The Curious Case of Benjamin Button

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

Fitzgerald was born in St. Paul, Minnesota and spent most of his childhood in Buffalo, New York. When he was 15, his parents sent him to school in New Jersey, where he met a teacher who encouraged him to develop his talent for writing stories. Fitzgerald went on to study at Princeton University, where he pursued his passion for writing so wholeheartedly that his grades suffered, and he eventually dropped out to enlist in the army. Though World War I ended before Fitzgerald was deployed, he met Zelda Sayre—whom he would later marry—while he was posted in Alabama. In 1920, he published his first novel, *This Side of Paradise*, which became an overnight success. The couple moved to Paris in 1924, where Fitzgerald supported his family primarily by selling short stories to popular magazines—he also published his most famous novel, *The Great Gatsby*, a year later. By 1931, though, Zelda had begun to suffer from mental illness. The Fitzgeralds returned to the United States, where Zelda was in and out of hospitals from 1936 onward. From 1936 until the end of his life in 1940, Fitzgerald spent much of his time in Hollywood, struggling with alcoholism and trying (largely unsuccessfully) to write screenplays. He died of a heart attack at the age of 44.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" takes place in Baltimore in 1860, a year before the outbreak of the American Civil War. Baltimore was full of tension during this period. The state of Maryland was technically part of the Union, but many of its most powerful citizens supported slavery and wanted the state to secede from the Union—some of these people even went against their own state and joined the Confederate Army. This divide was very much alive in Baltimore, which had the largest population of non-enslaved Black people. And, because of the city's emphasis on manufacturing, it strongly resembled some of the more progressive cities in the North. However, some of the richest, most influential people in Baltimore supported the Confederacy. In the story, these are the kind of people with whom Benjamin Button's family most likely socializes, since the Buttons are wealthy and part of Baltimore's high society. Of course, the story isn't completely centered around this dynamic, but it *is* the case that the outbreak of the Civil War takes attention away from the gossip surrounding Benjamin's reverse-aging condition.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" might seem unique in the context of F. Scott Fitzgerald's other literary work, since he's mostly known for writing realist stories about life during the Jazz Age. However, "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" isn't his only work of fantasy or speculative fiction. In fact, he published a small handful of supernatural or speculative tales—like "The Cut-Glass Bowl," for instance, in which a small glass bowl brings bad luck and hardship to a woman and her family. There's also his novella *The Diamond as Big as the Ritz*, which features a diamond that is, as the title suggests, the size of an entire hotel. In terms of the inspiration for "Benjamin Button," Fitzgerald claimed in the introduction to *Tales of the Jazz Age*—the collection in which "Benjamin Button" eventually appeared—that the story was based on something Mark Twain supposedly said: namely, that it's too bad the best part of life is at the beginning and the worst part is at the end. The introduction to *Tales of the Jazz Age* also maintains that a very similar plot can be found in the notebooks of the British author Samuel Butler, though Fitzgerald claims to have only read this *after* completing "Benjamin Button." In the nearly 100 years since its publication, the story has become one of the best-known examples of a sub-genre of science fiction called "Age Regression Fiction," in which characters age in reverse. Famous writers like Philip K. Dick and Roald Dahl have experimented with this premise.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Curious Case of Benjamin Button
- **When Published:** May 27, 1922
- **Literary Period:** The Jazz Age; Modernism
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** Baltimore between 1860 and roughly 1930
- **Climax:** Benjamin becomes an infant and dies.
- **Antagonist:** Societal expectations
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

The Big Screen. In 2008, the screenwriter Eric Roth adapted a loose interpretation of "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" as a feature-length film. The movie starred Brad Pitt, Cate Blanchett, Mahershala Ali, and a number of other well-known actors.

Medical Condition. Although the premise of "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" is highly improbable, there is a real medical condition—called progeria—that causes children to age extremely quickly (though not in reverse). Those afflicted with the disease often look elderly as children or teenagers, similar

to how Benjamin starts off looking much older than his numerical age.

PLOT SUMMARY

It's 1860, and Roger Button's wife has just given birth to their first child. The Buttons are respected members of Baltimore society, so it's surprising that their family doctor, Doctor Keene, brushes off Mr. Button when the men run into each other outside the hospital. He storms away and says that his reputation as a doctor has nearly been ruined. Inside the hospital, Mr. Button encounters the same hostility from the nurses, and he soon sees why: his newborn son looks and acts like a 70-year-old man.

The nurse orders Mr. Button to take his son home as soon as possible, since the baby's unusual condition could threaten the hospital's reputation. Mortified by the idea of being seen in public with Benjamin, Mr. Button rushes out to a clothing store to buy baby clothes for his son, though Benjamin looks ridiculous in them. The Buttons eventually decide to name their son Benjamin.

Mr. Button dyes Benjamin's hair, trims his beard, and tries to force Benjamin to live like an average child. Still, all Benjamin wants to do is read an encyclopedia, smoke cigars, and chat with his grandfather. He does make a point of breaking something in the house each day, knowing that it pleases Mr. Button to see his son acting like a little boy.

By the time Benjamin turns 18, he doesn't look quite so old, though he still needs to dye his hair. He runs out of hair dye shortly after arriving at Yale University, where he has been admitted as a freshman. The registrar thinks he's a strange older man posing as a college freshman, so he runs him out of his office. As Benjamin leaves, students follow him and shout insults, telling him to go try this crazy stunt at Harvard. Boarding a train for Baltimore, he decides that he *will* go to Harvard someday.

Back at home, Benjamin joins his father's hardware business, becomes wildly successful over the next few years. When Benjamin is 20, he looks strikingly like his father. As wealthy business partners, they attend prestigious dances together. At one of these high-society events, Benjamin meets Hildegarde Moncrief, the daughter of General Moncrief, one of the most powerful men in town. As Benjamin and Hildegarde dance, she tells him how much she likes older, more mature men—men like Benjamin. According to her, 50 is the ideal age. Benjamin doesn't tell her about his condition, instead enjoying her affection. Not long after this, they announce their engagement.

With news of Benjamin and Hildegarde's marriage, Baltimore erupts in gossip about Benjamin's condition. This time, though, people spread false rumors about him. General Moncrief hates the idea of Hildegarde marrying Benjamin, but he eventually gets used to it, largely because Benjamin is a successful businessman. Within 15 years, Benjamin is not only the head of the company, but also has the body and mind of a handsome young man. All the gossip about him goes away.

The only problem, though, is that Benjamin is no longer attracted to Hildegarde, who is now 35. Together, she and Benjamin have a son named Roscoe, but Benjamin dislikes their boring family life. Seeking a thrill, he joins the army and goes off to fight in the Spanish-American War, where he serves as a high-ranking official. After sustaining a small injury, he returns to Baltimore as a decorated and celebrated veteran.

Home from the war, Benjamin clashes with Hildegarde over his reverse aging and his growing interest in pretty young women. Meanwhile, Roscoe grows up and starts to look the same age as his father, and Benjamin hands the business over to him. Then, when Benjamin looks 20 years old, he attends Harvard University, where he becomes the star of the football team. But his athletic prowess doesn't last long, since he becomes weaker by the year. By the time he's a senior, he can't even make the team.

Still, Benjamin graduates from Harvard. He then returns to Baltimore and moves in with Roscoe, since Hildegarde has moved to Italy. Roscoe is ashamed that his father looks like a teenager, so he tells Benjamin to start referring to him as "Uncle" when other people are around.

Benjamin continues to grow younger, and he goes to kindergarten at the same time as Roscoe's young son. But when Roscoe's son moves on to first grade, Benjamin stays behind. Before long, Benjamin can't even keep up with the other kindergarteners, so he stays home with a caretaker he calls Nana. Soon, Benjamin only registers simple sensory details; memories of his adult life never occur to him. There's only Nana's presence, food, the bright sun, and darkness. Finally, even these things fade away.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Benjamin Button – Benjamin Button is a man born with a rare condition that causes him to age backwards. His personality changes significantly throughout the story, illustrating the idea that identity is directly tied to whatever developmental stage a person is going through. His birth astounds nurses and doctors, since his body and mind are that of a 70-year-old man. The nurse orders his father, Roger Button, to take him home, since news of his condition could ruin the hospital's reputation. Even Mr. Button worries about his own reputation, but he nonetheless takes Benjamin home and raises him. The first years of his life are marked by his father's insistence that he act like a young boy. A naturally accommodating person, Benjamin *does* try to meet his father's expectations, but this isn't really

possible until he gets a little older and starts to look younger. When he turns 20 (and looks 50), he joins Mr. Button's hardware business, helping the company succeed. He meets his future wife, Hildegarde, at a dance during this period—and though their apparent age difference causes a scandal, they get married and have a son named Roscoe. Benjamin is happy with family life for a while, but he grows restless as he gets younger, so he joins the army and fights in the Spanish-American War. Upon his return, he continues to seek out excitement by going dancing with younger women. This bothers Hildegarde, but Benjamin doesn't show her much compassion, too preoccupied with the life of a thrill-seeking young man. When he looks like a 20-year-old, he attends Harvard, and by the time he graduates, Hildegarde has moved to Italy. With nowhere else to go, Benjamin moves in with Roscoe, who hires a nurse named Nana to care for him. He spends his final years in ignorant bliss, passing the time as a content child until everything—tastes, sounds, sights—simply fades away.

Hildegarde Moncrief – Hildegarde Moncrief falls in love with and marries Benjamin Button. The daughter of General Moncrief, one of the most important figures in Baltimore's high society, Hildegarde is an attractive woman who appreciates the "mellowness" of middle-aged men. For this reason, Benjamin decides not to tell her that he only *looks* like he's 50, though in reality he's actually 20. They get married soon after they meet and have a son named Roscoe, and the couple's apparent age difference prompts gossip. In fact, there are so many scandalous tales about Benjamin that Hildegarde decides to ignore not just the lies about his condition, but also the *true* version of his story—which she inevitably finds out about as Benjamin gets younger as she gets older. Because she was originally attracted to Benjamin's maturity, she resents him for getting younger. Her unwillingness to accept Benjamin as he ages backwards demonstrates just how tightly people hold to certain ideas about age and identity. Hildegarde married him because she coveted his identity as an older, refined gentleman. Once he becomes a young man, though, she no longer loves him, illustrating that people often romanticize whatever they think a person represents (maturity, in this case), leaving very little room for their lover to change or evolve. This—along with Benjamin's lack of interest in Hildegarde as time goes on—leads to the dissolution of their marriage. Hildegarde eventually moves to Italy on her own when Benjamin attends Harvard University.

Roger Button – Roger Button is Benjamin's father. A member of Baltimore's high society and the owner of a wholesale hardware store, he cares about his reputation more than anything—including Benjamin. When he first learns about Benjamin's condition (which causes him to age backwards), he's so mortified that he can hardly concentrate on caring for his son, instead worrying about how this will affect his status in society. This response illustrates the extent to which an obsession with reputation can keep people from showing kindness and compassion, especially since Mr. Button largely fails to give Benjamin the fatherly support that he needs. Throughout Benjamin's childhood, Mr. Button forces him to act like his numerical age, refusing to accept his son for the person he is. It isn't until Benjamin is 20 and looks the exact same age as his father that Mr. Button finally grows accustomed to his son's condition, allowing him to join him in the family business. Over the next 15 years, Mr. Button hands the entire company over to Benjamin, finally feeling proud of the man his son has become—an indication that, at least in the society of the story, success matters more than anything else.

Roscoe Button – Roscoe Button is Benjamin and Hildegarde's son. Just like Benjamin, he joins the family hardware business when he comes of age, eventually taking it over when Benjamin loses interest in the company. When Benjamin later becomes a teenager, Roscoe lets his father come live with him—Benjamin, after all, has nowhere else to go. He is embarrassed about his father's condition, however; when Benjamin eventually becomes a young boy, Roscoe says that he must refer to him as "Uncle" in the presence of guests. Instead of kindly caring for his father, then, Roscoe focuses more on his own reputation, becoming yet another person in Benjamin's life who fails to give him genuine love and support. And this, in turn, leads Benjamin to a very lonely end, since Roscoe—the only family member left to comfort him as he nears death—shies away from connecting with him. Instead, he hires a professional nurse, Nana, to take care of Benjamin.

