for increased interiority and introspection. In the movie *The Curious case of Benjamin Button*, we see instances that glorify old age and encourage people to celebrate rather than despise it. To mention one instance; from Elizabeth's achievement at the age of sixty-eight, we understand that anything is possible and age is just a number. She who tried to become the first woman to swim across The English Channel at the age of nineteen and failed, was able to do it in her old age. In another instance when Thomas Button says he is sorry hearing about Benjamin's condition, Benjamin guilelessly replies: 'No need to be. Nothing wrong with old age'. In another scene when Benjamin hesitates Daisy's advances, she asks him: "Do you think you are too old for me... I've been with older men..." From her words, we can infer that age or physical beauty is not a barrier to anything including relationships. The main aim of one's life should be to utilise the maximum out of the time we get to spend on this earth. To quote the protagonist Benjamin: "I figured out one thing. If you're growing older or getting younger it really doesn't make any difference. Whichever way you're going you have to make the most of what this is". Thus Benjamin has undergone the process of individuation and accepted him as he is; considering Jung's belief that each individual must accept all parts of him/herself in moving toward wholeness and unity with all things.

Jung often describes the first part of life as the 'morning life' and the second half as its 'afternoon'. Jung's opined that the second half of life must not be governed by the principles of the first half of life; that the afternoon of life too is full of meaning as the morning, only its meaning and purpose is different. Jung offers a positive, life-enhancing approach to aging in which psychological and spiritual development is

possible across the life span. People in the second half of life can work toward the possibility of continuing creativity and fulfillment, and deepening of spirituality. The key is to turn inward during the second half of life. It is a journey of self-exploration and inner discovery that Jung called 'individuation'. We can discover and build our inner life, opening ourselves to new ideas and experiences, continuing to grow and learn as we age, leading to a new sense of meaning and purpose in our lives. This process of looking inward can open us to new ways of thinking about ourselves, our identities and the past and lead to the formation of new values and aims that can bring vitality and energy to our lives as we age. We can be open to conscious grieving and let go of goals that we did not achieve earlier in life. We can re-focus our energy on things that we can still achieve during the second half of life.

"Thoroughly unprepared, we take the step into the afternoon of life; worse still, we take this step with the false assumption that our truths and ideals will serve us hitherto, But we cannot live the afternoon of life according to the programme of life's morning: for what was great in the morning will be little at evening and what in the morning was true will at evening have become a lie. I have given psychological treatment to too many people of advancing years, and have looked too often into the secret chambers of their souls, not to be moved by this fundamental truth", (Jung, C., cited in Singer, 1972, 417-418.)

Changes are expected and normal in the latter part of life, and are part of what Jung meant by 'reversal into the opposite'. Jung (1969) referred to the last quarter of life (extreme old age) with these comments: We descend again into that condition where, unworried by our state of consciousness, we again become something of a problem for others. Childhood and extreme old age, are utterly different, and yet have one thing in common: submersion in unconscious psychic happenings (p. 403). This means that the last

stage of a person's life (old age) is similar to the first stage (childhood) and when applied to Benjamin's case the only difference is that the stages are reversed. By taking a holistic approach, we can come to the conclusion that Benjamin has successfully undergone the process of healthy ageing.

Moreover, the movie brings into light the ultimate reality that youth is transient and everything is subject to decay. Death is the ultimate truth which consumes everything. 'Benjamin' who aged in reverse, as well as normal humans, embraced death in the end. No matter how we strive to maintain our beauty and youth, ultimately it is subject to decay. There is a conversation between Benjamin and Daisy as follows:

BENJAMIN (CONT'D): Nothing lasts...

DAISY: Maybe some things last...

BENJAMIN: I've never seen anything not come to an end...

DAISY: Maybe it's something you can't see...

The movie teaches us that we have to cherish each and every phase of our life which is beautiful and unique in its own way. Childhood, teenage, old age- every stage of one's life has its own beauty.

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