

The concept of Alienation and its depiction in “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button” (1922) by F. Scott Fitzgerald

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Abstract

The theme of human alienation, encompassing various psycho-social disorders such as loss of self, anxiety, depersonalization, loneliness, and pessimism, has been extensively explored by philosophers, psychologists, and sociologists. In the context of modernist literature, this theme became prevalent as writers grappled with feelings of distance and isolation from their societies. F. Scott Fitzgerald, a prominent figure of the "Lost Generation" of writers, addressed the theme of alienation in his works, despite not initially receiving the same recognition as other modernist authors. One of his underrated works, the short story "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button," has gained renewed attention and even a movie adaptation, highlighting its enduring relevance in the literary landscape. This article forwards a theoretical exploration of alienation and how it is perceived by few of the main thinkers in the human history such as Friedrich Hegel, Karl Marx, and Max Weber. Additionally, Fitzgerald's "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" (1922) will be analyzed under the light of alienation in order to examine the portrayal of such phenomenon in the modern society.

مفهوم ظاهرة الاغتراب وتصويرها في "الحالة المحيرة لبنجامين بتن" (1922) للكاتب إف. سكوت فيتزجيرالد

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الملخص

الكلمات المفتاحية

الإغتراب،
الحدث،
ماركس،
فيبر،
هيغل،
فيتزجيرالد،
الأدب،
علم الاجتماع،
علم النفس.

تم تناول موضوع الاغتراب البشري والذي يشمل مجموعة واسعة من الاضطرابات النفسية والاجتماعية مثل فقدان الذات، والقلق، والتجريد، والوحدة، والتشاؤم، بشكل وافر من قبل الفلاسفة وعلماء النفس والاجتماع كما أنه في سياق الأدب الحديث، أصبح هذا الموضوع سائداً حيث حاول الكتاب الحديثون تسليط الضوء على هاته الظاهرة والتي عانوا منها ضمن مجتمعاتهم. فرانسيس سكوت فيتزجيرالد، الشخصية البارزة في "جيل الضائع" من الكتاب الحديثين، تناول موضوع الاغتراب في أعماله. على الرغم من عدم حصوله في البداية على نفس التقدير الذي حظي به كتاب حديثين آخرون فإن إحدى أعماله التي لم تحظ بالاهتمام الكافي، ألا وهي قصة " الحالة المحيرة لبنجامين بتن" أصبحت محل اهتمام من جديد وحصلت حتى على تكييف للسينما مؤخراً، مما يسليط الضوء على أهميتها في المشهد الأدبي اليوم. يقدم هذا المقال استكشافاً نظرياً للاغتراب وكيفية تصويره من قبل بعض أبرز المفكرين في تاريخ الإنسان، مثل فريدريك هيغل، كارل ماركس، وماكس فيبر. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، سيتم تحليل "الحالة الفضولية لبنجامين باتون" (1922) في ضوء مفهوم الاغتراب لفحص تصوير هذه الظاهرة في المجتمع الحديث.

1- Introduction:

The predicament of human alienation is a pervasive theme that has been used by philosophers, psychologists and sociologists to refer to an extraordinary variety of psycho-social disorders, including loss of self, anxiety state, depersonalization, loneliness, isolation, pessimism and the loss of beliefs and values. Alienation come to be one of the most prevalent themes in the works of modernist writers as they felt distant and isolated from their society back then.

As one of the self-styled “Lost Generation” writers, F. Scott Fitzgerald dealt with this theme in his works. Despite being one of the most iconic authors of modernism and the modern era, his works were not given the status other modernists’ works like Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Ezra Pound received. Among these underrated works is his short story “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button” which seems that just like its protagonist is aging well in the literary field as it has received lately a well-deserved attention in addition to a movie adaptation despite being only 33 pages long.

This short story is a work of alienation through and through which tries cleverly to depict the social situation of the modernist author within its 33 of highly condensed pages. Through this article, an attempt will be set forward to explore this theme and how it is depicted within Fitzgerald’s short story.

