

**Pastiche and Family Strife in Contemporary American Women's
Graphic Memoirs: Phoebe Gloeckner, Lynda Barry and Alison Bechdel**

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Abstract

This thesis examines pastiche in contemporary American women's graphic memoirs. It investigates how the visual/verbal combination of the genre performs the contemporary women artists' engagement with the male literary and artistic canon towards feminist reparative ends. Taking Phoebe Gloeckner, Lynda Barry and Alison Bechdel's works as representative examples of the genre, I argue that pastiche reacts against the injuries inflicted on their autobiographical subjects by abusive parents, as well as the injuries inflicted on women artists by the marginalisation of their art.

Chapter 1 examines Phoebe Gloeckner's graphic memoirs *A Child's Life and Other Stories* and *The Diary of a Teenage Girl: An Account in Words and Pictures*. It demonstrates how the girl protagonist is formed through the visual/verbal medium and allusions to previous texts, both of which negotiate the status of the female body – underage and adult – as a passive sexual spectacle under the authoritative male gaze. In addition, it shows that, while referencing those texts, Gloeckner's graphic memoirs simultaneously undo and challenge their meanings towards the autobiographical subject's reparation and the feminist reconfiguration of the female spectacle.

Chapter 2 considers Lynda Barry's *One! Hundred! Demons!* and *What It Is* in relation to canonical verbal/visual texts that engage with the subject of gender ambiguity and maternal monstrosity. It analyses how previous meanings and formal characteristics are repeated and revised in Barry's works for the formulation of the autobiographical subject as reunited with the maternal body. It also demonstrates how Barry's texts perform a feminist deconstruction of the boundaries between high and low art in a way that foregrounds the significance of everyday domestic artistic production.

Chapter 3 investigates how Alison Bechdel's engagement with the male homosexual literary canon in *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* allows the Oedipal reunion of the lesbian daughter with the closeted homosexual father. By showing how the canonical literary past is translated into the verbal/visual register of comics, this chapter introduces the potential of the medium for the performance of denaturalised and complex formations of gender and sexuality that repair the autobiographical subject's injuries and underscore the cultural significance of the artistic daughter's work.

The conclusion draws my arguments together and underlines the function of pastiche as reparation and the cultural significance of American women's graphic memoirs. It also briefly refers to two examples that demonstrate the continuity and variations of pastiche in contemporary texts, which call for academic attention and foreground the availability of comics to perform complex subject formations and a productive engagement with past traditions.

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Introduction

This thesis examines pastiche in contemporary American women's graphic memoirs. Taking Phoebe Gloeckner's *A Child's Life and Other Stories* (1998) and *The Diary of a Teenage Girl: An Account in Words and Pictures* (2002), Lynda Barry's *One! Hundred! Demons!* (2002) and *What It Is* (2009), and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006) as representative examples of the genre, this study shows how meanings created in texts from the male literary and artistic canon are reconfigured towards the survival of each autobiographical subject beyond a trauma caused by problematic relationships with abusive parental figures. By focusing on how the formal characteristics of comics are productively expanded through each artist's reflection on, and negotiation of previous art and literature, this thesis demonstrates how the contemporary graphic memoirs make an intervention in the field of graphic narratives. Simultaneously, it demonstrates how these graphic memoirs intervene in the longer history of Western art and literature to undo the prescribed formation of the woman and the girl therein by introducing women artists as agents of their own subjectivities and experiences. Thus, it brings forth the medium of comics, infused with artistic and literary influences, as a tool that can complicate and enrich contemporary autobiographical narratives.¹ By so doing, it aims to lay emphasis on the cultural significance of such texts and to intervene in different academic fields through its interdisciplinary approach: in comics scholarship, in visual culture studies and the study of contemporary women's life narratives, in the academic examination of trauma in relation to the visual, and in the field of intertextual studies.

Existing criticism on graphic memoirs has largely focused on the novelty of the medium of comics and the possibilities it offers in the formation of autobiographical

¹ There have been studies that describe and prescribe formal characteristics of comics like panels, frames, captions, speech balloons and their arrangement on each page. See Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994); Will Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, 2nd ed. (Tamarac, FL: Poorhouse Press, 1995); Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, trans. Bart Beaty and Nick Nguyen (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007); and Mario Saraceni, *The Language of Comics* (London: Routledge, 2003). However, I am using the term "comics" to refer to a loose category of verbal/visual narratives, including but not restricted to the version described by the comics specialists mentioned above. In the following chapters it will become clear that the graphic memoirs discussed in this thesis productively stretch the boundaries of comics. Thus, efforts to prescribe their formal characteristics restrict our understanding of the medium's potential. For critiques of such prescribed formal characteristics, see Elizabeth El Refaie, "Introduction," in *Autobiographical Comics: Life Writing in Pictures* (Jackson: Mississippi University Press, 2012), 6; and Hillary L. Chute, "Decoding Comics," *Modern Fiction Studies* 52, no. 4 (2006): 1020, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/modern_fiction_studies/v052/52.4chute03.html.

