

The Unfortunate Case of *Benjamin Button*

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I wanted to like this film. So many impressive ingredients: a plot drawn from a literary nugget by a great American writer, an impressive and risk-taking cast, and digital effects subtle enough to make Brad Pitt's elderly head imposed onto the body of a geriatric toddler never seem all that strange. While these admirable flourishes deserve heaps of praise, they obscure a sad reality: *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* is a derivative mess.



Critics and comics have already pointed out the abundance of similarities between *Benjamin Button* and Eric Roth's previous screenplay, *Forrest Gump*. Resemblances include folksy, yet obviously wise, protagonists who narrate their films with slightly inauthentic Southern drawls; protective mothers who love their disabled sons toward success; unlikely friendships between outsider protagonists and eccentric African-American men; cruises up and down the Gulf Coast on small commercial crafts guided by belligerent captains; and

meditations on the roles that fate and free will play in life's journeys. Repetition is not necessarily a bad thing. The problem arises when *Benjamin Button* so self-consciously imitates *Forrest Gump* that the moviegoing experience becomes an exercise in ventriloquism.

It didn't have to be this way. *Benjamin Button* opens promisingly with a wistful fable about a blind New Orleans clockmaker. Consumed with grief over the death of his son in the Great War, he constructs a massive timepiece that only runs backward. After its public unveiling, each counter-clockwise tick from the giant clock wishfully underscores slow motion fantasy footage of bullets exiting the bodies of young soldiers.

Although absent from F. Scott Fitzgerald's short story, this intriguing allegory precedes the "curious" birth of an eighty-something newborn in New Orleans. Fresh insights into the cost of war will soon follow, right? But the insights never come. As a point of reference, Volker Schlöndorff's excellent film, *Tin Drum* (1979), employs a similar technique involving aging/not aging within the landscape of war. The fact that *Benjamin Button* fails to flesh out genuine substance from its time-bending premise reminds us just how good *Tin Drum* is by comparison.

Of the many thematic echoes bouncing from *Forrest Gump* into *Benjamin Button*, the struggle between fate and free will proves the most frustrating. In *Forrest Gump*, Roth thoughtfully weaves this theologically weighty question throughout his screenplay. In *Benjamin Button*, he awkwardly inoculates the film with a single heavy-handed dose followed by a few unsatisfying boosters.

To be fair, astonishingly good special effects and some top-notch acting partially offset *Benjamin Button*'s derivative core. While Pitt's physical transformation from *Depends* to

Pampers has received the most attention, I find other makeovers within the film even more impressive.

As demonstrated by his stylish depiction of 1970s San Francisco in *Zodiac*, director David Fincher knows how to film a city in period. In *Benjamin Button*, nearly a century of the visual history of New Orleans dances across the screen without an inauthentic moment, from the seedy streets of the 1930s French Quarter, to the dawning of 1960s suburbia.

The digital wizardry brings mixed results to the acting. Even though much of the film focuses on Pitt's physical changes, Pitt as actor never completely vanishes into the role. With considerably less artificial enhancement, Cate Blanchett persuasively transforms herself from a vivacious, bohemian, teenage dancer to a bedridden elderly matriarch. One of the great actresses of our time, Blanchett endows each stage of the aging process with profound truthfulness.

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button is a curious case indeed. Obviously, its 13 Oscar nominations testify to its popularity with fans and critics. To be fair, we should encourage this kind of bold, sweeping filmmaking. For me, however, *Benjamin Button* ultimately falls short. It is impressively made and fundamentally decent at heart, it just does not have much fresh to say.

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