2- The Concept of Alienation :

*The term 'alienation' in itself is one of the most infamous concepts of this age due to its obscurity and fluid association with a diverse range of social groups and individuals throughout history. It is nevertheless, among the persisting central concerns not only in the sociological analysis but also in theology, philosophy, psychology, and even economics. Originally, 'alienation,' as a term is rooted in the Latin noun *alienatio*, which itself is derived from the Latin verb *alienare*, signifying 'to take away,' 'remove,' or 'cause separation,' found its early usage in theological texts. In the Bible, for instance, Paul used the concept to describe the gentiles as 'darkened in their understanding, separated from the life of God.' (Josephson, 1968, p. 12)*

2.1. Hagel Perspective:

Beyond its initial and ‘surface’ use, the concept of alienation has deep roots in philosophy and sociology, and it has been explored by various thinkers throughout history. German idealistic philosophy brought the concept of alienation into contemporary sociological literature. While social-contract theorists like Grotius, Hobbes, Locke, and particularly Rousseau have employed the notion to elucidate the relinquishment of personal rights, liberty, powers, and control to the general will of the community or organization; they assumed, however, that alienation in this case is in fact a desirable outcome. It was actually Hegel’s approach to the issue that put the concept

of alienation on an analytic framework which was the basic intellectual foundation to comprehend the problematic nature of alienation in modern society. (Fromm, 1966, p. 44)

Influenced by previous discussions of alienation like Rousseau's surrendering of the personal self and control and also by the theological use of the term as a state of separation, Hegel used two distinct German words *entausserung* (surrender or divestiture) and *entfremdung* (a state of separation) to define and describe the dual nature of alienation (Kanungo, 1982, p. 11)

In his book *Phenomenology of Mind* (1949), he uses the terms interchangeably to denote distinct forms of alienation. According to Hegel, there are two types of alienation. In the initial form, individuals undergo a state of separation where they no longer identify with the 'social substance' or the societal, political, and cultural structures. This alienation is not the result of intentional actions; rather, it is imposed upon the individual. In the second form of alienation, individuals willingly surrender or transfer their rights to another. This entails a conscious relinquishment or surrender with the intention of achieving a desired end, specifically unity with the social substance. (Schacht, 1970, p. 36)

Accordingly, Hegel proposed that the initial form of alienation is unfavourable for the individual, whereas the second form is advantageous. To evade imposed alienation, individuals should willingly commit to unity with the social system, leading to the fulfilment of oneself and humanity. This process actualizes the 'universal essence of man.'

2.2. Marx's Perspective:

Marx drew significant inspiration from Hegel's concept of the 'universal essence of man' in shaping his thoughts on human nature. However, a substantial portion of his belief in the universal aspect of human beings was specifically attributed to productive activity or labour. According to Marx, labour signifies the 'existential activity of man, his free conscious activity—not merely as a means for sustaining life but for unfolding his universal nature' (Kanungo, 1982, p. 13). In Marx's perspective, the essential characteristics of man encompass individuality, sociality, and sensuousness (Schacht, 1970, p. 74). For him, alienation is:

That man does not experience himself as the acting agent in his grasp of the world, but that the world (nature, others, and himself) remain alien to him. They stand above and against him as objects, even though they may be objects of his own creation. Alienation is essentially experiencing the world and oneself passively, receptively, as the subject separated from the object (Fromm, 1966, p. 44).

Marx observed that the concept of alienation is most prominently evident in the realm of work and the division of labour. However, he also discussed other forms of alienation, including religious alienation, political alienation, and alienation from one's fellow human beings (Coser and Rosenberg 1976, p. 395). In elucidating the alienation of labour, Marx stated:

First, that the work is external to the worker; that it is not a part of his nature, that consequently he does not fulfill himself in his work but denies himself, has a feeling of misery, not of well-being, does not develop freely a physical and mental energy, but is physically exhausted and mentally debased.... His work is not voluntary but imposed, forced labor.... Finally, the alienated character of work for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his work but work for someone else, that in work he does not belong to himself but to another person (Marx, 1976, p. 398)

A critical examination of the Marxian perspective on alienation raises certain questions. According to Kanungo (1982, p. 15), the Marxian concept of alienation implies a lack of control, autonomy, and ownership over one's job, as well as the submission of labor to the direction of another person. However, empirical evidence does not consistently support this assumption. For instance, working under the supervision of a senior group member in a research organization may not necessarily lead to alienation; the individual could experience complete self-fulfilment. Schacht, as cited by Kanungo (1982, p. 15), highlighted that such conceptualization suffers from issues of both over and under inclusiveness.

Furthermore, Marx has been criticized for overemphasizing productive activity and the alienation of labour to the extent that the role of other human needs, such as the physical and the social ones, has been completely disregarded" (Kanungo, 1982, p. 16). Despite these critiques, Marxian notions continue to play a fundamental role in contemporary theorizing on the subject of alienation.