subjects due to its visual/verbal combination.² However, it has not paid attention to how past artistic and literary elements reappear in the context of these memoirs and how they change and complicate autobiographical narratives told by means of the verbal/visual form. For example, Elizabeth El Refaie explains that despite intensifying readers' engagement with the text, the identification of past influences is not necessary to our understanding of autobiographical comics.³ This thesis argues that the examination of traces from the literary and artistic male canon in contemporary American women's graphic memoirs provides further insights into the construction of autobiographical subjects.⁴ It introduces these subjects beyond prescribed formations of gender and sexuality, and by so doing, it invests them with a self-sufficiency that, as I argue, repairs their wounds, which are caused by parental abuse and authority.

Memory in the Comics Form: Re-Membering the Male Canon and the Family

This study also introduces Gloeckner, Barry and Bechdel's graphic memoirs as reparative cultural formations that react to the marginalisation of women's art. To demonstrate how these texts claim cultural significance I examine the potential comics offers as a performance of the contemporary artists' revision and re-imagination of male canonical literary and artistic elements towards feminist ends. The contemporary texts form a part of the longer history in women's cultural production, of which Gloeckner, Barry and Bechdel are aware. Nevertheless, they strategically engage with male-dominated traditions to mediate the three artists' criticism and subversive struggles. This is why for the purposes of this thesis the canon is defined as male, despite the modifications that resulted out of feminist and postcolonial movements. Hence, I use Griselda Pollock's definition of the term. Pollock describes the canon as "the retrospectively legitimating backbone of a

² See Michael A. Chaney, ed., *Graphic Subjects: Critical Essays on Autobiography and Graphic Novels* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011); Charles Hatfield, *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005); Joseph Witek, *Comic Books as History: The Narrative Art of Jack Jackson, Art Spiegelman, and Harvey Pekar* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989); Rocco Versaci, *This Book Contains Graphic Language: Comics as Literature* (New York: Continuum, 2007); Hillary L. Chute, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); and Elizabeth El Refaie, *Autobiographical Comics: Life Writing in Pictures* (Jackson: Mississippi University Press, 2012).

³ El Refaie, *Autobiographical Comics*, 216-219. Most criticism on intertextual references in contemporary graphic memoirs discusses Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, and I engage with it in detail in the third chapter.

⁴ It is important to distinguish between author/artist, narrator and narrated "I" in autobiographical texts. For the distinction, see Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, "Autobiographical Acts," in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 72-73. Smith and Watson also use the term "autobiographical avatar" to refer to the narrated "I," visually constructed in the medium of comics. See Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 169. In this thesis, I will use the term autobiographical avatar to refer to the visually constructed self in the graphic memoirs and autobiographical subject to refer to the self as both a narrator and as visually embodied in each text.

cultural and political identity, a consolidated narrative of origin, conferring authority on the texts selected to naturalise this function,” a space of gender asymmetry, characterised also as an “all-male club.”⁵ Similarly, autobiography critics Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson note that the canon is “a culturally valued set of texts that are agreed to represent the ‘best’ that the culture has produced,” and they proceed to note that

canons are determined by widely recognized sources of cultural authority, a person or group of people charged with establishing criteria of inclusion and exclusion that determine what fits and what doesn’t fit the criteria [which] vary with culture, the national language, and the historical period.⁶

Since the canon is defined as an “all-male” club that excludes women’s work as unworthy, in this thesis I demonstrate how, from the space of exile, contemporary American women cartoonists react against the marginalisation of their art through their graphic memoirs and how they assert its cultural significance as they formulate their protagonists beyond trauma. Without diminishing the value of women artists’ cultural production, in this thesis I introduce Gloeckner, Barry and Bechdel’s works as performances of each artist’s strategic move to critically engage with male dominant texts so as to reconfigure their meanings in ways that lead towards reparation and trauma survival. To do so, I examine how traces from the male canon I have detected in their works are reconfigured through the medium of comics, which has been associated with the counterculture and juvenilia due to its verbal/visual nature.⁷ As Gloeckner, Barry and Bechdel remember and recreate childhood experiences, they follow the same process with regards to elements from the canonical cultural past. This thesis focuses on this remembering to show how it can function reparatively in relation to the autobiographical narrative and the cultural context that I have described above.

To refer to the memory processes that take place in each graphic memoir, I use the “memory” as an active interpretation and recreation of the past and not as a retrieval of

⁵ Griselda Pollock, “About Canons and Culture Wars,” in *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art’s Histories* (London: Routledge, 1999), 3-5.

