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A Normal Biography Reversed: The Temporalization of Life in F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button"

Michael Basseler

- ¹ In the process of modernity, time has become a crucial category and an increasingly important dimension of human life. It might be a universal, biologically predetermined fact that life unfolds in a temporal sequence: People are born, they grow up, and finally grow old (and eventually die) in all cultures and historical epochs, at least until today. As a consequence, "people throughout the world necessarily have to deal with time as an element of their lives as self-conscious humans," as Joan Silber succinctly remarks (107). However, the patterns of sequencing, i.e. the ways in which life is structured on a temporal level, are not only culturally and historically variable, but have also tremendously gained in significance in modern society.¹ Whereas in traditional societies place was the main factor for maintaining a stable identity as well as social status and security, the processes of mobilization in modernity required a different form of social and individual stability. As sociologist Martin Kohli argues, the social transformation in modernity is therefore essentially the process of a "temporalization of life" ("Gesellschaftszeit" 184).
- ² The present article borrows this notion of the temporalization of life in modern society, using it as a starting point and conceptual hinge for the discussion of F. Scott Fitzgerald's short story "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button." As I will argue, Fitzgerald's story exemplifies how literature not only reflects processes of social transformation, but also actively partakes in the negotiation of the cultural meaning of temporal structures—and in this particular case, the effects of what sociologists call the institutionalization of the human life course, or simply "normal biography."

- 3 To approach “Benjamin Button” from such a perspective also entails, at least to a certain extent, a critical reevaluation of this story, which is almost unanimously regarded as one of Fitzgerald’s less compelling achievements in the short story form. In contrast to his novels or his more canonized (and maybe more “modernist”) stories (e.g. “The Rich Boy,” “Babylon Revisited,” or some of the other pieces from *Tales from the Jazz Age* like “May Day”), “Benjamin Button” was quickly dismissed by the critics as a prime example of Fitzgerald’s outdated romanticism as well as his tendency towards the popular, and it has thus received very little critical attention until today.² Such negative evaluation was probably insinuated by Fitzgerald himself, who outright confessed that he disliked writing short stories and only used them as a financial lifeline (Müller 221). However, as Martin Scofield reminds us, “[o]ne opportunity the short story form gave him was to focus on [...] specific aspects of modern life” (151), and it is in this context that Fitzgerald’s short story legacy might require a critical reassessment: namely as a rich site for studying the complex relationship between literature, social performance, and the socio-historical transformation in/of modern America as well as the moral and ethical questions associated with this. The present article therefore takes Bryant Mangum’s advice to “search for undiscovered strengths” in one of Fitzgerald’s neglected stories and to “examine the degree to which Fitzgerald’s short fiction, often through subtext, [...] speaks to issues that transcend the modern” (60).
- 4 By focusing on the temporal dimension of human life as represented in fiction, this article ties in with, and expands, recent approaches in literary life-course studies (cf. the essay collection by Herbe/Coelsch-Foisner), interdisciplinary age studies,³ as well as what Ottmar Ette has called “literary studies as science for living,” i.e. an approach in literary studies which emphasizes the role of literature in the reflection, production, and negotiation of life knowledge or “knowledge for living.” To further elaborate on this, the next section offers some remarks on the relation between fiction and the temporal dimension of life, with a particular focus on the idea of reverse chronology as employed in “Benjamin Button.” The essay will then deal more closely with the concept of the normal biography as developed in the sociology of the life course, before the following section demonstrates how “Benjamin Button” poses a critique of modern chronopolitics. The conclusion, finally, reflects on the status of Fitzgerald’s short fiction in the modernist canon, especially with regard to his time and age consciousness, and closes with some more general thoughts on the relationship between (short) fiction and temporality.