2.3. Weberian perspective:

Following Marx, both Weber and Durkheim contributed significantly to the concept of alienation. Weber approached alienation similarly to Marx, considering it a universal trend. According to Gerth and Mills (1946, p. 50), while Marx focused on the wage worker being separated from the means of production, Weber expanded this idea to encompass various aspects of modern life. In Weber's perspective, individuals like soldiers, scientists, and civil servants are all 'separated' from the means relevant to their respective roles.

Weber and Durkheim believed that an individual's identity and personal value are shaped by their labour; and unfavourable working conditions lead to alienation. Unlike Marx, Weber argued that Protestantism facilitated capitalism by intensifying the work commitment of entrepreneurs. According to Kanungo (1982, p. 20), Weber

contended that the Protestant work ethic was crucial for realizing human potential to the fullest extent. Contrary to Marx's view, Weber saw capitalism as reducing alienation rather than exacerbating it.

According to Gerth and Mills, Weber emphasized the positive role of capitalism in reducing alienation, asserting that an engaged worker, bred in free associations emphasizing personal responsibility and autonomous decision-making, is a well-rounded individual (1946, p. 18). He advocated for the freedom to make decisions, assuming personal responsibility, and evaluating an individual's worth based on work achievements. Overall, Weber viewed alienation as a product of the work environment. If this environment fails to satisfy the needs of entrepreneurs for autonomy, responsibility, and achievement, it will generate a state of alienation in them (Kanungo, 1982, p. 20).

2.4. Durkheim's Anomie:

Durkheim interpreted alienation as a result of anomie, defined as 'the perceived lack of socially approved means and norms to guide one's behaviour for the purpose of achieving culturally prescribed goals' (Durkheim, 1976, p. 415). This perspective offered a novel explanation for alienation, diverging from earlier theories. Durkheim asserted that individual happiness is unattainable if human needs surpass available means. Despite most human needs being social and not solely biogenic, they continually expand in competitive societies. As Durkheim (1976, p. 416) expressed, "the more one has, the more one wants, since satisfactions received only stimulate instead of filling needs." To lead a content life, human passions must be constrained, and since individuals lack the means to limit them personally, external moral forces are necessary. Durkheim argued, 'the force can only be moral.' However, controlling passions is feasible only within just limits (1976, p. 416). Beyond these limits, it becomes challenging to manage human desires through coercive force or societal norms alone. Consequently, in the breakdown of these social norms (a state of anomie or normlessness), individuals struggle to adapt to the evolving social order, resulting in alienation. Expanding on this idea, Durkheim elaborates:

Man's characteristic privilege is that the bond he accepts is not physical but moral; that is, social.... But when the society is disturbed by some painful crises or by beneficent but abrupt transition, it is momentarily incapable of exercising this influence.... In the case of economic disaster, indeed, something like a declassification occurs which suddenly casts certain individuals into a lower state than their previous one.... It is the same if the source of the crisis is in abrupt growth of power and wealth. Then, truly, as the conditions of life are changed, the standard according to which needs were regulated can no longer remain the same; for it varies with social resources, since it largely determines the share of each class of producers.... The limits are unknown

between the possible and the impossible, what is just and what is unjust, legitimate claims and hopes and those which are immoderate. Consequently, there is no constraint upon aspirations.... Ultimately, this liberation of desires has been made worse by the very development of industry and the almost infinite extension of the market. (1976, pp. 419-422)

Accordingly, this progression leads to a state where social norms may exist, but individuals feel incapable of attaining culturally defined goals. Durkheim conceptualized this state as anomie, which inevitably results in alienation. Anomie is frequently regarded as a phenomenon arising in post-industrial societies. As noted by Blauner, the industrialization and urbanization of modern society have disrupted the normative structure of more traditional societies, displacing individuals from local groups and institutions that once provided stability and security (1964, p. 24). When people perceive themselves as unstable and insecure, they tend to experience social isolation. In psychological terms, this type of isolation is often linked to the frustration of social and security needs, such as the need for group belonging for social approval and comparison (Sarfraz, 1997, p. 50)

Durkheim's concept of anomie underwent further refinement by Merton, who described it as a “breakdown in the social structure, occurring particularly when there is an acute disjunction between the cultural goals and the socially structured capacities of members of the group to act in accord with them” (1957, p. 162). Merton identified five modes of individual adaptation to this dilemma: conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion. The ultimate result of innovation, ritualism, retreatism, and rebellion is more likely to be alienation. Innovation and rebellion lead to the establishment of a new normative system and, consequently, to social isolation. Similarly, ritualism and retreatism result in self-estrangement.