⁶ Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 98. I am using the term “culture,” as defined by Edward Said to mean “all the practices, like the arts of description, communication and representation, that have relative autonomy from the economic, social and political realms and that often exist in aesthetic form.” See Edward Said, “Introduction,” in *Culture and Imperialism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage, 1994), xii.

⁷ El Refaie, for example, identifies the potential of comics as subversive cultural tools because of their associations with juvenilia, counterculture and the margins. El Refaie, *Autobiographical Comics*, 4. See also David Carrier, “Words and Pictures Bound Together; Or Experiencing the Unity of Comics,” in *The Aesthetics of Comics* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 62; and Versaci, *This Book Contains Graphic Language*, 2.

actual events as they happened.⁸ As Nicola King puts it, memory is a process “of continuous revision, or ‘retranslation,’ reworking memory-traces in light of later knowledge and experience.”⁹ Sigmund Freud also notes that the subject of childhood recollection sees himself as an object in the process of remembering. Hence, his memory cannot be an exact replica of the previous event, because remembering is also guided by particular motives.¹⁰ Perceiving reparation as the motive behind Gloeckner, Barry and Bechdel’s remembering and behind the interpreting subject’s interaction with the texts, I show that the way in which childhood experiences and traces from the male canon are remembered function to undo both the wounds of each autobiographical subject and the devalued status of women’s art.

Comics scholar Jared Gardner is among the few who have noted the availability of the verbal/visual medium for productive engagement with the media of the past. He points out that with the development of new media at the turn of the twentieth to the twenty-first century, new ways beyond the verbal are required to express the relationship of the present to the past.¹¹ The examples he provides to substantiate his argument do not include women cartoonists’ work. Nevertheless, in his examination of texts by male artists like Art Spiegelman, Seth, Daniel Clowes and Chris Ware, he observes that they include “archives of ... forgotten artefacts and ephemera of American popular culture.”¹² These archives, as he explains, aid each protagonist in his efforts to make sense of his place in the world by collecting and preserving items from popular culture.¹³ His discussion ends with the claim that “comic writing is the only medium capable of ... allowing the shades of the past to overlap with and speak the impulses of the present ... [of] making the present aware of its

⁸ For definitions of memory as an active and contextualised re-interpretation of the past, see Annette Huhn, “From Home to Nation,” in *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (London: Verso, 1995, 2002), 147-169; Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 92; and Daniel L. Schacter, “Introduction: Memory’s Fragile Power,” in *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind, and the Past* (New York: Basic Books, 1996), 6-9.

⁹ Nicola King, “Introduction: But We Didn’t Know that Then,” in *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 1.

¹⁰ See Sigmund Freud, “Screen Memories,” in *Early Psychoanalytic Publications*, Vol. 3, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, trans. James Strachey, eds. James Strachey and Anna Freud, 2nd ed. (London: Vintage, 2001), 321-322.

¹¹ See Jared Gardner, “Archives, Collectors, and the New Media Work of Comics,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 52, no. 4 (2006): 787- 806, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/modern_fiction_studies/v052/52.4gardner.html.

¹² *Ibid.*, 787.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 788.

... past that is always in the process of becoming.”¹⁴ It is on this ability of comics, as identified by Gardner, that this thesis focuses.

Specifically, by examining how canonical texts from the fields of literature, the visual arts and illustrated writing are transformed through each artist’s vision and mediated through visual/verbal combinations, and by pointing to the permeability of these distinct categories, I aim to further push the boundaries of comics scholarship. Simultaneously, I want to foreground the potential of these turn-of-the-century texts as complex feminist expressions and point to the evolvement of the genre, which emerged at the countercultural margins of the United States during the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁵ Although I return to the description of my approach in the following sections of this introduction, I will now proceed to briefly describe the American underground comics scene to show the position of the woman therein and how and why women’s autobiographical comics first appeared. By so doing, I want to introduce the genre’s feminist origins and demonstrate how its current progression accentuates its cultural impact as a feminist tool.

Even though women’s autobiographical comics appeared in the underground context, it was male artists like Robert Crumb who were the initiators of the genre and in their work, women were depicted mostly as violated and abused sexual objects. Such texts were formed as reactions against the “comics code,” imposed on mainstream comics during the 1950s by Fredric Wertham, who believed them to contribute towards juvenile delinquency.¹⁶ Amy Kyste Nyberg defines the code as “a set of regulatory guidelines primarily concerned with sex, violence, and language drawn up by publishers and enforced by the ‘code authority.’”¹⁷ The code, therefore, imposed restrictions on the free expression of comics artists, against which underground male creators reacted mostly via visual

¹⁴ Ibid., 799.

