THE HUMAN NATURE OF THE TIME TRAVELER:

ISSUES OF MODERNITY IN

THE TIME MACHINE AND

THE TIME TRAVELER’S WIFE

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FOCUS: HISTORY OF SCIENCE AND LITERATURE
H.G. Wells coined the term “scientific romance” to describe his 1895 novel *The Time Machine*, recognizing that it did not fit within the realm of any predetermined literature genre. His invention of a man stranded in the future draws upon real scientific research and beliefs of the nineteenth century, although his story was pure fantasy. This use of fantastic, romantic literature grounded in real public belief and science is also employed in Audrey Niffenegger’s 2003 *The Time Traveler’s Wife*, the story of a man subjected since birth to involuntary time travel, unable to live the life he longs for with the woman he has always loved. Examining *The Time Machine* and *The Time Traveler’s Wife* through both the lens of the history of science and through literary analysis, it becomes clear that both books use the fantastic issue of time travel to understand technology, nature, and the “modern” human condition. Writing from the nineteenth century, Wells emphasizes control over nature through expanding technological advancements, while Niffenegger’s twenty-first century perspective presents medicine as a way of controlling nature that ultimately fails. Despite the dramatic differences in ideas of man’s control over nature, both authors present time travel as innately connected to a loss of identity in a modern world and isolation from those closest to oneself, although both hold out some hope for human love that may transcend time and lessen the finality of inevitable death.

**ISSUES OF CONTROLLING NATURE**

Building a machine that moves in time but not in space, the Time Traveller of Wells’ *The Time Machine* is first and foremost a scientist. While Henry DeTamble of *The Time Traveler’s Wife* is a subject of Nature’s will and has no control over where or when he ends up, the Time Traveller has more lucrative motivations for his voluntary time travel. As a scientist of the nineteenth century, an era of technological excitement and advancement, the Time Traveller
seems to have discovery and the pursuit of knowledge at the heart of his invention, but more selfish results of time travel are certainly not ignored. When considering the possibilities of time travel, his companions note the potential consequences of this newfound knowledge. “Just think!” one remarks, “One might invest all one’s money, leave it to accumulate at interest, and hurry on ahead!” (Wells 63). The Time Traveller can control when he would like to travel to aboard the machine, but his travel is confined spatially—although millions of years in the future, the Time Traveller is in exactly the same spot from which he departed. This has a direct effect on the Traveller’s encounter in the future: he observes familiar locations and landmarks (Wells orients the reader spatially by referencing well-known rivers and cities in England) and is able to understand exactly what his world will become. In this world of the future, the Traveller spends the majority of his time observing and exploring his environment—although he makes limited efforts to understand the culture and language of the people he encounters on his first journey. Wells describes the Traveller’s journeys into the future according to real scientific beliefs of the nineteenth century proposed by Darwin, Huxley, and other natural historians, and the issue of time travel is a direct reference to increased ideas in the manipulation of time through photography, railroads, telegraphy, and video towards the turn of the century.1

While Wells’ Traveller experiences the need for discovery and mechanical innovation rampant in nineteenth century England, Niffenegger’s Henry DeTamble is a victim of Nature. Unable to control his travels, Henry’s involuntary method of time travel follows patterns not entirely random—when considering his leaps, Henry tells Clare that “my subconscious seems to exert tremendous control, because I spend a lot of time in my own past, visiting events that are interesting or important, and evidently I will be spending enormous amounts of time visiting you

[...] I tend to go places I’ve already been in real time, although I do find myself in other, more random times and places” (Niffenegger 166). This pattern of revisiting times and places that are either comforting or extremely stressful yields both miraculous and devastating consequences for Henry; he appears to Clare throughout her life even when they have not met in sequential time, but he is also subject to the mercy of nature often with no means of escape. Henry does recognize the vast benefits of his “condition,” involuntarily visiting his deceased mother before she gave birth to him. Unlike his father, grief-stricken since the death of his wife, Henry is able to return to his mother, telling his father: “I see her on a regular basis. I’ve seen her hundreds of times since she’s died […] It’s not always a curse, okay? Sometimes time travel is a great thing. I needed to see her, and sometimes I get to see her” (Niffenegger 226).