General Moncrief – General Moncrief is Hildegarde's father, making him Benjamin's father-in-law. General Moncrief is powerful and widely respected in Baltimore, so it's a big deal when he doesn't approve of Hildegarde and Benjamin's engagement. For Moncrief, it's unthinkable that a woman as beautiful and desirable as his daughter would marry a man like Benjamin, who looks roughly 30 years older than her. However, Moncrief's opinion of Benjamin changes in the years following the wedding, when Benjamin becomes a prominent and successful figure in society himself. It also helps that Benjamin gives General Moncrief the money to self-publish a book he wrote that was previously rejected by a large number of publishers. From this point on, Moncrief approves of his son-in-law.

Doctor Keene – Doctor Keene is the doctor who delivers Benjamin. Although he has been the Buttons' family doctor for many years, he angrily tells Roger Button that he never wants to see anyone from his family again, fearing that Benjamin's birth—and, more specifically, his strange medical condition—might ruin his reputation as a doctor.

The Registrar – The registrar is a man who works at Yale University; his job is to enroll accepted students in the classes they want to take. When Benjamin meets with the registrar in order to do this, though, the registrar refuses to believe he's 18.

Calling him a "dangerous lunatic" because he thinks Benjamin is a middle-aged man posing as a college freshman, the registrar kicks Benjamin out of his office and makes it clear that he's not welcome at Yale.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Nurse – The nurse works at the hospital where Benjamin is born. Like Doctor Keene, she treats Mr. Button harshly. She forces him to take Benjamin away as soon as possible, because she thinks the news of Benjamin's reverse-aging condition will tarnish the hospital's reputation.

Benjamin's Grandfather – Benjamin's grandfather is an old man who initially takes offense when people say that Benjamin looks like him. Soon enough, though, Benjamin's grandfather enjoys spending time with his grandson, finding his slow, reserved personality appealing and companionable.

Nana – Nana is a hired nurse who Roscoe employs to take care of his father, Benjamin, at the end of Benjamin's life.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

AGE, DEVELOPMENT, AND IDENTITY

As Benjamin Button ages backwards due to a mysterious condition, his developmental stages have a huge impact on his identity—his entire personality seems to change with each new season of life. For example, he has the body of an old man when he's at the beginning of his life, and he behaves accordingly by exhibiting the kind of calm reserve that's often associated with older people. Then, as he approaches middle age, he becomes more engaged with life, leaving behind his slower personality. By the time he has the body and mind of a man in his twenties (though he's actually lived for 50 years), he's desperate to find excitement in life, acting like a fun-loving young person. And when he nears the end of his life and finally becomes a little boy, he leads the carefree existence of an innocent child. This all means that Benjamin doesn't just change physically, but also *mentally*. His transformation throughout the story suggests that while age is an arbitrary number that doesn't necessarily impact a person's identity, actual developmental stages *do* profoundly affect the way a person moves through the world.

Benjamin's entire personality depends not on his numerical age, but on his body and mind's current developmental state. This is especially apparent just hours after his birth, when he complains to his father about the hospital in the same cranky way an old man might gripe about something unsatisfactory. "This is a fine place to keep a youngster of quiet tastes," he chirps. "With all this yelling and howling, I haven't been able to get a wink of sleep." Complaining about noise is the kind of thing a stereotypically grumpy old man might do, so Benjamin essentially becomes a caricature of old age in this moment. At the same time, though, this moment also reminds readers that Benjamin is a "youngster" himself—a *newborn*, to be more precise. And yet, neither his body nor his mind are babyish; he even wishes that the hospital would provide him with a rocking chair to sit in. It's quite clear, then, that he has the conventional sensibilities and preferences of an old man despite only being a few hours old. Regardless of his age, it's obvious that he's in an advanced developmental stage—and this, not his numerical age, is what dictates his identity.

In keeping with this, Benjamin's identity is so affected by his developmental stage that it seems inauthentic when he tries to act his numerical age. When he's a child, for instance, he tries to satisfy his father by breaking something every day, since his father likes it when he behaves like a mischievous child. And yet, this doesn't do much to change Benjamin's overall personality, given that what he *really* wants to do is sit around, smoke cigars, and pass the day in idle conversation with his grandfather—pastimes normally enjoyed by elderly people. But when Benjamin does become a little boy at the end of his life, he comes to genuinely enjoy the exact things a young child would enjoy. Despite technically being elderly in terms of how many years he's lived, his body and mind have developed backwards to those of a toddler. He doesn't want to smoke cigars anymore, nor does he have the ambition that defined his middle-aged years, when he sought out the thrills of romance and war. Instead, he spends his time during this period jumping on the bed, repeating satisfying words like "elephant," and taking comfort in the soothing presence of his Nana. And Benjamin doesn't do these things as a way of taking on the childish identity everyone that around him *thinks* he should have—rather, he genuinely becomes a child through and through, even though his numerical age reflects otherwise.

Although Benjamin's transformation is unique in a sense, it represents a core truth about humans: that in each phase of a person's age-related development, their whole identity tends to drastically shift. Of course, everyone naturally changes as they go through life. But the fact that the changes to Benjamin's identity happens in *reverse* calls special attention to the influence of each developmental stage. If Benjamin aged regularly, it would be easy to overlook just how much the different phases of his life affect his personality—but flipping the process around makes these changes difficult to ignore, since Benjamin's development doesn't line up with his numerical age. Instead, his progress through life seems strange and novel, adding a fresh perspective on the many changes

people undergo as they move through each chapter of life. Although the story has an unconventional premise, then, it actually helps readers see something fairly straightforward about the developmental process: namely, that every stage of life has the power to reshape a person's identity.

REPUTATION, GOSSIP, AND SCANDAL

In *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, society is obsessed with gossip and scandal. So, when Mr. Button's son Benjamin is born with a condition that makes him age backwards, Mr. Button spends more time worrying that this will destroy the family reputation than actually caring for his son. Even the doctors and nurses who delivered Benjamin fret that the hospital's reputation will suffer because he was born there, and they treat Mr. Button and Benjamin terribly. This reaction validates Mr. Button's fear that Benjamin will bring dishonor to the family, indicating that society really *does* ostracize people who are different—this, apparently, isn't just an irrational fear of Mr. Button's. Indeed, as Benjamin grows up, people continuously spread salacious gossip about him because of his condition. And though this undoubtedly makes his life harder, there's one saving grace: nobody ever remembers the gossip for very long. Instead, the rumors always go away after a while, lying dormant until something else comes along and kicks up a new scandal. In fact, by the end of the story, only Benjamin's immediate family seems to know about his peculiar condition. This suggests that although gossip can be deeply hurtful and can tarnish a person's reputation in the short term, it isn't worth worrying about in the long term, because it's bound to fade away.

In the world of the story, the idea of losing face in society leads to a kind of hysterical fear, as people act like nothing could be worse than tarnishing their reputation. Benjamin's birth brings out this intense fear about reputation and status, since nobody wants to be associated with his condition. Doctor Keene barely lets himself stop to talk to Mr. Button outside the hospital, clearly afraid that being seen in public with him will jeopardize his own good name as a physician. Similarly, the nurse who takes Mr. Button to see his son treats him poorly, saying the hospital will no longer have even the "ghost of a reputation" after Benjamin's birth. For Mr. Button, who has yet to meet his newborn son, this treatment is jarring and nerve-wracking. Mr. Button doesn't even know about Benjamin's condition yet, but the nurse shows him no compassion at all—she not only keeps him in an excruciating state of anticipation, but also makes him feel unwelcome at the hospital. This suggests that society's obsession with reputation is so powerful that it keeps people from empathizing with one another. Most doctors and nurses make a point of comforting patients and their loved ones, not chastising them and making them feel worse. But Doctor Keene and the nurse don't comfort or reassure Mr. Button at all, since they're more concerned with maintaining their reputation than with being kind to other people.

Unfortunately for Benjamin, this obsession with status runs deep in Baltimorean society—so deep that even Mr. Button seems to care more about his reputation than about his own son. Faced with having to walk Benjamin home from the hospital, Mr. Button is terrified that important people will see them together, finding the very idea "grotesque" and "appalling." In the same way that this obsession with reputation overshadows any empathy that Doctor Keene or the nurse might otherwise have for the Buttons' situation, Mr. Button's own fixation on status keeps him from fully loving and supporting Benjamin.

Of course, there's a *reason* that so many characters in this story are protective of their reputations: the society they live in is hungry for gossip. Benjamin's birth becomes a huge "sensation" in Baltimore, and the only reason it doesn't severely "cost the Buttons and their kinsfolk socially" is that the Civil War begins, drawing attention away from the scandal. But gossip about Benjamin's condition resurfaces when, years later, he and Hildegarde announce their engagement. Because Hildegarde is the daughter of one of the most widely respected figures in Baltimore, everyone suddenly remembers the "almost forgotten story of Benjamin's birth." To make matters worse, people circulate the story in salacious, scandalous ways, embellishing it to make it even more ridiculous but also more intriguing. People even talk about him as if he's some sort of demon. The main effect of this gossip is that it turns Benjamin's future father-in-law against him. Just like seemingly everyone else in the story, General Moncrief apparently cares more about his family's reputation than about his daughter's happiness, since he tries to convince Hildegarde not to follow her heart by marrying Benjamin. Once again, then, an obsession with reputation negatively impacts Benjamin's life.

At the same time, though, the gossip about Benjamin doesn't completely derail his life. The rumors about Benjamin do have some negative effects at first, but the gossip and mistreatment never last very long. This is made evident by the fact that nobody really talks about his condition between the time of his birth and when he marries Hildegarde. And although his marriage stirs up some gossip, the stories quickly fade away again. In fact, by the time Benjamin leads the life of a young man, nobody remembers his condition. People gossip about the age difference between him and Hildegarde, but *not* about his process of reverse aging. Society has, in other words moved on—not necessarily because people don't care, but because society as a whole doesn't *remember*. When Benjamin goes out dancing with young women, for example, people gossip about his marriage with Hildegarde, not knowing that their own parents *also* used to gossip about Benjamin and Hildegarde, but for entirely different reasons. This highlights the passing nature of gossip and scandal. Everyone fixates on reputation, relishing any kind of slander that might dismantle a person's

status, but the story implies that none of this really matters. And although this hurts Benjamin throughout his life, only a small handful of people even recall Benjamin's strange condition at the time of his death. This suggests that no matter how much people obsess over things like status and reputation, "people inevitably forget" even the juiciest gossip.

EXPECTATIONS AND ACCEPTANCE

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button demonstrates how hard it can be to face other people's assumptions and expectations. For Benjamin Button, who's born with a condition that causes him to age backwards, this means constantly having to behave the way other people think he should. His father, for one, wants him to play the part of a dutiful firstborn son. Meanwhile, the rest of society wants him to act in accordance with his physical appearance, which is often out of step with his actual age. As Benjamin tries to navigate these different expectations, he ends up with very little room to live the way *he* wants, at least without disappointing certain people in his life. No matter what he does, it seems that he'll inevitably fail to live up to some expectations, even as he simultaneously fulfills others. By highlighting this double-bind, the story implies that people shouldn't focus too much on what others expect of them, since doing so is ultimately futile. Instead, people ought to live life on their own terms.

From the beginning of his life, Benjamin is pressured to live up to his father's expectations. These expectations exist for Benjamin before he even *meets* his father. Mr. Button fantasizes about Benjamin's future as he makes his way to the hospital to see him for the first time, hoping that his son will eventually go to Yale University (just like Mr. Button himself). Given that his father already harbors these aspirations for his son, it's clear that Benjamin—with his unique reverse-aging condition—will have an uphill battle when it comes to pleasing his father.

The problem that Benjamin encounters, though, isn't just that his father has high hopes for him—it's that Mr. Button's expectations basically ignore reality, since he wants Benjamin to act in ways that are completely out of touch with who he is. Benjamin's condition, after all, is both physical *and* mental—meaning that he doesn't just look like an old man but also thinks and feels like one. The fact that his father insists that he act like a little boy thus forces him to be someone he's not. This is this the case when Mr. Button brings home a baby rattle one day and orders Benjamin to "play with it"—a demand that seems ridiculous given that what Benjamin actually wants to do is sit around smoking cigars and reading an encyclopedia. Later, Mr. Button makes Benjamin play with children his own (numerical) age, and when Benjamin accidentally breaks a window one day, his father is happy about it because he sees this as the behavior of a stereotypical little boy. From this point on, Benjamin purposely breaks something every day, but he only does this because it's "expected of him." It's clear, then, that he's eager to please his father, but this means sacrificing the existence that *he*—Benjamin—wants to lead.