¹⁵ For discussions on the emergence of the genre of autobiographical comics, see Jared Gardner, “Autobiography’s Biography, 1972-2007,” *Biography* 31, no. 1 (2008): 1-26, <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/biography/v031/31.1.gardner.html>; Mark J. Estren, “Whence They Cometh,” *A History of Underground Comics*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley, CA: Ronin Publishing, 1974, 1993), 25-57; Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*, 3-31; and Roger Sabin, “Going Underground,” in *Comics, Comix and Graphic Novels* (London: Phaidon, 1996), 92-188. Here, I would like to note the use of the term “comix” as opposed to “comics” by comics scholars, artists and specialists to distinguish between underground and mainstream productions.

¹⁶ For the code, see Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York: Rinehart, 1954).

¹⁷ Amy Kyste Nyberg, “Introduction,” in *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), vii.

depictions of women's sexual violation.¹⁸ Indeed, Naomi Wolf explains that comics like Robert Crumb's *Zap* series depict a masculinist backlash against women and girls as they construct images of "child abuse and rape."¹⁹ Underground autobiographical comics therefore became a cultural discourse strongly connected with the formation and reproduction of the woman and the girl as sexual objects.

Women cartoonists started reacting against the misogynist comics scene described above, and their work was influenced and motivated by the Women's Liberation movement.²⁰ Emerging as marginal within the countercultural margins, women's autobiographical comics were associated with feminist struggles from their very origins. One of the most significant members of the women underground comics scene, Trina Robbins, notes that from the late 1960s onwards women cartoonists began claiming a space to voice their own experiences in underground comics.²¹ She observes that the year "1970 saw an explosion of feminist underground newspapers all over America," with "*It Ain't Me Babe*, the first women's liberation newspaper," being published in San Francisco.²² In this context, all-women feminist comics started to appear. *Gay Comics*, *It Ain't Me Babe: Women's Liberation*, *Tits 'n' Clits* and *Abortion Eve* are titles emblematic of the subject matters they addressed, which varied from questioning the sexist representation of women in comics to discussing issues of abortion, masturbation and sexuality.²³

¹⁸ For representative examples of male violence against women in underground comics, see the collected work of Crumb in Robert Crumb, *The Complete Crumb*, Vol. 1-17, ed. Robert Boyd (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2009).

¹⁹ Naomi Wolf, "Sex," in *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty Are Used Against Women* (London: Vintage, 1990), 137. See also Beth Bailey, "Sex as a Weapon: Underground Comix and the Paradox of Liberation," in *Imagine the Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and 70s*, eds. Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle (London: Routledge, 2002), 305-324.

²⁰ With regards to women's autobiographical comics in the American Underground and its association with the Women's Liberation movement, see Roger Sabin, "Women and Adult Comics," in *Adult Comics: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1993), 221-233; Trina Robbins, *From Girls to Grrrlz: A History of ♀ Comics from Teens to Zines* (San Francisco: Chronicle, 1999), 79-142; Trina Robbins, "Chicks and Womyn," in *The Great Women Cartoonists* (New York: Watson-Guption, 2001), 108-142; Aline Kominsky-Crumb, "Escape: Art School, Flower Power, Drugs, Sex, Early Wimmen's Comics, Twisted Sisters," in *Need More Love: A Graphic Memoir* (London: MQ Publications, 2007), 98-166; and Ana Merino, "Women in Comics: A Space for Recognizing Other Voices," *The Comics Journal* 237 (2001), <http://www.tcj.com/the-comics-journal-no-237-september-2001/>.

²¹ See Robbins, *From Girls to Grrrlz*, 79-111.

²² *Ibid.*, 85.

²³ *Ibid.*

Wimmen's Comix was to include the first autobiographical work by a woman artist, Aline Kominsky-Crumb.²⁴ Ever since, as Robbins explains, “autobiography has ... become a staple of comics drawn by women, and big chunks of women’s comix tend to be about the artist’s dysfunctional family [and] miserable childhood.”²⁵ Indeed, Kominsky-Crumb’s autobiographical comics in *Wimmen's Comix* and *Twisted Sisters* demonstrate a preoccupation with problematic parental figures, adolescent sexual experimentation, obsessive masturbation and abusive sexual contact.²⁶ Her undisciplined black-and-white drawing style and the obscene subject matter of her work underscore its underground origins as they also narrate the female experiences that were silenced both in mainstream and underground comics. With this project, I point out how the medium’s early association with feminist expression and struggle evolves at the turn of the century, and I argue that in its contemporary maturation the genre tackles similar subjects but in more complex and artistically informed ways.