In contemporary sociological thought on the subject of alienation, numerous social scientists have made valuable contributions to various aspects of the concept, both theoretically and empirically. For instance, Miller (1967) conceptualized alienation in terms of 'the lack of intrinsic pride or meaning in work.' Likewise, Blauner suggested that “alienation exists when workers are unable to control their immediate work processes, to develop a sense of purpose and function connecting their jobs to the overall organization of production, to belong to integrated industrial communities, and when they fail to become involved in the work as a mode of personal self-expression.” (1964, p. 15)

Given that alienation is a complex phenomenon with multiple dimensions as we have seen previously when we attempted to explore the concept throughout history, there has been a constant desire to express and unravel its diverse meanings that are ever changing with the change of society over time. Alienation is generally linked to social

groups, and among the main groups who have been described as alienated in varying degrees are women, industrial workers, migrant workers, the aged, the young generation as a whole, consumers, the audience of mass media, political radicals, and ultimately writers who are perhaps trying to explore, expose, and examine such concept both consciously and unconsciously in their works (Josephson, 1968, p. 12).

3- Alienation of Mr. Button:

Countless literary characters feel painfully alienated from the social institutions that surround them. Some, like Jake Barnes in Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), feel alienated from their own communities. Others, like Caddy Compson in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), feel alienated from their closer connections, including family members and loved ones. Still others, like Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), feel alienated by the religious institutions in which they have been raised; sometimes this type of alienation extends so far that the protagonist or even the other characters feel alienated from God himself. Perhaps the most extreme form of alienation lies in characters such as Meursault in Albert Camus's *The Stranger* (1942), and Benjamin in Fitzgerald's *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (1922) who feel alienated from everything with which they come into contact: his family, his society, and all aspects of life.

In a crafty manner, Fitzgerald was able to compress and fit an amazing and intriguing story that took a life time span in only thirty-three pages. The whole story involves around "Benjamin" who was born into the "Buttons" family not as a baby but as an old man in his seventies. His unprecedented case trembled the family to the core. Unlike the predictions or perhaps even the hopes of everyone around him, Benjamin stayed alive to realise later on that he was actually aging in reverse. Even though he lived a full life, Benjamin's unique anachronic disease, forced him to live his entire life as an outsider. His looks never reflected his true age which made it very difficult for him to assimilate to his family and society. In his seventies, he died not as an old man with a life time of memories but as a few months old baby with infantile blank empty mind. The first thing that strikes you as a reader in this short story is its opening lines:

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. So young Mr. and Mrs. Roger Button were fifty years ahead of style when they decided, one day in the summer of 1860, that their first baby should be born in a hospital. Whether this anachronism had any bearing upon the astonishing history I am about to set down will

never be known. I shall tell you what occurred, and let you judge for yourself. (Fitzgerald, 1922, p. 1)

In those lines, Fitzgerald pinpointed one of the main clashes in modernism, the clash between modernity (giving birth in hospitals) and tradition (home birth). Fitzgerald's request for the reader to judge whether Benjamin's case is related or not to his hospital birth (modernity) could be interpreted as a way to direct our minds to see what is beyond the story, to see through Benjamin experience and try to link it to modernity. Everyone resented Benjamin for being different, as though being different is necessarily wrong and necessarily a choice. Within the story, Benjamin could be seen as a representative figure of many new thinkers, philosophers, and writers who felt alienated because they had a vision that defers from the conventional stream. The protagonist here represents one of Merton's identified five modes of individuals who are attempting to solve the dilemma of alienation; he is the rebellious individual but in this case the choice of un-conform is not an active choice by him but more of an imposed reality because of his anachronic disease.

In general terms, critics have used the concept of "alienation" to allude to highly diverse types of experience in Literature. In its most specific use, it has been applied to those works where the character's estrangement is determined by fate: they are born alienated, and there is no possibility for them to create a sense of order in life; they find themselves in a "Wasteland." This interpretation reflects Sartre's theories about human life. From the very beginning, the central character Benjamin Button is presented as the outsider, being born with the physique and appearance of an old man. Everyone was chocked in the hospital; his father Roger was in complete denial as he could not accept the fact that his new-born is but a "septuagenarian" man (Fitzgerald, 1922, p. 7).