Of course, Mr. Button isn't the only one to force certain expectations on Benjamin—society as a whole also assumes that he'll act a certain way, and this conflicts with Benjamin's desire to please his father. Specifically, strangers take it for granted that he'll behave like whatever age he appears to be. On the whole, this shouldn't be much of a problem, since Benjamin genuinely feels however old he looks. But he often finds himself torn between expectations, since his father wants him to act his numerical age while everyone else wants him to act his physical age. This is a difficult dynamic to navigate, and it illustrates that it's impossible to please everybody at once. This inability to live up to conflicting expectations is especially pronounced when Benjamin finally fulfills his father's wish that he attend Yale University. Having managed to please his father, he's suddenly forced to face the fact that nobody outside his immediate family sees him as an 18-year-old, because he doesn't *look* 18. The registrar, for one, refuses to believe Benjamin's true age, calling him a "dangerous lunatic" for trying to infiltrate a freshman class as a middle-aged man. The registrar yells at him to leave, at which point an angry mob of students chase Benjamin away while shouting insults. By simply trying to satisfy his father, then, Benjamin is forced into a humiliating and degrading situation—one in which he has to confront the fact that his father's expectations of him are at odds with everyone else's.

Because trying to straddle multiple sets of expectations at the same time is so difficult, Benjamin seems most happy in the rare moments when he can just exist on his own terms. This happens in the middle of his life, when his outward appearance more or less matches up with his actual age—a period when nobody expects anything unreasonable of him. Unfortunately, though, this only lasts so long. His wife, Hildegarde, married him because of his maturity, so the fact that he gradually *loses* this maturity means that he increasingly fails to be the person she expects him to be. As a result, their marriage gradually falls apart—meaning that yet another one of Benjamin's relationships suffers due to his inability to live up to another person's expectations.

It isn't until Benjamin becomes a very young child that he regains the kind of unbothered happiness he enjoyed in the middle of his life, when everyone simply accepted him for who he was. This is because he stops trying to be something he's not; by the time he looks and acts like a toddler, nobody tries to force him into being anything other than a mere child. And this is fine with him, because he can't even remember that he is, in reality, quite old. The fact that this is seemingly the happiest period of Benjamin's life tragically illustrates how pointless it is to try to conform to society's many expectations—an endeavor that is at best impossible and at worst detrimental to a person's

overall happiness and well-being.

SUPPORT AND CARETAKING

Perhaps the most tragic aspect of Benjamin Button's life is that nobody supports or cares for him in meaningful ways. From the moment he's born, the very people who one might expect to comfort him and ease him into the world—people like his parents and the nurses at the hospital—focus solely on his condition (which causes him to age backwards) and how it might impact *their* lives. And although Benjamin's father, Mr. Button, eventually takes care of him, Mr. Button doesn't necessarily give Benjamin the kind of unconditional love and support that one might expect from a parent. The same lack of support is evident in Benjamin's eventual relationship with his wife, Hildegarde, who abandons him later in life because she can't accept that he gets younger as she gets older. And as the years go by, Benjamin needs more and more support because he loses (rather than gains) maturity, but he lacks caring relationships with family or friends. By the time he lives the life of a little boy, for example, he has nobody to turn to except his own son, Roscoe—and even *he* fails to give Benjamin the emotional support he needs. *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* is thus a story about how lonely it is to live without the supporting relationships that normally help people through life.

As a child, Benjamin *does* receive support from his parents, but it's tainted by their hesitancy to come to terms with his reverse-aging condition. Although they provide him with food, shelter, clothing, and financial stability, they don't necessarily nurture him or give him legitimate emotional support. This is evident very early in Benjamin's life, when he grabs hold of his father's hand (instead of the other way around) on the walk home from the hospital and asks what his name will be. In this moment, it's clear that Benjamin yearns for the kind of parental guidance and care that most people automatically give their children. Later, even though Benjamin has been living at home for several years, his father keeps accidentally addressing him as "Mr." and is "always somewhat in awe of him," almost as if he's not his son at all. In other words, Mr. Button is so preoccupied with Benjamin's unique medical condition that there's a very clear emotional distance between him and his son—ultimately depriving Benjamin of a fully engaged father figure.

Fortunately for Benjamin, he's able to find emotional support when he experiences genuine love in his relationship with Hildegarde—but she, too, eventually fails to support him. This is so gratifying to him that it's as if he's "blind with enchantment," feeling as if his life is "just beginning"—a testament to just how badly he yearned for true love and affection. But these feelings fade as Benjamin continues to age backwards, a process that reveals that Hildegarde *isn't* actually someone who will give him unconditional support and love. Rather, she resents him for getting younger, chastising him for continuing to age in reverse, despite the obvious fact that he can't do anything to stop this process. To be fair, by this point in his life, Benjamin isn't a particularly good spouse, either. He becomes less and less interested in Hildegarde as he gets younger, and in keeping with this, also stops considering how his actions will make her feel. All the same, though, the fact remains that Hildegarde refuses to stand by Benjamin, failing to be there for him as he worries about what will happen if his reverse aging process continues at such a rapid pace. Once again, then, he finds himself having to go through hardship without any meaningful emotional support.

Eventually, Benjamin experiences a role reversal when his own son, Roscoe, becomes his caretaker—but Roscoe shirks this duty, leaving Benjamin without any meaningful relationships toward the end of his life. This happens after Roscoe has become a successful businessman and Benjamin has become a young boy. But Roscoe doesn't want to take care of his father, meaning that he's yet another one of Benjamin's loved ones who fails to give him the unconditional affection that he needs. This reversal of the caretaking role resembles something that actually happens quite frequently in real life. Many adult children find that they're the ones who have to take care of their elderly parents, some of whom need the same kind of attention as helpless children. In this way, Benjamin's story invites readers to reflect on the way that caretaking roles can come full-circle. In Benjamin's case, though, Roscoe doesn't necessarily return the favor by showing his father the support Benjamin presumably showed *him* as a child. Instead, he hires a nurse to care for his father at the end of Benjamin's life, pawning off the responsibility on a stranger. In doing so, he ruins the possibility that Benjamin will finally be able to enjoy a genuinely loving, caring relationship before he dies.

Given that nobody in Benjamin's life ever provides him with true support, it's fitting that he ends up dying without anyone other than a hired nurse, Nana, to comfort him on his passage out of the world. And though he isn't aware of this because he has the undeveloped mind of a baby, it's clear that his life was defined by a profound lack of loving support—a lack that ultimately led him to a very lonely end.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE COLORFUL PAPER

The colorful paper that Benjamin encounters both times he attends kindergarten symbolizes the extent to which people change between different phases of life. When Benjamin first goes to kindergarten, he has no interest in playing with the colorful pieces of paper that captivate his

classmates—he even falls asleep while the other children cut shapes out of the paper. This, of course, is because he isn't a typical five-year-old boy. Instead, because of his reverse-aging condition, he has the body *and* mind of an old man, so the things that entertain children simply don't appeal to him.

Conversely, Benjamin very much enjoys the colorful paper when he returns to kindergarten many years later. By this time, Benjamin has become an actual child in body and mind, so he thinks that cutting shapes out of the paper is the "most fascinating game in the world." The paper itself thus represents the vast change that Benjamin has undergone, highlighting just how much a person's developmental stage affects their entire way of being.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Scribner edition of *The Short Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald: A New Collection* published in 1995.

Chapter 1 Quotes

The Roger Buttons held an enviable position, both social and financial, in ante-bellum Baltimore. They were related to the This Family and the That Family, which, as every Southerner knew, entitled them to membership in that enormous peerage which largely populated the Confederacy. This was their first experience with the charming old custom of having babies—Mr. Button was naturally nervous. He hoped it would be a boy so that he could be sent to Yale College in Connecticut, at which institution Mr. Button himself had been known for four years by the somewhat obvious nickname of "Cuff."

Related Characters: Benjamin Button, Roger Button

Related Themes:

Page Number: 159

Explanation and Analysis

This passage introduces readers to Roger Button and establishes that the Button family is powerful and widely respected in Baltimore. It also calls special attention to the time period, making it clear that "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" takes place in "ante-bellum Baltimore," which is to say that it's set right before the American Civil War.

These details are important because they hint at the kind of people Mr. Button socializes with—namely, powerful white Southerners who care about status and power more than anything else. After all, they see themselves as members of the Confederacy, despite the fact that Maryland was actually part of the Union. The implication, then, is that many of the people in Mr. Button's social circles most likely profit from slavery: a clear sign that they care about power and success more than actual human beings.

This, of course, will eventually bring itself to bear on Benjamin, since he constantly has to deal with people who prioritize status over everything else. Even his own father (who isn't an enslaver) is clearly fixated on the idea of prestige and status, considering that he fantasizes about Benjamin attending Yale University before even *meeting* his son. What's more, his hope that Benjamin will be a boy suggests that he wants the Button name to live on (which, at that time, would require him to have a son). And this family legacy, he hopes, will be highly esteemed—something he thinks will surely be the case if Benjamin goes to Yale.

"Is it a boy or a girl?"

"Here now!" cried Doctor Keene in a perfect passion of irritation, "I'll ask you to go and see for yourself. Outrageous!" He snapped the last word out in almost one syllable, then he turned away muttering: "Do you imagine a case like this will help my professional reputation? One more would ruin me—ruin anybody."

Related Characters: Doctor Keene, Roger Button (speaker), Benjamin Button

Related Themes:

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation takes place between Roger Button and Doctor Keene on the steps of the hospital. Mr. Button has just come to see his newborn for the first time, which why he anxiously asks Doctor Keene if the child is a "boy or a girl"—a straightforward, normal question for a new father to ask. And yet, Doctor Keene "snap[s]" at him. Of course, it's not yet clear why, exactly, Keene treats Mr. Button so terribly, but it *is* quite apparent that it has to do with his fear of tarnishing his reputation as a doctor. "Do you imagine a case like this will help my professional reputation?" he asks Mr. Button, indicating that he's much more concerned with protecting his status in society than with comforting Mr. Button.

This introduces a thread that will run throughout the entire story, as seemingly every character Benjamin encounters ends up caring more about their own status and reputation than about treating him with kindness. In this case, Doctor Keene fails to treat Mr. Button with a calm, reassuring attitude that would ease his worries—and this is because Doctor Keene suddenly wants nothing to do with the Button family, instead focusing only on saving face in society.

"All *right*, Mr. Button," she agreed in a hushed voice. "Very *well!* But if you *knew* what state it's put us all in this morning! It's perfectly outrageous! The hospital will never have the ghost of a reputation after—"

"Hurry!" he cried hoarsely. "I can't stand this!"

"Come this way, then, Mr. Button."

Related Characters: The Nurse, Roger Button (speaker), Benjamin Button

Related Themes:

Page Number: 161

Explanation and Analysis

When Mr. Button finally enters the hospital and tries to see his newborn child for the first time, the nurse who takes him to Benjamin behaves with the same harsh demeanor as Doctor Keene. Instead of soothing Mr. Button's anxieties, she seems to *scold* him, as if it's somehow his fault that his son's birth has put everyone in the hospital in a terrible "state."

The reason she behaves this way is that she fears news of Benjamin's condition will ruin the hospital's reputation—a sign that people in the society of the story care more about status than about treating people well. After all, if the nurse was at all concerned with showing Mr. Button kindness, she would try to reassure him instead of berating him for something over which he obviously had no control.

Indeed, the nurse's callous attitude has a detrimental impact on Mr. Button's nerves. "I can't stand this!" he yells, revealing just how flustered she has made him with her comments. Not only has she failed to inform him what, exactly, has happened (he still hasn't met his son), she has also tried to make him feel guilty—a clear sign that she has no regard for his feelings, fixating instead on the hospital's reputation.

The cool perspiration redoubled on Mr. Button's forehead. He closed his eyes, and then, opening them, looked again. There was no mistake—he was gazing at a man of threescore and ten—a *baby* of threescore and ten, a baby whose feet hung over the sides of the crib in which it was reposing.

The old man looked placidly from one to the other for a moment, and then suddenly spoke in a cracked and ancient voice. "Are you my father?" he demanded.

Mr. Button and the nurse started violently.

"Because if you are," went on the old man querulously, "I wish you'd get me out of this place—or, at least, get them to put a comfortable rocker in here."