Indeed, dysfunctional family lives, miserable childhoods and experimentation with female sexuality continue to be the central focus in contemporary American women’s graphic memoirs, as Gloeckner, Barry and Bechdel’s works suggest. However, this thesis will show that the genre has undergone a process of maturation in the years between 1970 and the turn of the century, shown, if only, by their compilation in book versions and their circulation outside the countercultural margins. In the following chapters, I demonstrate how their progress, also reflected in the intertextual references I have identified therein, complicates and enriches problematic childhood narratives and expressions of gender and sexuality, as it also allows the formulation of autobiographical subjects beyond childhood injuries and traumas caused by abusive parents.

The Trauma Effect in Contemporary Women’s Graphic Memoirs and the Possibility for Reparation

The version of trauma I have identified in the three case studies I interrogate is that which Maria Root describes as “insidious” and it stems from situations of repetitive abuse and

²⁴ Robbins, *From Girls to Grrrlz*, 90.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

²⁶ For a collection of Kominsky-Crumb’s autobiographical comics previously published in *The Twisted Sisters* and *Wimmen's Comix*, see Aline Kominsky-Crumb, *Love that Bunch*, ed. Gary Groth (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 1990). For a discussion on her work, see the first chapter in Chute, *Graphic Women*, 29-60.

discrimination, which cause feelings of anxiety and distress to the victim.²⁷ While it has different causes in each artist's texts, the reappearance of this ongoing subtle trauma in Gloeckner, Barry and Bechdel's childhood narratives points to its centrality in the American cultural context. Commenting upon the effect of trauma in American Studies, Ann Cvetkovich explains that

Constructing the history of the United States from the vantage point of trauma produces a critical American studies, one that revises a celebratory account of the nation and instead illuminates its emergence from a history that includes capitalism and economic exploitation, war, colonialism and the genocide of native peoples, and slavery, diaspora, and migration.²⁸

Cvetkovich's comment concerns public trauma caused by large-scale events that affect U.S. history in their emergence as disillusioning factors in idealist formations of the nation. This thesis shifts attention from the national to the private realm of the American family as reflected in the graphic memoirs I examine in the following chapters. Nevertheless, in my exploration of how insidious domestic trauma is negotiated in each artist's texts, another form of public injury surfaced, one that is caused by women artists' marginalisation in the cultural domain. Hence, this thesis examines contemporary American women artists' graphic memoirs as performances of such traumas and as reparative reactions to them.

Insidious trauma is, as Maria Root suggests, more subtle and continuous but less harmful in the victim's life than the trauma that Cathy Caruth describes.²⁹ For Caruth, trauma is "an overwhelming experience of sudden, catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena."³⁰ Root, however, notes that the continuity and "the frequency of insidious trauma results in a construction of reality in which certain dimensions of security are not very secure."³¹ The victim of insidious trauma is called

²⁷ For a description of insidious trauma, see Maria P.P. Root, "Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on Personality," in *Personality and Psychopathology: Feminist Reappraisals*, eds. Laura S. Brown and Mary Ballou (New York: Guilford Press, 1992), 241.

²⁸ Ann Cvetkovich, "The Everyday Life of Queer Trauma," in *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (London: Duke University Press, 2003), 36.

²⁹ Root, "Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on Personality," 241.

³⁰ See Cathy Caruth, "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History," in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 11.

³¹ Root, "Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on Personality," 241. For a similar discussion on continuous trauma, see also Chapters Four and Five in Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 2nd ed. (London: Pandora, 2010), 74-114.

therefore to adopt and survive in an everyday life where suffering is the habitual and not the unusual.³²

Similarly, Leigh Gilmore notes that in memoirs narrating abused childhood, there is “a kind of violence that begins at an earlier age, has longer duration, and gets connected to growing up in such a way that the boundaries of violence, or the location of limit and trauma, are overwhelmingly difficult to chart.”³³ It is precisely this notion of everyday insidious childhood trauma, stemming from abusive and distant parents, that is demonstrated in the graphic memoirs studied in this thesis. As Ann Cvetkovich puts it in *An Archive of Feelings*, it is “a sense of trauma as connected to the textures of everyday experience ... [and] moments of everyday emotional distress.”³⁴ Here, I want to clarify that even though it is a repeated phenomenon in the three artists’ works, insidious trauma has different causes and outcomes in each case, thus reflecting distinct forms of suffering within the American family domain. Consequently, as the following chapters will show, each artist uses pastiche differently to reach distinct artistic results and to achieve the reparation that each version of trauma demands.