“Benjamin Button”: Fiction, reverse chronology, and the temporal dimension of life

- 5 Whereas the patterns of our everyday life arguably follow a predominantly chronological principle, allowing at the best a certain degree of variance in terms of how slow or fast time passes, fiction is not obligated to this “realistic” model. This becomes most obvious, perhaps, where the chronological principle is reversed (Sawyer), as for example in Philip K. Dick’s novel *Counter-Clock World* (1967), Martin Amis’s *Time’s Arrow* (1991) or Christopher Nolan’s movie *Memento* (2000). While in all of these examples, the inversion of chronological time has quite dramatic effects for the protagonists and thus serves as a catalyst for the plot and a means of suspense, it also has another, maybe even more basic function: by highlighting the temporality of stories, time becomes the primary subject of those narratives. They invent what Joan Silber calls “fabulous time,” i.e. alternative time

conceptions which don't need to operate on the "usual rules" and laws of time and space (71). Of course, fabulous time can have very different effects and functions in different narratives. As the following reading of Fitzgerald's story will suggest, the reverse chronology in "Benjamin Button" as a specific form of fabulous time primarily serves to bring to the fore the cultural constructedness as well as the transition of life-course models in modern America.

- 6 As one of Fitzgerald's fantastic tales (cf. Buell), the story creates a tension between a realist mode and the older form of romance, a tension that some theorists of the short story have characterized as typical of the genre (May 8-16; 38). Similar to Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener," in Fitzgerald's story a highly aesthetic character—Benjamin Button—enters the world of everyday reality. For example, there are numerous references to the Civil War and the Spanish-American War, Baltimore's high society in the late nineteenth century, or the American educational system, which firmly ground the story in a socio-historical reality. As Charles May has pointed out with regard to "Bartleby," this narrative technique involves a blending of the traditions of romance and realism and forces the reader to take the protagonist as a symbolic and an "as-if-real" character at the same time (38).
- 7 According to Fitzgerald, "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" was written as a response to a quip by Mark Twain "to the effect that it was a pity that the best part of life came at the beginning and the worst part at the end" (Fitzgerald viii). What is more, as Stefan Willer points out, the title of Fitzgerald's story already alludes to the genre of the case history, which is frequently found in the medical discourse on theories of rejuvenation around 1900. In these sensationalist narratives, which served the purpose of popularizing rejuvenation therapies, physicians related the successful treatment of patients, following a formulaic before-after scheme (Willer 349).
- 8 The basic working principle of Fitzgerald's "case history" is that of reversal: when Benjamin Button enters life in a Baltimore hospital in 1860, he has the physique and mental state of a septuagenarian, much to the annoyance and even terror of the doctors and nurses who fear for the hospital's reputation. His parents, the Roger Buttons from an honorable family of enviable social and financial status, are equally appalled by the first glimpse at their aged infant. Rather reluctantly, Roger Button⁴ takes his offspring home and eventually comes to accept his fate, even though he does everything to conceal the physical and psychological age of his son ("But Mr. Button persisted in his unwavering purpose. Benjamin was a baby, and a baby he should remain" [Fitzgerald 184]). As Benjamin "grows up," it soon transpires that he is turning younger instead of older: at age twenty, he has the looks of a fifty-year-old; at thirty-five he is at the height of his life, a successful business man with a beautiful wife and son. Thus rejuvenating, he finally becomes a playmate for his own grandson, and in the end his world consists only of his crib, his nanny, and the faint smell of milk. In the story's closing scene, the now seventy-year-old Benjamin Button has become a baby, barely able to perceive anything around him: "Then it was all dark, and his white crib and the dim faces that moved above him, and the warm sweet aroma of the milk, faded out altogether from his mind." (Fitzgerald 205) In the end, as Henry Alexander notes, it is as if for Benjamin "there had never been any life at all"—his whole existence just fades into nothingness (7).
- 9 So, the story's eponymous character is obviously a literary "freak of nature," but just like other literary freaks, such as Gregor Samsa or Bartleby, he is also more than just that: he serves as an agent for uncovering certain norms and collective notions of "life" in a given

society and time. Fitzgerald takes what in a Western cultural, Judeo-Christian context is traditionally considered as a *lifetime*—seventy years⁵—and imagines what might happen if life started at the other end, if only for one person: in a world of otherwise perfect chronology, Benjamin is the only one living “against the clock.”

