

Rationality behind Benjamin Button and Frankenstein's Monster: Assessing the Interplay of "Madness" and "Civilization"

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Abstract

The year 1922 ushered with it a plethora of literary masterpieces from all over the world. Not only was the year fertile with the publication of an immense number of books but also the year was fruitful for the variety of subjects that the books dealt with. Amidst such a literary and cultural climate, F. Scott Fitzgerald popularized the term Jazz age using it for the first time to title his collection of short stories, *Tales of the Jazz Age*. The 1920s rose to uphold a cultural shift and breakaway from the regressive traditions of the past. Fitzgerald's stories and novels best depict the flamboyance of the age. Such a story is *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, written in the year 1922, introducing to us the reversed biography of Benjamin Button who is born as an old man and ages backwards only to end his life as a baby. The fact that his life goes against the natural chronology from "cradle to grave" and that he is capable of disrupting the set order of a normative biological course makes him a recalcitrant figure and social misfit. His disruptive existence reminds us of the monster in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* whom Shelley describes as "a creature of hideous contrasts." The monster makes several attempts to fit into society but is shunned repeatedly, making him an outsider. This paper attempts to trace how Benjamin Button and the monster in *Frankenstein* are posited by society as chaos because they do not fall into their imagined territory of "us." Being victims of the Foucauldian concept of constructed madness, both of them channelize their anger through repression and resistance respectively. More so, the paper would incorporate how both their journeys are inherent with inverted notions of innocence and experience.

Keywords: Jazz, age, creature, misfit, society



Introduction

The literary atmosphere post World War I altered the traditional ways of looking at the world. The war upturned the prevailing power structures in Europe; the post war trauma left people broken and barren and created an emptiness in the cultural field. Thus, the ground was prepared for modernism to enter into literature where the writers would indulge in self-conscious break from traditional ways of thinking and writing both prose and poetry. The year 1922 was that fertile year which witnessed a boom in the production of such literary masterpieces from all over the world. From T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* to James Joyce's *Ulysses*, from Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* to D.H. Lawrence's *Aaron's Rod*, from Katherine Mansfield's *The Garden Party and other stories* to May Sinclair's *Life and Death of Harriett Frean*, from Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies* to Rabindranath Tagore's *Muktohdhara*, to name a few, the year 1922 spearheaded a change in literature which was almost iconoclastic. In the middle of such a literary and cultural climate, F. Scott Fitzgerald popularized the term Jazz age using it for the first time to name his collection of short stories, *Tales of the Jazz Age*. Fitzgerald's stories and novels could best depict this post-war movement with its themes of idealism, decadence, resistance and a struggle towards achieving the American Dream. Such a story is *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, written in the year 1922.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

In order to map the position of Benjamin Button and the Creature in *Frankenstein*, my paper shall observe a qualitative method which would include close reading and interpretation of both the texts, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* and *Frankenstein*. To probe into the discourse of identity and stereotyping, I shall use theories related to Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* with special reference to the essays like *The Other Question: Stereotype, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism* and *Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of ambivalence and authority under a tree outside Delhi, May 1817*. Michel Foucault's concepts of constructed madness from *Madness and Civilization* is heavily banked upon to assess the interplay of madness and civilization in the lives of these two characters. Benjamin Button and the Creature would be read on a parallel paradigm to prove their rationality against society's irrationality.

Discussion

Fitzgerald's story presents us with the reversed biography of Benjamin Button who enters life as a Septuagenarian in a Baltimore hospital in 1860. Much to the horror of his family, doctors and nurses, Benjamin possesses the physicality and mentality of an aged man. Benjamin's father Roger Button, who hails from a socially enviable family is repulsed at the first glance of his aged baby and tries every means to conceal Benjamin's condition. As Benjamin grows up, it is soon detected that he ages backwards: at the age of twenty, he looks like a fifty-year-old, at the age of thirty-five with a wife and a son, Benjamin realizes that the gay side of life haunts him more, his contemporaries would cast an envious look at the vitality he poses, "He seems to grow younger every year" (Fitzgerald 19) they would say. When he is almost forty in 1898, he decides to join the army to serve in the Spanish-American War, as he resembles a young man now. With growing years Benjamin resembles no more than a lad and takes up new interests,

He took up golf and made a great success of it. He went in for dancing; in 1906 he was an expert at "The Boston," and in 1908 he was considered proficient at the



“Maxixe,” while in 1909 his “Castle Walk” was the envy of every young man in town (22).

