

Bartosz Warzycki  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2712-5079>
University of Applied Sciences in Nowy Targ
e-mail: bartosz.eng@o2.pl

F. Scott Fitzgerald's unwanted child: A functionalist perspective on the Polish translation of *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*

Niechciane dziecko F. Scotta Fitzgeralda: o polskim przekładzie *Ciekawego przypadku Benjamina Buttona* w ujęciu funkcjonalnym

Abstract

This article attempts to analyse the Polish translation of a short story, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, by F. Scott Fitzgerald, based on the principles of functional translation theories. The skopos theory (H. Vermeer) implies that a translation should be adapted to the purpose it is intended to fulfil in the target culture. Therefore, it cannot be merely a faithful reflection of the original. The translation of *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* was published in Poland in 1981, in the collection *Piękność Południa i inne opowiadania*. In the 1980s, the publication was culturally significant, as it expanded access to American literature and allowed Polish readers to interact with Fitzgerald's lesser-known works. In the afterword to the collection, Michał Ronikier emphasised the autobiographical nature of Fitzgerald's works, which is why this aspect is highlighted in the article. Ronikier's afterword serves as a point of reference for determining possible publishing goals and identifying the inspirations and consequences of the chosen translation solutions.

Keywords: F. Scott Fitzgerald, Benjamin Button, functional approaches to translation, Ariadna Demkowska-Bohdiewicz

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykuł stanowi próbę analizy polskiego tłumaczenia opowiadania F. Scotta Fitzgeralda *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, dokonaną zgodnie z założeniami funkcjonalnych teorii przekładu. Teoria skoposu (H. Vermeer) zakłada, że tłumaczenie powinno zostać dostosowane do celu, jaki ma spełniać w kulturze

docelowej. Nie może zatem być jedynie wiernym odbiciem oryginału. Tłumaczenie *Ciekawego przypadku Benjamina Buttona* ukazało się w Polsce w 1981 roku, w zbiorze *Piękność Południa i inne opowiadania*. W kontekście realiów PRL-u publikacja miała znaczenie kulturowe – poszerzała dostęp do literatury amerykańskiej i pozwalała polskiemu czytelnikowi obcować z mniej znanimi utworami Fitzgeralda. W posłowie do zbioru opowiadań Michał Ronikier podkreślił między innymi autobiograficzny charakter twórczości Fitzgeralda, dlatego w artykule ten aspekt został zaakcentowany. Posłowie Ronikiera stanowi punkt odniesienia dla określania możliwych celów wydawniczych oraz podczas próby ustalenia możliwych inspiracji i skutków wybranych rozwiązań translatorskich.

Slowa kluczowe: F. Scott Fitzgerald, Benjamin Button, funkcjonalizm w przekładzie, Ariadna Demkowska-Bohdziewicz

Introduction

Francis Scott Fitzgerald is most widely known for his novel *The Great Gatsby* (1925). This recognition is not limited to Polish readers, for whom the novel perhaps represents the author's most recognizable literary contribution. The organizers of the 16th International F. Scott Fitzgerald Society Conference pointed out that research on the writer's work has so far largely focused on *Gatsby*. They encouraged participants to direct their presentations toward his other writings¹. After all, Fitzgerald left behind five novels and more than 160 short stories. This article examines one of Fitzgerald's short stories, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* (1922) and its sole Polish translation to date by Ariadna Demkowska-Bohdziewicz (1918–2000), through the lens of functional translation theories. The functional approach was chosen here because of its application in culturally rooted translations, where the communicative function often prevails over lexical accuracy.

