

Fate vs free will in a time traveller's wife



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The Time Traveler's Wife explores the perspectives of a time traveller and a young girl who lives life in the same era and eventually share one; however, their experiences of that life together are very different. Throughout the novel, the characters Henry and Clare start to grasp how Henry's time travelling truly affects their lives. They begin to explore the philosophical idea of fate versus free will. It is evident that Henry represents the idea of fate, and Clare drives to express the idea of free will. The story explores the events of Henry and Clare's battle to fully grasp the meaning of life as the novel goes through Henry and Clare's different versions of reality, as well as with their struggle between life being pre-determined versus the capacity and power of our choice.

In *The Time Traveler's Wife*, Henry and Clare live in the same present day and later share a home and a life together, but rarely experience the same reality due to Henry's ability to time travel. Readers see them go through the same life very differently; Clare experiences life through present tense, while Henry continuously finds himself displaced in time from the past and future. When Henry meets Clare, he is 28 and she is 20 and finds herself "speechless. Here is Henry, calm, clothed, younger than [she has] ever seen him..." (Niffenegger 8). This is the moment where Clare meets present Henry, as opposed to the future Henry that used to visit her. Clare's version of reality at that moment consists of "being in love with a man who is standing before [her] with no memories of [her] at all. Everything is in the future for him" (Niffenegger 8). This quote demonstrates the opposing realities, as it is evident through the perspective of Henry's reality that he has no remembrance of whom this girl is that stands in front of him. In his

reality she is “ a massive winning lottery ticket chunk of [his] future [that] has somehow found [him] here in the present” (Niffenegger 10). Although this is their first interaction in the present time, Clare has accepted the idea of living with different perspectives of reality. She understands that he does not know her “ because for [him] none of it has happened yet, but for [her], well, [she has] known [him] for a long time” (Niffenegger 11). Natasha Walter examines further how experiencing different realities impacts Henry and Clare’s relationship as well. She analyzes the following quote:

Henry’s been gone for almost twenty-four hours now, and as usual I’m torn between thinking obsessively about when and where he might be and being pissed at him for not being here... then I hear Henry whistling as he comes up the path through the garden, into the studio... He’s looking marvelous, really happy. My heart is racing and I take a wild guess: ‘ May 24, 1989?’ ‘ Yes, oh, yes!’ Henry scoops me up...and swings me around. Now I’m laughing, we’re both laughing (Niffenegger 412).

Walter interprets this quote as how Henry’s version of reality impacts Clare, and “ the way Niffenegger uses time travel as a way of expressing the sense of slippage that you get in any relationship—that you could be living through a slightly different love story from the one your partner is experiencing” (2004). This example demonstrates how reality is influenced by emotion. Clare’s reality in that moment, without Henry, is filled with worry and anger; while Henry is experiencing a special moment with younger Clare in his reality. To conclude, Henry’s perspective of reality is one of the main focusses because it jumps through time uncontrollably. His experiences are linked to his emotional connections throughout time. He compares these

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experiences to gravity; “ the larger something is, the more mass it has, the more gravitational pull it exerts...” (Niffenegger 113). His reality is inconsistent in time but consistent in events. Henry describes a major trauma in his life to Clare, an experience that is a constant part of his reality. He says to Clare, “ my mother dying...it’s the pivotal thing... everything else goes around and around it...I dream about it, and I also—time travel to it. Over and over” (Niffenegger 113). *The Time Traveler’s Wife* reveals reality as subjective and influenced by the characters’ emotions. For Henry, the people he has deep emotional relationships with, in his future and his past, his relationship with Clare and his relationship with his dead mother are very much a part of his present life too. Past, present, and future are all one reality for him. On the contrary, the reality for Clare only exists in the present, because her life and consciousness are bound by chronological time.