Roger's insistent self-delusion was clearly shown when he went to buy a suite for his seventy years old child in the boy's department (Fitzgerald, 1922, p. 8). Instead of accepting reality and buying him a proper suite from the youth department, he, Roger, bought a rather ridiculous fancy dress-suit, as the narrator says, consisting of "dotted socks, pink pants, and a belted blouse with a wide white collar." Of course, Benjamin did not like it at all, yet he was forced to wear it. We see Mr. Button's denial again and again in the first few segments of the story as he insists that Benjamin play with a rattle, dye his hair brown to not seem old, break things around the house, and play with children his own age. "A desperate attempt to keep his son as normal as possible. Even when Benjamin became a child, his son Roscoe wanted him to wear fake eyeglasses and a beard. All these props and charades were imposed on him to hide his strange anachronistic lifecycle so that the family can keep up appearances for the outside world. No one gave a thought of how all this would affect Benjamin. This is exactly what Hagel

referred to as *entfremdung* (a state of separation) which is a forced social conformity that would lead eventually to self-estrangement.

Fitzgerald did not give us an insight of Benjamin's inner thoughts. Yet, the latter actions are as much expressive as his thoughts. Even though he lived a full life, Benjamin was alienated and distant his entire life. Arnold Kaufman, similar to Hagel, Marx, and the other thinkers mentioned previously, wrote: *To claim that a person is alienated is to claim that his relation to something else has certain features which result in avoidable discontent or loss of satisfaction.*" (Kaufman, 1965, p. 143)

According to Kaufman's statement, Benjamin was alienated as his relations with the family members like his father and his son were characterized with discontent or loss of satisfaction. Kenneth Keniston also joined the fold and redefined alienation on the fact that: *Most usages of 'alienation' share the assumption that some relationship or connection that once existed that is 'natural', desirable, or good has been lost.*" (Keniston, 1965, p. 390)

Benjamin's relationship with his wife Hildegard is well suited to demonstrate Keniston's definition. At first, their relationship was strong that it prevailed against all odds but with time, the age gap grew bigger and bigger until this relationship faded away. It became undesirable and unnatural as Benjamin grew younger whereas his wife grew older.

Lewis Feuer words feel like it was produced specifically to address Benjamin's alienation as he stated that: *'Alienation is used to convey the emotional tone which accompanies any behaviour in which the person is compelled to act self-destructively'*" (Feuer, 1962, p. 132)

By joining the army, Benjamin showed how little he thought of his family and his business. During the Spanish-American war of 1898, Benjamin was promoted several times as he showed a great performance as a captain. The idea of voluntarily joining the army and leaving everything that has value behind is an act of self-destruction. He risked losing everything, he even felt down when he had to resign and get back home. Subconsciously, he sought his own self-destruction by being face to face with death in the war.

Psychologically speaking, Benjamin was alienated as he had no control upon his syndrome nor upon the others reaction to it. Karen Horney, said in that matter: *"Alienation is the remoteness of the neurotic from his own feelings, wishes, beliefs, and energies. It is the loss of the feeling of being an active, determining force in his own life"* (Josephson, 1968, p. 16). Benjamin hoped that his syndrome would stop as soon as he reaches a bodily age equivalent to his age in years. His hopes and wishes to control his

un-growing went in vain. This in fact was the main reason that destroyed all Benjamin's relationships with the outside world.

Upon his realization of his inevitable fate, a new idea or concept comes to mind; the absurdity of his life. Existentialism regards the material or outside world as “absurd.” It illustrates that alienation is rooted in the nature of man as an “enigmatic cast away” on this world. Philosophers like Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus tend to view the human being as an isolated existent who is “cast” into an alien universe, conceive universe as having no meaning, inherent truth or value, and to represent human life as an existence which is absurd as well as “anguished.” Finkelstein further stated: “Each individual comes from a nothingness and moves through his life towards the inevitable nothingness that awaits him at the end; the death” (Finkelstein, 1967)

Benjamin's life could be described as an absurd and alienated life. He lived his life backwards, he could not find his place in this world, he was born as an old man with no memory and died as a baby with no memories too even though he lived a full life. At the end, his life seemed meaningless and pointless as his death did not change or matter much to anyone. Benjamin's story is a portrait of how a man with a strange anachronistic lifecycle exhibited people's quick assumptions and judgement based solely on semblance. Like any literary work and especially modernistic works, this short story is dark and sombre. The story can also be considered as an allegory of how society, conventions, and tradition could force us to sacrifice our own individuality alienating and estranging ourselves in the process for the sake of ‘playing’ a certain role that was already determined for us by the society. Just like the case of Benjamin, alienation can be costly to the modern thinkers in particular and to the modern individual in general especially in this era of time where one can find himself alienated on several levels like economically, socially, culturally, theologically, and intellectually to name a few.

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