- 10 However, a closer look reveals that the temporal structure of the story is slightly more complex than that. Henry Alexander has distinguished three lines or threads of time/age in Benjamin’s life, namely a chronological one, a physical one, and a psychological one (2). Chronologically speaking, Benjamin lives his life just like everyone else, turning older each year from his birth in 1860 to his death in 1930. By contrast, his physical age moves in the direct opposite direction, i.e. he “grows” younger and younger. The most complicated temporal thread is his psychological age, which hardly seems to undergo much change, except for his final years when he gradually loses his ability to speak and finally his consciousness. On a psychological level, there is neither a considerable process of maturation nor of regress. The story’s grotesque and ironic effects are produced by the circumstance that these temporal threads—chronological, physiological, and psychological age—are “seldom congruent”: “The theme comes out in cases where we are surprised or shocked by the discrepancies between age and appearance or by changes in appearance or by psychological shifts which strike one as dissonant with one’s own or another age” (Alexander 2). It is only in Benjamin’s middle years that these threads seem to converge, and it is certainly no coincidence that these seem to be his happiest years: he marries his wife Hildegarde, his son Roscoe is born, he successfully runs his own business and returns from war as a decorated veteran.
- 11 Now, the question is how this fantastic tale responds to the wider social and cultural context of modernism in the United States and what it might implicate in terms of the temporal structures, patterns, sequences, and rhythms of that age. Research in cultural studies has emphasized how to a very high degree, human existence is structured temporally. To examine the temporality of human life from a cultural-studies perspective thus involves an analysis of the ways in which time shapes human action, perception, interpretation, and remembrance. This goes far beyond the traditional concepts of time in literary studies, e.g. the analysis of narrative time in structural narratology (very influentially, for example, in the works of Gérard Genette). The question of how ideas and categories of human time are cultural constructs rather than givens involves, among other aspects, the contingency and ambivalence of time, the idea of “lifetime” as a major structuring principle of human life and experience, the relationship between (and coexistence of) generations, the acceleration (or deceleration) of time, as well as the representation of temporal concepts in literature and other cultural artifacts, for example the notion of an intensified perception of brief, single moments in modernist literature (cf. Assmann 121-48). In other words, one may ask how living always presupposes an (often rather implicit) knowledge of and about the temporality of life, how such knowledge is culturally and historically specific, and how this knowledge is both reflected in and shaped by literature and other media.
- 12 In his brilliant study *Beschleunigung (Acceleration)*, Hartmut Rosa has persuasively demonstrated how the process of modernization in Western societies should best be understood as a “structurally and culturally highly significant transformation of temporal structures and horizons” (Rosa 24, my translation).⁶ According to this notion, modernity and modernization not only describe societal processes which unfold in time, but also sustainably alter social time conceptions and perceptions. Taking its cue from

this observation, this article will contextualize “Benjamin Button” within the temporal transformations of modern America and argue how the seemingly trivial and artless fictional experiment of reversing a human life course actually performs a powerful and surprisingly subtle critique of a temporalization of life. Before, however, a closer look at the sociological study of human life courses shall contribute to the analysis of Fitzgerald’s story in this context.

The institutionalization of the life course and the concept of the “normal biography”

