

Progeria and Stigma of Normality in Scott Fitzgerald's "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button"

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Abstract

Deterioration in the physical or mental state of a human body has always been a cause of serious concern for both the affected and the related family. While medical practitioners, in hand with the researchers and scientists, have been actively innovative in finding cures for the manifold diseases reported worldwide on a daily basis, not all illnesses have found their killer-medicines. Progeria is one such rare genetic disorder with no cure. The disease has made its appearance in various genres in English Literature. This paper presents a study of the implications of this syndrome with reference to Fitzgerald's short story "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button." The case of Benjamin Button is a fictionalized case of Progeria where Benjamin suffers reverse ageing. Born as a septuagenarian, Benjamin dies as a baby. This curious case has triggered off several questions related to the idea of 'normalcy', 'diseased condition of the human body' and 'ageing' with its sociological, psychological and ontological implications, and the credibility of medical advancements devoid of humanitarian concerns. Drawing theoretical insights from C.P. Snow and Susan Sontag, this article discusses the stigma of ageing as perceived in the human society and the invincible potency of Progeria to demolish it.

Keywords: Progeria and English literature, Scott F. Fitzgerald, Benjamin Button, Ageing, Normality, Foucault, Medical Humanities

Literature serves as a guide to the rapidly changing medical landscape of the world. In his Reed lecture delivered in 1959, C.P. Snow observed “a gulf of mutual incomprehension – sometimes hostility and dislike” (2) between the sects of literary intellectuals and physical scientists. However, some works of literature have tried to bridge the gulf by fictionalising the experiences of the sick, the debilitated, the homeless, the disabled, the impaired and the challenged. These stories approach the idea of health and ability from scientific perspectives unperceived by the common man. Illness narratives make health and sickness at the centre of the fictional experience. In fact, they expeditiously actualised Snow’s vision to integrate the two cultures of science and humanities. Medical Humanities exhorts the field of Medicine to implement human-centred practices that blend traditional and cutting-edge technology, and work to mitigate the tension between the factors that allow the medical practitioners to address the disease and the holistic approach that encourages patients to thrive. It should adopt a humane approach towards the medical condition or sickness of individuals, boosting their morale to believe in the adoption of a healthy life. It captures the subjective experience of patients within the objective and scientific world of medicine.

Deterioration in the physical or mental state of a human body has always been a cause of serious concern for both the affected and the related family. While medical practitioners, in hand with the researchers and scientists, have been actively innovative in finding cures for the manifold diseases reported worldwide on a daily basis, not all illnesses have found their killer-medicines. Progeria is one such rare genetic disorder with no cure. The disease has made its appearance in various genres in English Literature. This paper presents a study of the implications of this syndrome with reference to Fitzgerald’s short story “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button.” The case of Benjamin Button is a fictionalised case of Progeria where Benjamin suffers reverse ageing. Born as a septuagenarian, Benjamin dies as a baby. This curious case has triggered off several questions related to the idea of ‘normalcy’, ‘diseased

condition of the human body 'and 'ageing 'with its sociological, psychological and ontological implications, and the credibility of medical advancements devoid of humanitarian concerns. Drawing theoretical insights from C.P. Snow and Susan Sontag, this article discusses the stigma of ageing as perceived in the human society and the invincible potency of Progeria to demolish it.

Progeria comes from a Greek word for 'prematurely old'. Hutchinson-Gilford progeria syndrome (HGPS) is characterised by "extreme short stature, low body weight, early loss of hair, lipodystrophy, scleroderma, decreased joint mobility, osteolysis and facial features that resemble aged persons" (Hennekam 2603). It is one of the rarest diseases affecting one in every four to eight million births. Gordon, Professor of Paediatrics research published the following facts about Progeria and its cause:

In 2003, scientists discovered that a genetic mutation causes HGPS. They identified a gene, called LMNA that controls the production of a protein known as Lamin A. This protein makes up part of the membrane that surrounds the cell nucleus. Scientists think that the damaged protein makes the cells of the body unstable. This instability leads to the process of premature ageing (np).