Clare Abshire’s perspective of life, which began with her having a very traditional and secure worldview, is altered completely by Henry. However, the idea that her relationship with Henry may be pre-determined occasionally infuriates her as she is determined that free will must play a part in her life. An example of this begins when Henry tells Clare what she likes before she has even realized this preference herself. When Clare tries coffee for the first time is when Henry time travels back to when she is thirteen. When she takes a sip of the one she makes for him she thinks it is disgusting and too strong, which Henry then replies “ it’s usually a little less ferocious. You like yours with lots of cream and sugar” (Niffenegger 75). This upsets Clare and she replies with “ you’re making me into a freak... you

know, like telling me that I like coffee with cream and sugar before I hardly even taste it. I mean, how am I going to figure out if that's what I like or if I just like it because you tell me I like it?" (Niffenegger 75). Although something as small as coffee does not seem life altering, it contributes to the frustration of the relationship testing her beliefs in free will. An example of this example is when Clare and Henry are looking to buy their first house together. However, in the process, Henry tells Clare that he has been to their home-to-be, which makes Clare feel as though house-hunting with Henry is now an illusion of free will. An example is when "[Clare finds herself] entranced with a white elephant in East Roger's Park...it's a mansion... [she knows] even before [she asks] that it's not [their] house; Henry is appalled by it even before [they] get in the front door" (Niffenegger 281). He tells Clare that it is absolutely not where they belong and she describes his voice as " the voice of one who has seen the future and has no plans to mess with it" (Niffenegger 282). Being with him while he possesses the knowledge of their future home frustrates her and she asks Henry if he would mind if she went house hunting by herself. She decides that house hunting without Henry would allow her to exercise her free will and go through the process of decision making. When analyzing free will from a psychological perspective " humanistic psychologists such as Maslow(1943) and Rogers(1951)... see self-actualization as a unique human need and form of motivation setting us apart from all other species" (McLeod 2019). McLeod uses this theory to explain human behaviour, and he says " when two people come together they could agree, fall out, come to a compromise, start a fight and so on. The permutations are endless and in order to understand their behavior we would need to understand what each party to the relationship chooses to do"

(2019). Here it is argued through a humanistic perspective that humans have free will; within a relationship—behaviour to people such as Clare who are bound to chronological time, cannot be determined due to the unknowing of how the other person is going to act.

Henry DeTamble goes through life knowing what his future holds, and re-watching past moments happen, therefore he believes that his life is inevitably bound to fate. He learns to accept the life he was given and learns how to cope with tragedy by imputing fate. For example, when Henry is 15 visiting his 15-year-old self, he recalls a story about seeing a little girl get hit in the head with a hockey puck. He says “ I found out later that she died in the hospital. And then I started to time travel back to that day, over and over, and I wanted to warn her mother, and I couldn’t. It was like being in the audience at a movie. It was like being a ghost” (Niffenegger 57-58). Henry attempts to save the girl, but each time he must go through the pain of experiencing her death. It is instances like this that he decides it is easier to accept tragedies in life when you understand that it is fate, and you can do nothing to stop it or change it. Henry will occasionally visit himself to teach him how to comprehend life as a time traveller. There is one lesson Henry teaches himself about fate and he says “‘ You talk about changing the future, but for me this is the past, and as far as I can tell there’s nothing I can do about it... It’s like with Mom. The accident. Immer wieder. Always again, always the same’ [to which his other self replies] ‘ free will?’ [And Henry tells him that] ‘ there is only free will when you are in time, in the present’” (Niffenegger 58). This conversation that Henry has with himself is the admittance that only those living in present time can experience free

will, but he has been to past and future and from what he has seen; he has no control over events in his life. Saul McLeod presents a relatable theory, known as Hard Determinism. Hard Determinism “ sees free will as an illusion and believes that every event and action has a cause” and that “ concepts like ‘ free will’ and ‘ motivation’ are dismissed as illusions that disguise the real causes of human behavior” (McLeod 2019). Henry shares this same perspective because he is able to see his past and his future; the idea of free will is impossible to him as he knows how his life will unfold. Moreover, theorist Richard Taylor stated once that “ Time is not by itself “ efficacious”; that is, the mere passage of time does not augment or diminish the capacities of anything and, in particular, it does not enhance or decrease an agent’s powers or abilities” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2018). This statement plays with the concept of time itself not having any determining powers with fate, however because Henry time travel’s his perception of time is altered by experiencing past, present, and future tenses.

In conclusion, the novel *The Time Traveler’s Wife* tells the story of Clare Abshire’s and Henry DeTamble’s attempt to lead a life together as close to normalcy as possible despite the fact that Henry is constrained by a force that they can neither prevent nor control. Their battle with Henry’s time travelling is seen to affect their relationship as Henry and Clare’s perceptions of the world consist of different versions of reality along with their struggle between life being already written and pre-determined versus the capacity and power of choices and free will.

Works Cited

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