**[Reel Therapy](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/reel-therapy) (a regular column in the journal *Psychology Today*)** Unraveling the mind through film by Jeremy Clyman, Psy.D. **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Why We Love “Juno”:** The goal of therapy is to Juno-ize the mentally troubled.

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Some movies have a gravitational pull. Take *The Godfather* for example. I've watched it ten times the most recent of which involved mindlessly channel-surfing across Al Pacino's stoic face. The next thing I knew two hours had passed and the laundry was fast wrinkling in the dryer. We loved The Godfather for showing us intelligence behind the violence. Why do we love Juno?

We loved Juno so much that we turned a simple, low-budget story about a pregnant teen into an overnight box office sensation and Oscar winner that remains within the heart of the zeitgeist and is frequently cited by smart people making interesting points. How did this happen? Film critics might cite the well-written script, strong direction or rare talents. I suggest an alternative hypothesis of a much more subtle and psychologically-gratifying nature.

Most stories of teen pregnancy are dysfunctional tales of impulsivity, avoidance and interpersonal conflict. Take a troubled girl plus a bad decision, mix in a little adversity-induced stress and existential uncertainty and - bam - you've got an outcome of trepidation and ineptitude that makes for sold out theaters and, unfortunately, human behavior of the lowest common denominator. Indeed, many of us are not resilient in the face of stressors like teen pregnancy, especially those of us who become impregnated due to poor judgment and self-destructive tendencies (as I don't think we keep statistics on stupid versus unlucky birthing teenagers, the exact percentage cannot be referenced).

But Juno is not in that pitiful camp. She is very different. Her story is as far removed from the stereotypical teen-pregnancy narrative as is known - it's practically a different genre. In "Juno" we have an independent-minded teenager who is wise and secure beyond her years and just so happens to be pregnant. To watch her handle the subsequent and inevitable obstacles is to watch a model in optimal psychological functioning and it is that fact more than any mechanical aspect of storytelling that makes this film a uniquely inspiring and funny experience.

Bottom of Form

The movie begins with Juno fresh off her first sexual encounter. Let's note that Juno is not sitting in the puddle of distasteful regret that forms after a one-night stand with that drug dealing neighbor who never goes on a second date. Not by a long shot. "The doodle that cannot be undid" stems from a volitional, deliberately thought act with the benevolent Paulie Bleeker - the kind of person that grows into a supportive husband and enriching father. The mentally healthy are attracted to the mentally healthy and our thin-slicing now has some data to deduce that Juno is a role model. The running joke here is that if anyone was taken advantage of, sexually, it was the oh-so-effeminate Bleeker. After all, Juno is a strong, independent woman and Bleeker is a walking nerd association - passive, socially oblivious and left for dead by "The Mean Girls."

The next major plot point contains Juno discovering that she's pregnant. Everything about this discovery process represents the maximally adaptive response. She seems ahead of the game - testing for pregnancy not because a few months have passed and now there are physical signs but because she just had sex (protected) a few days ago and she knew enough to know that "you never know" about things like pregnancy. And while some might delay or deny in such a moment, Juno calmly and systematically tests the hypothesis of pregnancy. The running joke here is that she drinks enough Sunny Delight to use up a ridiculously high number of pregnancy tests. The reason this is funny is because she has received the harsh reality from the first test like any well-adjusted individual and she goes through the remaining tests in a transparent and harmless attempt to procrastinate.

After this feat of urine production she turns immediately to the big confession. In most narratives the impregnated protagonist would drink herself under the table and pick fights with her parents about everything under the sun before she would dare confess to them of the perceived indiscretion. But Juno does not perceive this situation as shameful or indicative of a true and promiscuous character as the mentally unstable might. She recognizes that a statistically anomaly has occurred (condoms are only 97% effective) in all its simplicity and with as mature and wise a perspective as any parent could hope for, Juno discloses the news right off the bat. She even frosted the cake with thoughtful emergency response plans and an understanding that some trust-repairing lies ahead. In fact, Juno orchestrates her emotions with such coordination that she accomplishes the tasks of perspective-taking, sound analytical thinking and witty peanut gallery commentary simultaneously. You have to be socially, emotionally and cognitively intelligent for this - the psychological trifecta.

Following this, Juno finds and interacts with the couple to whom she'll eventually donate the baby. The parents-to-be worry about the moral mood swings and unreliability presumed in most teenagers, particularly the pregnant ones. And although this assumption is entirely ill-fitting to Juno's character she receives the implicit insults with a light-hearted scoff, which seamlessly transitions into a pleasant submission that she has no intention of misleading or deceiving. Moreover, she plans to deliver on the promised goods because she has accurately thin-sliced the mother-to-be's pure intentions like a crackerjack clinician. The psychologically sound are capable of this sort of empathic ability even in adolescence. She knows and loves the notion that her baby is going to be nurtured by the Michael Jordan of nurturance.

The next major segment of the story consists of Juno coping with the unbearable physical and psychic side effects of third trimester life. She balloons in fat cells, hormones and self-righteousness. But she's not out of control or overwhelmed. Developmentally normal adults, mind you, might start to fret as crunch time approaches. Self-doubts about adopting and fears about looming childbirth pain would undoubtedly whirl. Not our little ball of mental magnificence. Juno digests these frustrations with her best friend (as positive a coping strategy as there is) and clarifies her values in wanting to date Bleeker, which, of course, allows her to one-mindedly pursue the goal of actually dating Bleeker. Goal-orientation and living a life in-line with values is central to "the good life" and represents a resiliency that is particularly shocking considering the circumstances.

Add the ills of pregnancy and normal teenage hormones to the loneliness of a Bleeker-less six months and the betrayal of an abandoning father-to-be and you've got a recipe perfectly constructed for emotional dysregulation. This situation is rife with enough stress that defenses are likely to automatically flare up, which leads to unconscious rerouting of emotions and distortions of thoughts, which leads to things like kicking the dog, throwing the dishes, and confusing friends with enemies. But none of these mentally ill if not deliciously melodramatic things unfold with Juno. She's got every excuse imaginable to commit an "intelligence" hiccup and instead she reflects on her environment, generates some self-knowledge, fires up the emotional intelligence machine and commits herself to Bleeker with even-tempered genuineness. There's no last-minute race through traffic or paralyzing ambivalence. She marches up to Bleeker one day, plainly states her emotions, follows her mentally healthy father's guidelines for love (find someone who loves you for exactly who you are) and gives Bleeker an oh-so-tender kiss.

Here's the point and the answer to why we love Juno - healthy reality is more entertaining than great drama. Actually, now that I'm thinking about it, healthy reality is great drama. It's also the difference between mediocrity and inspiration in the movie business and a ringing endorsement of therapy. After all, the clinical psychology industry is what helps the non-Junos grow into Junos.

[**http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/reel-therapy/201002/why-we-love-juno**](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/reel-therapy/201002/why-we-love-juno)



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Note: This author bio is from the same page as the Juno analysis and is a regular feature of this column.