A functional perspective on literary translation

Functionalism in translation studies is an approach that originated in Germany in the 1980s. It is commonly known as skopos theory (from the Greek *skopos*, meaning *purpose* or *intention*) and is primarily associated with Hans Vermeer and Katharina Reiss. The core of this theory is the pragmatism of translation, according to which translation is an activity focused on achieving a specific communicative goal (Hatim, 2009: 39–40). Vermeer (2000: 221) claims that “any form of translational action, including therefore translation itself, may be conceived as an action, as the name implies. Any action has an aim, a purpose. [...] The word *skopos*, then, is a technical term for the aim or purpose of a translation”. Maria Piotrowska (2021: 69) notes that the functional shift in translation studies during the 1980s redirected attention away from individual words and sentences toward the broad-

¹ A passage of the 16th International F. Scott Fitzgerald Society pre-conference information states: „We are always happy to consider proposals on *The Great Gatsby*, but we are especially interested in discussions of lesser-known works, including those published in the centennial years of 1923–24, such as overlooked short stories (“Hot & Cold Blood,” “Dice, Brass Knuckles, and Guitar,” and the Gatsby cluster of stories), his play *The Vegetable*, or nonfiction pieces such as “How to Live on Practically Nothing a Year” and “The Cruise of the Rolling Junk.” Proposals on Zelda Fitzgerald’s writings are also welcome” (*Call for Papers*, n.d.).

er contextual meaning and the function of the entire text. In her opinion, despite differences between individual approaches, functionalism in translation generally means a departure from rigid word-for-word translation in favour of a flexible approach (Piotrowska, 2021: 69). The way in which a translator approaches a text depends largely on assumptions about its purpose, its role in the target culture, and the characteristics of the audience, including their knowledge, age, and expectations of the text (Mazur, 2014: 18).

When it comes to literary translation, we may consider it a form of creative interpretation (Jones, 2009: 152–154). Maria Krzysztofiak (1999: 30) believes that literary translation should be viewed through the prism of the context in which the original was created. Literary translation is not merely a product of the target language and culture; it also remains closely linked to the source text and its role within the original cultural context. Krzysztofiak (1999: 35) identifies important aspects of literary translation and refers to them as “structural elements” of the translation process. These include aesthetic norms, the poetics of the original work, its reception, as well as the aesthetics and poetics of the genre in the language and culture of translation. From the perspective of functional translation, it can therefore be assumed that this means capturing the original purpose of the work so as to convey its function in the target text effectively. In Vermeer's view (2000: 221–222), translation decisions within the framework of skopos theory should be guided by the purpose of translation, i.e., the function that the translated text is to perform in the target culture. However, a valuable extension of this assumption is the perspective of Christiane Nord (2002: 35), who emphasises additional aspects influencing the translation process. Nord assumes that in a goal-oriented translation process, the intention of the original author and the expectations of the recipient of the translation cannot be completely ignored. In order to maintain harmony between the function of the text and the pragmatic goal of translation and the ethical responsibility of the translator, Nord uses the concept of *loyalty*, which is understood as a commitment to all participants in the translation process (Nord, 2002: 35–36). According to this view, the translator becomes a mediator between different cultural norms and expectations. Translation therefore fulfils its communicative role when the author's intentions and the recipients' needs are equally important.

In this context, the communicative purpose of translation is linked to the need for the use of linguistic means appropriate to the type of text. Complementing Vermeer's theory, Katharina Reiss distinguished three main types of texts. The first group consists of *informative texts*, which are focused on conveying information. The second group includes expressive texts, which have an artistic element or express emotions. The third group is composed of *operative texts*, which are aimed at convincing the recipient of something (Reiss, Vermeer, 2014: 182). Reiss (2014: 18–19) assumes that in practical texts, language is primarily a tool for communication and conveying information. In literature and poetry, however, it is a means of artistic expression, conveying aesthetic values. Fitzgerald's story, discussed in this work, as a literary text, should therefore be considered an expressive text². Reiss also notes that in texts where the primary goal is to convey

² The typology of texts created by Reiss is clear, but it is worth noting that in practice, classifying a text into a given category can be difficult (cf. Mocarz, 2006: 107).

the content while taking into account the form, style and emotions, the translator's task is to preserve this expressiveness. It is important to evoke in the recipient of the translation the same reflections and feelings as those experienced by the recipient of the original text. The transmission of information ceases to be the only dominant feature of translation, but becomes a reflection of the artistic value of the original (Reiss, 2014: 32).

