A Look at *The Time Traveler's Wife*

"This Clare who is old and young and different from other girls, who knows that different may be hard."

—Audrey Niffenegger, *The Time Traveler's Wife*

The novel, *The Time Traveler's Wife,* written by Audrey Niffenegger, is an unconventional love story about a man named Henry, and a girl named Clare. They meet when she is 6 and he is 36. Henry possesses a genetic anomaly, coined Chrono-Displacement Disorder, which causes him to involuntarily time travel. This is ultimately a blessing and a curse. It enables him to visit Clare, his future wife in her younger years, but it also displaces him into hostile settings. His inability to remain in the present with his wife puts a strain on their marriage since Clare is always left behind. As this opening quote states, Clare Abshire is a combination of many things. Present day Clare is an adult in regard to her age and physical appearance, but in actuality, she is more representative of a child. My paper focuses on some of her childlike traits that hamper her from being a full-fledged woman. She eventually reaches maturity, but she has to first depart from her conditioned ways. This can be seen in the book, and also in the movie adaptation directed by Robert Schwentke, director of *Tattoo, Flightplan, Red*, and *R.I.P.D.*

Elements in the book that allude to Clare remaining like a child include more than the comparisons of her to literary children such as Alice in Wonderland and the elephant child. Clare's very appearance is comparable to one. She is portrayed as very pale, red-headed, and small. Her paleness is similar to that of a baby's unmarred, white skin. The white color also seems to hint at Clare's purity and innocence. The movie remains loyal to this description of Clare and adds to the child image by showing adult Clare as often wide-eyed. Clare is also shown to have a girly exuberance. In the book, she is described to giggle a lot, and she jumps and

whoops down Washington Square after being reunited with Henry. These actions are carried out in the movie by actress, Rachel McAdams, when she is giggling or bouncing. She is seen to bounce or skip away after reuniting with Henry (although not to the same degree as she does in the book), and she reiterates this movement when she joins Henry on the dance floor at their wedding. Here, the audience is given a profile view of Clare skipping up to Henry so as to better see the fullness of this girlish movement.

In addition, it is characteristic of Clare to not make major decisions as if she is incapable of them. Henry determines everything, including which house to buy (played out well in the movie). She does decide that she later wants a child, but Henry thwarts her by getting a vasectomy after several miscarriages. Clare lashes out at him in the movie for not being consulted, but in the book, she is almost indifferent. Henry asserts his dominance over her in subtle ways as well when he puts the wedding ring on her finger when she's asleep and cannot object. This is seen in the film, but not in the book. In the book, he proposes on her birthday in the traditional way, down on one knee. She answers with, "Of course, but I already have," while in the movie she says, "no" to his proposal. She immediately retracts this response with, "I just wanted to try it to assert my own sense of free will." Later on in the film, Clare also says in reference to Henry's influence, "You tricked me. You came to that meadow and you forced yourself into the heart and the mind of a little girl. What, do you think I wanted this life?" and "I never had a choice." This statement presents Clare as powerless. Thus, the movie shows her better aware of her lack of authority. Clare is constantly being manipulated and controlled in both versions. She is comparable to a primarily obedient child that simply waits to be directed or taught what to do. In the novel, fellow mermaids are teaching her how to swim in a dream because she is "new" at it, as a juvenile would be. This scene diverged too far from the main

story to include in Schwentke's adaptation which is neat and compact (as all of his movies aim to be).

Clare spends much of her childhood with adult Henry, meaning that he is missing from his present time where Clare is older. Since her entire childhood (from six to eighteen years of age) has included adult Henry and child Clare, sometimes separated by more than 30 years, Clare is forever labeled as the child, or the one that needs to be taken care of. She chooses to be taken care of by Henry in marriage when she's an adult, and he does care for and nurture her (even though it may not always be her ideal relationship). Henry is the constant provider, which is seen in both versions when he cheats the lottery and cooks for Clare. In the novel, she talks about starving to death because Henry is not there to make dinner. This shows her complete dependency on Henry. The movie inserts this idea not by showing her thinking on her chaise lounge with lemonade, but by having her father say, "I hope you know what you've signed on for. Her mother and I didn't succeed in preparing her for the real world I'm afraid." Having her father imply that she is immature packs a punch in the movie. The eight year age difference between the couple also contributes to the notion of Clare being more immature. Thus, Clare may be presented and perceived as a child because of both the attention to her childhood and the age difference separating the couple. Consequently, the characteristic of her being childlike is ingrained in the mind until she proves to be more mature or womanly.

