

Identity Crisis of Benjamin Button in F. Scott Fitzgerald's
The Curious Case of Benjamin Button

**Identity Crisis of Benjamin Button in F. Scott Fitzgerald's
*The Curious Case of Benjamin Button***

Astri Rahayu Agshari

English Literature, Faculty of Languages and Arts, State University of Surabaya

Astriagshari@gmail.com

Abstrak

Tesis ini berjudul krisis identitas oleh Benjamin Button dalam *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* di F. Scott Fitzgerald. *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* adalah Benjamin yang lahir seperti orang tua dan berbeda dengan orang lain. Kondisi Benjamin itu disebut progeria disease. Ini bertujuan untuk menyelidiki karakter utama krisis identitas menurut perspektif Erik Erikson yang meneliti keabsahan teorinya tentang identitas dalam menganalisa karakter fiksi. Tesis ini menganalisis tentang karakter utama krisis identitas Benjamin karena penuaannya terbalik. Tujuan dari tesis ini adalah untuk mengidentifikasi proses penuaan aneh oleh Benjamin dan untuk menganalisis proses penuaan Benjamin yang mengarah pada krisis identitas di F. Scott Fitzgerald *The Curious Case of Benjamin*. Ini purues untuk menunjukkan bahwa Benjamin sering menggunakan beberapa fakta psikoanalisis yang terkait dengan pysche manusia untuk membentuk kepribadian karakter fiktifnya. Data utama diambil dari narasi dan dialog dari *The Curious Case dari Benjamin Button* oleh novel F. Scott Fitzgerald yang terkait dengan krisis identitas Benjamin Button. Tesis ini merupakan metode kuantitatif deskriptif dengan pendekatan psikoanalisis. Dengan menganalisis novel *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, tujuan utama dari penelitian ini adalah untuk menunjukkan pentingnya psikoanalisis sebagai teori kritik sastra dan kebutuhannya saat mempertajam produksi sastra tertentu, karena memberi pembaca implikasi yang dikemas dengan mental. Berdasarkan pemahaman. Studi ini juga menemukan bahwa bisa jadi tampak bahwa kehidupan Benjamin Button tidak ada gunanya meski ia memiliki kelainan yang aneh. Dia bisa membuktikan bahwa dengan perjuangannya untuk tetap hidup seperti orang normal. Seseorang yang menghadapi krisis identitasnya biasanya mengalami depresi atau putus asa namun Benjamin bisa menghadapinya. Untuk sampai pada kesimpulan dari skripsi ini adalah bahwa Benjamin Button, meski ia memiliki penuaan yang ganjil, ia berhasil membuktikan bahwa hidupnya masih berarti setelah menceritakan krisis identitasnya dengan semangat untuk menjadi orang normal.

Kata kunci: Benjamin Button, Penuaan terbalik, Krisis Identitas

Abstract

This thesis is entitled *Identity Crisis of Benjamin Button in F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* is a play about Benjamin who was born like an old man and different with other people. That condition of Benjamin is called progeria disease. It aims at investigating the major characters identity crisis according to Erik Eriksons perspective examinig the validity of his theory of identity in analayzing a fictional character. This thesis analyzes about the main character Benjamin's identity crisis because of his odd aging backwards. The purpose of this thesis are to identify Benjamin's odd aging process and to analyze Benjamin aging process that lead to the identity crisis in F. Scott Fitzgerald *The*

Curious Case of Benjamin Button novel. It purues to demonstrate that Benjamin often uses some facts of psychoanalysis that are related to the human pysche to form the personality of his fictional character. The main data were taken from the narration and dialogue from *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* by F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel that related to the identity crisis of Benjamin Button. This thesis is descriptive quantitative method with psychoanalysis approach. By analyzing the novel *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, the main objective of this study is to show the importance of psychoanalysis as a literary criticism theory and its indispensability when persuing any given literary production, since it gives readers the implications that are packed with mental based understanding. This study is also found out that it can be seem that Benjamin Button's life is not useless although he has a curious disorder. He can prove that with his struggle to keep alive like a normal person. A person who faces his or her identity crisis usually get depressed or hopeless but Benjamin can faces that. To come to the conclusion of this thesis is that Benjamin Button, even though he is has odd aging backwards, he successfully proves that his life is still meaningful after relates his identity crisis with his spirit to become a normal person.