The average existence of a Progeria patient is observed to be thirteen years of age because ageing happens faster than usual in their cases. They are born with an aged look and have typical facial features and physique that is almost similar in all of them. Panigrahi and team's research paper declares that there is no effective treatment for its cure as of now. The only available approach functions towards symptomatic treatment, timely identification and prompt management of the arising complications (np). The available treatment only helps ease or delay some of the symptoms of the disease. Although medics and scientists work hand in hand to come up with a significant cure for this disease, the patients continue to suffer.

Fitzgerald's short story, "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button", is an exclusive account of a case of Progeria functioning with a heavy fictional element. It was first published in 1922 in *Collier's Magazine* and later anthologised in Fitzgerald's collection, *Tales of Jazz Age*. Fitzgerald notes that he was inspired to write such a tale at Mark Twain's remark "It is a pity that the best part of life comes at the beginning, and the worst part at the end" (Petry 202). It is probable that this idea had triggered, in Fitzgerald, the absurdity behind the universal desire to remain, be considered and admired as young forever, which became the seed for this short story. Although he says that his attempt to write this story had resulted in "a weird thing," that could be "the funniest story ever written," (Petry 202) the case of Benjamin Button has sparked off several discussions on the fantasies attached to youth, the real repercussions of ageing and more importantly, a very rare but terrifying disease called Progeria. He imagines a strange situation of growth from old age to babyhood. The story serves as "a backdrop for exploring the dimensions of having chronological age severed from psychological age, having the human experience be transformed whether in the imagination of artists or by bioengineers and those interested in rejuvenation medicine and those who espouse pro-longevity and immortality" (Felsted 142). It is reportedly a case of reverse ageing but can be related to Progeria due to similar medical conditions, symptoms, challenges and fatality.

In the beginning of the story, Benjamin Button appears as "a man of three score and ten, a baby of three score and ten, a baby whose feet hung over the sides of the crib in which it was reposing" (BB 5). The Buttons held a highly desirable social and financial position in Baltimore and were among the top-listed expectant parents of the town. They owned the legacy of being ahead of their times, be it the use of technology or a modernised lifestyle. Hence, they strived hard to maintain their honour and social esteem. But as destiny would have it, fortune missed favouring them on the day when Mrs. Button, to the utter shock of the entire medical

fraternity of Baltimore, delivered a septuagenarian, who became the only heir to the name, fame and property of the Buttons.

Mr. Roger Button, unable to accept the condition of the new-born, pressurises Benjamin Button to lead a 'normal life' that is coterminous with his chronological years after birth. While Benjamin waits to pore over newspapers and encyclopedias, enjoy hour-long chats with his grandfather or get to his closet to smoke a cigar in secrecy, his father forces him to play with rattles, toy trains and cotton stuffed animals. All the time, the father refuses to accept the reality behind Benjamin's medical, psychological and physical condition. While Mr. Button is aware of Benjamin's anomalousness, as revealed by his intentional grooming of his son, he insists on 'believing' in the illusion he creates about Benjamin that he was 'normal'. Obsession with normality is another important theme of this story. When critically analysed, discrimination based on normality and abnormality of an individual is racial science. The 1990 Disability Act in the US contained an elaborate explanation that concluded no individual as actually normal or abnormal. A psychology textbook describes "the idea of normality [as] socially constructed and contested notion" (Wetherell 359). Foucault severely criticised these notions and norms as "order defined by natural and observable processes" (179) and therefore, not possessed by anyone to exercise superiority over another. The conceptual framework within which the idea of 'normality' operates dates back to the eighteenth century. During this time disciplinary surveillance combined with physical examination of individuals was carried out in hospitals, prisons, schools and barracks. These groups endorsed "the universal reign of the normative ... [and] each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects to it his body, his gesture, his behaviour, his aptitudes, his achievements" (Foucault 304). Thus, the idea of normality became integral to the psychological discourse of the twentieth century.

Kim Sasser observes, "Mr. Button's selfishly motivated desire to perceive his son as normal causes him never truly to see his son, the actual person in front of him, and thus care

for Benjamin in the way his son's odd yet actual age requires" (188). Sasser's view gives an insight into the purpose served by Medical Humanities. A father like Mr. Button, who holds a selective vision of his son's ontological aberrancy, could be a potential threat to the life of the patient. Parents, indifferent to the needs of their ailing children, become one of the prime reasons for both mutual disharmony and failure of medical treatment given to the patients. Medical Humanities functions on the principles of humanistic approach to the treatment of diseases and reiterates the role of family and the society at large in transforming the fragile world of the patients into a comprehensive one.