Clare's juvenility may also be chalked up to Henry's influence in her growing years when he tells her what she does or doesn't like (based off of her future existence). She is not given the chance to discover her identity on her own; she has been conditioned to go off of what she has been told, never being allowed to think for herself. Thus, her growth has been stunted, and she remains in the mindset of a young adult. Further evidence of this is her observance of the Electra

complex, a fixation common in the early years of child development but typically outgrown in the latency stage.[1] Clare is not regressing to earlier modes of psychic functioning in child development, but rather she is stagnant in them for a prolonged amount of time. Her peers consider her strange or bizarre. Clare herself states Henry's impact when she perceptively says, "You are making me different," and tries to assert her individuality in this moment in the book.

Also, her inability to have a child is testament to her immaturity as well. She is logically incapable of bearing a child as a result of the fetus travelling outside of the womb or the womb aborting it (because of the genetic anomaly being hereditary). But, psychologically, she cannot bear a child because she is not yet reached the right stage of maturity. The act of childbearing is a woman's privilege, but Clare has been stunted in her growth and is not yet a woman. Thus, Clare undergoes six miscarriages while she is still in her childlike state. In the book, Clare dreams that she has to pass off her baby to her mother because she is incapable of carrying it. Clare says, "the baby becomes heavier and heavier, until I can barely lift it." The juxtaposition of Clare to a real mother is more evident when it says her mother "easily" carries the baby, which sheds light on Clare's incapability.

Particularly in early human evolution, "the effect of the prolongation of infancy in the individual was to ensure the sociality of the race." The helplessness of a child banded the family together "for longer and longer periods in successive epochs" because of the need to care for and help the child survive. Eventually, the association between the child and its parents or its caretaker is established well enough that "the family relations…become permanent.[2]" Thus, Clare's adherence to infancy could be her way to prolong Henry's companionship. Henry is also

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[1] Morgan, Tracy. "Electra Vs Oedipus: The Drama Of The Mother-Daughter Relationship." *Modern Psychoanalysis* 35.2 (2010): 267-272. *Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection*.

[2] Chamberlain, Alexander Francis. *The Child: A Study in the Evolution of Man.* London: Walter Scott, 1900. Print. The Contemporary Science Ser.

thought to be a new species of human by his doctors in the book. He is the next step in evolution as a result of his genetic anomaly. If you follow this line of thought, Clare is prolonging her infant tendencies to increase the intelligence of this new human since progress was thought to be made possible by increased infancy.[3] Both reasons could finally explain why Clare maintains this child persona. Neither the book nor the movie address it.

In the movie (and the book), we first see Clare as a child when she is running from her plantation house to the meadow where she has her meetings with Henry. There is a lovely wide, profile shot of her traveling through the woods before meeting Henry for the first time. This shot of her running is echoed in the final moments of the movie with adult Clare meeting Henry for (what may be) the last time. Clare is shown to be repeating an action from her childhood, but this reiteration also shows Clare being stuck as a child even in her adult years. It is a beautiful depiction of Clare in both scenes (arguably the best string of images out of both versions of the story). Schwentke often films characters in repetitive positions especially in this movie. This repeats the idea of Clare being stuck as a child since she's returning or staying in the same positions or places over and over again.

When the couple begins to fight regularly and gain distance from each other towards the end of the story, Clare seems to come into her own person and begins to make decisions in the relationship (such as not arguing to give the baby a sense of serenity in the womb). Distance is shown in the movie when Clare walks away from Henry while crossing the street, or when she turns her head away from Henry's disapproval of her excitement over knowing the sex of the baby. She starts asserting her independence and consequentially, shows more of her individuality

[3] Schoen, Max. "Prolonged Infancy: Its Causes and Its Significance: Some Notes on Mr. Fiske's Theory." *The American Journal of Psychology* 29.2 (Apr., 1918): 196-203.

(since she is now seen more as an individual instead of a branch off of Henry). Clare is also in the pregnancy that will come to full term this go-around. Her body is now ready to accept the baby instead of aborting it, making her capable of childbirth. This is a privilege that was not granted to her earlier when she still possessed her childish inclinations. She is now charged to be responsible and authoritative as she enters into motherhood with open arms. She is transitioning to her adult life, one that unfortunately, hardly ever includes Henry. This is where the movie greatly diverges from the book. In the book's conclusion, Henry dies and only sees Clare once more when she is 82. In the movie adaptation, Henry is implied to see Clare several more times after his death, including once when their daughter is nine, leaving the audience with hope. Regardless, both endings of the story are bittersweet and show Henry having to soon abandon Clare once again.