Unable to naturally achieve a normal life with Clare, Henry attempts to diagnose his time travel as a disorder of sorts in hopes that it can be cured with drugs. Comparing his affliction to both schizophrenia and epilepsy, Henry visits countless doctors, finally finding one who believes he can actually time travel. Trying to explain his travels, Henry understands that “there are clues; as with any disease there are patterns, possibilities. Exhaustion, loud noises, stress, standing up suddenly, flashing light—any of these can trigger an episode” (Niffenegger ix). Trying to suppress his “episodes” is vitally important to Henry and he does whatever he can to stop them: before his wedding day with Clare, Henry tries serious dopamine blocking drugs in order to stay in the present. This obsession with suppression of psychological unrest speaks to the twenty-first century’s need for diagnosis and the increasing use of drugs in psychological disorders, even though the drugs themselves might be dangerous. Niffenegger addresses this possibility—when Henry and Clare assess the side effects of the drugs needed to suppress time travel, Clare worries that “the cure might be worse than the problem” (Niffenegger 254). While the Time Traveller is
able to control Nature completely through technology—both through the invention of the time machine and other tools (matches, camphor, etc.), Henry attempts to control Nature through medicine and gene therapy, ultimately finding himself unable to conquer Nature in contradiction to his technologically-optimistic Wellsian counterpart.

When Henry’s affliction begins to hamper Clare’s need for children, the couple tries everything to understand Henry’s time travels on a physical level. After countless miscarriages, Henry and Clare lose all faith in Nature, disregarding any possible benefits to time travel. Distraught, Henry reasons that “Nature is telling us to give up, Nature is saying […] you’re a very fucked up organism and we don’t want to have any more of you” (Niffenegger 351). Completely subject to Nature’s whim, diagnosis and cure is completely necessary for the couple. Bringing current medical knowledge and technology into the romance, Niffenegger writes of the genetic tests that a doctor performs on Henry, extending research into Henry’s affliction as an entirely new disease to be studied and cured. The doctor isolates a particular chromosome responsible for Henry’s time travels, transplanting it into mice in order to determine whether Clare will be able to bear Henry’s children. The doctor finds that “it might be an immune reaction. Something about the fetal mice was so foreign that the dams’ immune systems were trying to fight them as though they were a virus or something. So we suppressed the dams’ immune systems, and then it all worked like magic” (Niffenegger 360). This sense of the “magic” of time travel is in fact eschewed by both Niffenegger and Wells—by giving detailed, scientific evidence for exactly why Henry and the Time Traveller are able to leap through time, the authors take the focus away from the fantastical aspect of time travel and place it on more personal levels indicative of the context the writers find themselves in. Unable to comprehend the Time Traveller’s abilities in *The Time Machine*, a companion wonders his friend has
“Nebuchadnezzar phases”, implying that the Traveller physically transforms in bodily fashion, but the Traveller quickly proves his invention is simply a work of mechanical ingenuity rather than a form of magic (Wells 72). This issue of mechanical and technological advancement is common to both the nineteenth century and the twenty-first century, but views on how much control society still possesses over nature has changed dramatically. With one time traveler able to control his journeys while the other is simply a subject a Nature’s whim, the question of consequences to the human psyche caused by “modernity” remains.

VULNERABILITY THROUGH TIME TRAVEL

While it is clear that the issue of “modernity” faced both writers and influenced their views of human control over nature in very specific ways, rapid technological advancement and the human vulnerabilities it may bring was an issue integral to both the nineteenth century and the twenty-first century. Forced to endure time travel through necessity of some sort, both the Time Traveller and Henry DeTamble face consequences that pinpoint their commitment to fulfilling their desires, calling into question the selfishness of the travelers and causing the reader to struggle over the lasting effects and implications of time travel. On a more obvious level, Wells and Niffenegger describe the physical toll of time travel in almost exactly the same manner: the Traveller tells his companions that “I am afraid I can not convey the peculiar sensations of time travelling. They are excessively unpleasant. There is a feeling exactly like that one has upon a switchback—of a helpless headlong motion! I felt the same horrible anticipation, too, of an imminent smash” (Wells 77). Henry, too, explains to the reader that “sometimes you feel as though you have stood up too quickly even if you are lying in bed half asleep. You hear blood rushing in your head, feel vertiginous falling sensations. Your hands and feet are tingling
and then they aren’t there at all. You’ve mislocated yourself again” (Niffenegger viii). The travelers arrive at their destinations both starving and nauseated, but their travels also exert a more intense draw on their persons over time. Upon his return from the future, the narrator of The Time Machine describes the Time Traveler, noting that “his expression was haggard and drawn, as by intense suffering” (Wells 71). Even though the Time Traveller is clearly committed completely to his invention and observation in the future, his trials are obvious on a physical level. Henry, too, simply runs out of energy and can not physically withstand time travel for so long. Nearing the end of his life, Henry writes: “I think that time is short, now. I feel as though all my reserves, of energy, of pleasure, of duration, are thin, small. I don’t feel capable of continuing very much longer” (Niffenegger 519). These outward, physical drawbacks of time travel are perhaps used to suggest outward drawbacks of the larger themes presented in the novels—continuous advancement and constant scientific discovery may slowly draw to an end, and society may be unable to completely suppress and control psychological disorders or achieve simplicity when it is so deeply complex already.