An attempt to define the purpose of the Polish translation of Benjamin Button

This section considers the possible purpose of the Polish translation of *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, first published in 1981. During the 1980s, Poland continued to function within the structures of the Polish People's Republic, and any discussion of world literature translations into Polish from this period should take into account the issue of censorship, which had affected literary works since 1945 (Kamińska-Chełminiak, 2018: 54). In the post-war era, though, literature was also distributed outside official channels through smuggling and samizdat practices (cf. Olaszek, 2015: 291–296). The limited or selective availability of foreign texts disrupted the natural flow of cultural exchange and left Polish literature disconnected from global currents (Gaszyńska-Magiera, 2023: 111). However, there were periods between 1945 and the 1980s when translations enjoyed more acceptance from the authorities. In the 1950s, particularly in 1956, political changes took place in Poland³. An increasing number of translations from English, French, and German were published. Works by Camus, Sartre, Saint-Exupéry, Kafka, Hemingway, Steinbeck and Faulkner appeared (Stępień, 1987: 234). The first Polish translation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's prose was *The Great Gatsby*, published in 1962. Although I possess no direct evidence of censorship in translation of *Benjamin Button*, the political context may nevertheless have influenced its tone and lexical choices. Given the perspective adopted in this paper, issues related to censorship will not be discussed in detail. The potential impact of censorship on translations of Fitzgerald's prose is a subject worth discussing in a separate study⁴.

A discussion of the Polish translation of *Benjamin Button* from a functional perspective would first require asking what function the translator intended it to fulfil. Bożena Tokarz (2017: 19) suggests that afterwords serve as a space where translators articulate their specific understanding of the translation, particularly highlighting its cognitive, didactic, and artistic roles. In this light, the afterword can be read as a reliable indicator of the intended purpose of the whole collection (cf. Dimitriu, 2009). The afterword written by Michał Ronikier to the collection of Polish translations of Fitzgerald's short stories,

³ In 1956, Władysław Gomułka was elected First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party, which led to a temporary political thaw, which also affected Poland's cultural relations with other countries.

⁴ It is worth mentioning that Robert Looby is the author of the most comprehensive study to date, known to me, on the impact of censorship on Polish translations of English-language literature (Looby, 2015). Cf. (Bates, 2013: 225–242).

Piękność Poludnia i inne opowiadania (1981), (Eng. *The Last of the Belles and Other Short Stories*), in which Ariadna Demkowska-Bohdziewicz's translation of Benjamin Button appeared for the first time, will be supportive here. Although the afterword was not written by the translator herself, it addresses the collection as a whole. It reflects the editor's perspective, with Ronikier himself having selected the stories included in the volume. In the eight-page afterword, the author depicts Fitzgerald's work as a multifaceted literary reality. Ronikier begins with the end of the writer's life, his career as a screenwriter in Hollywood, his death, and the number of books sold. He then moves on to a brief description of Fitzgerald's life, beginning with his birth, education, marriage, rich social life, and ending with his financial problems and alcoholism. Ronikier (1981: 374) draws attention to the relationship between Fitzgerald's work and his private life. Not only social conventions, but also personal successes and failures, finances, his wife's illness, relationship with his daughter, travels, fears and desires – these are the aspects of Fitzgerald's life that are reflected in his writing.

From the very first page of the afterword, we learn that Fitzgerald's stories, including *Benjamin Button*, were intended to build Fitzgerald's image as an established writer in American literature. As Ronikier (1981: 369) wrote:

When he died in December 1940, Scott Fitzgerald was convinced that he had failed both as a man and as a writer. Yet today, he is one of the most widely read American authors in the world. In the United States alone, his books sell an average of one million copies a year.⁵

Given its popularity, his work deserved a wider presence in Polish literary circles. The aim was therefore to introduce the writer to Polish readers as a classic of American literature.

Another function of the Polish translation of the stories can be seen as an attempt to provoke existential and psychological reflection in readers of the late Polish People's Republic and to emphasise the autobiographical nature of Fitzgerald's writing. Ronikier notes that:

[...] an understanding of Fitzgerald's life is key to appreciating his short stories. Like no other writer, he drew inspiration for his works from his own experiences – his entire oeuvre is autobiographical in nature. Each of the characters in the novel: Amory Blain, Gatsby, Dick Diver – has certain traits of the author. Thus, in his stories we find a longing for success, a melancholic sense of its superficiality, and finally a bitter awareness of defeat (Ronikier, 1981: 374).