Benjamin finally becomes a playmate to his grandson and then his life is all but a crib, a nanny and a muzzy smell of milk. When Benjamin is seventy-year-old, he looks as he should have during his birth: he is now an infant hardly able to perceive anything that surrounds 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 28). With the help of Benjamin’s inverted bildungsroman, Fitzgerald is trying to imagine a character who resists the normative chronology of life and death, upends the usual journey from “cradle to grave” and stands as an avant-garde to the otherwise set order of a society.

Benjamin’s recalcitrance reminds us of the monster in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, another social misfit. Shelley provides us with a repulsive image of the monster whom she describes as a “creature of hideous contrasts.” He is an eight-foot-tall creation with a translucent, pale yellow skin which is so stretched over the body that it hardly distinguishes the work of the arteries and muscles underneath; he has strangely watery eyes, lustrous black hair, chipped black lips and notably white teeth. Victor Frankenstein who gave a form to his madness is himself repulsed by his own creation. The amiable intentions of the monster are thwarted time and again by society as he fails to coalesce with the set beauty standards and normative performativity. His hideous physical appearance meets with reiterated disgust and disregard. His first human interaction happens in a hut belonging to an old man who feels threatened by his physicality although he does absolutely no harm to him. His second interaction in the village, where some scream, some faint and others attack him, entails a similar fear and hostility. The Creature being unable to obtain sympathy, fellow-feeling and recognition from society and from his creator resorts to violence. The society recognizes the monster as someone of a demeaning identity as he looked nothing like them. He suffers tangible damage and distortion as society reciprocates his amiability with contempt and derogation. Thus, the Creature comes across as a signifier of physical deformity; a person who is repeatedly not-recognized and demarcated as the significant ‘other’ due to his physical appearance. In an attempt to find a potential remedy for such non-recognition, he unleashes a terror upon society and channelizes the discourse of othering by really adorning the garb of an “outsider” gifted to him by society itself.

Representatives of an Age

After World War I, a host of Jazz musicians migrated to Chicago and New York from New Orleans, the original center of Jazz. The musicians brought with them jazz music which gained rapid popularity during the 1920s. Jazz with its roots in blues and ragtime, broke away from the traditional and cultural hegemony of the previous generations. It offered a completely fresh and rebellious form of music which included complex notes and chords, call and response vocals, blue notes, polyrhythms and a lots of improvisation. The traditionalists looked down upon jazz music as a corruption of morality. Some of the middle-class African-Americans even termed it as “devil’s music.” Professor Henry Van Dyke of Princeton University commented about jazz, “it is not music at all. It’s merely an irritation of the nerves of hearing, a sensual teasing of the strings of physical passion” (Ward and Burns). Jazz continued to influence and overlap with other cultural developments. A period and a movement thus started which was marked with a



remarkable cultural shift with a mindset of freedom. The period saw a significant boom in artistic growth in which Expressionism, Surrealism and Dadaism flourished displaying surprising juxtapositions, nonconformity and irrationality. The irrationality of the age attempted to critique the prevailing notions of art and culture for a more rational evaluation of society. Against the backdrop of such a cultural tempest, Fitzgerald popularized the term Jazz age and gifted to us a character who is the perfect embodiment of such an age. Benjamin Button who is posed by society as a freak of nature actually demonstrates how society is “aged by culture.” He functions as a reminder of the myth of chronological aging and sets an instance of new chronologies marked 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). The idea of time and its chronological manifestations are social constructs and looking at it from a subverted position is extremely modernistic. The post-war age saw an emergence of “temporalization of life” which gave importance to the fact that the discourse of life-course is after all socially institutionalized. This age attempts to uphold a kind of individualization, liberating an individual from the constraints of time, space, stereotype and normalcy. Benjamin Button, thus, resides in “fabulous time” as Joan Silber calls it, indicating an alternate time pattern which does not correlate with the usual conceptions of time and space. For the traditional notions of a society which often made aging synonymous with depreciation, Benjamin is a bizarre bohemian. Just like the Jazz, which appeared to the traditionalists a nuisance because it was nothing like theirs, Benjamin too appeared to have come from another age because he attempted a break from the general beliefs and sights of mankind.