Another consequence of the extreme action of time travel is the ever-present fear of being stranded or stuck in time. This hits Wells’ Time Traveller when he finds that his machine has been stolen; the Traveller panics, realizing that “at once, like a lash across the face, came the possibility of losing my own age, of being left helpless in this strange new world. The bare thought of it was an actual physical sensation. I could feel it grip me at the throat and stop my breathing” (Wells 94). Wells may be speaking to the very real feeling of apprehension in the nineteenth century with technology advancing so quickly, dramatically changing societal preconceptions, leaving the public unsure of what to believe in and what to invest faith into. Although the Time Traveller has chosen to invest his life in the success of the time machine, he
begins to realize the implications of its failure when it is stolen. His confidence completely removed, the Traveller realizes that he is at the mercy of Nature in a totally foreign time and must rely completely on himself, void of technology, in order to survive or draw any conclusions from his new world. Henry, used to having to rely completely upon himself, is afraid for both his own survival and for the woman he leaves behind. Voicing these fears to Clare, Henry says: “I am afraid of winter. I am afraid of police. I am afraid of traveling to the wrong place and time and getting hit by a car or beat up. Or getting stranded in time, and not being able to come back. I am afraid of losing you” (Niffenegger 105). These are very realistic fears for Henry—his time travel experiences are often bad ones, and death seems inevitable when Henry continues to appear in dangerous places away from Clare, the one person that understands him.

Separating the time travelers from any realm of normalcy is their inability to feel confident about their own existence—both travelers have doubts about the reality of their situations, worried that they dreaming or may even be insane. Attempting to orient himself in any means necessary, Henry decides that: “All the things that happened. When I was a kid. I mean, so far they have only halfway happened, because you aren’t there yet. So when they happen to you, then it’s real” (Niffenegger 215). He decides to only consider his time travels “real” when they have coincided with Clare’s life in real-time, and mostly avoids trying to explain his predicament to anyone besides Clare. When his closest friend experiences one too many of Henry’s odd appearances and disappearances, Henry is only able to convince him of the reality of the situation by disappearing directly in front of him. While Henry understands his travels as a neurological disorder, he does not doubt the reality of his situation because of how devastating it is. Explaining his theory to Clare, he says that: “the fact that there are bad times makes it more real. It’s the reality that I want” (Niffenegger 431). By understanding his
condition in pre-established medical terms, Henry is able to relate to his travels as decidedly real, perhaps because other people could understand the situation as well. The Time Traveller, on the other hand, doubts the reality of his situation when he returns from his first journey. Trying to understand his experience, the Traveller questions: “did I ever make a Time Machine or a model of a Time Machine? Or is it all only a dream? They say life is a dream, a precious poor dream at time—but I can’t stand another that won’t fit. It’s madness. And where did the dream come from?...I must look at that machine. If there is one!” (Wells 152). Indeed, none of the Traveller’s friends believe that he has really travelled through time or that time travel is even possible—after hearing the Traveller’s theories, the narrator states that: “I don’t think any of us said very much about time travelling [...] though its off potentialities ran, no doubt, in most of our minds: its plausibility, that is, its practical incredibleness, the curious possibilities of anachronism and of utter confusion it suggested” (Wells 69). Regardless of whether anyone believes him or whether he even believes himself, the Traveller is consumed with the need for discovery and is obsessed with his machine. Despite his identity crisis and his loneliness, the Traveller returns on another journey without the approval of his companions. These vulnerabilities faced by both time travelers are indeed serious, but the travelers face far more concerning consequences in the deep connection between self-identity and the ability (or inability) to form lasting connections with other people.

