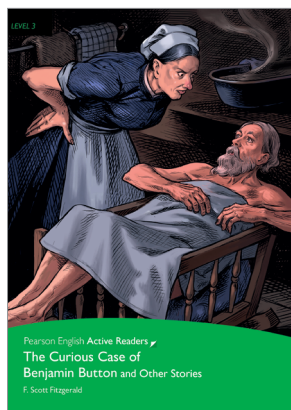


The Curious Case of Benjamin Button

F. Scott Fitzgerald



About the author

Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald was born on September 24, 1896, in St. Paul, Minnesota. In 1913, he went to Princeton University where he started to show promise as a writer, publishing several stories in local magazines. In 1918, he met Zelda Sayre who became his wife in 1920. Their relationship was a tempestuous one owing to Sayre's flirtatious nature and Fitzgerald's jealousy, and the couple was well known for throwing wild drink fueled parties and getting thrown out of clubs. Fitzgerald referred to the 1920s as the Jazz Age and drew much inspiration for his novels on his dysfunctional relationship with his wife and her series of mental breakdowns. He finished four full-length novels: *This Side of Paradise*, *The Beautiful and Damned*, *Tender is the Night*, and his most celebrated work *The Great Gatsby*, as well as many short stories. Fitzgerald died of a massive heart attack on December 21, 1940. The story of *Benjamin Button* was made into a movie in 2008, starring Brad Pitt, and *The Beautiful and Damned* is currently in production, starring Keira Knightley.

Summary

Story One, Part 1: In 1860, Mr. Roger Button arrives at a hospital to check on his wife and new born baby. The doctor and the nurse behave very strangely towards him and he begins to worry. The nurse shows him into a room of crying babies and points to Mr. Button's son. Scarcely able to believe his eyes, he looks at an old man of about seventy sitting in a crib, dressed in a blanket. After recovering from the shock, he decides the child needs clothes if he is going to take him home. He leaves the hospital and returns with a party suit for a child. The child is christened Benjamin, and his parents do their

best to dress him and treat him like a baby, but Benjamin only wants to read books. His parents introduce him to small children, but he is more interested in talking to his grandfather. With each passing year, Benjamin becomes physically younger, and his father decides he should take the entrance exam for Yale College. He passes the exam and has an interview with the professor, who doesn't believe Benjamin is eighteen years old and throws him out of his office.

Story One, Part 2: One evening at a dance, he meets a beautiful young lady, Hildegarde Montcrief, who mistakes him for his father's brother. A short time afterward Hildegarde and Benjamin get married. Over a period of fifteen years he seems to possess more energy with each passing day. His wife, on the other hand, is getting older. She has a son, Roscoe, and now only reluctantly goes to parties. As a consequence of this Benjamin falls out of love with his wife. They begin to argue about his apparent reversed aging process and he begins to show more interest in dancing with young girls and other activities. After a spell at Harvard College, he returns to Baltimore to discover that his wife has moved to Italy, so he moves in with his son, Roscoe. His young appearance proves to be an embarrassment to his son and his former friends, who stay away from him, and he decides to leave and join the army again. He arrives at Camp Mosby dressed in a child's army uniform, much to the amusement of the other soldiers. Roscoe brings him home. He returns to kindergarten and enjoys playing the children's games he had so hated when he really was six years old. After a while he can no longer understand the games and is taken out of school and put in the care of a nurse. He loses his memory of the past and his world contracts to include only his crib and his nurse, until finally nothing at all.

Story Two, Part 1: Sally Carrol is a nineteen-year-old woman living in Tarleton, Georgia, in 1919. One morning, her friend Clark questions her about her engagement to a Yankee man from the North. He feels she doesn't like Southern men and that she is making a mistake by marrying a Yankee. Sally Carrol tells him she wants change, to see more of the world, and that the men in Tarleton lack ambition. Later, the man from the North, Harry Bellamy, visits Tarleton to ask Sally Carrol to marry him. She takes him to a churchyard and shows him the grave of a woman called Margery Lee, who had died in 1873. She thinks she can picture Margery in her mind.