Related Characters: Benjamin Button (speaker), The Nurse, Roger Button

Related Themes:

Page Number: 162

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Roger Button sees his newborn son for the first time. This is a crucial moment in the story, since it focuses on the shocking experience of encountering a newborn baby who looks, sounds, and acts like a 70-year-old man ("threescore and ten" is an old-fashioned way of saying 70). This moment also reveals one of the story's central concerns, since it emphasizes the fact that Benjamin's condition completely upends his father's expectations. Indeed, Roger Button walks into the hospital prepared to meet an infant, but what he finds is a wrinkled old man with a harsh voice. This sets the stage for the rest of the story, in which Benjamin must constantly try to live up to his father's expectations even though they're unrealistic, given Benjamin's reverse-aging condition.

On a more basic level, this scene simply establishes the story's humor. Although "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" often reads like a serious story about life's big questions (like what shapes a person's identity, for example), at its core it's also an entertaining tale. The humor in the story is especially apparent in this scene, like when Benjamin says that he wants a "comfortable rocker"—a statement that lightly pokes fun at the things that elderly people stereotypically enjoy. In this way, the story invites readers to laugh at its fun and absurd premise.

"This is a fine place to keep a youngster of quiet tastes. With all this yelling and howling, I haven't been able to get a wink of sleep. I asked for something to eat"—here his voice rose to a shrill note of protest—"and they brought me a bottle of milk!"

Mr. Button sank down upon a chair near his son and concealed his face in his hands. "My heavens!" he murmured, in an ecstasy of horror. "What will people say? What must I do?"

Related Characters: Roger Button, Benjamin Button (speaker), The Nurse, Doctor Keene

Related Themes:

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

In this moment, Benjamin complains about the hospital in a way that makes him sound like a stereotypically grumpy old man. This plays on the humor of his situation, but it also reveals that he doesn't just *look* like an old man—he really *is* one despite having just been born. It's not that he's an old man on the surface but a newborn baby on the inside. Rather, he is an old man in everything except his numerical age, and his cranky behavior demonstrates this perfectly. More importantly, this suggests that his developmental stage has more of an impact on his actual personality than his official age—an idea that will become crucial as his life unfolds throughout the story, since his entire identity morphs with each season of life.

This passage also highlights Mr. Button's obsession with reputation and society. "What will people say?" he cries. "What must I do?" Instead of caring about whether or not his son is healthy, he worries about what the people in his prestigious social circles will say about him. In the same way that Doctor Keene and the nurse were more concerned with protecting their reputations than with comforting Mr. Button, Mr. Button himself is more concerned with his status than with caring for his newborn son. This, in turn, suggests that thinking so much about reputation can prevent people from acting with kindness and compassion, since Mr. Button fails to give Benjamin any kind of fatherly support.

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. " I can't. I can't," he moaned.

People would stop to speak to him, and what was he going to say? He would have to introduce this—this septuagenarian: "This is my son, born early this morning." And then the old man would gather his blanket around him and they would plod on, past the bustling stores, the slave market—for a dark instant Mr. Button wished passionately that his son was black—past the luxurious houses of the residential district, past the home for the aged. . . .

Related Characters: Roger Button (speaker), The Nurse, Benjamin Button

Related Themes:

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

As the nurse tries to rush Mr. Button and Benjamin out of the hospital, Mr. Button starts to worry about what it will be like to walk in public with his newborn son, who looks like an old man rather than a baby. His fear of losing face in society comes to the forefront of the story in this moment, especially since he thinks of Benjamin as an "appalling apparition," as if he's a monster whose mere presence will forever tarnish the Button family name.

This image of walking through the streets with Benjamin is so "dreadful" that Mr. Button momentarily wishes he could sell his son into slavery. The narration here subtly acknowledges how horrific and cruel this thought is, describing the moment that Mr. Button thinks this as a "dark instant" that passes over him. And yet, even if this wish only lasts for an "instant," it's hard to overlook the fact that it occurred to Mr. Button. Indeed, this illustrates just how troubling he finds the idea of losing face in society—so troubling, it seems, that he finds himself yearning for ways to rid himself of his very own son, ultimately demonstrating his failure to care about Benjamin more than his social status.

Chapter 2 Quotes

If, say, he could only find a *very* large boy's suit, he might cut off that long and awful beard, dye the white hair brown, and thus manage to conceal the worst, and to retain something of his own self-respect—not to mention his position in Baltimore society.

But a frantic inspection of the boys' department revealed no suits to fit the new-born Button. He blamed the store, of course—in such cases it is the thing to blame the store.

Related Characters: Roger Button, Benjamin Button

Related Themes:

Page Number: 164

Explanation and Analysis

Knowing that he has to walk Benjamin home from the hospital, Mr. Button runs out to a clothing store and tries to find something that will make his son look a bit more presentable. This passage underlines the fact that his frantic scramble to make his son look respectable has much less to do with Benjamin as it has to do with Mr. Button himself. After all, he tries to find clothes for Benjamin that will "retain something of his own self-respect"—not Benjamin's "self-respect," but *Mr. Button's*.

This therefore reveals that he doesn't actually care much about Benjamin's well-being. Rather, the reason he's worried about Benjamin's condition is that he fears it will thoroughly ruin his own position in society. This, of course, is largely because Mr. Button belongs to a rather powerful sect of Baltimore's high society, which is most likely why he decides to blame the clothing store for not having anything that would look good on a 70-year-old baby; he's used to blaming other people when things don't go his way. With this, the story shows how a preoccupation with social status can cause people to prioritize maintaining their reputation over making sure the people around them feel supported and respected.

"They look sort of funny to me," he complained. "I don't want to be made a monkey of—"

"You've made a monkey of me!" retorted Mr. Button fiercely. "Never you mind how funny you look. Put them on—or I'll—or I'll *spank* you." He swallowed uneasily at the penultimate word, feeling nevertheless that it was the proper thing to say.

"All right, father"—this with a grotesque simulation of filial respect—"you've lived longer; you know best. Just as you say."

As before, the sound of the word "father" caused Mr. Button to start violently.

Related Characters: Roger Button, Benjamin Button (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 164

Explanation and Analysis

When Mr. Button brings Benjamin clothing to wear on their walk home from the hospital, Benjamin complains about the outfit, saying that he doesn't "want to be made a monkey of." By saying this, he subjects his father to the very same obsession with reputation and appearance that inspired Mr. Button to buy the clothes in the first place. In other words, Benjamin inadvertently gives Mr. Button a dose of his own medicine. His father, however, just responds by doubling down on his worries about his own reputation, insisting that Benjamin is the one making "a monkey" of *him*. All in all, what's clear is that both men are hung up on the way other people will perceive them, to the extent that they can't even get along with each other.

Furthermore, the fact that Mr. Button threatens to spank Benjamin calls attention to his attempt to behave in a way he thinks all fathers should behave. Although it makes him uncomfortable to assume the role of Benjamin's father, he still tries to live up to certain standards that he thinks parents are expected to meet. Threatening to spank Benjamin is, he believes, "the proper thing to say." And yet, he's uncomfortable when Benjamin responds in the way one might expect a son to respond, disliking the way it feels for Benjamin to call him "father." He is therefore torn between how he actually feels toward Benjamin and how he thinks he's expected to behave as a new parent. This dilemma will continue for Mr. Button throughout the story, as he tries to behave like a typical parent even though Benjamin is obviously not a typical child.

> The remaining brush of scraggly hair, the watery eyes, the ancient teeth, seemed oddly out of tone with the gayety of the costume. Mr. Button, however, was obdurate—he held out his hand. "Come along!" he said sternly.
>
> His son took the hand trustingly. "What are you going to call me, dad?" he quavered as they walked from the nursery—"just 'baby' for a while? till you think of a better name?"
>
> Mr. Button grunted. "I don't know," he answered harshly. "I think we'll call you Methuselah."

Related Characters: Roger Button, Benjamin Button (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 165

Explanation and Analysis

As Mr. Button and Benjamin finally leave the hospital, Benjamin takes his father's hand with the warmth and trust of a small child. In fact, Mr. Button actually *offers* him his hand, trying to act like everything is normal and like his son doesn't have the mind and body of a 70-year-old man.

At the same time, though, Mr. Button can't quite find it within himself to treat Benjamin with the kind of loving support expected of most parents. This is especially evident when Benjamin "trustingly" holds Mr. Button's hand and asks what his name will be. In this moment, it's almost as if Benjamin is actively searching for parental support, trying to gently steer Mr. Button into acting like a real father. And yet, Mr. Button isn't ready to do this, instead "harshly" joking that his son should be named after Methuselah, the oldest character in the Bible. This shows Mr. Button's emotional unavailability, making it quite clear that he's not yet able or willing to give his son the love and care of a devoted parent simply because Benjamin doesn't meet the expectations he had for his child.

Chapter 3 Quotes

> But Mr. Button persisted in his unwavering purpose. Benjamin was a baby, and a baby he should remain. At first he declared that if Benjamin didn't like warm milk he could go without food altogether, but he was finally prevailed upon to allow his son bread and butter, and even oatmeal by way of a compromise. One day he brought home a rattle and, giving it to Benjamin, insisted in no uncertain terms that he should "play with it," whereupon the old man took it with a weary expression and could be heard jingling it obediently at intervals throughout the day.

Related Characters: Benjamin Button, Roger Button

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis

This passage details the way Mr. Button treats Benjamin in the first years of his life. When Benjamin was first born, his father was reluctant to even take him in and care for him, worrying that news of his reverse-aging condition would tarnish the family reputation. Now, though, he appears to have made peace with the idea of raising Benjamin.

In order to do this, though, Mr. Button essentially deludes himself into viewing Benjamin as a typical child—that is, one who doesn't have the mind and body of a 70-year-old man. To that end, he forces certain expectations on his son, like that Benjamin act like a little boy instead of an old man. He even tries to get Benjamin to play with a baby rattle, demonstrating that he's quite serious about treating his son like an infant.

This, it seems, is simply Mr. Button's attempt to do what he thinks is expected of him as a father. According to him, these are all things a father does for his child, and he doesn't want to stray from convention by admitting that Benjamin is an old man. This has a noticeable effect on Benjamin, who "obediently" plays with the baby rattle "throughout the day" in an effort to please his father. The implication, then, is that Benjamin feels pressure from Mr. Button to act like his numerical age. Unfortunately for him, this pressure will later cause problems, since the rest of society expects him to act like an old man. Mr. Button's unrealistic demands thus put Benjamin in a difficult position.

> The sensation created in Baltimore was, at first, prodigious. What the mishap would have cost the Buttons and their kinsfolk socially cannot be determined, for the outbreak of the Civil War drew the city's attention to other things. A few people who were unfailingly polite racked their brains for compliments to give to the parents—and finally hit upon the ingenious device of declaring that the baby resembled his grandfather, a fact which, due to the standard state of decay common to all men of seventy, could not be denied. Mr. and Mrs. Roger Button were not pleased, and Benjamin's grandfather was furiously insulted.

Related Characters: Benjamin's Grandfather, Benjamin Button, Roger Button

Related Themes:

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis

In a society obsessed with reputation and status, it's unsurprising that news of Benjamin's reverse-aging condition spreads far and wide. The Buttons, after all, are powerful and influential members of Baltimore's high society, so people are bound to talk about the family's juicy gossip. However, this gossip doesn't last for nearly as long as one might expect, since the onset of the Civil War distracts everyone who would otherwise spend their time spreading rumors about Benjamin.

Of course, the outbreak of war is always likely to overshadow the other news of the day. But the fact that Benjamin's extremely rare, unbelievable condition ends up fading from public consciousness is nonetheless extraordinary, suggesting that people eventually move on from even the most sensational stories. In the meantime, though, the Buttons' friends have to "rack[] their brains for compliments" about Benjamin, indicating that although this society is clearly full of gossip, people still try to *seem* as if they're polite and gracious. This, after all, is what respectable people do, and everyone in the Buttons' social circles wants to be seen as respectable.

> Benjamin, once he left the hospital, took life as he found it. Several small boys were brought to see him, and he spent a stiff-jointed afternoon trying to work up an interest in tops and marbles—he even managed, quite accidentally, to break a kitchen window with a stone from a sling shot, a feat which secretly delighted his father.
>
> Thereafter Benjamin contrived to break something every day, but he did these things only because they were expected of him, and because he was by nature obliging.

Related Characters: Benjamin Button, Roger Button

Related Themes:

Page Number: 166

Explanation and Analysis

This passage outlines the extent to which Mr. Button refuses to accept that Benjamin has the personality of an elderly man. Instead of making peace with the fact that his son has a rare condition, Mr. Button tries to act like nothing about Benjamin is out of the ordinary. Above all, this is an attempt to make sure the Buttons are seen as a normal, respectable family. But unfortunately for Benjamin, this means his father is more interested in keeping up appearances than actually allowing his son to be himself.