Keywords: *Benjamin Button, Odd Aging Backwards, and Identity*

Introduction

F. Scott Fitzgerald is a popular American novelist and short story writer. He was born on September 24, 1896 in St Paul, Minnesota. Together with Zelda Sayre (1900-1948) he finished four novels: *This Side of Paradise*, *The Beautiful and Damned*, *The Great Gatsby*, and *Tender is the Night* but the famous novels that he written and supporting his careers are *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and *The Beautiful and Damned* (1929). Before his dead he wrote his last novel *The Love of the Last Tycoon* but that novel is unfinished, and become the fifth novel. F. Scott Fitzgerald considered as one of the greatest American writers of the 20th century.

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button is one of the popular novels that he published in 1925. This novel is different with the other novels because the theme of this novel is about age and despair. Fitzgerald novels always told about

hedonism, social class, and party, but *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* novel is totally different. Fitzgerald tried to change his style of writing and used age and despair as a theme in this novel. The story of this novel has related with Fitzgerald's life. Fitzgerald wrote this novel about an abnormal child birth, that relates to how his sister, Louise Scott died shortly before his birth. When Benjamin join for the Spanish American War in this story, Fitzgerald in his real life also joined the US army too, and setting of the place in this story is in Baltimore, Maryland when Fitzgerald's wife is hospitalized after she endured from her disease.

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button novel is talk about Benjamin Button who was born an old man and begins aging backward. Benjamin wasn't born like other children instead of being small, young face, and crying. When Benjamin was born, he is not crying but he is talking and his face is frightening. His condition make him to be

Identity Crisis of Benjamin Button in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*

rejected by society and his family. Benjamin's struggles his life with his condition of being born old to become a normal person. However, the climax conflict of this story is when he is not only born old, but also discovers that he is aging backwards throughout his life.

Literature has some relationship with psychology since character in it sometimes a psychological problem. Because of that, human are interesting to be analyze especially about identity. In literature identity is one of the most favorable themes because it is the part of human life. The application of individual identity is the way to direct the identity into the personality perspective. Personality perspective itself is the personality approach which is show some crisis in an identity. Every people have personality and identity since they were in a childhood and they have different personality and identity.

Identity is one of the big problem for most people. Sometimes people cannot find their identity in their life. The process happens in adolescence period where is usually put in a position in which one has a lot of option to takes. In term of identity, a character is important things that really need an identity because it will make a mark of a something. Sometimes the characters can get a conflict about their identity one of the big conflict happens during this identity forming is the identity crisis.

Identity crisis is a general issues and each of every people can actually experiences the crisis. Identity crisis is the reflection of people life that can make them become stronger or even make them

weakness in the identity. Identity crisis also is when a person loses a sense of personal sameness and historical continuity. According to the Erik Erikson, identity crisis can be reinforced by deep doubts earlier about sexual identity and about the place and value in the primary family relationship (Erikson, 1963, 403).

There are two problem of study of this thesis first is how is Benjamin Button's odd aging process in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* and second is how does Benjamin Button's odd aging process lead to identity crisis in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*.

This thesis will be concern in identity crisis of the main character because of his odd aging backawrds and use some theories by Erik Erikson with identity crisis ththeory and the concept of aging process by Steven and Edward theory.

METHOD

It should be a data in every thesis study, instead the literary work has a data. This thesis is a qualitative study. Qualitative study is the method that the data is not contains of numeric data. Qualitative data are interesting because it contains of a deep and clearly explanation and description about the literary works as an object of the data. The thesis will present the classification of the data into three groups they are data source, data collection, and data analysis.