For example, in Chapter One, I examine how Gloeckner’s version of trauma stems from the girl protagonist’s sexualisation and sexual suffering caused by stepfather figures in the family domain.³⁵ I demonstrate that in her narration, Gloeckner chooses to critically engage with male canonical cultural works that produce and reproduce the status of the woman and the girl as passive sexual beings. Furthermore, I explain how she strategically subverts them to introduce both the girl’s experience of sexual suffering, and her survival beyond it. Reparation lies in Gloeckner’s feminist reconfiguration of the canonical texts in ways that make them construct the girl’s narrative rather than that of the male artist. In Chapter Two, I discuss the second version of insidious trauma in Lynda Barry’s graphic

³² Laura Brown discusses insidious trauma in relation to incest and notes that such phenomena call for the re-examination and reconfiguration of Caruth’s definition of trauma to suit situations of everyday, less catastrophic private events. See Laura S. Brown, “Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma,” in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 100-112.

³³ Leigh Gilmore, “There Will Always be a Father: Transference and the Auto/Biographical Demand in Mikal Gilmore’s *Shot in the Head*,” in *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 92.

³⁴ Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 3.

³⁵ See Phoebe Gloeckner, *A Child’s Life and Other Stories*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley, CA: Frog Books, 1998, 2000); and Phoebe Gloeckner, *The Diary of a Teenage Girl: An Account in Words and Pictures* (Berkeley, CA: Frog Books, 2002).

memoirs, which stems from maternal estrangement and abuse.³⁶ As I will explain, given that what is at stake is maternal hostility, the artist chooses to focus on male canonical texts that concern either directly or indirectly the subject of mother/infant unity and maternal monstrosity. Reparation is achieved through Barry's strategic move to resignify the meanings of the previous texts through a childish artistic perspective, which will be shown to allow the embodiment of the mother/infant conflation and the positive transformation of maternal monstrosity. Lastly, in Chapter Three, I analyse Bechdel's narrative of how paternal closeted homosexuality causes the father to be distant and violent against the daughter, hence forming the third version of insidious trauma interrogated in this thesis.³⁷ As trauma stems from the father's closeted secret, Bechdel turns to the fin-de-siècle and the early twentieth century male homosexual literary canon to repeat and reconfigure it through the visual/verbal register so as to make it speak her father's secret in parallel with her own lesbian masculinity. Bechdel's artistic decision will be shown to function reparatively for the protagonist by Oedipally conflating the father/daughter pair in the context of her graphic memoir. By demonstrating how each artist's work negotiates distinct versions of trauma, which demand different uses of pastiche and different forms of reparation, I want to foreground the availability of comics in relation to the performance of engagement with the cultural past, the expression of insidious trauma and the achievement of reparation.

In *Graphic Women*, Hillary Chute also discusses the aforementioned works in relation to how they negotiate trauma. However, she focuses on the potential of visual images to mediate what verbal language fails to express about traumatic experiences and memories. Her discussions demonstrate how, as Leigh Gilmore has suggested, "trauma mocks language."³⁸ Chute's analysis of the representation of trauma in the verbal/visual medium of contemporary women's graphic memoirs underscores the association of traumatic memory with the visual. Indeed, Cathy Caruth has noted that "to be traumatized is ... to be haunted by an image," and in her observation she introduces the power of the visual in relation to the mediation of trauma.³⁹ If trauma "mocks language," as Gilmore suggests, then the "haunting" visual becomes a more suitable medium for its expression.

³⁶ See Lynda Barry, *One! Hundred! Demons!* (Seattle: Sasquatch Books, 2002); and Lynda Barry, *What It Is* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009).

³⁷ See Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006).

³⁸ See Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography*, 6.

³⁹ See Cathy Caruth, ed., "Introduction," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 4. In relation to fragmented traumatic memory where certain events are repressed, see Freud, *Early Psychoanalytic Publications*, 306.

This is precisely the aspect of graphic memoirs that Chute's discussion focuses on, as it explains how the fragmented verbal/visual medium succeeds in constructing the difficulties that emerge in the expression of trauma. Chute discusses childhood sexual abuse and incest in relation to Barry and Gloeckner's graphic memoirs. She shows how the medium allows the construction of traumatic memories, the victim's inability to comprehend and process the traumatic event in its occurrence, and its delayed recognition as such.⁴⁰ She also introduces the potential of comics to represent the gap that emerges in Bechdel's *Fun Home* by the unexpected death of Alison's father, which leads to the protagonist's obsessive archival research in her struggle to make sense of it.⁴¹ Even though the critic foregrounds the potential of the medium in relation to the expression of trauma, she does not pay attention to the recreation of the male canon in these graphic memoirs and to trauma as an everyday insidious process. Consequently, she fails to point to the potential of such work to be reparative.