Benjamin Button suffers disappointment throughout his life due to his incongruent physical and mental age. Fitzgerald had designed a story where the worlds and Benjamin's time frames operate in opposite directions, to meet somewhere in the centre, which is the only time of his life he could live like other human beings. Around thirty years after his birth, he is physically and mentally able to embrace the age in its entirety. However, his happiness is short-lived as he begins to experience frustration in the phases that follow where at one point of time he grows physically and mentally younger than his own son.

"The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" also questions the underlying presumption of normal behaviour concerned with memory befitting old age, memory and youth. Born as a baby, a human being acquires knowledge, accumulates memories as he grows into adulthood and then passes into old age, a second childhood. Benjamin Button's supposed "weird" life deconstructs the fantasies attached to youth and youthful appearance. Both turn out to be huge challenges for him whose life is sandwiched between physical and mental growth and the pressure to comply with the social norms. Since his life seems to be on a reverse movement, he comes on earth with the knowledge sourced from experience. That could probably be the reason why he takes life in the right stride with a composure befitting his age defined by physical and mental conditions. His likes and dislikes are compliant with this age. As a result,

Benjamin enters his youth after experiencing old age. At several points of time, the stark truth frequently haunts him that he would never be able to go back to that age which he had lived through and his friends would be experiencing in future. This psychological discord creates emptiness and a desire for 'normalcy' in the deep abyss of his psyche.

In this case, age is not mere numbers or the accumulation of years after the birth date. Age becomes an individual's identity in the world. However, the idea that one changes with age remains constant because Benjamin also undergoes change after birth. Age dictates one's physical and mental conditions, personality and character traits. Though Benjamin succumbs to his age-related wishes, he is forced to behave as per his chronological age. The other characters are insensible to Benjamin's needs and aspirations because they bother more about society's expectations and reaction. He, however, manages to please his father and later, his son, but most often is helpless.

Prioritising peace, comfort and happiness, it is absurd that neither Benjamin nor his family were allowed the freewill to accept the former's condition as it is. Fitzgerald challenges the real purpose and meaning of ageing through Benjamin who seems to be abnormal to the society, yet demonstrates the problems associated with youth too. Growing young could create confusion within a family. Ageing could be graceful if one accepts it with a positive frame of mind. While ageing is usually accompanied with memory related issues, remaining young could be equally challenging. In any case, the importance of 'perfect remembering' and the 'fear of forgetting' are largely debatable. The natural trait of forgetfulness in old age is a blessing in disguise because it helps one to grow beyond the limiting beliefs of hatred, anger and differences. One grows to embrace humanity in its whole. But Fitzgerald evokes real-life situations through the life of this fictitious character whose life "stresses the disruption and havoc that can emerge when the threads of memory are severed from the salient features of life. It brings about how such severance is an obstacle to change.... By highlighting how

forgetfulness damages and dissipates Benjamin Button's topsy-turvy existence, we can grasp how forgetfulness may overlap into moral concerns" (Alexander 16). The three threads namely chronological age, bodily age and psychological age are seldom congruent and are inharmoniously interwoven in Benjamin's life. Hence, he fails to cope with his peculiar circumstance which further creates confusion and disorientation in his life. Being an adult, he is not allowed to behave like one. Instead, he is forced to be like a child befitting his chronological age. Similarly, when he reaches his old age, though physically becomes a baby, he is expected to behave like an adult. These expectations are as per the chronological age and the society completely ignores his bodily and psychological peculiarities and special needs. Compelled to comply with the society's belief system, people like Benjamin Button tend to deceive themselves by pretending to project themselves as not abnormal in any way. In certain circumstances Benjamin Button either revels in his inability or hides his growing unhappiness by diverting his mind towards newer interests. Though he does not indulge in self-pity, he seems frustrated with his life running reverse and termed 'abnormal' in the human world. Susan Sontag terms such pretence as 'romantic agony' in her essay "Illness as Metaphor. She writes, "Agony [becomes] romantic in a stylised account of the disease's preliminary symptoms... and the actual agony [is] simply suppressed" (29).