For the data source, there are 2 kinds of the data source. First, the primer data is taken from the novel itself entitled *F. Scott*

Fitzgerald's The Curious Case of Benjamin Button. This novel was published on May 27, 1992 and turned into a movie on December 25, 2008. It will involve quotations, fragments and dialogues or monologues that showing the factors and the resolution leading to Benjamin Button's identity crisis. The method of collecting data which is used is library method. The data be collected by reading the novel closely and take some quotations which can prove the issue. The data in this study will be classified according to the problem statement. So, it will discuss only important thing that related to the issue. The next step is explaining about the issue using theory, the theory is take from Erik Erikson theory. This study used identity crisis and psychological stages theory by Erik Erikson. After explaining the issue next step is organize the outline and after that writes the thesis.

DISCUSSION

This thesis shows the analysis to answer and to solve the statement of problem in the previous chapter. Fitzgerald used the title of *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* to show that this novel is about Benjamin Button who has a curious disease odd aging backward in his life. This story represents Benjamin as the main character in the novel here that he has a problem with the society, family and his love because of his aging backward. The meaning of the title's novel is the life of Benjamin Button that lack of a normal identity because of his aging backward and his family.

The aging backward of Benjamin Button is the main problem that can lead an identity crisis. He cannot be accepted in his family, society, his career and this condition are affection to his life. So, this study will examine that aging backward and identity crisis of the main characters of the novel titled F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* with the named Benjamin. How reflections of Benjamin aging process and also odd aging backward that caused of Benjamin's identity crisis by Erik Erikson.

In this novel shows that any disease that caused of aging. Benjamin born like an old man and have abnormal aging process. People with normal aging process definitely born with fresh and young condition like the statement above, but Benjamin aging process is different. He get inverted aging process. He was born with the abnormal condition. This abnormal condition is called aging backwards.

Benjamin's Aging process is different with normal aging process it is a rare genetic disorder that causes accelerated aging. This disease called Progeria. Progeria is a rare genetic condition that causes a child's body to age fast. Most child who get progeria disease do not live pas the age of 13 years old. This disease affects both sexes and all races equally. It influences around one in every four million births worldwide.

"Wrapped in a voluminous white blanket, and partly crammed into one of the cribs, there sat an old man apparently about seventy years of age. His sparse hair was almost white, and from his chin dripped a long smoke-colored beard, which waved

Identity Crisis of Benjamin Button in F. Scott Fitzgerald's
The Curious Case of Benjamin Button

absurdly back and forth, fanned by the breeze coming in at the window. He looked up at Mr. Button with dim, faded eyes in which lurked a puzzled question. (Fitzgerald, 1922: 10).”

Benjamin's condition above shows that he get a progeria disease. His symptoms when he was born are same with the progeria patients. As a progeria patient he get older, and he get disease that expect to see in people who was age 50 and older. Including his bone loss, and heart disease. Patients with progeria disease usually died with heart attacks or strokes. Progeria disease does not affect intelligence or brain development in children at all. A kid with this condition is no longer possible to get an infection from other children, either. At this time, there is no cure for progeria disease, but the doctors are try working to finding it. Some treatments usually can help progeria patients to delay several of the disease's symptoms of progeria.

Benjamin experience identity crisis because his odd aging backwards and that condition make him rejected in his society and also his family. According to Erikson he said that an identification process usually happens in a childhood period. The first identification figure for a child is his own parents. With identification, a child hopes that he can get warmth, order, and security (Erikson, 1968: 155). This quotation above is influenced Benjamin's identity because he is try to ask about his father, his identity of Benjamin's family. Benjamin need to know about the identity of his father and his mother and also his family. Family is also influenced in identity and it is important

because when they know his identity of their family then they will know about their identity. Mr. Button try to ask this old man (Benjamin) to ensure that Benjamin is his son.

“Where in God's name did you come from? Who are you?

(Fitzgerald, 1922: 10).

“I can not tell you exactly who I am. Because I've only been born a few hours—but my last name is certainly Button.”(Fitzgerald, 1922: 11).”

That quotation above shows that Benjamin confuse with his identity but he try to find his identity with give a statement that his last name is Button because he know that his father have the 'Button' in his last name. Benjamin sure that he is a member of Button family while his father do not accept his to be a member of Button family. In with become accept Benjamin as his son and admit that he is become Benjamin's father. In this case, Benjamin mind is working because he just had been born but he know his last name. Very impossible that a baby who was born a few hours can know his last name. Newborn baby should can not remember anything and they are also did not know about their identity until their parents tell them and teach them.