Indeed, it's obvious that Benjamin's entire way of being in the world has nothing to do with his numerical age. All the same, though, he goes through the motions of trying to live up to his father's expectations, making a point of breaking something every day, though the only reason he does this is because it's "expected of him." This shows that Benjamin is very aware of his father's unrealistic expectation that he behave like someone he's not (namely, a mischievous, carefree little boy).

> When he was five he was sent to kindergarten, where he was initiated into the art of pasting green paper on orange paper, of weaving colored maps and manufacturing eternal cardboard necklaces. He was inclined to drowse off to sleep in the middle of these tasks, a habit which both irritated and frightened his young teacher. To his relief she complained to his parents, and he was removed from the school. The Roger Buttons told their friends that they felt he was too young.
>
> By the time he was twelve years old his parents had grown used to him. Indeed, so strong is the force of custom that they no longer felt that he was different from any other child—except when some curious anomaly re- minded them of the fact.

Related Characters: Benjamin Button, Roger Button

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 167

Explanation and Analysis

This passage charts Benjamin's progress through childhood. The fact that he goes to kindergarten in the first place is a reminder that his father wants him to live the life of a typical little boy. However, it's very obvious to everyone except Mr. Button that Benjamin has the personality of an old man, not that of a young boy. His kindergarten teacher, for example, understands that Benjamin doesn't belong in kindergarten, despite the fact that his numerical age lines up with the age of most kindergarteners. But Mr. Button refuses to accept

this, even going so far as to tell family friends that Benjamin shouldn't be in kindergarten because he's too *young*—an obvious lie that just shows how desperate he is for other people in society to see his family as normal.

This attempt to pretend that nothing about Benjamin's childhood is out of the ordinary eventually makes it quite easy for Mr. Button and his wife to overlook his condition entirely. After a while, they "no longer [feel] that he [is] different from any other child." This, however, is only because they've deluded themselves: Benjamin is an old man, but the Buttons have somehow managed to push this from their minds in an attempt to uphold their reputation as a family and avoid any negative attention that might come their way. In this way, they're not truly accepting and supporting Benjamin—they're merely denying who he really is.

Chapter 4 Quotes

"The word had gone around that a lunatic had passed the entrance examinations for Yale and attempted to palm himself off as a youth of eighteen. A fever of excitement permeated the college. Men ran hatless out of classes, the football team abandoned its practice and joined the mob, professors' wives with bonnets awry and bustles out of position, ran shouting after the procession, from which proceeded a continual succession of remarks aimed at the tender sensibilities of Benjamin Button.

Related Characters: The Registrar, Benjamin Button

Related Themes:

Page Number: 169

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, a group of students at Yale University chases Benjamin off of campus. He has just tried to enroll in classes as a freshman, but the registrar doesn't believe he's only 18 years old. Instead, the registrar is convinced that Benjamin is a middle-aged "lunatic" posing as a teenager in order to infiltrate the freshman class. Consequently, the registrar banishes him from his office, attracting the attention of multiple people, all of whom form a mob that bears down on Benjamin and runs him out of town.

This is an important moment because it's the first time in the story that Benjamin butts up against society's expectations in a major way. Although his father wants him to act like his numerical age, everyone else expects him to behave in accordance with however old he *looks*. This puts him in an impossible position: either he disappoints his father, or he makes himself vulnerable to mobs of jeering, mean-spirited people who launch a "continual succession" of insults at him. In turn, this lose-lose situation illustrates that it's impossible to please everyone at the same time.

Chapter 5 Quotes

"I've always said," went on Hildegarde, "that I'd rather marry a man of fifty and be taken care of than marry a man of thirty and take care of *him*."

Related Characters: Hildegarde Moncrief (speaker), Benjamin Button

Related Themes:

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis

Hildegarde says this to Benjamin when they first meet. As they dance, she talks about how she likes older men because they're more mature than men her own age. This maturity, she implies, is important when considering a marriage partner, since she wants to be "taken care of." Marrying a younger man, on the other hand, would mean she would have to take care of her husband. This is a rather bold thing for her to say to Benjamin, as it strongly implies that she's interested in potentially marrying him, since she thinks he's 50 years old.

But this statement is more than a forward way of flirting with Benjamin—it also foreshadows the demise of their future relationship. Hildegarde and Benjamin do end up getting married, but they eventually fall out of love, largely because Benjamin becomes the exact kind of partner Hildegarde says she uninterested in: an immature young man. Although it might initially seem like they're a perfect match, then, their relationship is actually doomed, because there's no way Benjamin will ever be able to live up to her expectations as he gets younger and younger.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ The almost forgotten story of Benjamin's birth was remembered and sent out upon the winds of scandal in picaresque and incredible forms. It was said that Benjamin was really the father of Roger Button, that he was his brother who had been in prison for forty years, that he was John Wilkes Booth in disguise—and, finally, that he had two small conical horns sprouting from his head.

The Sunday supplements of the New York papers played up the case with fascinating sketches which showed the head of Benjamin Button attached to a fish, to a snake, and, finally, to a body of solid brass. He became known, journalistically, as the Mystery Man of Maryland. But the true story, as is usually the case, had a very small circulation.

Related Characters: Roger Button, Hildegarde Moncrief, Benjamin Button

Related Themes:

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis

After Benjamin and Hildegarde announce their wedding engagement, Baltimore buzzes with gossip about their union. Suddenly, everyone starts talking about Benjamin's reverse-aging condition again. This time, however, there's no Civil War to distract people from the story, so the gossip gets out of hand. The fact that people circulate such outlandish stories illustrates just how eager this society is for salacious gossip, even if it's obviously untrue.

To that end, the rumor that Benjamin is actually John Wilkes Booth (the man who assassinated President Lincoln) is so farfetched that it's hard to understand how, exactly, anyone would believe it. The same goes for the rumor that Benjamin has "small conical horns" coming out of his head—this one in particular emphasizes just how out of touch with reality the gossip about Benjamin becomes. And yet, the stories continue to circulate, demonstrating how much people love scandalous rumors, which are much more exciting than the truth. Indeed, it is for this reason that "the true story" of Benjamin's birth has a "very small circulation" in Baltimore—it simply isn't as compelling as the rumors.

❝ So many of the stories about her fiancé were false that Hildegarde refused stubbornly to believe even the true one. In vain General Moncrief pointed out to her the high mortality among men of fifty—or, at least, among men who looked fifty; in vain he told her of the instability of the wholesale hardware business. Hildegarde had chosen to marry for mellowness—and marry she did....

Related Characters: Roger Button, General Moncrief, Hildegarde Moncrief, Benjamin Button

Related Themes:

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis

As rumors swirl throughout Baltimore about the circumstances surrounding Benjamin's birth (and his reverse-aging condition), Hildegarde takes the negative attention in stride. This is partly because she recognizes the stories for what they are: farfetched rumors. The problem, however, is that she also lets the gossip convince her that even the *true* story about Benjamin's condition is false. In the same way that Benjamin's father deludes himself into largely ignoring his son's unique reverse-aging process, Hildegarde manages to persuade herself that there's nothing out of the ordinary about her fiancé.

This suggests that people are capable of overlooking certain aspects about their loved ones, especially when it helps them convince themselves that their significant others are who they want them to be. Because Hildegarde has "chosen to marry for mellowness," then, she has to ignore the fact that Benjamin will only become less and less "mellow" as time goes on—otherwise, she would have to completely rethink her entire decision, and this is something she seems unwilling to do. Consequently, she treats Benjamin as if he's the person she *wants* him to be, and this sets the couple up for trouble down the road.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ In the fifteen years between Benjamin Button's marriage in 1880 and his father's retirement in 1895, the family fortune was doubled—and this was due largely to the younger member of the firm.

Needless to say, Baltimore eventually received the couple to its bosom. Even old General Moncrief became reconciled to his son-in-law when Benjamin gave him the money to bring out his "History of the Civil War" in twenty volumes, which had been refused by nine prominent publishers.

Related Characters: General Moncrief, Roger Button, Hildegarde Moncrief, Benjamin Button

Related Themes:

Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes the aftermath of Benjamin and Hildegarde's marriage. Even though Baltimore's high society runs wild with false rumors about Benjamin in the wake of his engagement to Hildegarde, the scandal eventually dies down. This indicates that all forms of gossip—including the most titillating, juicy stories—fade away after a while.

This is especially the case, it seems, when the gossip is about someone who becomes rich and successful. As Benjamin makes a name for himself in the hardware business, Baltimore quickly accepts him and Hildegarde, "receiv[ing] the couple to its bosom." It's not just that everyone has moved on from the gossip surrounding their relationship, but also that Benjamin has solidified himself as someone with status. And in a society that cares so much about reputation and rank, this is enough to overshadow seemingly any kind of scandal, as evidenced by the fact that even General Moncrief—who was originally so against his daughter marrying Benjamin—comes to approve of their relationship, suddenly realizing that his son-in-law is a powerful figure who can lend him money.

> In the early days of their marriage Benjamin had worshipped her. But, as the years passed, her honey-colored hair became an unexciting brown, the blue enamel of her eyes assumed the aspect of cheap crockery—moreover, and most of all, she had become too settled in her ways, too placid, too content, too anemic in her excitements, and too sober in her taste. As a bride it had been she who had "dragged" Benjamin to dances and dinners—now conditions were reversed. She went out socially with him, but without enthusiasm, devoured already by that eternal inertia which comes to live with each of us one day and stays with us to the end.

Related Characters: General Moncrief, Roger Button, Hildegarde Moncrief, Benjamin Button

Related Themes:

Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

After Benjamin comes home from serving in the Spanish-American War, he finds that he's no longer attracted to Hildegarde because she doesn't look young anymore. This means that their roles in the relationship have reversed, with Benjamin now looking and feeling like the younger one while Hildegarde looks and feels older.

Of course, Benjamin's feelings about Hildegarde are a bit hypocritical, since she loved him when *he* looked old and acted slow. The difference, however, is that Hildegarde actively sought these traits out in Benjamin, appreciating him precisely *because* he had the looks and personality of an older man. Benjamin, on the other hand, fell in love with Hildegarde's youthful spirit. She used to "drag[]" him to parties, but now she only goes out with him "without enthusiasm." And now that this youthful spirit has left her, he doesn't feel quite so in love with her.

What's more, part of Benjamin's disinterest in Hildegarde has to do with *his* new identity as a young man. Now that he's no longer an old man, his entire personality has changed—he's become livelier and more interested in new experiences. Meanwhile, Hildegarde's new existence is defined by a sense of "inertia," or stillness. They've both become different people, their demeanors and interests changing in accordance with the developmental stages they're going through. As this happens, it becomes impossible for them to fulfill each other's needs, since Hildegarde has always expected Benjamin to behave like a mature older man, while Benjamin has always expected her to behave like a fun-loving young woman. This shows the extent to which a person's age-related development affects their personality, to the point that even their closest and most long-lasting relationships can change as a result.

Chapter 8 Quotes

> "Well," he remarked lightly, "everybody says I look younger than ever."
>
> Hildegarde regarded him with scorn. She sniffed. "Do you think it's anything to boast about?"
>
> "I'm not boasting," he asserted uncomfortably.
>
> She sniffed again. "The idea," she said, and after a moment: "I should think you'd have enough pride to stop it."
>
> "How can I?" he demanded.
>
> "I'm not going to argue with you," she retorted. "But there's a right way of doing things and a wrong way. If you've made up your mind to be different from everybody else, I don't suppose I can stop you, but I really don't think it's very considerate."

Related Characters: Hildegarde Moncrief, Benjamin Button (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis

This conversation takes place between Benjamin and Hildegarde shortly after Benjamin comes home from the Spanish-American War. Benjamin has recently begun to worry about what will happen to him as he continues to age backwards, realizing that he'll slowly lose everything he cares about in life. With this in mind, he brings the matter up with Hildegarde over dinner.

Unfortunately for Benjamin, Hildegarde doesn't pick up on—or perhaps doesn't *care* about—the fact that he's worried. Instead of comforting him or giving him emotional support, she looks at him "with scorn" and makes it clear that she thinks he's bragging about his youthful good looks. This calls attention to the tricky dynamic that defines their relationship: Hildegarde married Benjamin with the expectation that he'd always be a dignified older man. Now, though, he's no longer that person, and she resents him for this.

