

THE INFLUENCE OF NONLINEAR TIME

FROM

“THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON”

BY

YI -CHUEN LIU, JHIH-SIANG HU, YAN-WEN CHEN,

PEI-SHAN HSIAO & PIN-YAN LIN

ADVISER: PORFESSOR WAN-HSUAN LIN

Yuanpei University of Department of Applied English

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Committee member

and Advisor

Director of the

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Abstract

This is a story that describes a man who was 70 years old when he was born. Actually, he was just a normal child like others, but his appearance was that of an old man.

So, he started his life in a difficult position. His looks reversed from an old man to a new born baby, and then passed away. His mother was dead while he was born, so his father thought that it was his fault, and then his father left him in the front of a rest-home. Fortunately, a black couple adopted him, so he grew up in the Home for the Aged until he left this place to go sailing.

After he came back, he met Daisy again. They associated for a long time and had a girl. When Benjamin's mien became younger, and Daisy became older, he thought he would encumber Daisy, so he left her. But, he died beside her at last.

In this story, we can learn so many lessons from his story, no matter that of life, aging, social contact and so on. Most significantly, the movie offers a peculiar picture of time. Time is endless in the universe. If time does not exist, then nothing will be in motion. Some thinks that time has no beginning and end. We can only feel the move of time as our body experiences some physical changes. Human beings have to invent various timing tools, among which clocks rank as the most used, to keep track of time. Clocks showed up in the 15th century, but they did not tell the accurate time until the minute hands were introduced in the 18th century. Now we can acquire what time it is with every electronic product everywhere.

INTRODUCTION

“Life would be infinitely happier if only we could be born at the age of 80 and gradually approach 18” from Mark Twain.

Human beings did not use clocks to measure their time before the industrial revolution. Their sense of time came about as a result of observing natural phenomena such as the vicissitudes of seasons and the movements of sun and moon. Industrial revolution was also the time when the notion of linear time rose. Linear time is carried out into modern beliefs. However, it differs slightly from Christian time, because it extends before and beyond the human. The image of time has become the marching on of minutes, hours, and days. The movie *“The Curious Case of Benjamin Button”* provides many descriptions of time which contradict with the common understanding of linear time. We will explore these plots to see what possible ways of conceiving time and the related understanding of life stages can be thus configured. Most people tend to live their lives according to certain set timetable, doing the same thing at the same time. Such understanding of time rules our lives. When the clock is turned back, they might be confused and do not know how to live. Since Benjamin, the leading character of the movie, lives his life “backward,” he is relatively unaffected by the common notion of linear time. In this movie, we can see that the notion of linear time which maintains everyday life will also be disrupted during disasters. The movie

reveals that we will be forced to gaze upon each stage of our lives if we break away with the assumed timetable generated by the notion of linear time. We will try to figure out what kind of new understanding of time and life stages, recasting the meanings of youth, aging, and love. Our understanding of time has been mostly confined by the linear time. We want to give a more adequate definition of time by perceiving what possible feelings or perceptions can be liberated once such concept is reshaped.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Isaac Newton believed that time is a concept of universal or absolute value. As early as 35 million years ago, we have been under the reign of the time while humans were supposed to dominate the world. However, our time might have always been a kind of illusion and is actually nothing by itself. Time has no beginning and end (Zebrowski 80). Even if you do not use a clock to measure time, it still exists and continues into the future. It was in response to certain need of human society that the idea of measurement was added to the “bare” time. Ancient people began to attach importance to the time in agrarian times. They used sundials to measure the time. Clocks with hour hands were not introduced into the human society until the industrial age in the 15th century when people the invented watches (Gunnell 44-45). The invention of the clock enabled people to measure time meticulously to and to improve their planning capacities. For example, beginners for music used a metronome to help them keep track of rhythm steadily while playing music; voyagers relied on accurate clocks to identify heading and location; the age of steam trains took advantage of the clock to unify time zones to avoid delays. People’s desire to measure the time has led to the evolution of technology and science.