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Before they leave the churchyard, they agree to marry the following March. She travels North by train to Harry's town. She is more excited the further North she goes and feels the energy of the place despite the intense cold. She is met by Harry and some friends at the station and is taken to a large, old house to be introduced to his parents. She likes his father, but has reservations about his mother. When the couple is alone in the library, Harry angers her by making unfavorable comparisons between the people in the North and her native South.

Story Two, Part 2: At a dinner party attended by handsome, loud men and quiet pretty girls, she meets Roger Patterson, a professor, who she instantly feels will be a good friend. She also realizes that the majority of the women she meets are empty people, and that a mutual hatred exists between her and Harry's mother. One day when they are walking, Harry assumes that a poor man they see in the street must be from the South, and implies all Southerners are lazy. She takes offense to this and begins to feel nostalgic about the South. The big night of the visit to a spectacular ice palace arrives. Sally Carrol loses sight of Harry in the crowd and gets lost in the dark passages. As she fears for her life, she hears a voice talking to her. She looks up and sees Margery Lee, dressed exactly as she had imagined her in the graveyard, who comforts her. When the men arrive to rescue her, she screams that she wants to go home to the South immediately. One day, back in Tarleton, Sally Carrol sees Clark's old car stop near her house. He calls up to her and the two go swimming.

Story Three, Part 1: Ardita, a nineteen-year-old woman, is lying on a sofa on a boat, the *Narcissus*. Her uncle approaches her and tries to convince her to go ashore to have dinner with his friend, Mr. Moreland, and especially to meet Moreland's son, Toby. Ardita has plans to meet a man in Palm Beach, a man her uncle believes is a womanizer. She tells her uncle to go away and he leaves. In the early evening, a group of seven men, six of them black and one white, come alongside the *Narcissus* in a small boat. The handsome white man, Carlyle, tells Ardita that he and his friends are pirates and that they are taking control of the *Narcissus*. Ardita agrees to sail with the pirates and, on their way to a deserted island, Carlyle tells her about his poverty stricken past, his life as a musician, and his desire to be respected in high society.

Story Three, Part 2: Carlyle tells Ardita that he has stolen nearly a million dollars and plans to travel to Afghanistan to buy a palace before returning to England. Ardita tells him of her life as a society girl and how she came to hate it. They swim in the lake, dance on the shore, and begin to fall in love. While they are dancing, one of the black men shouts that a boat has arrived at the island, which Carlyle confirms is a revenue (police) boat. They go back to the *Narcissus* to await the arrival of the revenue officers. Two old men, an officer and two sailors come aboard. One of the men is Ardita's uncle. When he starts to ridicule her, she tells him to shut up and walks angrily away. Her uncle laughs and his friend, Mr. Moreland, asks Toby, alias Carlyle, if he had found his true love. When Ardita returns to the group and is told of the trick that had been played on her, she is initially angry. Her anger soon gives way to affection and she and Toby kiss.

Background and themes

Story One: The central theme in this story is youth. Fitzgerald was preoccupied with the aging process and wanted to be eternally young, but in the case of Benjamin, it brings only sadness. The message here is that one should age in harmony with one's peers.

Story Two: A person's roots are important in shaping their lives and character. Sally Carrol thinks she wants change, but realizes where her heart really is in the end.

Story Three: Toby realizes that the only way to Ardita's heart is through a disguise. He knows she is attracted to adventurous and daring men, so he acts out a role as a pirate and wins her love.

Discussion activities

Story One, Part 1

While reading (p. 4, after "What shall I do?")

- 1 Role play:** Put the students in pairs and tell them they are going to act out a conversation between Mr. Button and his son. The son has to behave very badly and say adult things and the father becomes very angry. See Discussion activities key.

