

Time passes, and  
much else changes:  
"the curious case of  
benjamin button" and  
its...



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In order to discuss the importance of context and changes made to the story in accordance to that context, I would like to take David Fincher's adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's short story "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" as the case study for this topic. To emphasise the influence of the change of context in adaptation, I will discuss not only the contextual changes made to the original story but also the way in which the context behind the time period of the adaptation process as well as the context of the film-making process itself have shaped and enriched the changes in the plot.

Furthermore, I would like to point out how these factors influenced the genre of the story, turning it from a social satire into a tragic contemporary fable tale about finding oneself. It may also be relevant to note that the reason why the contextual change does not seem out of place is because the main theme of the short story and its adaptation is time and time is itself something that both signifies a change but also something that is passing and cannot be framed.

Fitzgerald's short story begins in 1860s Baltimore, Maryland and is defined heavily both by the context and by the mindset of the said context. The short story points out that the Buttons were ahead of their time in their decision to have the child at hospital rather than at home (Fitzgerald, 3) - interestingly, despite Benjamin's birth taking place precisely when giving birth at hospitals started becoming popular in America, in the film he is born at home. This change in setting shows an interesting reversal of progress shown by the Buttons in the original text but may have been necessary in order to make the parallel with Caroline's birth at home which Benjamin, like his father, has to ultimately abandon his child, albeit in different circumstances. The fact

that the 'Buttons held an enviable position, both socially and financially, in ante-bellum Baltimore' and the fact that they have links to 'This Family and That Family' (3) is made clear early on in the short story. This defines the mood for the rest of the plot which is heavily concerned, albeit in a satirical tone, with the social position of an individual and the struggles of an individual outside of the established pattern to apply himself to this pattern at any costs. The change in the context in adaptation also changes the attitude towards the importance of social status and importance of a white American male's status in a society that surrounds him. Roger Button is hoping for a boy because it is a convention and because it is a convention that in itself will continue the traditions that come with the convention: whether it be going to Yale University or inheriting the Wholesale Hardware company, it is something that has to be done and has nothing to do with individual choice, despite certainly seeming like a more privileged set up. In the film, however, this is changed - not only through the change in the context of the film but from the perspective of the context in which the film was made. 1990s onwards, the notion of individuality, which had been in development since 1960s, has become more prominent and has superseded the value of the public opinion on one's definition of "normal" and "abnormal". This as a result meant that Fincher had to appeal to the audience not from the point of view of the traditional privilege, but from the point of view of a social outcast, without changing the protagonist's race or gender in the process. To put it in the words of Ortolano, 'the first version of Benjamin Button provides the fantasy of buying into a burgeoning culture that can grant limitless opportunity, while the second offers viewer a hope that he or

she can maintain his or her own sense of self in the face of the dominant socio - economic framework.'

With the satirical tone of the short story and the importance of social status in mind, a number of statements that take place seem to be bordering on both ridiculous and cruel. The doctor who assists Benjamin's birth and who has been his family's doctor for generations refuses to have anything to do with the family any longer - he has no visible sympathy for the unfortunate parents or the child and is more concerned with his personal status, stating: 'Do you imagine a case like this will help my professional reputation? One more would ruin me - ruin anybody.' (4) The hospital staff join him in that concern and insist on the " anomaly" being taken away from the hospital as soon as possible (6). Furthermore, as if to emphasise how engrained social norms were in Fitzgerald's contemporaries, the short story Benjamin begins talking within the first day of his birth, making poignant observations about the way he should be treated as in relation to his place in the society, for instance saying he does not wish to wear the clothes his father had bought for him because he doesn't ' want to be made a monkey of.' (8) This can be linked to his father's own observations about what is the right thing to do, e. g. ' babies always have blankets' (7) or have to play with a rattle (10) - in other words, even though Benjamin's father is older, his own observations come from derived conventions, not from his own experience with fatherhood.