IDENTITY AND HUMAN CONNECTION

Perhaps the most significant issue facing both travelers is the “modern condition”—problems of alienation and isolation, an inability to relate to anyone else amidst a life of uncertainty. The effects of time travel on the human psyche seem to be presented on a much
deeper scale in the travelers’ sense of identity and reality as well as the relationships between the
Time Traveller and Weena and Henry and Clare. While stranded in time, the travelers face
another necessity that must be fulfilled—survival through whatever means necessary. Resorting
to primal survival methods, the travelers enter another reality of sorts that forces them to do
things outside of the constraints to which most human are subject. Because Henry can not take
anything with him when he travels, he is often stranded naked and moneyless with no idea of
where he is. Years of experience have taught him how to lie, steal, pick locks, and fight any
enemies that may prey on such a hopeless creature. Finding that explaining his predicament is
usually unsuccessful, Henry explains that “when I am out there, in time, I am inverted, changed
into a desperate version of myself. I become a thief, a vagrant, an animal who runs and hides. I
startle old women and amaze children. I am a trick, an illusion of the highest order, so incredible
that I am actually true” (Niffenegger ix). This vagrant life holds a sort of wonder for Henry;
although he would rather live a normal life, his acquired skills are decidedly masculine and
somewhat liberating. The same is true for the Time Traveller—in a future where societal
constraints do not apply, he is able to fight and even burn down a forest with seemingly no
immediate consequences. When faced with real, immediate danger, the Traveller is finally able
to climb aboard his time machine and escape. Even Henry, though he can’t control his travels,
notes wryly that “that’s our Darwinian advantage […] we escape” (Niffenegger 361). This lack
of societal constraint may seem appealing, but it caters only to the travelers’ immediate desires,
not warranting the hurt and loneliness left in their wake.

Despite Henry’s occasional trips to see his mother, Henry is consumed by the need for a
normal life with Clare—something he is never able to achieve. Henry explains that all of his
desires are “homey ones: armchair splendor, the sedate excitements of domesticity […] these are
the things that can pierce me with longing when I am displaced from them by Time’s whim” (Niffenegger ix-x). He tries to replicate normalcy by working a “normal” job in a library, refusing to tell himself details of his future life that he has seen in his travels, seldom tempted to use his ability for discovery like the Time Traveller. He spends his trips focused on surviving, trying to ignore what he sees in the future and consumed with fear over where he might end up. Henry struggles over where he actually belongs in time, identifying his place by anywhere Clare is. In only one instance, when Clare needs more room for her artwork, Henry offers her winning lottery numbers out of sheer desperation. Their need for a normal life, however, is more important and they reject the option. In a state of confusion, Henry laments that: “I want my own home, in my own apartment. Home sweet home. No place like home. Take me home, country roads. Home is where the heart is. But my heart is here. So I must be home” (Niffenegger 215-216). He feels comforted when he is with Clare or in the stacks of his library, but his comfort is soon disrupted by another involuntary leap in time. The Time Traveller, on the other hand, has only momentary bouts of need for normalcy—he is driven by his desire for knowledge. Looking up at the night sky, the Traveller remarks that “I felt a certain sense of friendly comfort in their twinkling […] And amid all these scintillating points of light one bright planet shone kindly and steadily like the face of an old friend” (Wells 123). The feeling doesn’t last for long, though; the Traveller voluntarily returns to his travels.

Regardless of the travelers’ specific needs for either discovery or normalcy, both heroes are able to tolerate being stranded in time by having someone to return to. Henry’s deep desire for Clare is a central theme of Niffenegger’s novel, but Wells’ Time Traveller also survives in the future in large part because of his relationship with Weena, a native member of the Eloi race that he encounters. Although Weena is child-like and is unable to provide the Traveller with any
real conversation or insight, he considers her “somehow, a very great comfort […] for, by merely seeming fond of me, and showing in her weak futile way that she cared for me, the little doll of a creature presently gave my return to the neighborhood of the White Sphinx almost the feeling of coming home; and I would watch for her tiny figure of white and gold so soon as I cam over the hill” (Wells 103-104). With Weena to return to, the Traveller is able to keep some sense of routine and normalcy to his life, having someone to protect and care for. Although the Traveller does seem to genuinely care for Weena like a daughter, he also appears to use her to fulfill his curiosity about the Eloi of the future and wants to bring him back to the present with him. His actual need for Weena is debatable—he uses her as a scientist uses any evidence for his discovery, and when he fails to protect Weena and leads her to her death, the Traveller is quick to move on and return to his exploration. Clare, on the other hand, is a symbol of consistency and reliability for Henry, something for him to survive for. Reflecting on his life, Henry tells Clare that “our love has been […] the only real thing in this strange life of mine that I could ever trust” (Niffenegger 519). Wrapped up in the modern world of complexity and alienation, Henry is only able to endure his travels because he has faith in returning to Clare.