One of the biggest advantages that the film had over the book was its ability to incorporate music. The score in the opening credits holds the most impact for those who know the outcome of the film (and even those who don't) because of its melancholy sound and the pureness of the vocalist's voice. The sad quality of the music is representative of the tragic ending, but also of Clare's loneliness throughout her life paired with Henry. However, the richness in the vocals seems to hold promise, possibly of seeing Henry again, or of the triumph of love over time. Thus, it effectively relays the mood and message of the movie in under a minute. The book would be best represented with a more upbeat or fast tempo score primarily because of the difference in tone and style between the two adaptions. The movie is much more serious throughout so the melancholy sound is appropriate to start it off.

Another adaptation difference in the movement of the story from the page to the screen is the exclusion of additional supporting characters, e.g. Clare's grandmother. In an interview,

Schwentke stated that this was done in order to simplify the storyline (as well as cut down on screen time). This cutting simultaneously gets rid of characters that compromise either Henry, Clare, or their relationship. For example, an aspect of the book that was no more than touched upon in the movie is the romantic relation between Gomez and Clare. In the book, Clare has sex with Gomez twice; once, in college when Henry has not yet re-entered her life, and once, after Henry is dead. She does not commit adultery, but she feels guilty for her disloyalty to Henry and their love (even after he is gone). In the novel, the moment she has sex with Gomez after Henry is dead is extremely emotional for the reader because she fantasizes that it is her deceased husband.

In regards to Henry, a good portion of the book was dedicated to his life before Clare, one that included Ingrid, his previous lover, and many other women. Ingrid is a reminder of his wild past. She commits suicide partly because of him, putting Henry in negative light. He is further described to have been suicidal as well as "bad news" and a "sociopath." Ultimately, he is said to have been a man who destroys women. In the movie, Henry's early, base life is glazed over, and Ingrid's existence is only hinted at with a tube of lipstick left in Henry's apartment. Clare's view of Henry in the film is "a mature, worldy [and caring] person," which is implied to be positive. Also, he is the harbinger of good new instead of bad in the film adaptation (Dr. Kendrick is never told that his child will have Down syndrome). The movie idealizes Henry, possibly trying to make him and their love story more attractive. Henry is almost perfect except for his genetic disorder.

The movie ultimately ignores tidbits from the book in its telling to hone in on what is most important in the work overall: the love story of Clare and Henry. Thus, additional details such as Clare's unfaithfulness or Henry's wild past are viewed as irrelevant when the story is

boiled down. Also, no conflicting romantic relations are mentioned in the movie so as to make Henry and Clare's love seem more all-consuming. Overall, the movie can best be described as rounder and more resolved (in slight contrast to the book). The romance, as well as the overall film, is meant to be picturesque, so this undeniably influenced what Schwentke and the screenwriter decided to incorporate.

In regard to literary devices, the book makes wonderful use of dates in its narrative. At the beginning of each new scene, there is a date orienting us in time (so that we can keep up with Henry's travels) and two ages. One tells the age of Henry as he travels or exists in the present, and one tells Clare's age. The scenes are not always presented chronologically, so the skipping through time is reminiscent of Henry travelling to different periods. Schwentke thought there was no need for either of these because the information would be presented visually. The book also gives us two narratives, Clare's and Henry's. This gives us two concrete perspectives, while the film only alludes to perspective. It does this, for example, by incorporating a low angle shot with a POV shot to view adult Henry from young Clare's eyes. Schwentke also likes to have focus on an object such as food or clothes in the forefront of a shot, and then focus the camera on the bigger image behind, such as a person. This director is also very repetitive as mentioned earlier. In the very beginning of the movie, Henry is seen to enter from a hallway on the left of the screen to a main room in the library where he works.

What we assume is the following day, he is shown to come from this same hallway into the main room again. This action may be meant to showcase the mundaneness of Henry's life before he meets Clare. Another clever use of movement can be seen when Clare first sleeps over at Henry's apartment. The camera follows her as she snakes through the rooms exploring, and her

unfamiliarity with the place is shown when she takes the long way to the bathroom. This shot sequence displays Clare with a child's heightened sense of curiosity.

The novel and the film adaptation of *The Time Traveler's Wife* are both filled with a yearning for a chosen lover. Henry says in the novel, I hate to be where she is not, when she is not" in reference to Clare. This sincerity of both of the characters' love is what makes the overall story so attractive. Although there were differences in the film, especially with emphasis, this kind of adoration remained unchanged and made it a successful, if not better, adaptation.