When Benjamin and his father on the way to hospital, Benjamin and his father arguing about Benjamin's clothes. Benjamin did not want to wear that clothe because the clothes is short and it is for babies. Mr. Button mad at Benjamin and threatened him if Benjamin would not wear his clothes.

“...or I’ll spank you”

“All right, father” –this with a grotesque simulation of filial respect—“you’ve lived longer; you know best. Just as you say.” As before, the sound of the word ‘father’ caused Mr. Button to start violently. “

“And hurry.”

“I’m hurrying, father. (Fitzgerald, 1922: 14).”

The first quotation above represent how Mr. Button mad with Benjamin because he did not want to wear his clothes until his father threatened him. The next quotation shows that Mr. Button did not mad again with Benjamin when Benjamin called Mr. Button ‘father’. Mr. Button begin try to accept Benjamin as his son. Because when Benjamin say ‘father’ Mr. Button start violently. The word ‘father’ make Mr. Button become sensitive although he hate Benjamin. It means that Mr. Button admit that he is a Benjamin’s father.

Marcia said that families have an obligation to create a conducive environment for their children, show them love and provide for their needs. As a child are growing up, they need to hear some words of encouragement that help them to believe in themselves. When they do not hear such words, they tend to experience identity crisis (Marcia: 1976: 147). So, Mr. Button acts violently and become sensitive with the word ‘father’ can help Benjamin to find his identity. Mr. Button try to accept Benjamin as his son and admit that he is become a Benjamin’s father, and because of it Benjamin can feel love and feel

comfortable by a father like the other children.

As we know that Benjamin Button did not have a name. His father did not give him a name, but in the previous chapter Benjamin give a statement to his father that the last name of Benjamin is ‘Button’. Button is the last name of Benjamin’s father, Roger Button and it is a family name. Benjamin and his father go back to home. In the middle of they are walking Benjamin ask his father.

“What are you going to call me, dad?” he quavered as they walked from the nursery—“just ‘baby’ for a while? Till you think of a better name?” Mr. Button grunted. “I don’t know,” he answered harshly. “I think we’ll call you Methuselah.” (Fitzgerald, 1922: 15).

He try to ask his father about his name and his father did not know what he will give Benjamin name after his father think that Benjamin should have a name ‘Methuselah’. Methuselah is not a name is a harsh word that inappropriate to be used as a name. A name is the first identity of a person. A name is a basic identity and this is a powerful things and it is important to a person to have a name. A name or identities describe who we currently are. A name usually given at the time we had just been born or when a baby. Each person must have a name as their first identity. It is a present day representation of how we perceive ourselves in this world. A name must be given by their parents or their family. Usually the parents named their children with a beautiful name and it has a great meaning. It is not happen with Benjamin, his

Identity Crisis of Benjamin Button in F. Scott Fitzgerald's
The Curious Case of Benjamin Button

father give him name with a harsh word that have a bad meaning.

The quotation above shows that Benjamin did not have a real name and can influence his identity. His father make Benjamin confuse about his identity. The status of Benjamin now is did not have an identity he become an identity crisis until his father give him a real name. Without having a name Benjamin cannot be accepted in the society. Names and identities are the first impression. If Benjamin did not have a name, then he can not know about who he are and this is influence how he present himself to the world and how Benjamin interact with the world. With having no name, Benjamin can not be recognized in society, he also can not attend a school or a job. Benjamin only know his last name 'Button' but he did not know who exactly his first name, it means that he also did not know about his identity. A last name is did not help Benjamin to know his identity because 'Button' is a family name and if Benjamin say that his name is Button he may can not be trusted in society especially with his condition.

After Benjamin arrived at home with his father, Benjamin meet his Button family. With Benjamin condition it was impossible for Button family to ignore the fact that his son was an excuse for a first family baby. At that moment Benjamin finally given a name from his family. They called him Benjamin Button.