Perhaps the most heartbreaking aspect of time travel for both men is the inherent loneliness and isolation that comes with a life punctuated by random absences. Wells’ Time Traveller, although reliant almost completely on himself, finds himself longing for a companion in his travels on multiple occasions. Finding himself in dangerous situations battling the Morlock race he encounters in the future, the Time Traveller realizes that being alone may have its advantages, but ultimately a companion would be preferable in easing his fear. Without anyone to confide in or express his fears and observations to, the Traveller remarks that: “I felt hopelessly cut off from my own kind—a strange animal in an unknown world” (Wells 96).
Towards the end of his journey, the Traveller’s recklessness kills Weena and he finds himself without any form of compassion or camaraderie in this foreign time. Despite his curiosity for time travel, the Traveller’s insatiable need for exploration leads him to a sobering conclusion: “it left me terribly lonely again—terribly alone. I began to think of this house of mine, of this fireside, of some of you, and with such thoughts came a longing that was pain” (Wells 140). In one episode of insecurity, the Traveller writes his signature on a monument he finds in the future, seemingly as proof to himself that he still exists. Although it may seem that the Time Traveller has fulfilled his appetite for adventure and will return to his present time more knowledgeable but satisfied, he returns home only for a short while. The Time Traveller’s ironic return to travels is both surprising and understandable—having experienced such a great triumph once, the Traveller is unable to give up his pursuit of knowledge provided by his miraculous invention.

Henry DeTamble, however, experiences an even more intense loneliness because of his love for Clare. Because he spends sporadic periods of time with Clare at different points in both of their lives, Henry is completely consumed with love for Clare but has virtually no one to talk to. Henry sometimes appears to himself at different ages and times, providing himself with the comfort of someone understanding in every way—he himself. Because Henry knows what happened on any given day in his consciousness, he is able to mentor his younger self through the original difficulties in understanding his affliction. The young Henry does not realize at first that it is himself and not another time traveler appearing to him; the realization that he is alone in his experiences is deeply heartbreaking and confusing to the young Henry. He states that: “when I was little, I imagined a whole society of time travelers […] I still feel like a castaway, the last member of a once numerous species. It was as though Robinson Crusoe discovered the telltale footprint on the beach and then realized that it was his own” (Niffenegger 54). Mentoring
himself has practical benefits for Henry—he appears during his own first travelling experience and teaches his younger self how to pick locks, steal, and survive in the real world; unfortunately he is unable to make anyone else understand exactly what he is going through in involuntarily jumping through time. Most doctors tell him he is delusional; his friends and lovers only know him as unreliable and potentially insane.

This unreliability and loneliness extends much further for both time travelers—neither of them are able to commit to another person, leaving everyone else dependent on their occasional presence, waiting for them to return. According to one author, the “time traveler acts as both the functional center of the temporal structure and as a floating signifier released from any fixed relationship to that structure” (Hollinger 210).2 This is certainly true for Wells’ Time Traveler and Niffenegger’s Henry DeTamble; while everything else revolves around the time traveler, the time traveler himself is able to come and go, leaving everything and everyone else waiting for his potential return, unsure of where or when he might appear again. This is particularly difficult for Henry and Clare—Henry laments that “I hate to be where she is not, when she is not. And yet, I am always going, and she cannot follow” (Niffenegger x). Hollinger states that “the presence of the Time Traveller has, in fact, always and already been an absence,” a sentiment that rings true for Clare—although she meets Henry when she is only six years old and is immediately enchanted with him, her entire life is made up of a string of his absences (213).

When Henry realizes that his death is imminent, he writes Clare a letter, telling her that “you have been waiting for me all your life, always uncertain of how long this patch of waiting would be […] What an uncertain husband I have been, Clare, like a sailor, Odysseus alone and buffeted by tall waves, sometimes wily and sometimes just a plaything of the gods” (Niffenegger 519).

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Indeed, Clare’s life is marked by Henry’s absence and her inability to let him go; her life is affected as much by Nature as Henry’s is.

