

LOVE AND LOSS IN AUDREY NIFFENEGGER'S
THE TIME TRAVELER'S WIFE

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Abstract:

This paper explains the theme of Love and Loss in Audrey Niffenegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife*. This novel is a love story about a man with genetic disorder that causes him to time travel unpredictably. This novel which has been classified as both science fiction and romance, examines issues of love, loss. In particular it uses time travel to explore miscommunication and distance in relationships, while also investigating deeper existential questions. *The Time Traveler's Wife* is also more than a love story between two people. It explores all the relationship of their lives: their parents, families, friends, and ex-lovers. The novel seems to draw a line between the love story and the outer world in terms of value, intensity, and their relevance to each other. This kind of structuring is, in part, typical of romance, the genre which lends *The Time Traveler's Wife* other terms of self-designation. Apart from the issues of love and loss Audrey Niffenegger expounds the predestination and paradoxes in which one comes to a conclusion that fate is mightier and gains an upper hand and nothing can be done to alter the future.

Key words: Predestination, Genetic Disorder, Time Travel, Self-Designation.

The Time Traveler's Wife is a love story, which is populated by realistic characters. Even with

the time travel and its effects on their lives, Henry and Clare are people who intimately know and empathize with, their fears and flaws common to us all. Everyone has a cross to bear, and Henry's is unique. Ms. Niffenegger does an admirable job portraying their life together, and exploring a love built over a lifetime that course deep through both of them. Even through their rough stretches of their life, the lifelong fear of something terrible happening to Henry while time traveling, their anguish at the miscarriages when Clare wants a baby more than anything else, the moments where they had just rather be alone, their love for each other hope is never extinguished.

The Time Travel, while not completely an original idea, does bring a spark of freshness and suspense to the love story. Knowing that stress can trigger an episode, Henry plans carefully and worries often during potentially stressful situations, like his wedding to Clare or meeting her family for the first time. It also adds to the suspense of the story, not knowing when Henry will arrive or leave during any important part of their life together. Although, at times it is obvious where the story is headed in the larger sense, Ms. Niffenegger is astute enough to throw in surprises with Henry's travels with either fills in lost knowledge about their pasts, or sets the stage for some part of their future. Often these small portents of the future that keep the pages turning in the hope that they mean something other than what they seem to suggest.

Loss is a predominant theme in the novel, while reading the novel one could experience the feeling of loss in the heart of the characters. Both Clare and Henry experience loss in their families. Henry experiences it much earlier than Clare, losing his mother at age five, whereas Clare does not lose her mother until adulthood. As a family themselves, Clare and Henry are continuously fighting through the loss of several babies. Henry and Clare are both shaped by the absence of their mothers, by an aching emptiness in the one place every child looks for a comforting presence.

When a person experiences an irrevocable loss, such as the death of a loved one or permanent paralysis the individual goes through a period of intense distress and failure to experience such distress is thought to be indicative of a problem. Absence is a kind of presence in this book, "like damaged nerve, like a dark bird"(576). Clare's life, shaped around the need to wait for Henry, circulates around the various absences of her time-traveling husband, of the six children she miscarries, and of her one time-traveling daughter. She has lived, as Henry says, "a life of suspended animation"(576).

She met Henry as a young girl, knowing they are fated to marry. She experiences her life as an adolescent and young adult as preparation for Henry, making time until they meet in proper chronological order. As he faces his own death, Henry fears more than anything else that Clare will, like his father, crumble before his final, irrevocable absence, will be unable to "live fully, present in the world, which is

so beautiful”(577). His absence, he hopes, will give Clare a presence in the world she has missed, in her waiting. At the same time, his promise in his last letter to her that he will visit her again is a cruel gift, condemning her to wait yet more even as it offers a hope on which she can continue to live.

Clare faces a lot of trials and tribulations in her life and is at loss. At critical points in her life she faces Henry’s imminent disappearance from her life for two years, negotiating the transition to life as a couple, surviving her difficult pregnancies, contemplating life as a new mother, dealing with Henry’s disability, and learning to live without Henry.

Clare struggles with what should be her last pregnancy the sixth child, conceived just before Henry gets his vasectomy. She draws a tiny heart at the center of an elaborate web of veins “that hold the small heart enmeshed like a fly in a spider web”(415). Like the small red bird, the heart is entangled by its surroundings. The bird’s thicket, though, though, is a trap that keeps it from soaring; the veins support the heart, sustain it. Clare wants to keep this baby with her, in this world, to trap the ethereal heartbeat that is the only sign of the baby within her. The act of creating the heart makes that transitory sound concrete, encapsulates the child for which she yearns, and for which she yearns, and for which she repeatedly risk her life. At the same time, the images of the fly in the spider web points to the impossibility of trapping life in this way and to the betrayal perpetrated by her body in repeatedly expelling these tiny lives. The web that should sustain has turned deadly.

Clare and Alba also experience loss but not in a normal way. Since Henry and Alba can time travel, Alba sees her father on occasion when she time travels to the past. Clare does not see Henry as much as Alba does but at the very end of the book when Clare is an old lady, Henry time travels to the future and Clare gets to see Henry one last time.

Henry has, after all, given her entire life shaped and weights. Clare can remember no time without him and so cannot imagine her life without his presence, actual or imminent. She feels herself vanishing, weightless, without him to hold her down, until the portrait is more real, more present, than she is “I place my finger on her forehead and say, “Vanish, but it is she who will stay I am the one who is vanishing”(590). Henry has always been present in her life, even in his absence. With his death, she is absent from own life; she is as insubstantial.

When Henry dies, she sinks into a paralyzing depression punctuated by a stifled resentment that Alba visits Henry while she cannot. Though she is seen first faltering steps out of depression, the novel is mostly silent about what Clare does, how she survives and then learns to live, in the forty-seven years between Henry’s death and his final visit to her.

At the end of the story, Henry is killed in an unfortunate hunting accident while time travelling.

This book analysis time travelling in Henry's life in every way so it would make sense that the story would end with his death because death is a part of life. Time travelling is the most eminent part of life in the novel which at last kills him. Time travelling takes his feet so when Henry time travels into the past where Clare's brother mistakes him for a deer, he cannot run and is helpless to the fact that he will be shot.

Henry is not ready to die. He has already witnessed the action of experienced by his death his father after his mother death. So he dreaded that for Clare. Henry did not want Clare to end up like his father. This is why Henry writes Clare a note saying that this is not the end that they will see each other in the future. Henry says that he has already been to that time and he does not want to tell her what happens because Henry wants Clare to experience for herself. She has waited for Henry all through her entire life, and she continues to wait, trapped in his discontinuity. "But I have no choice. He is coming, and I am here"(592).

The profound connection shared Henry and Clare represents the meaning of their lives. A meaning so deep, that it allows them to transcend the vicissitudes of living in the shadow of a shifting and uncertain chronology. The end of the novel, Henry continues to time travel even after his death, so that even though it is hard to deal with existential isolation while she waits for him, "But I have no choice. He is coming, and I am here"(592).

Clare knows that Henry will return, and for her. This return means everything. Thus the issues of romantic love and loss are predominant themes in *The Time Traveler's Wife*. Apart from the issues of love and loss Audrey Niffenegger expounds the predestination and paradoxes in which one comes to a conclusion that fate is mightier and gains an upper hand and nothing can be done to alter the future.

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