The influence of an age and its events are also quite unmistakably visible in Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Mary, having been brought up amidst the left leaning political ideals of her father William Godwin, believed that all men are inherently good but corrupted by societal evils. She craftily makes the Creature represent the plight of the proletariat and their constant struggle for recognition against the bourgeoisie as represented by Victor Frankenstein. In an article, *(R)evolutionary Images in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein*, Chikage Tanabe writes that the monster’s perpetual rebellion against Frankenstein “...reminds us of the basic concept of the French revolution, that is, the rebellion against the King (a father figure) ...” (Tanabe 51). The Creature was benevolent at first having full faith in Victor Frankenstein but it was only after the latter failed to execute his duties and denied the former his rights and privileges that he turned malevolent. The third estate of France too believed that the government had certain responsibilities towards them, the failure of which entailed violence, murder and bloodshed. The people from the lower rung of the French society warned the government just as the Creature expressed its desire for recognition and a mate from Frankenstein. Shelley portrays Victor Frankenstein as upholding a kind of bourgeoisie capitalism where he tries to interfere with the natural ways of creation for fame and glory. The Creature’s journey from innocence to experience follows the graph of the French revolution where the proletariat too had intentions that were efficient but being grossly rejected by those in power, ended the revolution with “reign of terror.” Every revolution claims not only the lives of the powerful but also the lives of the blameless. In the novel *Frankenstein*, the monster too killed the blameless and the innocent. Elizabeth, who was described as, “the living spirit of love” (Shelley 20) and “the best hope, and the purest creature of earth” (144) has to meet an untimely death because of Frankenstein’s exploits. Henry who was



“perfectly humane, so thoughtful in his generosity-so full of tenderness and kindness...made doing good the end and aim of his soaring ambition” (20) also fell victim to the crimes that were not his. Justine, who could too make a bright future by virtue of her merits and qualities, had to meet her death. All these mistimed demises carry the pathos of revolution and the plight of the guiltless. Shelley’s fictional character, the Creature is in fact a corporeal presentation of her views on the French Revolution.

Question of Identity

Benjamin Button and the Creature fall victim to the universal concept of designating in one’s own discourse a familiar space which they call “ours” and an unfamiliar space which they call “theirs.” This kind of exclusion is more social, racial and cultural rather than legal. The construction of a stereotype by society turns out to be the main cause for identifying Benjamin and the Creature as ontologically the other. The discrepancy between Benjamin’s biological and physical age appears to be disruptive of a normal life course and hence he is denied the very identity of being a member of society. His father spends quite an amount of time hiding the reality of his crisis. At age five, when he is admitted into the kindergarten, he stands out from the rest of the students by virtue of his aged appearance and soon he gets expelled from the school. At the age of eighteen, he enters as a freshman at Yale but his fifty years old physical outlook leads the registrar to say, “Get out of college and get out of town. You are a dangerous lunatic” (Fitzgerald 13). He further adds, “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” (14). Benjamin is expelled from there as well. Benjamin’s life, except for his middle years which he leads quite happily and successfully, remains disjointed. His life, running against the clock, refuses to conform to the stereotype of a life-course that is institutionalized by society and hence he must remain an outsider. In a similar context, Victor Frankenstein’s vaulting ambition to test the potential of science gives birth to a “child of storm” but because of the abnormality of his appearance he abhors and abandons him; repeatedly refers to him as “the monster.” He fails to extend his paternal responsibility towards him. The Creature is shunned by society, stoned by the villagers and shot by the father of a girl whose life he has saved. The vindictiveness of society teaches him violence and how to wield it as a weapon of resistance. The Creature’s appearance and behaviour, his contrasting emotions of affection and revenge, his hybrid sense of benison and curse, his mixed reaction as a savage and an obedient servant clearly embody the stereotypes about blacks constructed by agents of colonialism. He comes across as a sexually formidable black male much like Caliban whose presence is threatening to society and therefore must be driven away. In Homi Bhabha’s *The Other Question: Stereotype, discrimination and the discourse of colonialism*, Bhabha opines that the construction of “the other” in a stereotypical way serves the function of creating a coherent identity of the self. The colonizer, in these contexts: society tries to use the half-hearted knowledge about its colonized (Benjamin and the Creature) to construct their identity which is significantly different from theirs and in turn attempts to look for a comprehensive identity of their own which can be controlled. However, both the characters point at the imaginary nature of such a stereotype which entails repetition to sustain and crack the notion of a homogeneous identity that the colonizer quests for.