In fact, Hildegarde resents Benjamin so much that she abandons all rationality. She criticizes him for not "stop[ping]" his reverse aging, refusing to see that this is as ridiculous as him asking her to stop getting older. To make this argument, she points out that he's failing to lead an appropriate, socially acceptable life, insisting that there's a "right way of doing things and a wrong way." This plays on the story's interest in exploring the expectations that society places on people. According to Hildegarde, Benjamin isn't living up to these expectations because his life doesn't conform to society's norms. But at the same time, if Benjamin were to change his behavior to please other people, his relationship with Hildegarde wouldn't be any more authentic or fulfilling, because Benjamin would be pretending to be someone he's not.

❝ "Look!" people would remark. "What a pity! A young fellow that age tied to a woman of forty-five. He must be twenty years younger than his wife." They had forgotten—as people inevitably forget—that back in 1880 their mammas and papas had also remarked about this same ill-matched pair.

Related Characters: Hildegarde Moncrief, Benjamin Button

Related Themes:

Page Number: 175

Explanation and Analysis

As Benjamin gets younger, his hunger for excitement and entertainment leads him to attend as many parties and dances as possible. He takes Hildegarde to these events, but it's clear she doesn't want to be there, especially since Benjamin spends all his time dancing with beautiful young women. Meanwhile, Hildegarde sits in the corner and watches him reproachfully, and everyone else at the party gossips about their marriage.

This time, however, the gossip isn't about Benjamin's reverse-aging condition. Instead, it's about Hildegarde, since people feel sorry for Benjamin because they think he's a young man who has—for reasons they can't fathom—been "tied" to an older wife. The word "tied" suggests that they see this marriage as an injustice to Benjamin, as if Hildegarde is actively restricting his freedom. Benjamin, for his part, might even agree with this, since he clearly yearns for the unrestrained life of a young single person—though this is, of course, not Hildegarde's fault.

What's most important about this passage, though, is that it illustrates the fleeting nature of gossip and scandal. The people who now gossip about Benjamin and Hildegarde have "forgotten" that their parents also used to gossip about this "ill-matched pair." This time, however, the circumstances have changed: whereas people used to think Benjamin was too old for Hildegarde, now they think Hildegarde is too old for Benjamin. Either way, this goes to show that although some gossip often *seems* important and long-lasting, the truth is that "people inevitably forget" even the most scandalous stories.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ But though he was welcomed in a general way, there was obviously no heartiness in Roscoe's feeling toward him—there was even perceptible a tendency on his son's part to think that Benjamin, as he moped about the house in adolescent mooniness, was somewhat in the way. Roscoe was married now and prominent in Baltimore life, and he wanted no scandal to creep out in connection with his family.

Related Characters: Roger Button, Hildegarde Moncrief, Roscoe Button, Benjamin Button

Related Themes:

Page Number: 176

Explanation and Analysis

After Benjamin graduates from Harvard University, he has nobody to turn to for support except Roscoe, his adult son. Hildegarde has moved to Italy to live on her own, so she isn't around to help him as he transitions from a young man into a teenager. This calls attention to the lack of caring, supportive people in Benjamin's life. Of course, he has Roscoe, but his son isn't happy to have him "mop[ing]" around the house like a moody teenager, clearly seeing Benjamin as nothing but a burden.

Roscoe's hesitancy to fully embrace his father is rooted in an obsession with status and reputation. Just like Benjamin's father, Roscoe is more worried about what people will think about his family than about actually supporting Benjamin. This is because he's a "prominent" man in Baltimore, so he doesn't want "scandal to creep out in connection with his family." Once again, then, the story highlights how thinking so much about reputation can keep people from treating their loved ones with compassion.

❝ "And another thing," continued Roscoe, "when visitors are in the house I want you to call me 'Uncle'—not 'Roscoe,' but 'Uncle,' do you understand? It looks absurd for a boy of fifteen to call me by my first name. Perhaps you'd better call me 'Uncle' *all* the time, so you'll get used to it."

With a harsh look at his father, Roscoe turned away. . . .

Related Characters: Roscoe Button (speaker), Benjamin Button

Related Themes:

Page Number: 177

Explanation and Analysis

Roscoe says this shortly after Benjamin moves in with him. The fact that he's so worried about what visitors will think about Benjamin's age calls attention to his fear of losing face in society. Seeing himself as an important, respectable gentleman, Roscoe frets that his status will suffer if his friends think he's willing to let a 15-year-old boy talk down to him. Once again, then, somebody close to Benjamin prioritizes status and reputation over showing him support and kindness.

Another interesting thing about this moment is the mere idea that Roscoe's friends don't know that Benjamin is actually his father. Even though the news of Benjamin's reverse-aging condition has been the hot gossip in Baltimore multiple times throughout his life, people *still* don't remember who he is or what's unique about him. This just proves that scandal and gossip rarely last for very long. Indeed, even the most sensational stories eventually fade away.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ Roscoe took them both to kindergarten on the same day and Benjamin found that playing with little strips of colored paper, making mats and chains and curious and beautiful designs, was the most fascinating game in the world.

Related Characters: Roscoe Button, Benjamin Button

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 179

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes Benjamin's process of becoming a child, specifically focusing on the period during which he has the mind and body of a kindergartener. Going to school alongside Roscoe's son, he discovers that he loves playing with "little strips of colored paper." This is an important detail, since Benjamin showed no interest in playing with colored paper when he first attended kindergarten, back when he had the mind and body of an elderly man. Now, though, he finds simple arts and crafts delightful.

This shift makes it very easy to see the extent to which Benjamin's entire way of being has changed over the course of his life. He's not an old man trapped inside a kindergartener's body—he's a kindergartener through and through. In other words, he has completely transformed, changing according to whatever developmental stage he's going through. In this case, he has developed into a child, so he thinks cutting colorful paper is the "most fascinating game in the world." And although everyone changes as they age, the fact that Benjamin undergoes this process in reverse makes it all the more obvious that a person's physical and mental development deeply influences their personality and interests.

Roscoe's son moved up into the first grade after a year, but Benjamin stayed on in the kindergarten. He was very happy. Sometimes when other tots talked about what they would do when they grew up a shadow would cross his little face as if in a dim, childish way he realized that those were things in which he was never to share.

The days flowed on in monotonous content.

Related Characters: Roscoe Button, Benjamin Button

Related Themes:

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis

Even though Benjamin stays in kindergarten while Roscoe's son moves on, he seems perfectly happy—except, that is, when he has the momentary realization that he'll never again be a full-grown adult. The fact that this only occurs to him from time to time—like a "shadow" passing over his face—indicates that he doesn't actually *remember* his past life. He's no longer aware of his reverse-aging condition. Instead of thinking about how he's actually quite old, he simply lives in the moment, and this protects him from the sadness he'd otherwise feel about nearing the end of his life.

This is why Benjamin's "days flow[] on in monotonous content," suggesting that the repetitive nature of his life is perfectly pleasing because he's fine with just living in the moment. In the past, he always had to navigate the discrepancy between his numerical age and his developmental stage, all while trying to live up to everyone else's expectations. Now, though, none of this occurs to him, ultimately suggesting that ignorance is bliss. Sometimes, the story implies, simply taking life for what it is can help a person feel "content."

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Roger Button makes his way through Baltimore on his way to the hospital. It's 1860, and his wife has just given birth to their first child. Mr. Button hopes this child will be a boy who will follow in his own footsteps, perhaps attending Yale University when the time comes.

Right away, it's clear that Mr. Button has high hopes about what it will be like to have a child. For one, he wants this child to be a boy, perhaps suggesting that he's eager to pass on the family name (which, at least in 1860, would mean he'd have to have a son). The fact that he wants this son to carry on his own legacy at Yale University also implies that Mr. Button wants to make sure his family's prestigious reputation remains in place. It seems, then, that Mr. Button is quite invested in his own social status, meaning that his child will undoubtedly have to live up to his lofty expectations.

These excited thoughts quickly slip away, though, when Mr. Button encounters Doctor Keene outside the hospital and learns that something has gone wrong. Doctor Keene barks that Mr. Button should see for himself if he's so eager to know whether his child is a girl or a boy. He then angrily departs, muttering that his reputation is at stake and that he never wants to see anyone from Button's family again.

Like Mr. Button, Doctor Keene is concerned with his status—in particular, he's worried about what associating with the Buttons and their child could mean for his career. He is so preoccupied with his professional reputation that he doesn't seem to care what's wrong with the Buttons' child or how he could best comfort Mr. Button in this moment.

Inside the hospital, a flustered nurse directs Mr. Button upstairs, failing to conceal her terror and anxiety. Another terrified nurse takes him to the nursery, though not before reproachfully saying that the hospital's reputation will never recover from the events of that morning. When Mr. Button finally gets a look at his child, he understands why everyone is so upset: stuffed uncomfortably into a crib sits an old man who looks roughly 70 years old. This, the nurse tells Mr. Button, is his newborn son.

The nurses behave with the same contempt as the doctor, further illustrating how focused people in this society are on preserving their reputation. In this case, the nurses are nervous about the hospital's reputation, and this overrides any empathy they might otherwise show Mr. Button, who could undoubtedly use a little kindness. Instead of trying to ease the shock he surely feels upon discovering that his son looks like a 70-year-old man rather than a baby, the nurses fixate on their own interests, demonstrating that obsessing over things like reputation can make people less compassionate and kind.

In an old, cranky voice, Mr. Button's son addresses him directly. If Button really is his father, the man-child demands, he should take him home immediately, since he finds the hospital dreadful. The nurse also wants Mr. Button to take his son away as fast as possible, but Button is mortified by the idea of being seen in public with this decrepit old man.

What's surprising about this moment—other than the fact that Mr. Button's son is a talking newborn with an old man's body—is that Mr. Button reacts the exact same way that Doctor Keene and the nurses reacted. He doesn't feel sad about his son's unique condition, nor does he worry about whether or not his son is going to be all right. Instead, he immediately worries what people will think about him if he's seen in public with this man-child. From the very beginning of their relationship, then, Mr. Button fails to give his son the unconditional love and support that most parents automatically show their children.

The idea of walking through the reputable neighborhoods of Baltimore with his son is so devastating that Mr. Button briefly wishes the child had been born Black, so he could sell him at the slave market. Pushing this disturbing thought from his mind, he rushes to a nearby clothing store to buy his son something respectable to wear.

Mr. Button is so afraid of damaging his reputation that he has the heartless, racist thought that everything would be easier if he could sell his son into slavery. The extreme nature of this desire reveals just how desperate Mr. Button is to find a way out of caring for his son. Once again, he thinks more about his own status in society than about how to be a good father, apparently unable to show his son any empathy.

CHAPTER 2

Mr. Button returns with a suit that looked dignified on a mannequin in the store but, unfortunately, looks ridiculous on his son. Even his son complains about how absurd he looks, but Mr. Button forces him to wear it, threatening to spank him if he disobeys. Out on the street, the old man takes Mr. Button's hand and asks what he's going to name him. Mr. Button sarcastically suggests "Methuselah."

Here, Mr. Button treats his son like he's an actual child instead of an old man. His threat of spanking his son is nonsensical, since the child is developmentally older than Mr. Button himself is. It does say something about Mr. Button's character, though: because he's so devastated by the idea that his son might ruin his reputation, he's ready to delude himself into acting like everything is normal. And yet, he knows this isn't truly the case, as evidenced by his sarcastic remark that he should name the man-child "Methuselah"—the oldest figure in the Bible.

CHAPTER 3

Mr. Button names his son Benjamin and does everything he can to make him look less old and decrepit. He cuts and dyes Benjamin's hair, trims his beard, and even dyes his eyebrows. But none of this makes Mr. Button any less disappointed in his first and only son. Still, he insists on treating Benjamin like a child and tries to make him drink warm milk—something Benjamin hates. So, Mr. Button relents and lets him eat soft foods like oatmeal. He also brings him a baby rattle, which Benjamin dutifully plays with, though only to make his father happy. What he'd *really* like to do is smoke cigars and read the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, but Mr. Button discourages this behavior.

Mr. Button's insistence on treating Benjamin like a child has to do with his high expectations for his son. After all, Mr. Button had a clear idea of the path he wanted Benjamin to take before he even met him, fantasizing about how his son would follow in his footsteps by attending Yale. Given that he formed these expectations before Benjamin was even alive, it's perhaps unsurprising that he doesn't want to let go of the vision he originally had for how Benjamin's childhood should go. Unfortunately, though, this puts Benjamin in a difficult position, since he doesn't actually want to do any of the boyish things his father forces him to do. And this, in turn, reveals an important aspect of Benjamin's condition: he doesn't just look *like an old man, he also* feels *and* acts *like one. To make him behave otherwise, then, is to make him be somebody he's not.*

If it weren't for the beginning of the Civil War, the news of Benjamin's condition would surely ruin the Button family's status in society. Thankfully, though, the war draws attention away from the matter. And yet, friends of the family still find themselves having to come up with something graceful to say about the situation.