By contrast, the unconditionally loving, naturally maternal Queenie in the film adaptation represents the kind of all-consuming acceptance that people who know what it's like to be prejudiced against can offer in abundance, let <https://assignbuster.com/time-passes-and-much-else-changes-the-curious-case-of-benjamin-button-and-its-film-adaptation/>

alone since she had not at that moment in the plot been able to conceive herself. Taking the original setting and racist judgement passed by Benjamin's father, who deems the embarrassment to the family as worse than having a child with a black slave as he walks past the house for the aged (6), Roth and Fincher turned the statement on its head, placing Benjamin in the care of a black couple living in the house for the aged and ironically, the two do a greater job raising him in the film than Benjamin's family do in the short story. Rather than Benjamin being raised in prejudice and superficial superiority that ends up making him unhappy in family life, the adaptation places him in a setting where he is able to see that he is not the only one who is odd and an outcast – he gets accustomed to the fact that he is one of many, even if he is odd in a unique way. In a moment of doubt, Queenie insists that 'everybody feels different about themselves, one way or the other. But we all going the same way, just taking different roads to get there, that's all. You're on your own road, Benjamin.' (19: 25 – 54). As Orlando states, 'Benjamin's difference is not negatively "other" then but simply unique' which goes hand in hand with the transformation of the American society throughout the 20th century in which Benjamin grows up, into a more accepting place for individuals diverging from the norm.

In the film, there are two timelines to follow: the story begins in the hospital, in 2005 with the news of the hurricane Katrina being announced on the television in the background but that is just a framing for the main story, which begins with Benjamin Button's birth in 1918 New Orleans, Louisiana. The first timeline is important because it draws in the contemporary viewer – the tragedy of the most devastating hurricane in American history had taken

its toll on the citizens and was still a fresh wound that people were emotionally linked to; the second timeline as well as the location change are meant to relate back to the past of New Orleans and its previous traumas, including the first World War described in Mr Gateau's loss of his son but also, perhaps more importantly to the story, Fincher and Roth thought New Orleans to be a more appropriate, 'an unbelievable melting-pot' (Huddleston) environment. It is additionally insightful to learn that the film was originally meant to be set in Baltimore but because the place had ironically changed so much that recreating it would have cost much more than looking for a new location, they had to decide against it (Weintraub). This is ironic since if anything this context of the film-making process reaffirms the idea of the film that a lot of things are destroyed with time. To elaborate more on the importance of the context of film-making having an influence on the context within the adaptation, I would like to first quote Hutcheon: 'adaptation, like a work it adapts, is always framed in a context – a time and a place, a society and a culture; it does not exist in a vacuum.' (142) With this logic in mind, the scriptwriter's, Eric Roth's and the director's, David Fincher's, personal circumstances during the pre-production process, namely the fact that they had both lost parents affected not only the contents of the story as a whole but even specific setting and scenes. For instance, the hospital scenes of the "present day" New Orleans were inspired by Roth's own experience at hospital with his parents before they passed away, and even some real life dialogues managed to make it into the film (Yamato), including his mother's 'I'm curious' in response to him asking whether she is afraid. Despite having taken place outside of the context of filming, the word choice, 'curious' in this response works really well within <https://assignbuster.com/time-passes-and-much-else-changes-the-curious-case-of-benjamin-button-and-its-film-adaptation/>

the context of the film entitled "The Curious Case", sending out a further message about time challenging human ability to remain curious and accept curiosity. Setting the first timeline in the hospital at the time preceding the full devastating effect of hurricane Katrina while the audience is very well aware of it before the characters are sets the mood for a truism that runs as a leitmotif in the film - everything is ephemeral and is subjected to time's cruel treatment.

Another way that is popularly accepted by the critics for interpreting the change in the context is the appeal to the baby boomer generation that would have watched the film as a way of reconnecting to their youthful ambitions and pursuits in life. Kathryn Lee Seidel suggests that 'the film appeals to the anxiety of aging baby boomers, focusing on the desire to be young again and the reality that "what we love, we will lose"' and specifically that 'the fact that Benjamin and Daisy are "not in synch" mirrors the Baby Boomer propensity to form relationships that do not last.' (Seidal) This in return provides an interesting contrast between Benjamin's relationship with his wife Hildegard in the short story and their onscreen alternatives.