Despite his aged stoop, Benjamin Button—for it was by this name they called him instead of by the appropriate

but invidious Methuselah—was five feet eight inches tall. (Fitzgerald, 1922: 17).

In the previous quotation Benjamin father did not give Benjamin name and he called Benjamin with harsh word 'Methuselah'. After Benjamin meet the Button's family with his condition, they directly give Benjamin name with 'Benjamin Button'. Based on the Benjamin's statement in the previous quotation that his last name must be Button and it is a family name. Now, Benjamin is a member of Button family and he have a permanent name if he have a name automatically he also have an identity. With having a name or identity Benjamin can be accepted and be recognized by the world because identity is important things. He also can attend a school, a job, and associate. Although Benjamin know his identity but his condition is the inception of his problem with confusing identity.

CLOSING

Conclusion

In Fitzgerald, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, the main character is Benjamin. He has an identity crisis and it influences by his aging backwards. As the identity emerges problem for Benjamin, it followed by the appearing of 2 statements of analysis of the data, the result can be concluded that there are two conclusions. Firstly is the concept of Benjamin's aging process. Benjamin was born old (late adulthood) and as time progress he becomes younger and fresh. When he at the age of 71, he matures into a child and dies. The real concept of normal aging is born young and as time progress they become old not

become young like Benjamin. This condition is called progeria disease. Progeria disease is a disease of aging. People with this disease may have some symptoms such as a bigger head, large eyes, small lower jaw, a thin nose with beaked tip, scaly skin, loss of body fat and muscle, hair loss included eyebrows and eyelashes, and limited range motion.

Secondly, he has a different character because he get odd aging backwards and he can't choose a certain identity for himself. He has a problem with his identity if an identity can't be the people's necessity, they will out of control and have a divergent in their identity. It called as an identity crisis.

SUGGESTIONS

After understanding the new perspective of being identity crisis in this new era, there are some suggestions which can be related to the topic under discuss. This novel has a character who is considered as a identity crisis man. using this as the media of study will help to understand more about identity crisis. Identity crisis phenomenon in this era is very clear, applying this to the society will help to reveal them. While, since this thesis is discussing the identity crisis which is popular among teneeger. This thesis gives the new perspspective about in and teaches to find their real identity before adolescent period to help them did not get identity crisis. Understanding this topic will useful to reveal this phenomenon and it also helps to undiscovering identity crisis's world and thus is of course useful to referine the new insight of psychoanalysis studies.

Daftar Pustaka

Boeree, Goerge C. 2006. *Personality Theories. Erik Erikson [1902-1955]*.

Downloaded on Monday, 28 November 2016

<http://www.ship.edu/%7Ec%7Boeree/per%20contents.html>

Bran, N. (2009). *The Cambridge Introduction to postmodern fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dumitrescu, M. (2001). *Modernism, Postmodernism, and the question of identity*. Romania: Burcharest Academy of Economic.

Erikson, Erik H. 1968. *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. New York: W.W Orton and Company. Inc.

Erikson, E.H. (1970). Reflections on the dissent of contemporary youth, *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 51, 11-12.

Erikson. E.H, (1955). *Identity and the life cycle*. Selected papers. New York: W.W Orton and Company. Inc.

Fitzgerald, Scott F. *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, 1922.

Frosh, S. (1991). *Identity Crisis Modernity pschoanalysis and self*. London: Macmolia.

Kellner, D. (1992). *Popular culture and the construction of postmodern identities*. London and New York: Routledge.

Kusnir, J. (2011). *Postmodernity in American and Australian fiction*. Slovakia: University of Persov.

Identity Crisis of Benjamin Button in F. Scott Fitzgerald's
The Curious Case of Benjamin Button

Maria, J. E. (1980) Identity in adolescence.
In J. Adelson (Ed), *Handbook of Adolescent Psychology*. New York: Wiley.

Steven N. Austed, Edward J. Masoro. (2006). "Handbook of the Biology of Aging 6th edition"

Matthew J. Bruccoli's "A brief life of Fitzgerald" originally appeared in F. Scott Fitzgerald: *A life in Letters*, ed. (New York: Scribners, 1944).