The importance of reputation in 1860s Baltimore is apparent in this section, as the Buttons narrowly escape social ruin because the Civil War distracts everyone in their community. But this also suggests that although the Buttons clearly live in a society that relishes drama, even the juiciest, most startling stories will likely fade to the background when something bigger and more pressing happens.

Many people point out that Benjamin resembles his grandfather. This infuriates his grandfather at first, but soon he and Benjamin grow quite close, enjoying each other's company as they sit and talk about the slow, tedious aspects of daily life. When Benjamin isn't doing this, he goes out of his way to break something each day, knowing this boyish behavior delights his father.

Benjamin's behavior suggests that his personality syncs up with whatever developmental stage he's currently in. He has the mind and body of an old man, so he has the identity of an old man, too. This makes for some light humor in the story, as Benjamin is basically a caricature of old age. Conversely, Benjamin only acts like a little boy in order to please Mr. Button, hinting at the unfortunate fact that his father's expectations make it difficult for him to simply be himself.

Benjamin goes to kindergarten, but because he keeps dozing off while the other children make art out of **colorful paper**, his teacher complains and has him removed from school. To save face in society, his parents tell their friends that they decided Benjamin was too young for kindergarten.

It's obvious that Benjamin isn't too young for kindergarten, since he has the mind, body, and personality of an elderly man. But his parents tell their friends this anyway, demonstrating how eager they are to act like everything about their family is normal—yet another illustration of how much they care about status and reputation. This is also one of the first times that Benjamin finds himself caught between his father's expectation that he act like his numerical age and society's unwillingness to accept him as such.

Shortly after his 12th birthday, Benjamin looks in the mirror and realizes the roots of his hair aren't as white as they used to be. His wrinkles are also beginning to smooth over, and he looks stronger and healthier. Feeling grown up, he tells his father he'd like to wear long pants, but Mr. Button says long pants are for boys 14 and older. When Benjamin argues that he's big for his age, his father falsely claims that he himself was the same size when he was 12. But after much debate, Mr. Button agrees to let Benjamin wear long pants—on the condition that he play with children his own age, stop wearing glasses, and stop using a cane.

Once again, Mr. Button tries to force Benjamin into acting like someone he's not. Even though it's clear that Benjamin has the personality of an old man, his father goes to great lengths to ignore this fact. He's so intent on treating Benjamin like an average little boy that he deludes himself by saying that he was just as big as Benjamin when he was 12—an obvious lie, considering that Benjamin has an adult body. Nonetheless, Mr. Button continues to force his expectations on Benjamin, regardless of whether or not they actually make sense for his son.

CHAPTER 4

By the time Benjamin is 18, his hair has become thicker, his back straighter, and his voice stronger. He's accepted to Yale, just like his father hoped he would be—but when he goes to sign up for classes, the registrar refuses to believe that he's 18. Benjamin tries multiple times to convince him of his real age, but this only outrages the registrar, who calls him a "dangerous lunatic" for trying to enter a freshman class as a grown man.

Again, Benjamin has to deal with his father's expectations and the ways they conflict with what the rest of society expects of him. In this case, he finally manages to live up to his father's high standards by going to Yale, but he quickly discovers that this door isn't actually open to him. While his father sees him as an 18-year-old boy, the registrar (and everyone else) sees him as a strange middle-aged man with suspicious intentions. Given these conflicting expectations, it becomes clear that it's impossible for Benjamin to satisfy everyone.

The registrar shouts Benjamin out of the office, attracting the attention of a group of students who follow him through campus and chase him out of town, leering and insulting him by suggesting that he should try this stunt at Harvard. Boarding a train for Baltimore, Benjamin decides that he *will* go to Harvard someday.

Trying to live up to his father's expectations has detrimental consequences for Benjamin, as evidenced by the fact that an angry mob chases him off Yale's campus. This illustrates just how unwilling people are to accept anything that seems out of the ordinary, ultimately making it quite hard for Benjamin to live his life without constantly having to encounter adversity. This jeering mob also shows that people are drawn to scandals—after all, people crowd around Benjamin as if he's some sort of exotic zoo animal, each one of them clearly relishing the drama of this moment.

CHAPTER 5

At 20 years old, Benjamin looks the same age as his 50-year-old father. The year is 1880, and he now works with Mr. Button at Roger Button & Co., Wholesale Hardware. The two men are often mistaken for brothers—especially when they appear at high society dances, like the one they attend one evening in August at a fancy country house in Baltimore. It's at this dance that Benjamin first falls in love, laying eyes on Hildegarde Moncrief, the daughter of one of the most powerful men in town.

Although Benjamin's condition makes it difficult for him to do things like go to college, he manages to lead a somewhat normal life by the time he turns 20. This is because the difference between his numerical age and his physical appearance is no longer quite so pronounced. As a 20-year-old, he's old enough to work alongside his father, and the rest of society doesn't interfere with this because there's nothing out of the ordinary about the sight of a middle-aged man working at a hardware company. Benjamin can therefore be himself for the most part—he no longer has to act younger than he feels to please his father, nor does he have to act older than his actual age to conform to society's expectations.

Benjamin asks Hildegarde to dance and then spends the majority of the evening eagerly awaiting his turn on her dance card. As he waits, he watches her younger suitors, finding them all unbearably annoying. When it's finally his turn, though, all of these thoughts drop away. As he and Hildegarde move easily along the dance floor, Benjamin feels so dazzled and excited that it's almost as if his life has just begun.

"The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" is fundamentally a coming-of-age story. Of course, Benjamin's aging process happens in reverse, but the story still traces his life's arc. Moreover, the events that take place roughly in the middle of his life are pretty typical. Dancing and falling in love with a young woman like Hildegarde, for example, is the exact sort of thing a 20-year-old would do. As he nears middle-age, then, Benjamin's developmental stage gets closer and closer to his actual numerical age, making it easier for him to lead a straightforward, average life uninfluenced by the social constraints of his condition.

Hildegarde thinks Benjamin and his father are brothers, and Benjamin doesn't correct her because he wants to avoid the kind of intolerance he experienced at Yale. She also goes on about how she prefers older men, saying that her young suitors are all immature. Fifty years old, she says, is the perfect age. She would rather marry a 50-year-old who would take care of her than marry a 30-year-old who would need *her* to take care of him. On the ride home that night, Benjamin is so smitten that he can't even hold a conversation with his father.

At least at this point in the story, Hildegarde seems like the perfect match for Benjamin, since she prefers dignified older men over immature younger men. As ideal as this match might seem, though, Benjamin's decision not to tell Hildegarde sets them up for trouble down the road—after all, if Hildegarde likes older men, she'll be in for a surprise when Benjamin just keeps getting younger. Her expectations have already been set: she assumes (reasonably enough) that Benjamin will always be the dignified, mature older man she wants him to be. And this, in turn, sets Benjamin up for yet another difficult relationship in which he'll have to constantly try to be someone he's not.

CHAPTER 6

Benjamin and Hildegarde announce their engagement six months later, much to the dismay of Hildegarde's father, General Moncrief, who disapproves of the union. Everyone in Baltimore talks about the upcoming marriage, as people recall the story of Benjamin's birth and circulate exaggerated versions of the tale. People say that Benjamin is actually Mr. Button's father, or that he's Mr. Button's brother who has been imprisoned for 40 years, or that he's really John Wilkes Booth in disguise. There's even a rumor that he has horns poking out of his head.

Benjamin has been alive for 20 years, but it isn't until he marries into one of the most widely respected families in Baltimore that gossip about his condition really starts to circulate. Of course, people talked about him when he was born, but the Civil War drew attention away from the matter. Now, though, gossip runs wild, as people get so carried away that they not only suggest Benjamin could be a monster but also that he could be John Wilkes Booth, the man who assassinated President Abraham Lincoln. These far-fetched stories show how much people like to stretch the truth. Even though the real story of Benjamin's birth is quite interesting as it is, everyone is apparently hungry for an even crazier story, demonstrating society's appetite for scandal and drama.

The newspapers run disparaging drawings of Benjamin, depicting him with the body of a fish or snake. With all these stories going around about him, hardly anyone ever talks accurately about his condition, and Hildegarde even manages to convince herself that the true version of Benjamin's story is untrue. To dissuade her from committing to the marriage, her father reminds her that 50-year-old men are closer to death and points out that the hardware business is unstable. All the same, Hildegarde wants to marry Benjamin for his "mellowness," so she goes through with the engagement.

The gossip about Benjamin has an unexpected effect on his relationship with Hildegarde, since it essentially makes it possible for Hildegarde to completely ignore the reality of Benjamin's condition. This, it seems, is an act of self-delusion, as Hildegarde chooses to disregard the real story of Benjamin's birth so that she can keep thinking of him the way she wants. In other words, the reason she refuses to believe that he's 20 is that she likes the idea of marrying a dignified older man. And though this might work out well for Benjamin in the short term, it's not a very solid foundation on which to begin their marriage, since someday it will be impossible for Benjamin to live up to Hildegarde's image of him as an older man.

CHAPTER 7

General Moncrief changes his opinion of Benjamin over the next 15 years, as his son-in-law takes over for Mr. Button at the hardware company and achieves great financial success. (It also helps that Benjamin gives Moncrief money to self-publish his book, which nine publishers have rejected.)

Benjamin lives in a society where a person's reputation matters more than anything else. This is why General Moncrief initially disapproves of Benjamin and Hildegarde's marriage, since there's so much gossip surrounding Benjamin and his reverse-aging condition. Ironically enough, though, society's obsession with reputation is also why General Moncrief eventually accepts Benjamin, who makes a name for himself as a respected businessman. While a negative reputation can ruin a person's life, then, a positive *reputation can lead to success and social acceptance.*

The rest of Baltimore also accepts Benjamin, who begins to look young and strapping. As for Benjamin himself, he starts gravitating toward the more exciting aspects of life, enjoying the thrill of being the first person in Baltimore to own a car. Seeing his son flourishing in this way, Mr. Button finally feels proud of Benjamin.

Again, it's clear that Benjamin's life is much easier now that he's middle-aged, because he doesn't have to deal anymore with a discrepancy between his actual age and the way he looks. No longer torn between his father's expectations and the expectations society placed on him, he can simply flourish as a successful, widely-respected businessman.

Despite all his success and happiness, though, Benjamin has a problem: he no longer finds Hildegarde attractive. She's now 35 and is the mother of Benjamin's 14-year-old son, Roscoe, but Benjamin no longer finds her exciting. And it's not just her looks that fail to entice him—he's mainly bothered by how subdued she has become. She used to force him to go to dances, but now he's the one taking *her* to social events.

Benjamin's sudden lack of interest in Hildegarde again confirms that his condition is both physical and *mental. It's not just that he looks like a young man—he also thinks and feels like one, and this means that he wants to lead the thrilling life of a typical youngster. It also unfortunately means that he has no interest in carrying on a romantic relationship with a middle-aged woman. Benjamin has been judged his entire life based on how old he looks, and now he is judging Hildegarde the same way.*

Unhappy with the lack of excitement in his life, Benjamin joins the army at the beginning of the Spanish-American War in 1898, securing a high rank because of his social status. He sustains a slight injury in the war and is rewarded for his bravery. Though he doesn't want to give up the thrill of military life, he eventually comes home to continue looking after his hardware business. Upon arriving in Baltimore, he's greeted by a celebratory brass band.

Benjamin's desire to go off to war starkly contrasts with the quiet life he used to lead when he had an old man's body and mind. It's quite clear that his entire personality has changed, as he now yearns for dangerous thrills. In this way, he has come to embody the stereotypical identity of an active, eager young man, and this demonstrates the impact that his various developmental stages have on his entire way of being. Each phase in his development brings about a new transformation, suggesting that different seasons of life have a profound impact on identity. On another note, the fact that a brass band greets Benjamin when he comes home calls attention to how much society has embraced him, now that the scandal surrounding his marriage to Hildegarde has died down.

CHAPTER 8

Hildegarde gives Benjamin a warm welcome and a loving kiss when he returns from the war, but he's depressed by how old she looks. She's now 40, and her hair is beginning to gray. In contrast, he's alarmed by the his own face's youthfulness when he goes upstairs and looks in the mirror. He'd hoped that his reverse-aging would stop once he reached a certain point, but now he sees this isn't the case. He looks like he's 30, and though he used to like these changes, they now make him worried and uncomfortable.

