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The Curious Case of Benjamin Button

Abstract

This is a review of *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (2008).

Considered the third of the “scrolls” of the Hebrew Bible, Ecclesiastes reflects on the uncertainty of life. Though authorship is debated, the text has been linked with Solomon, who is reflecting on a life of self-indulgence. The narrator, known to us as Qoheleth (“the teacher”) speaks of death as the reality that calls into question life’s meaning: When I realized that my fate's the same as the fool's, I had to ask myself, "So why bother being wise?" (2: 15, The Message). Since both idiot and genius ultimately die, Qoheleth concludes, the best we can do is appreciate what YHWH has given us.

Brad Pitt’s first impression on reading the screenplay for *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* was that of a Romeo and Juliet scenario – a creatively tragic love story. Director David Fincher, in the wake of dealing with his father’s passing, asked Pitt to reread it “not as a love story but as a death story.” By positioning the main character as a “child” growing up surrounded by mortality, the setting gives Benjamin (Pitt) a unique perspective on life and death. In a pivotal scene, Benjamin remarks how “nothing lasts.” On another occasion, he passes a man raking leaves and comments, “Why bother? They’ll just be here tomorrow.” Deliberate or inadvertent, the film is a meditation on Ecclesiastes. Qoheleth writes: “Life, lovely while it lasts, is soon over. Life as we know it, precious and beautiful, ends. The body is put back in the same ground it came from. The spirit returns to God, who first breathed it” (12: 6 -7).

Qoheleth repeatedly uses the expression “chasing the wind” as a metaphor for how we pointlessly craft strategies for being in control. Therefore it seems fitting that Benjamin’s story is told against the backdrop of Hurricane Katrina – a symbol of uncontrollable change. In the opening frames of the film, Caroline (Julia Ormond) stares through the outside window of a New Orleans hospital room. Her elderly, dying mother asks, “What are you looking at?” “The wind,” she replies. It is apparent mother and daughter have had a distant relationship and the unfolding of the story provides understated hints as to why.

The epic is set in motion when the elderly Daisy (Cate Blanchett) asks her daughter to retrieve and read aloud from a mysterious journal. The account is penned by Benjamin, narrating the story of a man who ages in reverse. The infant Benjamin is left on the doorstep of a nursing home and raised by an African-American couple on staff. Having the appearance and physical ailments of a man in his eighties, Benjamin is expected to die at any moment but instead begins to grow biologically younger. While appearing to be in his seventies, he is cognitively a child. Benjamin meets the six-year-old Daisy, visiting her grandmother and the two become “playmates.” In his teen years Benjamin leaves home to work on a tugboat and serves in the Second World War. Along the way, a number of colorful characters usher him through various rites of passage into adulthood. Surviving the War, Benjamin returns home to discover Daisy is now an accomplished ballet

dancer in New York and it is clear their lives are going in separate directions. But a random accident ends Daisy's dance career. Eventually she returns to New Orleans and the couple experiences what appears to be a storybook romance, undercut by a musical score foreshadowing the reality of the situation – they are merely “meeting in the middle.” One is growing older, the other younger. Daisy asserts she is prepared for the consequences of the two being together, but it becomes clear that her greatest fear is not Benjamin growing younger, but herself growing older. Meanwhile, Benjamin's greatest fear is how a man aging in reverse can be a father to their infant daughter. The realism he absorbed in his time in the nursing home somehow prepares him to make a decision that viewers of the film will debate after its conclusion.

Critic Roger Ebert gave the film low marks, saying “the movie's premise devalues any relationship (and) makes futile any friendship or romance.”¹ Rather, the film shows a couple getting as much out of life together while they can. Ebert missed the “useless beauty” of the story.² Qoheleth writes, “Don't sit there watching the wind. Do your own work. Don't stare at the clouds. Get on with your life” (11: 4). Perhaps this explains why mother and daughter see the world differently. The opening scene centers on a young woman “watching the wind.” Caroline's father leaves a diary for her, instructing her to stop watching the wind and live. Qoheleth further counsels readers to “Honor and enjoy your Creator while you're still young,

before the years take their toll and your vigor wanes; before your vision dims and the world blurs” (12: 1 -2). In the words of scholar Walter Brueggemann, Qoheleth teaches that “youth should live life to the hilt” - while “old age is not for wimps.”³

¹ <http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20081223/REVIEWS/812239995>

² The title of Robert K. Johnson’s *Useless Beauty: Ecclesiastes through the Lens of Contemporary Film* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004) was filched from the title of an Elvis Costello song.

³ Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 332.