After reading

- 2 Discuss:** Benjamin wants to go to Harvard College. Put the students in small groups and ask them to discuss the following questions: *Do you want to go to college or start work after school? Do you know what subject you want to study? Do you know which college you want to go to? Do you want to go to a college in your hometown?*

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Story One, Part 2

While reading (p. 16, after "It's better to marry a man of fifty.")

- 3 **Discuss:** Put the students in pairs and ask them to discuss the following questions about marriage: *What is a good age to get married? Do you want to get married? Do you think it is important to marry somebody the same age as you? Would you marry somebody of a different nationality? Do you think good looks are important in choosing a husband or wife?*

After reading

- 4 **Write and ask:** On the board, write *What color was Hildegard's dress at the dance?* Elicit the answer (Yellow and black). Ask students to write another question about something in Story One, Part 2. Now have students stand up and walk around the classroom, asking and answering each other's questions.

Story Two, Part 1

While reading (p. 32, after "They died for us, the South.")

- 5 **Research:** Tell the students that the American Civil War took place between the Northern Yankees and the Southern Confederates in the early 1860's. Ask them to look for information about the war on the Internet. Each student then gives an oral presentation of what they have found out.

After reading

- 6 **Game:** Tell the students there are nine words in Story Two, Part 1 that are parts of the body. Put them in pairs and tell them they have three minutes to find the words. The pair that finds all the words in the shortest amount of time, wins.

Story Two, Part 2

While reading (p. 46, after "Margery Lee," she said.)

- 7 **Discuss:** When Sally Carrol sees Margery Lee, she is seeing a ghost. Put the students in small groups to discuss the following questions: *Do you believe in ghosts? Have you ever seen a ghost? Are there any famous stories of ghosts in your country? Can ghosts talk and touch things? Do you like to watch films and read books about ghosts?*

After reading

- 8 **Write and guess:** Put students in pairs and ask them to choose a short paragraph from Story Two, Part 2. Tell them to write it again, making five changes to words in the text. Students then read out their paragraphs to the other students, who have to identify the mistakes.

Story Three, Part 1

Before reading

- 9 **Predict:** Put the students in pairs and ask them to predict the answers to the following questions: *Is the pirate handsome or ugly? Was the pirate a policeman/musician in the past? Has the pirate killed somebody/stolen some money? Does the pirate have some black/white friends with him? Is the pirate a nice person/bad person?*

While reading (p. 56, after "I'm not really interested in money.")

- 10 **Discuss:** Put the students in groups to discuss the following questions about money: *Does money make people happy? How much money do you spend a week? What is the most expensive thing you have ever bought? What would you buy if you had a million dollars? Do you want to get a job that pays a lot of money or a job that you like doing?*

After reading

- 11 **Pair work:** Write the following words on the board; *sofa, wind, prisoners, law, paint, asleep, trick, beach.* Ask the students talk and write in pairs to say how these words were used in Story Three, Part 1.

Story Three, Part 2

After reading

- 12 **Write and guess:** On the board, write *Carlyle wanted to spend ten years in Afghanistan.* Elicit which word is wrong from the students (five not ten). Now students choose a sentence from Story Three, Part 2 and rewrite it changing one word. Students move around the classroom, reading out their sentences and the other students have to identify and correct the mistake.

After reading

- 13 **Write:** Put the students in pairs and ask them to write a summary of Story Three. Tell them the summary must be exactly fifty words, not one word more or less. The students then read out their summaries to each other.
- 14 **Research:** Ask the students to look up information on the Internet about the 2008 movie *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. Each student then gives a presentation about what they have learnt. Ask them to consider the following questions: *Does the movie have the same story as the book? Did the newspaper writers like the movie? Would you like to see the movie?*
- 15 **Discuss:** Put the students in small groups and ask them to discuss the following questions about the three stories: *Which story did you like the best? Who was the most interesting person? Who didn't you like? Would you like to grow younger like Benjamin?*