Hildegard only appreciates Benjamin because of his age, or because of what she assumes is his age, fifty, remarking that "Men of your age know how to appreciate women...You're just the romantic age...fifty." This alludes to the 1920s dynamic of a rich "daddy", a slang term which was indeed popularised throughout 1920s and the issues it raised were discussed by Fitzgerald in particular in his novel "Tender is the Night." It is also safe to say that Benjamin is fascinated by her youthfulness in return, hence his loss of interest once her beauty starts to fade, the 'sight [which] depressed him.'

<https://assignbuster.com/time-passes-and-much-else-changes-the-curious-case-of-benjamin-button-and-its-film-adaptation/>

Their relationship is in no way healthy, or healthier than the Baby Boomer mould. Benjamin and Daisy, on the other hand, do not judge each other's appearance based on age. When they reunite after Benjamin had abandoned Daisy and Caroline, Benjamin initiates the intimacy to which Daisy weakly objects with, ' Oh, but Benjamin, I'm an old woman now.' (2: 29: 42) but they end up having an intercourse anyway because Benjamin's feelings towards Daisy and vice versa had not been influenced by age in any aspect other than practical. In his film commentary, Fincher insists that while they might not be a definition of fated lovers, they ' continue to sort of parallel one another throughout life.' (Goldberg) However, in relation to the baby boomer statement, this model of relationship, where people have become disillusioned with finding one soul mate for life but rather enjoying a relationship while it lasts may indeed have influenced the accepting way in which the main couple progress through life with other relationships on the side.

The way in which the contextual changes shaped this particular text had changed many elements of the story. In responding to Fitzgerald's text, the creators of the film version changed the main protagonist's background, they changed his attitude towards relationships, the way one views oneself outside of a normal society. However, what has remained at the core of either version was the transience of time and importance of appreciating it while it lasts.

## Bibliography

<https://assignbuster.com/time-passes-and-much-else-changes-the-curious-case-of-benjamin-button-and-its-film-adaptation/>



Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. Accessed May 06, 2018. <http://english307formsofmodernshortstory.web.unc.edu/files/2014/01/Francis-Scott-Fitzgerald-The-Curious-Case-of-Benjamin-Button.pdf>.

*The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. Directed by David Fincher. Produced by Kathleen Kennedy, Frank Marshall, and Ceán Chaffin. By Eric Roth. Performed by Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett. United States: Paramount Pictures, 2008. DVD.

Goldberg, Matt. "' The Curious Case of Benjamin Button': The Films of David Fincher." Collider. October 10, 2017. Accessed May 04, 2018. <http://collider.com/the-curious-case-of-benjamin-button-review/>. Huddleston, Tom. " David Fincher on ' The Curious Case of Benjamin Button'." Time Out London, 2009. Accessed May 4, 2018. <https://www.timeout.com/london/film/david-fincher-on-the-curious-case-ofbenjamin-button-1>

Hutcheon, Linda, and Siobhan O'Flynn. *A Theory of Adaptation*. London: Routledge, 2012. Ortolano, Scott. " Changing Buttons: Mainstream Culture in Fitzgeralds " The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" and the 2008 Film Adaptation." *The F. Scott Fitzgerald Review* 10, no. 1 (2012): 130-52. Accessed May 05, 2018.

Seidel, Kathryn Lee et al. " The Case Gets Curious: Debates On Benjamin Button, From Story to Screen." *The F. Scott Fitzgerald Review* 7, no. 1 (2009): 2-33. Accessed May 02, 2018.

<https://assignbuster.com/time-passes-and-much-else-changes-the-curious-case-of-benjamin-button-and-its-film-adaptation/>

Weintraub, Steve. " Screenwriter Eric Roth Exclusive Interview – THE CURIOUS CASE OF BENJAMIN BUTTON." Collider. December 26, 2008.

Accessed May 03, 2018. <http://collider.com/screenwriter-ericroth-exclusive-interview-the-curious-case-of-benjamin-button/>.

Yamato, Jen. " RT Interview: Eric Roth Calls Benjamin-button His Most

Personal Film to Date." Rotten Tomatoes. December 22, 2008. Accessed May 3, 2018. <https://editorial.rottentomatoes.com/article/rtinterview-eric-roth-calls-benjamin-button-his-most-personal-film-to-date/>.