The person left behind while the hero leaps through time is trapped in “an oscillation between the desire for presence and the awareness of absence” (Hollinger 214). Clare is given a distinct voice in *The Time Traveler’s Wife*, so her devastation upon Henry’s frequent absence is obvious and heartbreaking. Not knowing when her husband will suddenly disappear is extremely difficult for Clare, and she is left as a single woman for the majority of her life, unable to find another companion or even someone to remotely understand what she is going through. Clare tells Henry that: “I lie awake worrying that you might disappear and never come back” (Niffenegger 249). When she realizes that having a child will give her a piece of Henry to have with her all the time, Clare is consumed with longing; the fact that she is plagued with miscarriages leaves her deeply depressed. Unable to pretend that she is okay with Henry’s condition any longer, she breaks down, screaming that: “we pretend to be normal people, having normal lives! I pretend it’s perfectly okay with me that you’re always disappearing God knows where. You pretend everything is okay even when you almost get killed and Kendrick doesn’t know what the hell to do about it! I pretend I don’t care when our babies die” (Niffenegger 350). Although Weena is not given a voice at all in *The Time Machine*, the Time Traveller begins to realize that his child-like companion is increasingly reliant on him. Apparently happy before he took her under his wing, Weena follows the Traveller around and loves him unconditionally. The Traveller notes that when he leaves on expeditions: “her distress when I left her was very great, her expostulations at the parting were sometimes frantic, and I think, altogether, I had as much trouble as comfort from her devotion” (Wells 103). The Time Traveller takes it upon himself to protect Weena, but he ultimately leads her to her tragic death, only briefly lamenting her demise.
Later, the Traveller remarks that: “Until it was too late, I did not clearly know what I had inflicted upon her when I left her” (Wells 104). The “other person” relying on the time traveler in both *The Time Traveler’s Wife* and *The Time Machine* is clearly a tool in the heroes’ happiness, only getting occasional satisfaction and happiness of their own. The consequences of technological advancement and the issue of control over nature may seem dire, but optimism still lies in the hope for some human element to outlast time and technology.

**THE HUMAN SPIRIT TRANSCENDENT**

While it is clear that the time travelers leave others behind as they embark on adventures in time—whether they want to or not—the question of whether something transcends time remains. The editor of Wells’ *Time Machine* states that the novel speaks to the fact that extinction and finality is “in the nature of things,” Wells seems to be suggesting that common motivations and the essence of the human psyche remains regardless of evolutionary changes to the world we live in (Wells 45). Wells ends *The Time Machine* with the narrator’s comment that “even when mind and strength had gone, gratitude and a mutual tenderness still lived on in the heart of man” (Wells 156). While this observation may be a little ironic—the gratitude and tenderness exhibited by Weena was awarded with death—it remarks on a common sentiment that love transcends all time. The narrator returns to the Traveller’s house with his curiosity more than piqued, and is shocked to find that the Traveller has departed on another journey through time. As a scientist, the Traveller’s need for discovery and observation has clearly not been fulfilled, speaking to the infinite pursuit of scientific knowledge regardless of potentially fatal or devastating consequences. Nearing the end of his life, Niffenegger’s Henry DeTamble also realizes that his love for Clare has lasted for both of their entire lives, and that it will remain on
even when he is no longer alive. In a letter to Clare, Henry writes that: “tonight I feel that my love for you has more density in this world than I do, myself: as though it could linger on after me and surround you, keep you, hold you” (Niffenegger 519). Henry’s travelling brings him life after death of sorts—when Clare is an old woman, Henry appears to her as a young man, allowing Clare something to hope for and wait for long after Henry’s death. Henry concludes his live a mere tool of Nature’s whim believing that “Time is nothing” (Niffenegger 521).

While H.G. Wells’ *Time Machine* and Audrey Niffenegger’s *Time Traveler’s Wife* were written more than a century apart under very different social contexts, they both speak to common themes in the human psyche under the fantastical model of time travel. Wells examines the nature of the time traveler as a nineteenth-century scientist driven by a need for discovery and observation, while Niffenegger attacks time travel as a disease devastating any sense of normalcy in a relationship that seems all too realistic. “Modern” issues of control seem to be at play in different senses in both texts—in an age of innovation and rapid expansion, Wells approaches the idea of man’s control of Nature through technology as optimistic and successful, while Niffenegger depicts man’s potential inability to conquer Nature in a world of diagnosis and over-medication. It is easy to get caught up in the unrealistic qualities of time travel in itself, but both authors imply that their use of time travel is simply a tool in examining larger issues of the role of the “modern man” and his relationship with technology and nature. Despite the enormous gap in both time and technological advancement between 1895 and 2003, themes of what humans need and human elements that may outlast time are remarkably similar. The “modern condition” may govern the Time Traveller and Henry DeTamble, but Wells and Niffenegger ultimately leave the reader with hope for some sort of human prevalence over the devastating consequences of technology and nature.