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# Speed of Light: "Becoming" as a Model of the Female Experience in Claudia Smith Brinson's "Einstein's Daughter"

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Speed of Light: “Becoming” as a Model of the Female Experience in Claudia Smith Brinson’s  
“Einstein’s Daughter”

Claudia Smith Brinson’s short story “Einstein’s Daughter” portrays a young nameless girl who is eager to actively participate in life despite her mother’s wish for her to wait and be patient. Brinson tells the story from the point of view of the daughter, whose only moniker throughout the story remains “Einstein’s daughter,” identifying her as the product of a man who says that motion is relative. In fact, Einstein’s theory of relativity constitutes a major theme throughout the story, providing a metaphorical paradigm in which to view feminine identity. Likewise, Friedrich Nietzsche’s theory of the eternal recurrence of the same and Soren Kierkegaard’s concept of repetition may be used as helpful paradigms through which to understand the female experience. The daughter’s motion serves as the focal point of conflict in the story; she self-determines to be fast, momentous, and circular, while her mother’s (and, by extension, her grandmother’s and great-grandmother’s) designs for her include the typical feminine regimen: slowness, meekness, patience, and stability (Dobie 119). The daughter, by taking on more stereotypically masculine traits and activities, actually enriches the female experience by exhibiting a tendency toward *becoming* rather than *being*. “Becoming” here signifies an open-ended and unfinalized process, whereas “being” indicates a fixed and finalized essence. Typically, culture prescribes the feminine mode as one of static passivity and the masculine mode as one of dynamic activity, but Einstein’s daughter deconstructs that binary: by breaking out of her rigid female constructs, she approaches a life of radical becoming, which is a richly feminine experience of identity (Gardiner 349). In fact, Brinson shows through the character of Einstein’s daughter that we can think of the female experience in terms of becoming

rather than being in three ways: her focus on the relativity of motion and time based upon lifestyle speed, her illustration of Nietzsche's eternal recurrence theory through generational recurrence, and her embodiment of Kierkegaard's concept of repetition as a religious movement from nonexistence to existence.

Einstein's daughter demonstrates a life of open becoming through her fascination with speed and motion and their effects upon time. Albert Einstein's theory of relativity stipulates that when a moving object's velocity approaches the speed of light with respect to some fixed reference point, the time experienced by the object will approach zero with respect to the time experienced at the reference point (Mermin 63). Einstein's daughter takes this concept she learned in school and appropriates it metaphorically to life: "Simple speed was...in my head long before I read about it in high school physics, long before I read that tale of twins, one who remains on Earth while the other blasts off at half the speed of light, travels the curvature of space-time and returns younger than the twin who stayed on a straight line, who waited. No wonder women always end up looking older than their men" (Brinson 400-401). Einstein's daughter here uses the scientific concept of the relativity of time with respect to motion to demonstrate poetically why it is that women seem to age more quickly than their men. Patriarchy stereotypically describes and prescribes the female experience to be one of waiting, patience, and ease, while it sees the male experience as one of motion, ambition, and activity (Dobie 119). Thus, just like the twins in Einstein's daughter's thought experiment, men end up aging more slowly than women because they are constantly moving rapidly, while their women grow old from sitting still too long, washing dishes (Brinson 405).

Another evidence of the influence of Einstein's theory of relativity upon Brinson's story is Einstein's daughter's assertion that moving fast enough can make one disappear. She says,

“Go fast enough, and to the watcher the clock stops, mass becomes infinite, measurements shrink: disappearance. According to the watcher. ‘It’s all relative,’ I told my mother” (402). Einstein’s daughter here reveals another motivation for moving fast: she does not want to be the center of attention. Later, the mother scolds her daughter for spurning the attention of boys: “If you would only slow down, get off that bike of yours...and get to know some boys” (405). The daughter does not desire to fit neatly into the cultural female identity of being an accessory to a man; she would rather “disappear” (402). Her statement to her mother that “It’s all relative” indicates that she is seeking her identity in becoming rather than being, for this identity of becoming is not an identity in the usual conception of the term because it is not fixed (402). Indeed, becoming is a *relative* process of growth and change which leaves room for circularity and openness (Gardiner 352). Einstein’s daughter again demonstrates her preference for an identity of process when she says to her mother, “I’m not going to let gravity wreck me. I’m not going to spend my life at home waiting for some man to show back up. The more you try to tie me to you, the faster I’m going to go” (Brinson 406). The reference to gravity recalls Einstein’s theory of relativity again, as the mass of a moving object approaches infinity as the object’s velocity approaches the speed of light (Mermin 145). For Einstein’s daughter, this extra mass means slowness and waiting, which she sees as a “penalty”: “To me [my mother] is mass unconverted, gravity’s penalty, my immutable mother” (Brinson 406). By referring to her mother as “immutable,” Einstein’s daughter recognizes that her mother has accepted the masculine identity of being, which involves permanence and immutability (Gardiner 353). In contrast, the daughter strives for motion and impermanence, a living mode of becoming through which her individual female experience is radically expanded and enriched.