- 13 In his approach of a sociology of the life course, Martin Kohli (1985) argues that life course and age constitute a discrete socio-structural dimension or category (“soziale Tatsache’ eigener Art” 1) similar to those of gender or race, an idea that has also been emphasized by recent works in the emerging field of age studies/cultural gerontology. As a social institution, the life course is not so much a natural, biological fact, but determined and regulated by a set of social rules and practices, a hypothesis which Kohli corroborates by means of a historical analysis that furnishes evidence for the structural transition from one life-course regime to another (2). Analyzing the temporal structures in Western (i.e. European and North American) societies from a diachronic perspective, Kohli⁷ introduces five major theses (3):
- 14 1. *temporalization*: the significance of the life course as a social institution has increased during modernity and has led to a “temporalization of life”; this basically means that the process of aging has become a dominant structural principle, while in traditional or pre-modern societies it was only relevant as a categorical status;
- 15 2. *chronologization*: this temporalization of life is to a large extent linked to chronological age as its basic principle, which has led to a *chronologically standardized* life-course model, the “normal biography”;
- 16 3. *individualization*: this temporalization and chronologization of life can be regarded as part of the larger process of individualization, i.e. the liberation of the individual from local (and thus spatial!), corporate or class-based as well as other bonds and restrictions;
- 17 4. *centrality of work*: working life has become the center of the normative life course in modern societies, basically following the threefold division into vocational preparation (childhood), activity (adulthood), and retirement (old age);
- 18 5. *regulatory and orienting functions*: on the one hand, the life course as social institution regulates the sequential process of life,⁸ while on the other hand it also serves to structure the *Lebenswelt* and knowledge that individuals refer to when orienting themselves and planning their actions.
- 19 For Kohli, the process of modernization therefore basically marks the transition from the pattern of a contingency of life events to the pattern of a predictable and controllable life course. Although this pattern is primarily organized around the working life, it also affects family life and family cycles, which become more standardized as well: following a more or less strict temporal congruency, the typical life events include the leaving of the family of origin, the completion of a formal education, the taking on of an employment activity, marriage and the formation of an own family, and so forth (7). This brief discussion of the institutionalization of the life course in modernity may suffice as a basis

for the discussion of Fitzgerald's story as a critical examination of modern United States chronopolitics.

"Benjamin Button" as a critique of the modern life-course regime

- 20 In their recent collection *From the Cradle to the Grave: Life-Course Models in Literary Genres*, Sarah Herbe and Sabine Coelsch-Foisner have reminded us that the "[r]epresentations of the human life cycle in literature have varied with time, social conditions, and value systems" and therefore "may be seen as projections of, or deviations from, an 'ideal life'" (Coelsch-Foisner X). Moreover, an analysis of these literary representations of the human life course centers around "aesthetic time." It thereby adds an important dimension to current life-course studies, which usually discriminate "between 'historical time' and 'institutional time'" and thus foreground "social, political and economic considerations" (XI). This notion of "aesthetic time" not only allows us to foreground the particularities and privileges of literature in comparison to other discourses. It also invites interdisciplinary research by posing the question of how the "aesthetic time" of a given work corresponds to the historical and institutional time of its production context. By the same token, this allows me to specify my thesis of the cultural work that Fitzgerald's story performs in a kind of literary thought experiment. By contriving a disconnection of the biological and social dimensions of the human life course, "Benjamin Button" exposes the social administration of human lifetime and particularly the effects of the regulatory system of the "normal biography" and thus can be read as a critique of the modern life-course regime.
- 21 The discrepancies between his physical, psychological and chronological age have tremendous effects on Benjamin's identity as well as on his social status: since (at least for a large part of his life) he cannot be subjected to the regulatory system of the normative life course, Benjamin Button is also denied the possibility to become a valuable member of the society. If we are to accept the notion of an increasing chronologization and institutionalization of the life course (as part of modern chronopolitics), then this involves the establishment of certain criteria as well as binding age limits (Kohli, "Die Institutionalisierung" 8): certain actions, behaviors, lifestyles etc. are closely connected to particular life phases, allowing only for small deviations. Unsurprisingly, then, it is mainly in his encounters with social institutions that Benjamin is made into a social outsider. Let me give you three examples to elaborate on this:
- 22 1. At (chronological) age five, Benjamin is sent to kindergarten. There, however, he not only stands out through his unchildlike and therefore inappropriate behavior. He is also soon "irritated and frightened his young teacher" (Fitzgerald 186) and is therefore removed from the school.
- 23 2. Although he fulfills all formal requirements, passes his initial examination and becomes a member of the freshmen class at Yale when he is aged eighteen (but looking fifty), he is soon called to the registrar who eventually expels him from the college with the words "Get out of college and get out of town. You are a dangerous lunatic" (188). When Benjamin quietly but persistently insists that he is eighteen, the registrar is even more outraged: "'The idea!' he shouted. 'A man of your age trying to enter here as a freshman. Eighteen years old, are you? Well, I'll give you eighteen minutes to get out of