Ronikier's emphasis on the autobiographical nature of the writer's work may have encouraged readers to identify more deeply with the characters in Fitzgerald's prose. Their inner confusion, melancholy, and existential uncertainty may have resonated with the feelings of individuals living in the reality of communist Poland.

⁵ Quotes translated from Ronikier's afterword are by the author of the article.

The third possible goal of the translation was cultural mediation, understood as introducing Polish readers to previously inaccessible English-language literature. The author of the afterword states:

The stories included in this collection certainly differ in terms of their artistic level and rank. However, the aim was to present as complete an overview as possible of the author's short stories, known until now only from two slim volumes: "Babylon Revisited" and "One Trip Abroad" (Ronikier, 1981: 375).

The Polish translations of the stories collected in two volumes were part of a mission to broaden the literary horizons of the target audience. The aim was to bridge the gap that had resulted from previous restrictions on access to English-language literature.

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button

Fitzgerald believed that his work had two dimensions. The first was commercial short stories, and the second was serious novels. The writer often wrote short stories to quickly earn money for his current needs (Bruccoli, 2002: 102, 189). Fitzgerald was not a thrifty person, and his extravagant lifestyle required a regular income, which was the driving force behind the creation of new short stories (Higgins, 1971: 14). Anne Margaret Daniel (2017: 14) adds that:

Short stories were, from the first, Fitzgerald's bread and butter. [...] To give the magazines what they wanted: that was Fitzgerald's brief as a young writer, and he continued in this very lucrative mode through the 1920s. He sold his work for money and was acutely aware of that fact and of how much he could make, quickly, with short stories, as opposed to waiting until he had enough of a novel complete to consider serialization.

Fitzgerald's short stories were published in magazines such as *Collier's*, *Liberty Magazine*, *The Smart Set*, and *Scribner's Magazine*. However, they most often appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post*, which from 1929 offered the writer as much as \$4,000 per text (Bruccoli, 2002: 22, 185). In the first half of 1922, Fitzgerald wrote one short story – *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. However, *The Saturday Evening Post* was not interested in publishing it, considering the text "too unusual" (Mizener, 1951: 94). Ultimately, on 27 May 1922, the story was published by *Collier's* magazine, which offered Fitzgerald \$1,000 (Bruccoli, 2002: 165). In the same year, *Benjamin Button* was also published in the collection *Tales of the Jazz Age*. A distinctive feature of this volume is that in the table of contents, under each title, Fitzgerald included short introductions to the stories, in which he presented interesting facts about their creation or outlined the plot. In announcing *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, the writer revealed that the story was inspired by Mark Twain's idea that it was a pity that the best part of life came at the beginning and the worst at the end (Fitzgerald, 1922: ix).

The story of Benjamin Button begins at the moment of his unusual birth – he was born in 1860, appearing as an old man with a long gray beard, barely fitting in a hospital crib. His bewildered father, Roger Button, tries to raise his offspring according to the conven-

tions of the time. When Benjamin is old enough to start school, he looks like an old man, which prevents him from studying at Yale College. Over the years, he begins to look younger, achieves professional and military success, but his relationships with his wife and those around him become complicated. As he grows younger, he gradually loses his mental and physical abilities until he regresses to infancy and dies as a newborn (cf. Tate, 2007: 55)⁶.

As noted earlier, Fitzgerald's personal life often provided an important backdrop for his works, and *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* was no exception in this regard. Completed in February 1922, the story was written at an important moment in the author's life, when he and his wife Zelda Fitzgerald (1900–1948) were undergoing significant changes. Less than four months before writing the story of Benjamin, on 26 October 1921, their only daughter, Frances Scott Fitzgerald (Scottie) (1921–1986), was born. Alice Hall Petry (1989: 202) states that the birth of the child may have caused the writer anxiety and uncertainty, which inspired him to write the story of Benjamin's unusual birth. In the spring of 1922, the young Fitzgeralds were going through another difficult period. Zelda became pregnant again, but she was not ready for a second child (Brucoli, 2002: 159) and in March 1922 she decided to have an abortion (Milford, 1971: 101). Sara Mayfield, Zelda's childhood friend, recalled that Fitzgerald's wife had a total of three abortions during their marriage, although there are no documents available confirming the exact dates of these procedures (Brucoli, 2002: 159). Fitzgerald also did not want another child at the time, which may have influenced the personal shape of the plot of *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. The caricatured image of a seventy-year-old newborn baby in the story serves as a symbol of both guilt and an attempt to cope with difficult emotions (Petry, 1989: 202–203).