Benjamin has spent his entire life dealing with the superficial judgments people make about him based on his appearance. Now, though, he views Hildegarde in the same superficial way, losing interest in her just because of how she looks. In some ways, this is yet another sign that Benjamin's entire personality has changed in accordance with his developmental stage. Once again, he takes on the stereotypical identity of whatever phase of life he's in, this time acting like a young man who only shows interest in women he finds attractive.

At dinner that night, Benjamin brings up the fact that he looks younger than ever before, which offends Hildegarde. She thinks he's bragging about his youthful good looks. According to her, he should have the dignity to put an end to this ridiculous reversal of the aging process. And though he argues, she refuses to recognize that he *can't* stop it—if he had any sense, she implies, he would stop being so inconsiderate by purposefully making himself "different." There's no arguing with her on this point, so Benjamin simply stops trying.

The reason Hildegarde can't accept Benjamin's reverse aging is that she fell in love with a different version of him. Indeed, she was initially drawn to him because he was a dignified older man—something she found very appealing. As he ages in reverse, though, it becomes increasingly difficult for him to be the person she expects him to be. Thus, instead of emotionally supporting him as he makes his way toward childhood (an obviously disconcerting process), she resents him for changing.

During this period, Benjamin yearns for excitement. He goes to every party in Baltimore, dragging Hildegarde with him. He spends these evenings dancing with the most attractive young women while Hildegarde sits and watches him with scorn. This attracts all sorts of comments from the community, as people talk about how unfortunate it is that this strapping young gentleman has been saddled with an old woman. Of course, the young people talking this way have forgotten (or don't know) that years ago, their parents used the same disapproving tone to talk about Benjamin and Hildegarde's marriage.

Once again, it's evident that even the most pressing gossip eventually fades away. Even though Benjamin and Hildegarde's marriage originally created such a scandal, society as a whole seems to have forgotten about it. But now there's yet another reason to gossip about Benjamin and Hildegarde, though the circumstances are reversed: whereas everybody used to think that Hildegarde was throwing away her youth by marrying someone so much older than her, now everybody thinks Benjamin is throwing away his *youth by staying with Hildegarde. This just shows that gossip has a life of its own, surging in certain moments before eventually falling away—until, that is, the next big scandal comes along.*

Benjamin picks up new hobbies, golfing and spending his spare time perfecting the popular dance moves of the day. He and his son, Roscoe, look increasingly alike and are often mistaken for each other. Roscoe has just graduated from Harvard and is poised to take over the family business, which makes Benjamin happy because he's too occupied with his exciting new life to care about work.

Benjamin's personality continues to change as he ages in reverse. Now that he looks like a man in his early 20s, he's solely focused on leading an active, entertaining life. Compared to the slow existence he led at the beginning of his life, he now seems full of energy. His disinterest in running his hardware business also highlights how much he has changed: instead of showing responsibility, he seeks out fun and adventure. This behavior does—in some regards—line up with the standard aging process, since his desire to move on from the hardware business is similar to how most people embrace retirement after a lifetime of work. In a strange way, then, his journey through life isn't so different from other people's.

All of Benjamin's new activities help him forget about the worries he had when he first came back from the Spanish-American War. Instead of fretting about his reverse-aging process, he simply takes pleasure in his youthful appearance. The only thing that bothers him these days is going out with Hildegarde, who is now almost 50. Being seen with her makes him feel ridiculous.

By leaving his age-related worries behind, Benjamin fully becomes a quintessential young person. After all, young people generally don't worry about aging and mortality as much as older people do. Therefore, the fact that Benjamin forgets about his concerns once again suggests that his whole way of being is directly tied to whatever developmental stage he's currently going through. And this, in turn, shows that identity largely depends on the stage of life a person is in. Unfortunately for Hildegarde, though, this means that Benjamin takes on the rather perspective of a stereotypical young man, especially when it comes to romance. Unsurprisingly, this places an even greater strain on their relationship.

CHAPTER 9

In 1910, Benjamin enrolls as a freshman at Harvard. He looks like he's 20, so he has no trouble fitting in. He joins the football team and, because of his strength and determination, becomes the star. In a game against Yale, he not only scores multiple points but also knocks 11 of his opponents unconscious. As a result, everyone at Harvard loves him and sings his praises. But when his junior year comes around, he's barely able to make the football team because he's shorter and weaker than he was before. The following year, he doesn't make the team at all.

Benjamin finally gets to live the life of a successful college student. Not only that, but he makes good on his vow to attend Harvard as a way of avenging the cruel people who chased him out of Yale. This, then, is a moment of redemption, as Benjamin finally gets to feel like he fits in at college. The problem, though, is that he won't fit in for long—as he gets younger and younger, he once again finds himself out of step with his surroundings, and it just becomes harder for him to lead the typical life of a young man.

Underclassmen start mistaking Benjamin for a freshman. A rumor goes around that he's a genius who gained entrance to Harvard at the impressive age of 16. Because so many of his classmates went to a prestigious preparatory school called St. Midas, he resolves to enroll there after college.

Benjamin's desire to attend St. Midas is yet another indication that his developmental stage dictates the way he moves through the world. It wasn't long ago that he would have found the idea of attending a preparatory school absurd and unappealing, but now he just wants to lead the life of an average teenaged boy. On an even more basic level, it's almost as if Benjamin has resigned himself to the fact that he can't pretend to be someone he's not: he has the mind and body of a teenaged boy, so trying to act like an old man simply doesn't make sense. It's also possible that he can't *do anything but behave like a teenager, since this is truly who he has become.*

After graduating from Harvard, Benjamin returns to Baltimore and moves in with Roscoe, since Hildegarde has moved to Italy. Now an important man in Baltimore society, Roscoe is embarrassed to have someone who looks like a teenager sulking around the house. Moreover, he fears that gossip about this situation will bring a bad name to the family.

It's now clear that Benjamin's relationship with Hildegarde has come to a complete end. Instead of continuing to support him out of love, Hildegarde has moved on, seemingly unable to accept that he's no longer the older man she initially expected him to be. Of course, it's also worth noting that Benjamin was the one who left Hildegarde by going to Harvard in the first place. Still, though, it's clear that he can't depend on her for any kind of support, which is why he turns to Roscoe. And yet, Roscoe feels the same way that Mr. Button felt when Benjamin was first born, focusing more on his own reputation than on caring for Benjamin. In this way, yet another one of Benjamin's loved ones prioritizes status over showing him unconditional love.

With this in mind, Roscoe tells Benjamin to drop the idea of enrolling at St. Midas, finding it ridiculous that Benjamin would even consider going to preparatory school. He also says Benjamin has taken this whole "joke" too far. When visitors come to the house, he adds, Benjamin must refer to him as "Uncle," because it's unacceptable for someone who looks 15 to call him by his first name.

"The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" is full of reversals, and this moment is a perfect example of that. In the same way that Benjamin's aging process is reversed, his entire relational dynamic with his son has now been flipped on its head. Roscoe no longer treats him with the respect people usually show their parents—instead, he treats him like a son (or, worse, like a pesky, unwanted burden). And this, it seems, is because Roscoe is worried about his own reputation. As a result, Benjamin is forced to make do without the emotional support he needs as he grows younger.

CHAPTER 10

In his room at Roscoe's house, Benjamin looks at his smooth, hairless chin in the mirror and wishes he could join the army again. World War I is just beginning, but the minimum age to join the military is 16, and Benjamin doesn't look that old. (He would also be ineligible if he were going by his actual age of 57.) But then he receives a letter from the government informing him that reserve officers from the Spanish-American War are being called to duty. Beside himself with excitement, he sneaks off to a tailor to have a uniform made, and then he secretly makes his way to South Carolina, where he's supposed to command his own brigade.

It seems likely that Benjamin wants to join the army because he misses the authority he used to have when he was a high-ranking official in the Spanish-American War. These days, his own son looks down on him and treats him like nothing but a nuisance, so it makes sense that he would yearn for his former position of power. It's also possible that Benjamin wants to join the army simply because he has the mind of a teenaged boy, since many teenagers romanticize the idea of leading an adventurous life in the military.

When Benjamin reaches the military base, the guard on duty won't let him in. Similarly, a colonel who rides up on a horse won't listen to him, thinking he's nothing but a kid—even though, in reality, he's a general and a decorated veteran. Benjamin barks out orders, but his voice cracks and sounds weak, so he hands over the official letter summoning him to duty. Confused, the colonel takes Benjamin and the letter to headquarters. Two days later, Roscoe arrives to bring Benjamin home.

Benjamin's attempt to go to war is similar to his previous attempt to attend Yale University. In both cases, he tries to do something that makes perfect sense for his numerical *age but makes no sense based on how the rest of the world perceives him. When he tried to go to Yale as an 18-year-old, for instance, he ran into trouble because he looked like an old man. Now, upon trying to go to war, he runs into trouble because he looks like a child masquerading as a soldier. Given that both of these episodes lead to nothing but embarrassment, Benjamin would perhaps be better off if he accepted the constraints of his unique condition. Plus, his actual identity is directly linked to the developmental stage he's in, so joining the military would only force him to act like someone he's not.*

CHAPTER 11

Roscoe has his first child in 1920. Nobody mentions that Benjamin, who now looks like a 10-year-old, is the newborn's grandfather. Within five years, Roscoe's son is old enough to play with Benjamin, who looks the exact same age as him. They attend the same kindergarten, where Benjamin takes great pleasure in playing with **colorful pieces of paper**.

When Benjamin's parents initially sent him to kindergarten in the first part of his life, he couldn't muster up any interest in playing with colorful paper. Now, though, he finally sees the appeal. This makes it easy to track the changes in his development, as he goes from the withdrawn attitude of an old man to the earnest enthusiasm of a child.

The next year, Roscoe's son moves on to first grade while Benjamin stays behind, but this doesn't bother him because he enjoys kindergarten so much. Every once in a while, though, the other children talk about what they want to be when they grow up, and a momentary darkness comes over Benjamin's expression, as if he faintly recalls that he'll never again be an adult.

It would undoubtedly be difficult for someone who has lived for so many years to lead the life of a kindergartener. At the same time, though, the story subtly acknowledges that a version of this actually does *happen to people as they age, since it's common to lose certain cognitive abilities in one's later years. In the same way that elderly people with dementia might occasionally remember the life they used to lead, Benjamin momentarily recalls his past. This, in turn, reminds him that he's not at the beginning of his life—instead, he's nearing the* end *of his life. And yet, this only occurs to him from time to time, suggesting that he has otherwise completely relaxed into the life of a young boy.*

Soon, Benjamin can't keep up with the other children, often crying because they're so much bigger than him. Even his kindergarten teacher can't soothe him, so Roscoe removes him from school. At home, he spends all his time with a nurse, Nana. He passes the time by jumping on the bed, hitting things with a cane from the coatrack, and saying words that Nana teaches him over and over. In the evenings, Nana feeds him mushy foods like oatmeal before he drifts into a pleasant slumber.

As his body and mind get younger and younger, Benjamin's life comes full circle. When he was an old man, his father tried to force him to drink warm milk, but instead he preferred soft foods like oatmeal. Now that he's a small child, he once again eats oatmeal. The story thus spotlights the strange similarities between youth and old age. Moreover, this period of Benjamin's life stands out as a very lonely time. The only person who truly cares for him is Nana, but she only does this because Roscoe hired her. This indicates that nobody in Benjamin's life cares enough to give him the love and support he needs.

When Benjamin sleeps, he doesn't dream of the past. He doesn't dream about the Spanish-American War or about Hildegarde and the pleasant years of their marriage. Soon, nothing but the present moment occurs to him, and then even that begins to fall away. He cries when he's hungry and relaxes when he feels Nana's presence. And then he fades into darkness, nothing registering in his mind at all.

The reverse aging process comes to a completion in this moment, as Benjamin turns into a baby and then fades out of the world. The fact that he no longer remembers anything about his life serves as yet another reminder that his identity is directly linked to his developmental stage: in this part of his life, he's a baby, so he doesn't have the cognitive ability to think about anything other than immediate sensations. But this doesn't mean he's unhappy—in fact, as far as dying goes, Benjamin's experience is enviable because it's totally painless. The story thus spotlights Benjamin's ignorant bliss, suggesting that sometimes people are happiest (or at their most comfortable) when they simply give themselves over to life—or, in this case, death.

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