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A Daughter's Struggle to Individuate in "Einstein's Daughter"

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Dr. Wilfong

Literary Analysis

10-30-14

Individuation in "Einstein's Daughter"

Claudia Smith Brinson's short story, "Einstein's Daughter," is a coming of age tale about a young girl who must delicately navigate her relationship with her mother in order to gain independence. The protagonist, who narrates the story, remains unnamed and is defined mostly in reference to her mother's lineage. The narrator begins the story with the concept that one's biologically inherited character traits largely determine one's future. Brinson alludes to Einstein's theory of relativity as the protagonist uses her supernormal speed to travel back in time and explore the previous three generations of families on her mother's side. She uses her observations of the characteristics and lives of her predecessors to plot the probabilities of her own future. The protagonist's struggle for autonomy demonstrates how mother-daughter relationships perpetuate patriarchal gender roles, which inherently marginalize women. Additionally, the protagonist's flight at the story's end suggests that women must reject biological essentialism and individuate from their mothers in order to fashion a sense of self that deviates from patriarchal norms.

In "Einstein's Daughter," the protagonist is acutely aware of her mother's adherence to the ideals of the patriarchal woman. According to Tyson, the patriarchal woman is "modest, unassuming, self-sacrificing, and nurturing. She has no needs of her own, for she is completely satisfied by serving her family" (89). Tyson's definition is not a comprehensive list; rather it is a brief example of traditional femininity. The protagonist's

observations of her mother reveal the mother's internalization of patriarchal norms. The mother "sits patiently, interminably, ankles crossed, hands clasped, head tilted five degrees to the left," which suggests that she has been socially constructed to sit like a lady, patiently, and holding her head at just the perfect angle (Brinson 401). Additionally, the protagonist emphasizes her mother's passivity and listlessness. She describes her mother's daily routine of "drinking decaffeinated coffee, staring out the window, . . . [leaning] against the stove, slowly stirring the vegetable soup . . . [as her wristwatch ticks] its way toward five-thirty and dusk, and, some days, the arrival of [the protagonist's] pilot father" (401). This passage conveys the mother's lethargic, mundane existence and her dependence on the male provider. The mother has internalized patriarchal femininity and accepted her duties to her husband as a housewife and as a mother to their child; she has accepted her lifestyle as normal and makes no effort to change her circumstances.

The mother's adherence to traditional femininity and gender roles causes her to exert pressure on her daughter to conform to the socially accepted norms. Nancy Chodorow refers to this process in her theory pertaining to the psychological reproduction of mothering. According to Chodorow, "the mother is very important in the daughter's psyche and sense of self, such that core psychological and interpersonal experiences for women can be understood in terms of this internal mother-daughter lineage" (339). Additionally, Chodorow asserts that "the mother-daughter relationship may overwhelm and invade both the mother's and the daughter's psyche" (340). In "Einstein's Daughter," the mother's attempts to construct her daughter's behavior encroach upon the daughter's identity, which innately contradicts traditional femininity. The mother's attempts to "train" her "irritable baby" in "the art of waiting" parallel the mother's necessary patience as she

waits for her husband to come home and demonstrate how the mother tries to reproduce her own social values and behaviors in her daughter: the mother “[straps her daughter] into the infant carrier,” “[straps her] into . . . the windup swing with its T-shaped cinch,” and “[stores her in the] playpen with its unscalable mesh walls” (401). The child’s confinement mirrors the mother’s own confinement to the home and prefigures the oppressive, housewife, lifestyle, which threatens to entrap the child. Yet, even during infancy, the protagonist opposes her mother’s restrictions: she destroys the mobile intended to pacify her “wails,” she knocks over the “infant seat,” she “[bounces] the swing until it [creaks] and [rattles] and [shivers] in its resistance to [her] orbit,” and she “[gnaws]” through the “mesh walls” of the playpen (401). The child’s behavior illustrates her innate divergence from the female stereotype and precludes her determinacy to escape the housewife lifestyle.

As the protagonist matures, she quickly recognizes that patriarchal gender roles oppress and marginalize women, and this realization initiates her attempt to formulate an identity and a future in opposition to her mother’s expectations. According to Nancy Chodorow, “women experience a sense of self-in-relation that is in contrast to men’s creation of self that wishes to deny relation and connection” (339). In “Einstein’s Daughter,” the protagonist moves away from defining her identity in relation to her mother to a more masculine kind of identity formation in which she deviates from her mother. This process occurs over the course of the story, beginning with the protagonist’s rejection of patriarchal norms. In the beginning of the story, the protagonist references a hypothetical situation, the “tale of two twins,” designed to explain Einstein’s theory of relativity and, specifically, the relativity of time (Brinson 401). According to Einstein’s theory, if one twin travels around the earth fast enough, he or she will return to earth

younger than the twin who stayed on Earth. The protagonist applies this concept to men and women in patriarchal societies; she says, “No wonder women always end up looking older than their men. Starting out even or behind won’t save them” (401). This statement conveys the protagonist’s understanding of the limitations set in place for women in a patriarchal society. She mentions Penelope, who “sits by her loom,” and “Dorothy Parker’s character, . . . [who] sits by her telephone,” calling attention to the slow-paced lives and low-paying jobs that women typically hold in factories or as secretaries (401). The protagonist’s realization that patriarchal norms keep women from leading significant, fulfilling lives enlightens for her urgency of her situation. Additionally, her understanding of the deficiencies of her mother’s proposed lifestyle initiates the protagonist’s individuation from her mother.