town” (188-89). Again, the rigidity of the regulatory system is primarily based on chronological age as its underlying principle; interestingly enough, the registrar seems more outraged by the fact that a “man of that age” tries to enter as a freshman than he is by Benjamin’s alleged lie.

- 24 3. It is in this light that we may also interpret the story’s initial sentences: “As long ago as 1860 it was the proper thing to be born at home. At present, so I am told, the high gods of medicine have decreed that the first cries of the young shall be uttered upon the anesthetic air of a hospital, preferably a fashionable one” (176). Interestingly enough, the first two sentences are primarily concerned with temporal markers (“as long ago as...,” “at present” etc.), thus already highlighting the theme of temporality beyond the usual sequences (also Willer 353) as well as a significant change in the social realm. The institutionalization of the life course here begins with (or actually even before) the individual’s birth, whereas the home birth–still the “proper thing” in 1860–points toward spatial stability (“home”) and appears as something pre-modern and somewhat dated. This echoes with the sociological argument introduced above, namely that the institutionalized fixation of the life course served to guarantee a greater predictability and controllability of individual life courses. To quote Hartmut Rosa once again: “For the individual, this created reliable life-course patterns, which guided them from birth through education through retirement; for the economic development, a stable, long-term basis for calculation as well as expectance securities was established.”⁹ In the light of such modern chronopolitics, Benjamin Button appears as a recalcitrant character, someone–quite literally–from “another age,” a social misfit. A disruptive factor that even threatens the very foundations of the modern society, he is simply a “dangerous lunatic.”
- 25 Interestingly enough, however, despite the anomalies of his aging process, Benjamin’s life still resembles to a certain degree a typical upper-middle-class American biography in early modernism. As John Kuehl points out, “[i]f the chronological inversion of Benjamin’s life is ignored, the pattern of events seems normal, for he attends college, finds work, gets married, becomes brigadier general” (29). Hence, Benjamin’s identity is to a high degree based on what sociologists call the institutionalization of the life course: his life is not a succession of random events, but follows a highly conventionalized and pre-structured pattern, the “normal biography.” However, as Benjamin is repeatedly stigmatized as a social outsider and thus denied the possibilities and standardized life-course model that the normal biography usually provides, the story also exposes the alienation of human beings in the modern life-course regime.
- 26 Regarding the time structure of the story, it is precisely for this reason, then, that it is so crucial that Benjamin is the only character in a world of perfect chronology: this narrative trick renders the social dimension and regulation of the human life course visible. Except for his “middle years” in which he is both professionally successful and a happy family man, Benjamin Button is a burden and a threat to society. And although this is closely related to the convergence of his physical and chronological age, it may also be read as an emphatic critique of the chronologization of life based on economic productivity and rationality; as a response to structural social challenges, the institutionalization of the life course in modernity serves to source out the problems and efforts to previous and subsequent life phases, i.e. childhood and old age (cf. Kohli, “Die Institutionalisierung” 14). Hence, Benjamin’s somewhat disruptive childhood and old age may be read as an exaggeration of a general social tendency, namely the valorization of

adulthood as the age of economic productivity and the depreciation or at least subordination of its preceding and subsequent life phases.