The recurrence in the generations preceding Einstein's daughter demonstrates Nietzsche's eternal recurrence theory to show that the female experience of becoming is cyclic rather than linear. Nietzsche's theory of the eternal recurrence of the same describes how, given enough time, every action, person, or state of affairs will repeat itself exactly (Nietzsche 45). In like form, the protagonist's mother describes the generations preceding Einstein's daughter as similar with only minor variation: "Do you think any daughter wants to be like her mother? I never met one... That's all you get, one small change... You think you can fly? You're my daughter. I'm bred in you" (Brinson 406). Brinson here works under a generational recurrence paradigm to understand the heritage of Einstein's daughter; like the poetic use of the scientific theory of relativity, here Nietzsche's eternal recurrence is not being used literally but as a metaphorical framework. The story opens with Einstein's daughter claiming that she "was born with the knowledge of [her] ancestors and descendants coalescing into one trait" (400). Just as it was before, so shall it be hence (Nietzsche 186). The daughter perceives that all of her preceding and following generations recur in similar fashion; she alone is the broken link. Brinson tells us that Einstein's daughter's great-grandmother Susannah directed her household from a red sofa (403). Her grandmother Reba beat her children because her husband left her (403). Her mother stays placid and content despite having a dreary and monotonous life (407). Each generation propagates the feminine stereotypes that patriarchy first prescribes and then describes (Dobie 104). The daughter alone is the defeater of the eternal recurrence. She says, "I want my mother to see that I, unlike her, am not my mother's daughter" (Brinson 406). She denies recurrence and expands her own being and possibilities as a result. By rejecting a fixed identity passed down through generational recurrence, Einstein's daughter takes on an "evolving configuration" of

identity (Gardiner 352). She exhibits a mode of becoming rather than being through her radically self-determined, as opposed to generational, approbation of process identity.

Einstein's daughter demonstrates a motion of becoming as she progressively inhabits a life of repetition, Kierkegaard's concept for the reification of the always-unfinalized individual. Kierkegaard's repetition is, briefly, a religious movement from nonexistence to existence, or abstraction to concretion (157). It is a recovering of oneself or one's identity from loss through recapitulation of the same in the individual's life (144). Thus, repetition is cyclic or circular. Brinson imbues the story with the circle motif as Einstein's daughter constantly "whirls" and "spins" throughout the story (402). The daughter says that she has "wheels, for circles let you go, spheres of faith and momentum. But right now I have only myself, and in the bombardment of possibilities I spin and twirl and spiral" (406). Here the daughter connects the circle with possibilities, which imply flexibility and fluidity—the marks of the feminine process identity (Gardiner 355). Thus repetition, the circular applied to life, is a component of becoming; repeating opens up the possibilities for unfinalized living.

Another example of repetition leading to becoming occurs when Einstein's daughter invites her mother to spin with her. She describes the experience in terms of the cyclic nature of life: "I take her hand, cold and small, and yank her to the center of the floor and twirl; ease my arms around her waist, lock them behind her back and spin; pull my mother into circumrotation, circumgyrations...around the ironing board, around her lonely self at the breakfast table" (Brinson 407). The mother does not fully embrace the experience, choosing to remain within her stasis; nevertheless, this event does cause her to become more sympathetic to her daughter's pursuit of her identity, later letting go of her as she rises (Brinson 408). By this point, the daughter has come into a full acceptance of her becoming identity as distinct from those of her

ancestors. She describes the moment of her Kierkegaardian reification, her recovering of identity from generational identity loss: “We start to circle, feeding off each other. I gain speed, reeling on a path past moon-rise, star-rise. Her hands release me, and I rise. Anabatic I rise, heading toward the only possible destination: now, a now of my own making. She has let go of me as we both knew she should. What will she do without me? I dare not stop to ask” (Brinson 408).

Earlier, Einstein’s daughter had expressed that she needed to “rescue [herself],” presumably from the generational recurrence that plagued her with a false gender identity (Brinson 405). Now she achieves this rescue, this apotheosis, as she rises toward her own “now,” the “now of [her] own making” (Brinson 408). Einstein’s daughter remains unfinalized, ascending towards an always unfinished identity, a becoming mode of living, a radically-enriched and expanded feminine experience not subject to the static being of her ancestors.

Einstein’s daughter expands and enriches her female experience by inhabiting a mode and identity of becoming, an unfinalized process, rather than of being, a fixed essence. She does so in three ways. First, she lives in accordance with the relativity of time and space in regard to motion, for which reason she moves fast and waits for nothing. Second, she denies the effect of generational recurrence upon her life, and in so doing, creates for herself possibilities of identity that never existed for her ancestors. Third, these possibilities come also as a result of the existential repetition that she embodies in her life. Brinson shows us through the apotheosis of Einstein’s daughter that the female experience can be something radically free and open: an experience of process becoming rather than static being.

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