This thesis addresses the gap that emerges in *Graphic Women* by introducing the possibility for reparation via intertextual references incorporated in the visual/verbal medium of comics. Nevertheless, both Chute's discussions, as well as the ones that follow in the next three chapters, are situated within the contemporary rise of academic interest in the visual with regards to the representation of trauma. In *Picture Theory*, Thomas Mitchell observes that "we live in a culture of images, a society of the spectacle, a world of semblances and simulacra" and that we "are surrounded by pictures."⁴² Technological advances, such as the availability of the Internet and the personal computer, have allowed a wealth of visual images to inform us about events that take place on a worldwide scope. Among those events are also catastrophic and traumatic ones, like scenes of torture from the war in Iraq and the collapse of the World Trade Center. The mediation of such traumatic situations by visual means affects spectators in radically different ways than their verbal mediation would, and this is the context in which the contemporary academic examination of public trauma in relation to the visual has emerged.

⁴⁰ Freud describes childhood sexual trauma, which is not perceived as such at the time of its occurrence but in its mnemonic retrieval. See Freud, *Early Psychoanalytic Publications*, 164. For an analysis of Freud's discussion on the delayed construction of sexual trauma, the *Nachträglichkeit*, see also Jean Laplanche and Jean B. Pontalis, "Deferred Action; Deffered," in *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (London: Hogarth Press, 1973), 112-113.

⁴¹ See Chapters Two, Three and Five in Chute, *Graphic Women*, 61-134, 175-218.

⁴² W.J. Thomas Mitchell, "Introduction," in *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994), 5.

Marianne Hirsch, for example, describes the obsessive censorship imposed on visual images from the war in Iraq and the fall of the towers on September eleventh and notes the strong emotional reaction of spectators towards them.⁴³ Jill Bennett, too, explains that visual images have more power than words in the expression of traumatic events because “the eye can function as a mute witness through which events register as eidetic memory, [as] images imprinted with sensation.”⁴⁴ Tobin Siebers also notes “the excessive expressivity of images,” a characteristic that leads to a constant policing of their circulation.⁴⁵ Hirsch explains that “media representations function like euphemisms to obstruct seeing, saying and understanding,” in periods of public trauma.⁴⁶ In parallel to this general censorship, however, she introduces Art Spiegelman’s graphic memoir *In the Shadow of No Towers*, which describes the protagonist’s reaction to the terrorist attack at the World Trade Center by rendering the witness’s uncensored “traumatic seeing” of the events through the visual element of comics.⁴⁷ As she points out, in times of censorship there is an urgent need for the development of a “visual literacy” that will allow for a more complex construction of narratives of trauma.⁴⁸ According to her, the medium of comics is useful because it “reveal[s] the limited obstructed vision that characterizes a historical moment ruled by trauma and censorship.”⁴⁹

Gillian Whitlock, in agreement with Hirsch, also notes that the restrictions imposed around images from the war in Iraq and the area around ground zero “shape a new and

⁴³ Marianne Hirsch, “Editor’s Column: Collateral Damage,” *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 119, no. 5 (Oct 2004): 1211, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25486117>. John Groeger notes “the picture superiority effect” to describe how pictorial information is recalled more easily on a short-term basis, thus underlining the effect of pictorial representations on the spectator. See John A. Groeger, “Remembering Complex Events,” in *Memory and Remembering: Everyday Memory in Context* (Essex: Longman, 1997), 90-99. In relation to the rising significance of visual images after the war in Iraq, 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, see also Nicholas Mirzoeff, “Introduction,” in *Introduction to Visual Culture*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2009), 1-20.

⁴⁴ Jill Bennett, “The Aesthetics of Sense-Memory: Theorizing Trauma through the Visual Arts,” in *Trauma and Erinnerung, Trauma and Memory: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, eds. Franz Kaltenbeck and Peter Wieber (Vienna: Passagen, 2000), 84.

⁴⁵ Tobin Siebers, “Words Stare like a Glass Eye: From Literary to Visual Disability Studies and Back Again,” *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 119, no. 5 (2004): 1316, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25486125>.

⁴⁶ Hirsch, “Editor’s Column,” 1214.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 1213. For Spiegelman’s graphic memoir, see Art Spiegelman, *In the Shadow of No Towers* (London: Viking, 2004).

⁴⁸ Hirsch, “Editor’s Column,” 1212.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 1213. Gillian Whitlock and Anna Poletti also refer to the “cartoon wars” of 2005 caused by the Muslim reaction against a Danish newspaper’s cartoon representation of Prophet Muhammad to point to the global distribution and the emotional effect of cartoon images. Gillian Whitlock and Anna Poletti, “Self-Regarding Art,” *Biography* 31, no.1 (2008): ix, <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/biography/v031/31.1.whitlock.html>.

urgent context for the sustained discussion of words and images, of reading and looking.”⁵⁰ Deviating from the U.S. cultural centre where the genre of autobiographical comics emerged, Whitlock discusses Marjane Satrapi’s graphic memoir *Persepolis* as a text that reflects the complexities of comics in recreating the child protagonist’s experience of the revolution in Iran.⁵¹ Both Spiegelman and Satrapi’s graphic memoirs, however, engage with the traumatic events that Cathy Caruth describes. In each case we come across an extraordinary public event and each protagonist’s reaction to it. Unlike the aforementioned critics, I have not identified in contemporary American women’s graphic memoirs the return to and expression of such traumatic incidents.