- 27 By the same token, the fantastic invention of a character who is born as an old man can also be related to the growing hostility towards old age in the modern American society. Analyzing the changing notions of age in the United States, Thomas Cole has demonstrated that the history of aging in America is characterized by a continual devaluation of old age that lasts well into the recent past. While the notions and values of age have of course significantly varied from the Middle Ages through Puritanism and Victorian America, it was only by the mid-19th century that Americans displayed an increasing “hostility toward old age—suggesting that old people are seen as powerful impediments to progress, unwelcome reminders both of the oppressive weight of the past and of humankind’s inevitable weakness and dependence” (Cole 83). Here, the fact that Benjamin is born in 1860—one year before the outbreak of the Civil War and thus the most powerful rupture in American society—becomes meaningful, as Benjamin symbolically embodies the “oppressive weight of the past” and an “unwelcome reminder” of weakness and dependence and thus a hindrance to the modern United States. In this light, Fitzgerald’s seemingly absurd invention of the infantile septuagenarian is thus closely intertwined with the social and cultural upheavals in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century America.¹⁰

Conclusion

- 28 Although F. Scott Fitzgerald’s writing and especially “Benjamin Button” may not easily “fit the paradigm of the modernist short story as it has traditionally been constructed” (Curnutt 296), it still offers an intriguing vantage point on the relationship between literature and the social upheaval of modern life. More specifically, one might argue that Fitzgerald’s main contribution to modernist (short) fiction lies in his almost obsessive expression of the many tensions between individual and collective time as well as pre-modern and modern temporal perception, tying in with modernist literature’s general “uneasiness about bondage to time” (Stevenson 84). Although at a first glance it might seem that Benjamin Button is merely a freak of nature, and therefore his curious case a matter of aberrant biology, the story intriguingly demonstrates how we are “aged by culture,” to borrow Margaret Morganroth’s catchy phrase. Mary Russo has argued that “[t]he dominant fiction of chronological aging [...] plots our lives in continually increasing numbers” (25). Read in this light, “Benjamin Button” serves both as a reminder of the cultural construction of this “fiction of chronological aging” and as an unusual yet instructive example of modernist fiction’s new chronologies, characterized by “a conflicting, double awareness; of two separate, even antithetical views of time and life—a double awareness shared by other phases of contemporary culture, and in some ways by the age as a whole” (Stevenson 124). As a fictional experiment in human time, the story exposes the power structures and chronopolitics behind the social regulation of the life course in modern society and especially the processes of temporalization, chronologization, and individualization this involves.
- 29 It has been pointed out before that aging and the human life course figure prominently as a theme in Fitzgerald’s fiction, both long and short. Many of his works explore what it means (not) to act one’s age, thus problematizing the tension between chronological age, social age, and psychological age, e.g. in stories like “Bernice Bobs Her Hair,” “At Your

Age” (1929) or “Babylon Revisited” (1931). Kirk Curnutt notes that “throughout his writing his fixation with youth is a central concern,” and he is right to add that “most critics ignore the cultural background of Fitzgerald’s age consciousness” (28-29). Rather than attributing Fitzgerald’s “age consciousness” merely to a personal foible, it should be contextualized within the “broader conflux of modern attitudes toward the life cycle” (29). These attitudes, of course, include the “invention” of youth and adolescence as a distinct, liminal life phase in the late 19th century (Hall) and the growing hostility towards old age, as well as the specific social performances and life styles emanating from this: “Fitzgerald’s age consciousness was the product of a culture in which aging became synonymous with deterioration and degeneration” (Curnutt 45).