Translation analysis

Although the selected excerpts represent only a small part of the source text and its Polish translation, they were chosen because they seem representative of a functionalist analysis. They focus on the description of Benjamin's appearance, the psychological negation of his father, and other significant translation decisions that shape the tone and communicative purpose of the target text.

I

The analysis of Benjamin Button's translation shall begin with the scene in which Roger Button sees his child for the first time. Roger is terrified by his son's appearance and does not accept him. Fitzgerald juxtaposes the characteristics of a newborn, symbolising purity, freshness and the beginning of life (Kopaliński, 1991: 77), with the physicality of an old man, who in turn represents fatigue, the twilight of life, experience and wisdom (Drabarek,

⁶ It is worthwhile to recall the 2008 film adaptation of the story directed by David Fincher. Although both works share the basic concept of the main character's reverse ageing, the film transforms the original story, introducing many changes that give the story a new dimension (cf. Gajak-Toczek, 2020: 215–234).

Falkowski, Rowińska, 1998: 165). The paradox outlined by the author introduces a sense of confusion, nonsense and even anxiety (Petry, 1989: 203).

His sparse hair was **almost white**, and from his chin dripped a long smoke-colored beard, which waved 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 (F: 195).⁷

Włosy miał przerzedzone i **siwe**, na pierś spadała długa broda koloru dymu; powiew wiatru z okna idiotycznie kołysał brodę jak wachlarzem. Staruszek spojrzał na pana Buttona zamglonym, spłowiałym wzrokiem, w którym czało się **zdumione** pytanie (DB: 240).

The passage reveals the inner experiences and social tensions associated with Benjamin's unusual appearance. Fitzgerald uses grotesque contrast to evoke feelings of unease and absurdity. In the original, the child's hair is almost white, which emphasises the character's premature old age, which, combined with the absurd situation, fuels the grotesque dissonance. From the perspective of Hans J. Vermeer's skopos theory, the priority of translation is to achieve a specific communicative goal in the target culture (Hatim, 2009: 39–40). In the 1980s, the Polish translation of *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* was intended to strengthen Fitzgerald's position as a classic and make his prose accessible to readers in the late Polish People's Republic.

In Ariadna Demkowska-Bohdziewicz's translation, *siwe* (Eng. *gray*) hair is quite natural for elderly people, and the translator's solution may not fully reflect the unnatural paleness present in the original. In the passage in question, Benjamin looks at his father, and in his eyes lurks *a puzzled question*. This unspoken, mysterious question, or rather the desire to ask it, leaves the reader room for interpretation. We cannot be entirely sure whether Benjamin is surprised by his father's reaction, frightened by the new place, or perhaps contemplating his physicality. Through this ambiguous description, Fitzgerald introduces a certain degree of surrealism and mystery into the text and reinforces the atmosphere of unease and strangeness. The translation of the word *puzzled* as *zdumione* (Eng. *astonished*) is more unambiguous (*Słownik języka polskiego PWN*, n.d.), which reduces the intensity of the vague reflection present in the original and may affect the emotional reception of the scene. From a functional perspective, the purpose of translation depends on the cultural conditions of the recipient. Even in the case of translations of contemporary authors, the cultural distance between the readers of the original and the recipients of the translation leads to a change in the function of the text. It is also important whether we deal with the original from the perspective of a different culture or with its translation, which always contains an element of interpretation introduced by the translator (Reiss, Vermeer, 2014: 53). This function may account for why the translator softens the grotesque in several places, replacing exotic details with more domestic elements. We can interpret this solution as an attempt to make the text

⁷ Fragments marked (F) are taken from (Fitzgerald, 1922). Fragments marked (DB) are taken from (Fitzgerald, 1981).

more accessible to Polish readers in the 1980s. Thus, the individual decisions discussed here are part of the broader goal of the translation, which is to affirm Fitzgerald's position as a classic of American literature. The simplification of the emotional layer may have served not so much to literally convey the mood of the story as to anchor it functionally in the culture of the target reader.