Human being feels the time passing because our biological clock has been changing and each person's body has a certain biological law. Humans have full energy in their young age; after the ravages of time, their bodies became weak and infirm in their old days. Our bodies resemble a kind of clock, set by evolutionary circumstances to a certain biological rhythm.

Today our lives are supposed to follow a strict schedule. For example, it is generally held that we need to go to school before 20 years old and work until 60 years old. Life is like a routine; every day we work according to timetable we set. However, with dramatically disrupted sequences of time, we might have different perspectives of how life should be. Lipovetsky has made a similar statement: "If one day your life is reversed and you will review the death and it shows that without properly aging, life can be very confused. 'Benjamin Button' reminds us that age is not everything but a number" (Lipovetsky 1-2).

According to the above arguments, we can say that since time is closely related to our lives, different awareness of time might lead to different configuration of life. Humans use a variety of ways to measure and demonstrate the existence of time. In my opinion, life is just a beginning; we should focus on every moment in process of life, rather than the result. Last but not the least; the most important thing is not the passage of time, but the experience of spirit and growth.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Human beings did not use clocks to measure their time before the industrial revolution. Their sense of time came about as a result of observing natural phenomena such as the vicissitudes of seasons and the movements of sun and moon. The rise and fall of the sun especially served as the phenomena by which people measured the pass of time.

The notion of linear time came about after the industrial revolution. With the invention of the clock and the later advancement in clock-making technologies and accuracy, the measuring units spelt out by the clock seem to get into more and more aspects of our life with a very far reaching influence. Our understanding of time has since then been strictly regulated by the concept of linear time; however, such understanding can be very limited.

What we mean by linear time is a concept which arose after the Industrial Revolution. This idea is used to designate how the life of people, now considered as workers, should follow contain phases pre-arranged by the whole social system which proceed contain rigid order. For example, kids are supposed to receive education so that he will learn whatever a worker needs to know. When he comes to certain age, he should get a job become a useful citizen, then he should get married to reproduce future workers for the society. After working for an approved period of time, he has to

retire and lead the rest of his life on pension. In other words, his whole life is integrated into a linear schedule support the industrial society even before his birth. How a person spends his day is also supposed to follow a linear schedule. That's why we say the main target with which Benjamin's reversed life has a dialogue is containing idea of linear time.

By exploring Benjamin's peculiar reversed life which in a sense breaks away with the idea of linear time discussed above, we attempt to map out the effects exerted by different time frames on ways of living. World War Two and the Hurricane Katrina mentioned respectively at the beginning and the closing scenes of the movie can be read as powerful forces which shatter the notion of linear time which will usually be stuck to in normal conditions. Thrown into a chaotic situation, what matters will be how we choose to live our lives instead of what the calendars or clocks tell us to do. In other words, while following the idea of linear time probably makes it easy to live an overall pre-arranged life, people tend to leave aside the significances of each stage of life until they are forced to face them in extraordinary conditions such as natural disasters. When people are unable to abide by daily routine which provide their ways of living with certain rigid framework, they have to start to think about how to survive in such new situation and to use various ways to learn a variety of life experiences. Benjamin's reversed life exemplifies the effort of human being to feel his way in a

world of non-linear time, which paradoxically reveals a fruitful way of making the most of one's life. It can be deducted that stuck in our daily routine though, our attempt to take an adventure by leaving the constraint of linear time aside might lead to our productive reconsideration of what the true meaning of life is.

TEXTURE EVIDENCES

In the beginning of the movie, Daisy, who is in her late years, decides to reminisce about and relish her time spent together with Benjamin before her death. Her story starts from the part in which a blind clockmaker who manufactures a station clock moving in a reversed course in memory of all the brave soldiers who has lost their lives World War I, among which his son is a member. The very clock turns out to be a symbol of Benjamin Button's reversed life, which begins immediately after the episode of the clockmaker. His story gradually unfolds as Daisy's daughter, Caroline, is told to read the diary he kept when he was still alive to her mother. As she goes through each chapter of Benjamin's' diary, it seems that a time capsule buried decades ago has eventually been dug out and opened. The memories from the past mix with the moments of the present, creating certain fantastic but perplexing effect on Caroline, who is supposed to the daughter of Benjamin and Daisy. As audience, we are also deeply engaged in such peculiar arrangement in which different courses of time, that of dashing into the past conjured up by Benjamin's diary and that of moving forward to the pending flood which hits where Daisy stays at the end of the movie, and take hint of what it means to deviate temporarily from the linear order of time, getting to reflect on what effect such deviation might have on our understanding of different stages of life.