- 30 Although this age consciousness also finds expression in Fitzgerald’s novels, not least in *The Great Gatsby*, the short story arguably provided an exceptionally well-equipped form to capture the temporal perception and re-structuring of modern America.¹¹ Paul Ricoeur famously claimed that “temporality and narrativity are closely related” and that their structural interrelationship is one of reciprocity: narratives follow a temporal pattern while our very understanding of temporality is based on narrative principles. Stories are always about the passage of time and so “the sequence of any fiction is, by its nature, the path of time evaporating” (Silber 111). The very brevity of the short story condenses and thus emphasizes the interrelation between temporality and narrativity and turns the short story into an exceptionally time-sensitive genre. Forced to handle time in a compressed and efficient manner, short stories are therefore particularly apt to highlight, expose, and subvert our common patterns and sequences of temporality, a quality that arguably contributed to the popularity of the genre among modernist writers. This exposing of normative time patterns and perceptions can be achieved either by focusing on single, decisive moments and episodic movements—maybe *the* trademark of the modernist short story—or, as in “Benjamin Button,” by narrating a whole lifetime within the limited space of only a few dozens of pages.
- 31 Some critics have claimed that because of its tendency toward fragmentariness, the short story cannot depict the “length and complexity of the life course” (Malcolm 101). What it can certainly do, however, and what it probably can do better than any other genre, is to make us aware of how much our lives are plotted by the fiction of the life course. As I hope to have shown, it is through their distinct temporal setup that short stories have a special potential to reveal and reflect upon the temporality of life itself, i.e. the many time patterns, structures, models, etc. which underlie our lives. In real life, these patterns and structures usually go unnoticed. Short fiction does not only imagine for us “a stopping point from which life can be seen as intelligible” (Silber 8). It can also raise our awareness of life as a “temporal project,” including the dynamic processes of synchronization of everyday-time, lifetime, and historical or social time.

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NOTES

1. See Georges Poulet's classic *Studies in Human Time* (1956), especially the introduction, for an informative account of the changing conceptions of time from the Middle Ages through Renaissance and late modernity.
2. The story has been delivered from obscurity by David Fincher's only partly successful 2008 movie adaptation that has, however, rather solidified "Benjamin Button's" status as a somewhat lame and predictable story.
3. Cf. Willer for an informed reading of Fitzgerald's story in the context of contemporary rejuvenation theories and anti-aging practices.
4. Strangely enough, the story not once mentions Benjamin's mother. For Willer, this emphasizes the symbolical level of the age-reversal, since only the paternal genealogy, expressed in the handing down of the name, is thematized (351-52).
5. See Psalms 90 ("God's Eternity and Man's Transitoriness"): "The days of our years are threescore years and ten;/ and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years."
6. In the original: "eine strukturell und kulturell höchst bedeutsame Transformation der Temporalstrukturen und -horizonte."
7. While his major focus is on the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Kohli's analysis encompasses the time between 1840 and 1980, allowing Kohli to draw his conclusions on the transitions of different life-course regimes.
8. E.g. in form of chronologically stratified governmental authorization systems ("chronologisch geschichtet[e] staatlich[e] Berechtigungssysteme," [Kohli, *Die Institutionalisierung des Lebenslaufs* 10]) in the fields of law, social security, education, etc.

9. The German original reads: “Für die Individuen entstanden so verlässliche Lebens-Lauf-Bahnen, die sie von der Geburt durch die Ausbildung bis zur Rente leiteten, und für die wirtschaftliche Entwicklung wurden stabile, langfristige Berechnungsgrundlagen und Erwartungssicherheiten geschaffen” (Rosa 156).

10. In this regard, the story serves as a good example for the role of literature in reflecting and producing images of age, acting as a “mirror to culturally accepted views of aging and to the underlying assumptions of those views,” but also “testing new concepts of aging [and...] inventing different paradigms for meaningful living in the last stages of life,” as Rosalie Baum reminds us (89).

11. Cf. the volume by Chialant and Lops for a general discussion of the treatment of time in the short story.

ABSTRACTS

Cet article propose une lecture de “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button” de F. Scott Fitzgerald, une nouvelle qui est souvent considérée comme un écrit commercial aux mérites esthétiques moindres. En effet, le texte de Fitzgerald illustre la manière dont la littérature reflète non seulement les processus de transformation sociale mais participe aussi activement à la négociation de la signification culturelle des structures temporelles – et dans ce cas particulier, des effets de ce que les sociologues appellent « l’institutionnalisation du cours humain de la vie », ou plus simplement, la « biographie normale ». Une nouvelle marginale est donc réexaminée au prisme d’une contextualisation qui prend en compte les bouleversements sociaux et les effets aliénants du régime de la vie moderne.

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