II

Benjamin's father is unable to accept that his son does not fit into the traditional framework of what a firstborn child should be. Roger Button's reaction to this unwanted and traumatic experience is very primitive and consists of denial (Petry, 1989: 78). In other words, Roger activates repression, a basic psychological defence mechanism associated with rejecting a problem and not allowing it to enter consciousness (Grzególska-Klarkowska, 1986: 56–57). The first symptom of repression visible in the father is the need to dress the newborn old man in boys' clothes.

The notion of dressing his son in men's clothes was repugnant to him. If, say, he could only find a very large boy's suit, he might cut off that long and awful beard, dye the white hair brown, and thus manage to conceal the worst, and to **retain** something of his own self-respect – not to mention his position in Baltimore society (F: 198).

Pomysł ubrania syna w męski garnitur wydał się wręcz odrażający. Ale gdyby, powiedzmy, znalazł bardzo duże chłopięce ubranko, mógłby obciąć tę wstrętną brodę, pofarbować siwe włosy na brązowo, ukryć tym sposobem najgorsze i **podratować** własne poczucie godności – nie mówiąc już o swej towarzyskiej pozycji w Baltimore (DB: 242).

Roger attempts to disguise his son's appearance, which highlights the desire to protect his reputation in Baltimore. Fitzgerald points to the duality of Roger's motivations, both on a personal level and in the context of social status. In the original, the verb *retain* is used, indicating Roger's actions aimed at keeping his social position intact, protecting what he already has. In the Polish translation, the verb *podratować* (Eng. *to repair*, Stanisławski, 1997b: 176) appears, meaning to bring to a better state. The verb *podratować* (Szymczak, 1982a: 745) in the translation implies that Roger's social position is no longer stable and that he is intervening to remedy the situation. The word carries the connotation of a temporary improvement or partial restoration of the previous state. Note that at this stage of the story, Roger has not shared any information about his son's appearance with anyone. The Polish translation gives the father's behaviour a more desperate tone and may suggest that news of the unusual birth has already spread throughout the city. The subtle difference between *retain* (meaning *to preserve*) and *podratować* (meaning *to repair*) may affect how readers perceive Roger's desperation. In the original, his actions seem more deliberate and precise, while in the translation they may appear more chaotic and corrective. The translator's lexical choices depart from the neutrality present in the original, but in line with the aim of translating the entire collection, they may serve to reinforce the image of Fitzgerald as a writer with strong psychological and emotional potential.

III

The father's denial of the problematic situation does not end with his attempt to mask Benjamin's appearance. It is worth remembering that the mechanism of repression, widely described in psychological literature, operates on an unconscious level, protecting the individual from painful content. Repression refers to unconscious mental processes that protect a person from anxiety-provoking thoughts, impulses, or memories. The mechanism prevents these from reaching awareness, while still remaining active unconsciously. The repressed material expresses itself indirectly through symbolic forms in dreams, slips, and neurotic symptoms (Reber, Reber, 2002: 851–852).

Roger Button's behaviour and thoughts continue to reveal a denial of reality, which manifests itself in his extreme desires. When the time comes to take Benjamin home from the hospital, the father imagines an embarrassing walk through the city, picturing in his mind the questions passers-by will ask about the old man accompanying him. In an instant, Roger wishes that his son, instead of looking like an old man, were black.

And then **the old man** would gather his blanket around him and they would plod on, past the bustling stores, the slave market – for a dark instant Mr. Button wished passionately that his son was **black** – past the luxurious houses of the residential district, past the home for the aged... (F: 197).