To view Benjamin's life on a large scale, his birth as a baby with an eighty-year-old appearance and his death with the look of a new-born baby. The extremes of life ultimately meet no matter in what order has the course of life proceeded. Juxtaposing this part with the regular appearances of the hummingbirds in the movie, we might reach the conclusion that instead of proceeding exclusively in a linear way, life could trace of the configuration of the symbol of infinity, " ∞ ", which generates as many paths as possible at each point of the figure. Something about the hummingbird is that, unlike the rest of its feathered relatives, it is able to fly forward and backward. It can even stay in the air by flapping wings or steer direction suddenly. The appearances of the hummingbird in the movie serve as certain metaphor with the implication that life can be made different once we break away with the rigid mindset of what time should be. Instead of moaning about how time moves forward so fast and letting our life revolve around this assumption, we can create paths of flight by exploring the possibilities of an alternative picture of time.

At a family reunion, Benjamin's foster mother announces to the crowd the news of pregnancy. Benjamin seems to be pretty lost on hearing the news, for he will no longer be the only child his foster mother cares about. It is thus clear that in spite of his appearance of an old man, Benjamin is spiritually still a child who is worried about falling from grace because of an expected baby. This part of the plot shows that

what defines youth might be the inner state of mind rather than the physical appearance. In the spiritual level, Benjamin, like everyone else, grows up gradually from the state of total innocence to that of sophistication. His first journey out of the house by himself in his childhood is featured by his intense curiosity about everything the outer world presents to him. The episode in which the captain takes him to the brothel for his first sexual experience also reveals that his apparent appearance of an old man does not prevent him from looking for adventure in every aspect of life like a teenager.

Benjamin and Daisy meet each other again in their middle ages when their respective time courses finally intersect and his physical appearance parallels hers. They fall in love with each other and spend the most beautiful time of their lives together until Daisy is pregnant. Daisy's pregnancy forces Benjamin to face the reality that while Daisy is getting older, his aging process takes the opposite path. Even their deep love is unable to prevent him from gradually becoming Daisy's burden. So he sold the factory his father left to him, leaving all his property to Daisy and his daughter, and left them without a word. Afterward, Benjamin lives out the remaining years of his life wandering all over the country and keeps a journal about what happens in his life. Benjamin's choice to leave his love of his life tells us that his mind is much more mature than his young looks, which testifies again to the fact that what

determines a stage of life is the point of view we develop rather than our physical appearance. While looking like a teenager who is equipped with all it takes to explore the whole world lay before him, Benjamin makes a decision which can only be made by a responsible, mature man who is experiencing the autumn of his life.

CONCLUTION

Referring back to the Mark Twain's sentence "*Life would be infinitely happier if only we could be born at the age of 80 and gradually approach 18*", it is yet to be found out that whether we would develop similar opinion if the development of our physical state does not go with our age as it is supposed to be normally. Perhaps Mark Twain's main purpose is on the one hand to express with this statement the regret of an old man about how his body, old and feeble now, no longer affords to pursue the beauty of life which does not reveal itself until he has lived so many years, and on the other hand to explore the yearning the man must have now for a younger body. To be sure, resuming youth when old is not the case in real life. However, even the apparently dullest journey may turn out to be of great significance if we explore what it might mean its fullest degree in every person we meet, every decision we make and every challenge we take. Perhaps the symbol of infinity revealed in the way the hummingbird shakes its wings is hidden in our seemingly ordinary but extraordinary life.

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