The protagonist’s attempt to craft an identity and a future apart from the housewife lifestyle that her mother continually reinforces demands that she reject the notion of biological essentialism, “the belief that women are innately inferior to men, . . . based on biological differences between the sexes that are considered part of our unchanging essence as men and women” (Tyson 84). Rather than surrendering to the biological influence over her identity and her future, the protagonist determines to learn from the past in order to change the outcome of her own future. When she looks into the past, she says, “The probabilities would swirl in my eyes and if I turned my head I could see the future growing behind. Stasis or travel, symmetry or adventure . . . nothing simple, nothing set, only arcs of possibilities to enfold myself in” (402). The protagonist’s belief that her future is not predetermined conflicts with her mother’s belief in the “immutable rules and consequences” of biological essentialism (402). The protagonist says that her mother

believes “what she’s been taught to think, that we’re all just floating down the river, generations caught in the current together,” which demonstrates the mother’s view that people cannot escape the generational influences that shape their futures (402). When the protagonist explores her family history, she does, in fact, find generations of women oppressed and marginalized by patriarchal norms. Her Grandfather Luke abandoned his wife Reba, who, in turn, became violent towards her eldest daughter, the protagonist’s mother (403). Her Great-grandmother Susannah, who once “[rode] horses like a man” and who “[attended] one of the first women’s colleges in the state,” married and had eight children, a few stillborn, after which she became bedridden (403). Susannah’s marriage stifled her individuality and potential to lead a fulfilling life. Yet, rather than accepting the fate of these women as natural and unavoidable, the protagonist sees Reba’s “diverted strength playing into my magic,” and “wonders, if the amount of energy in the universe is constant, is this where my powers began? Did I accrue what [Susannah] refused to use?” (403, 404). The protagonist realizes that these women were not born weak; rather, patriarchal society corrupted their strength. Yet, she does not have to make the same mistakes. She does not have to get married and have children like her mother wants her to. The daughter’s rejection of biological essentialism empowers her to embrace a sense of self entirely independent from mother’s identity and expectations.

The protagonist’s burgeoning identity creates necessary conflict in the mother-daughter relationship and forces the protagonist to accept that her own aspirations are irreconcilable with her mother’s lifestyle. The protagonist’s “simple speed” is a crucial aspect of her identity because her speed is the trait that enables her to break free from the bounds of patriarchal gender roles, which keep most women behind (400). The

protagonist's mother actively works to suppress her daughter's speed and encourages her to embrace traditional femininity saying, "If you would only slow down, get off that bike of yours, . . . and get to know some boys" (405). Additionally, when the two visit a shopping mall, the "mother's eye draws [her daughter] back beside the long-sleeved lace blouses that stain so easily, the silk dresses intended only for dancing and desire, for slow movement toward traditional resolutions" (406). The effeminate clothing that her mother suggests completely contradicts the protagonist's sense of self, which is based on her innate speed and her determination to leave the realm of the housewife. The inherent differences between the mother's expectations for her daughter and the protagonist's individual sense of self necessitate a reevaluation of the mother-daughter relationship. The mother's fierce claim over her daughter's personhood initially prevents the protagonist from leaving. The mother tells her daughter, "I'm bred in you," reiterating the inescapable biological influence (406). When the daughter tries to "show her [mother] . . . just how fast she can disappear," she doubts her ability to "avoid [her] blood," and returns, her hands "speckled with the dust of the possibilities [she] could not grasp" (406). In order for the protagonist to leave, the mother-daughter relationship must mature. The mother must acknowledge that it is her responsibility to allow her daughter to grow into her own chosen identity, regardless of her daughter's rejection of traditional femininity. The story's closing image suggests the importance of the mother's release as the two women "clasp hands and lean back, opposing forces . . . feeding off each other" (408). Ultimately the protagonist needs her mother to acknowledge their differences and willingly release her to "a now of [her] own making" (408).

In "Einstein's Daughter," the protagonist's relationship with her mother demonstrates how the mother's identity and ideology influences the daughter's sense of self. The mother's internalized patriarchal norms contradict the daughter's inherent nature and nontraditional aspirations for her future, such that the daughter must individuate from her mother in order to grow into her true identity. The story's end suggests that mother-daughter relationships must move beyond the reproduction of patriarchal gender roles and permit subjective views of femininity in order to break the cycle of female oppression and marginalization. Ultimately, both mothers and daughters must embrace individuality and reject the concept of predetermined, uniform gender roles.

Works Cited

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