Potem **starowina** owinię się ciaśniej kołderką i poczłapią dalej, miną sklepy pełne ludzi, miną targ na niewolników – przez jedną ponurą chwilę pan Button z całego serca żałował, że jego syn nie jest **Murzynem** – miną wytworne rezydencje dzielnicy willowej, dom dla starców... (DB: 241).

Fitzgerald shows Roger's inner world as he tries to cope with his son's problematic appearance by fantasising about situations that are less socially compromising. Alice Hall Petry notes that in the second half of the 19th century (Benjamin was born in 1860), children of mixed descent were accepted in some parts of the United States. Although the USA at that time was marked by racial segregation and strong prejudices, children of mixed skin colour fell within socially acceptable norms, even in high-status families. However, a fully white newborn baby who did not meet social expectations could not count on acceptance in upper-class circles (Petry, 1989: 87). The reaction of Roger Button to Benjamin's birth may reflect Fitzgerald's similar emotions towards Zelda's second, unwanted pregnancy (see: Milford, 1971: 101). The unusual nature of the seventy-year-old child may have been a projection of his guilt over the decision to have an abortion. According to Petry (1989: 202), just as Roger Button rejects his son because of his unacceptable appearance, Fitzgerald tried to rationalise the difficult events in his life. In the Polish translation, the use of the word *Murzyn* (Eng. *Negro*, Stanisławski, 1997a: 558), currently considered a pejorative epithet (Paluszak-Bronka, 2022: 488). However, it should be remembered that Benjamin's translation was written in the 1980s, and terms such as *Afro-American* (Pol. *Afroamerykanin, Afroamerykanka*) were not as firmly established in Polish at that time as they are today. The word *Murzyn* was used quite naturally at the end of the 20th century, and it was only over the last two decades that it became obsolete and loaded with negative connotations (Łaziński, 2014: 140; 2020; cf. Paluszak-Bronka, 2022: 480–491).

Therefore, in the Polish translation, we cannot infer any reinforcement of the term *black* used in the original. In the passage in question, however, it is worth noting the translation of the term *the old man*. In this scene, Roger is angry, broken and embittered. He perceives Benjamin as an “appalling apparition” (F: 197) – a terrifying ghost. The term *starowina* (Eng. *geezer*, Stanisławski, 1997b: 341) used by the translator evokes sympathy and compassion (Szymczak, 1982b: 322) and may weaken the perception of the father’s negative emotions. The translator’s choice may weaken the existential dimension of the father’s conflict with reality. Meanwhile, according to the publisher’s assumptions, it was precisely this aspect that was supposed to resonate with Polish readers in the 1980s.

IV

The following passage depicts a scene in which Roger Button and Benjamin leave the hospital room, and the son asks his father what he intends to name him.

His son took the hand trustingly. “Come “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**” (F: 200).

Syn ufnie chwycił jego dłoń. – Jak będziesz mnie nazywał, tatusiu? – **zaskrzeczał**, gdy wychodzili z pokoju dla niemowląt. – Może po prostu „dzidzia”? Zanim nie wymyślisz czegoś lepszego?

Pan Button chrząknął.

– Nie wiem – odparł szorstko. – Sądzę, że damy ci na imię **Matuzalem** (DB: 244).

The above scene refers to the symbolic figure of Methuselah, the oldest man in the Bible. The name *Methuselah* becomes a form of ironic distance, through which Roger attempts to control the absurdity of the situation. Fitzgerald shows how Roger Button tries to cope with the unusualness of the situation by using humour as a defence mechanism. In the Polish translation, this irony is preserved, but the translation of the verb *quavered* is noteworthy. Demkowska-Bohdziewicz renders it as *zaskrzeczał* (Eng. *croaked*, Stanisławski, 1997a: 180). In the original, the word *quavered* suggests the delicacy and uncertainty present in Benjamin’s question (Stanisławski, 1997b: 129). In the Polish version, *zaskrzeczał* sounds contemptuous (Szymczak, 1982b: 246), evoking the image of a character with a harsh, rough voice. The translator’s choice gives the scene a more comical and grotesque character, emphasising Benjamin’s senile traits. As a result, the perception of this character in the translation may shift the emphasis from emotionality and reflection towards caricature.