The choice of diction further validates the idea of normality as a major concern posed by the story. Scott Fitzgerald often confounds the readers by using words like 'normality', 'normal appetite', 'proper thing', 'acceptable and appreciated by the people of Baltimore', 'years of normal ungrowth' and so on. The idea of 'normalcy' is itself questionable as it is an elusive component in the sociological circle. Society assigns roles, responsibilities, behavioural norms to different age groups and persuades them to follow them. Balzer challenges the enforcement of such attributes in his article:

We have to negate ourselves to perform ourselves in contrast to our feelings, emotion, needs and so on. Questioning the attributes of ‘adulthood’ and ‘childhood’ as well as their effects, could mean to produce new possibilities of experiencing life for those who need recognition to live, but who feel restricted by the very parameters that are used for their recognition as an adult – ignoring this may have painful consequences even for fictitious persons like Benjamin Button. (218)

Financial insufficiency and the need for special care marginalise these special people in the society. Though the funded research organisations provide them with assistance at various levels, it does not suffice.

Family plays a major role in the life of these patients. It is important that they underplay their sorrows and frustration at the unfortunate sight of their own children suffering from this disease and prioritise the needs and expectations of these patients. While in reality, the patients do get the benefit of a friendly environment, Fitzgerald’s fictitious character Benjamin is not privileged to experience such compassion and kindness. His family, especially the father (the mother’s presence is not evident in the story), does not accept him for what he is. He agrees to satisfy Benjamin’s wishes as long as he plays along with a charade of normality. His family exists around him simply as an obligation, with no real love or care for him. Neither his father nor his son tenders any understanding of his desires and cravings. He is left to suffer loneliness and disappointment as most of his expectations are not met by the society. Be it the wish to spend time in hour-long chatting with his grandfather or choosing to join army or getting into Harvard, he is denied these wishes owing to his appearance which is in contrast to his chronological age. Henry Alexander states that Benjamin fails to change his behaviour as per others’ expectation because he is “unable to see himself as others see him” and is unaware “as to how he comes across to others” (2). It is evident that in spite of the ever-growing fantasy

attached to remaining young forever, Benjamin's case reveals the immanent distress and disillusionment that come along with it. This case of reverse ageing, an imaginary extension of Progeria, effectively brings out the mental condition of a person affected by such a rare disease for which no cure is available.

Through this story, the author indicates the need for a discrimination-free society that is likely to provide equal opportunity and adequate space for such patients to live their life to the fullest. From the perspective of Medical Humanities, this paper highlights the various challenges faced by Progeria patients with reference to Benjamin. It asserts that people affected with rare diseases also deserve a meaningful life and it is necessary to treat every being with dignity. Physical and mental disorders have a grievous implication on patients. Physical disorders especially, distort one's external appearance. This directly influences the individual's attitude towards oneself. Moreover, the society casts them as a freak which further affects demoralises them. Hence, apart from the work to be carried out in the field of medicine, it is the responsibility of the society to discard curiosity towards such people and embrace them as part of the society.

Aged, differently-abled and terminally ill people and people with rare physical and mental disorders have recently gained attention from various sectors like media, medical care and literature. While deteriorating health may cause impairment of one's abilities, discrimination based on this inability causes mental depression and a sense of insecurity among patients. To arrive at a remedial measure, the medics should join hands with psychologists and social thinkers to evolve a unique care-system that embraces humanity along with its physical, psychological and social inadequacies. The medical fraternity should strategise an effective combination of medicine and motivation in the care system that eschews stereotyping and social judgements from affecting the patients' morale.

Richard Smith sums up the two apparent formulations of Medical Humanities, “The additive view is that medicine can be ‘softened ’by exposing its practitioners to the humanities; the integrated view is more ambitious, aiming to shape the ‘nature, goals and knowledge base ’ of medicine itself” (qtd. in Greaves:2). The combination of medicine and art of literature should aim at developing a standpoint that is concerned with the understanding of what is it to be human with a common mode of enquiry. The professionals should therefore eschew all sorts of bias, prejudice, selfishness and greed for money and, espouse the cause of humane care to foster a healthy and happy world community.

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