Idea of Constructed Madness

Michel Foucault in *Madness and Civilization* claims that madness is not always a naturally occurring condition but is greatly constructed by society in which it exists. Societal structures constitute its experience of madness. Any notion which goes against the institutionalized order of society is termed madness. Benjamin Button has been treated as a freak ever since his birth and has been called “lunatic” twice in the course of the story. Once by the registrar and then by the undergraduates,

On his melancholic walk to the railroad station he found that he was being followed by a group, then by a swarm and finally by a dense mass of undergraduates. The word had gone around that a lunatic had passed the entrance examinations for Yale and attempted to palm himself off as a youth of eighteen (Fitzgerald 14).

An air of excitement permeated through the entire college as men left their classes, boys abandoned their football practice, professors' wives joined the crowd to watch and pass a judgement on Benjamin who they treated like a painted fool. However, perhaps it is Benjamin and Benjamin alone who can provide us with a rational appraisal of a society that thrives by hypocrisy and feeds on sham double-standards. Benjamin channelizes his anger through repression, he makes several choices in his life that help him to deal with the Foucauldian concept of madness. He gets back at society neither through violence nor through vengeance but by showing them that his life is not a strange assortment of random moments but it is just like them in which he can become a successful businessman, can marry, father children, join the army, learn dance and get popular. Only the difference being, Benjamin's life stands as an antithesis to Mark Twain's opinion that it was really a sad thing that the best part of life came first and the worst part at last.

Foucault further charts in *Madness and Civilization*, a departure from the fantastical images of madness in the Renaissance period to an image in which the madman was perceived as half animal. This perception justified the bestial treatment with the madman. The world, rather than acknowledging the similar animalistic traits with the madman, proclaim themselves to be belonging to a highly developed strata. Such an attitude rips the madman of all his humanity. Thus, the madness makes the madman absolutely free. He can no longer be restrained by human laws. The animalistic attitude of the madman is not conceived as a part of nature because it goes against the rationale set by society. A liberated behaviour and a looming sense of absolute liberty of a certain person is often termed as madness as he begins to interrogate the orders of the realms. The Creature in *Frankenstein* is portrayed as a “noble savage” who is a person, but very much alien to the human world. He differs from others by virtue of his stature and by his lack of elementary civilization. He merely lives by his instincts like animals although initially all his intentions were good. When he approaches society and responds to it with his impulse and “uncivilized” reason, all he receives is despair. The society fearing the Creature's liberated behaviour, gives him the position of the madman who does not deserve the civil society and hence be bound. Since the Creature dares to question the so called “rationality” of society, fights for his share of happiness and struggles for inclusion, he is thwarted like a beast. It is the malice of society that constructs the madness in him because they have no answer to his peculiarity. The Creature thereby channelizes his anger through resistance and violence. In a way, the Creature is a perfect embodiment of “Depressive Realism” where his voice of despair is the sanest assessment of society.



Notions of Innocence and Experience

Benjamin experiences an inverted journey of innocence and experience. He starts his life with the malice of society facing all the experiences that we generally receive as we grow up. As Benjamin grows up, he journeys towards innocence experiencing waywardness, popularity and childish caprice. He finally ends his life in complete innocence barely sensing anything around him. On the contrary, the journey of innocence to experience is quite complicated for the Creature in *Frankenstein* because he is brought to life as a full-fledged adult. He did not receive a normal infancy yet was innocent of the ways of the world. He remains confused and inexperienced in a world he does not know; he remains a child in a man's body. When he finally makes an attempt to provide light to his ignorance, the experience comes to him in the form of dereliction. Thus, he uses this experience to untether an unhindered radicalism upon society.

Conclusion

Benjamin and the Creature, both witness a transition. For Benjamin, the transition comes in the form of modernism which sought to overturn the traditional desires of representations and for the Creature, the transition comes in the form of upheaval where the oppressed becomes an oppressor. They threaten to dismantle the order that society has so superficially woven around it. Being trapped in the vicious circle of constructed madness, they retaliate with a reverse discrimination against the majority. Thus, in the interplay of madness and civilization, Benjamin and the Creature serve to reflect those aspects of society that are visibly obliterated by the power structures.

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