V

The denial and repression of Benjamin’s unusual condition is a theme that runs throughout the story, affecting other characters as well. Although he was becoming physically younger, both his family and society were still unable to accept his unusual development. The culmination of this repression is the scene in which Benjamin’s son, Roscoe,

experiences frustration and anger when he sees that his father is retaining his youth and vitality for too long.

No one disliked the little boy whose fresh, cheerful face was crossed with just a hint of sadness, but to Roscoe Button his presence was a source of torment. In the idiom of his generation Roscoe did not consider the matter “efficient.” It seemed to him that his father, in refusing to look sixty, had not behaved like a “**red-blooded he-man**” – this was Roscoe’s favorite expression – but in a curious and perverse manner. Indeed, to think about the matter for as much as a half an hour drove him to the edge of insanity. Roscoe believed that “live wires” should keep young, but carrying it out on such a scale was – was – was inefficient. And there Roscoe rested (F: 221–222).

Ten mały chłopczyk o świeżej, pogodnej twarzyczce, jakby owianej cieniem smutku, raczej budził ogólną sympatię – lecz dla Roscoe Buttona obecność jego była źródłem męczarni. Roscoe uważały, mówiąc językiem jego pokolenia, że cała rzecz „nie ma sensu”, że ojciec, który za nic nie chce wyglądać na sześćdziesiąt lat, to nie jest „**rasowy samiec**” (jego ulubione wyrażenie), to typ postępujący dziwnie, przewrotnie, podle. Wystarczyło, żeby myślał o tej sprawie przez pół godziny, a bliski był zaiste, oblędu. Należy dugo zachować „werwę”, owszem, ale żeby aż do tego stopnia?! Coś takiego było po prostu „bez sensu” i przy tym Roscoe pozostał (DB: 260).

Roscoe believes that his father behaves in a perverse and peculiar manner because he refuses to accept his true age. In Demkowska-Bohdziewicz’s translation, *red-blooded he-man* is rendered as *rasowy samiec* (Eng. *a purebred male*). In the original, this phrase refers to the vigour, masculinity and strength typical of the stereotypical real man. Polish translation may, in this respect, influence the way readers perceive the masculinity and vitality presented in the original. The translator’s use of the term *rasowy samiec* reinforces the image of a vital man and adds a slightly primitive tone to the description, suggesting a more instinctive, physical, almost animalistic manifestation of masculinity (Szymczak, 1982b: 20–21, 173). This solution has the potential to intensify the intergenerational conflict and internal tensions between the characters. In line with the overall aim of the volume, this may prompt the reader to analyse interpersonal relationships and social expectations in greater depth.

Conclusion

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button by F. Scott Fitzgerald can be viewed through the prism of autobiographical themes, which played an important role in his work. As Michał Ronikier (1981: 374) noted, the writer’s personal life resonated strongly in his works. Reflections on responsibility, parenthood, ageing and alienation can be read as a projection of Fitzgerald’s inner struggles related to the challenges of fatherhood and family tensions. Both in the original text and in its Polish translation, there is a clear contrast between social expectations towards a newborn child and the grotesque image of an old man, causing confusion and anxiety in the reader. From a functionalist perspective, translation should achieve the communicative goals set for the target text. I assumed that in this case, the goal was to introduce Fitzgerald as a classic of American literature,

to deepen the existential reflection of readers in the late Polish People's Republic, and to present previously inaccessible English-language literature.

The presented analysis focused on Benjamin's appearance, his father's emotional repression, and intergenerational tensions. Demkowska-Bohdziewicz partially softened grotesque images (*almost white* as *siwe*), intensified emotional desperation (*retain* as *podratować*) and used humorous reinterpretation of tone (*zaskrzeczał*, *starowina*, *rasowy samiec*). Although these choices to some extent change the tone from surreal or existential to comical, they also may reflect an attempt to adapt the story to the cultural expectations of Polish readers in the 1980s. The translator's decisions do not undermine the thematic complexity of the original and maintain the communicative function of translation. Research on Fitzgerald's prose and its Polish translations could be further expanded by examining how different translators have approached grotesque or existential elements. Moreover, investigating the reception of these translations among Polish readers represents another area for potential study.

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