In contrast, I have detected, as explained, a subtler and more continuous process, the boundaries of which are difficult to chart, which derives from children protagonists’ interaction with abusive parents.⁵² To a different extent, I approach contemporary women’s graphic memoirs as responses to another form of insidious trauma that is not constructed in the *mise-en-scène* space of each graphic memoir. Maria Root notes that one of the three categories she divides insidious trauma into is associated with repetitive racism, sexism, anti-Semitism and other forms of continuous discrimination in one’s environment.⁵³ Perceiving sexual discrimination as a cause for such a trauma, I am looking at the history of Western canonical male art and literature and the until-recently continuous rejection of female work therein as another traumatic situation against which Gloeckner, Barry and Bechdel’s graphic memoirs emerge as reparations.⁵⁴

In this light, my work is situated next to that of Ann Cvetkovich in *Depression: A Public Feeling*, where she explains that insidious trauma is associated with the feeling of

⁵⁰ Gillian Whitlock, “Autographics: The Seeing ‘I’ of the Comics,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 52, no. 4 (2006): 965, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/modern_fiction_studies/v052/52.4whitlock.html. See also Marjane Satrapi, *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood and the Story of a Return* (London: Vintage, 2008).

⁵¹ Whitlock, “Autographics,” 965.

⁵² In relation to childhood autobiography and the frequency of documentation of children’s relations to often absent and abusive parents, see John Hodgson, *The Search for the Self: Childhood in Autobiography and Fiction Since 1940* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 19, 33-35; and Chapters Four and Seven of Richard N. Coe, *When the Grass Was Taller: Autobiography and the Experience of Childhood* (London: Yale University Press, 1984), 139-168, 240-274. See also the Introduction and Chapter One in King, *Memory, Narrative, Identity*, 1-32; Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 155; and Nancy K. Miller, “The Entangled Self: Genre Bondage in the Age of the Memoir,” *Publications of Modern Language Association in America* 122, no. 2 (2007): 542-544, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25501720>.

⁵³ According to Root, the second type derives from “unresolved trauma attendant defensive behaviors and/or helplessness that is transmitted transgenerationally,” and the third from conditions of sickness, like cancer. See Root, “Reconstructing the Impact of Trauma on Personality,” 141.

⁵⁴ In relation to the canonisation of male artists and the exclusion of women artists from the canon, see Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, “Painted Ladies,” in *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (London: Harper Collins, 1981), 114-133.

everyday depression and that “women’s [art is] a site of struggle and [a] renewed opportunity for feminist politics” in a cultural context where it is constantly devalued.⁵⁵ With this thesis, I introduce contemporary American women’s graphic memoirs as sites where the engagement with and revision of canonical influences in a countercultural medium can react against such devaluation and fight what Cvetkovich describes as women artists’ cultural depression. Thus, I am arguing that these texts become performances of “cultural memory,” a memory that, as Mieke Bal explains, “can be understood as a cultural phenomenon as well as an individual or a social one,” and that they show how “the past is continuously modified and redescribed even as it continues to shape the future.”⁵⁶

Apart from introducing a cultural feminist statement, however, the memory of the literary and artistic canon performed in each text simultaneously intervenes in the autobiographical narrative and constructs the autobiographical subject beyond her injuries. As explained, in Gloeckner’s graphic memoirs, I discuss how it constructs the story of the protagonist’s sexual development, her quasi-incestuous sexual abuse and her move beyond the injury it causes. In Barry’s texts, I examine how the autobiographical subject is performed through what I will describe as the artist’s childish artistic revision of the paternal canon, beyond the injury of maternal estrangement and in a state of conflation with the mother. Lastly, I demonstrate how Bechdel’s cultural memory facilitates the Oedipal reunion between the closeted homosexual father figure and the lesbian masculine daughter. Consequently, in this thesis I show how the verbal/visual medium of comics and the remembering of the male literary and artistic canon can engage with and mediate distinct experiences of female insidious trauma and how it can work towards its reparation. To support the aforementioned argument, I largely focus on the visual aspect of these graphic memoirs due to what Tobin Siebers describes as its “excessive expressivity.” As it will become clear, while the verbal text narrates trauma, it is primarily through the visual images that trauma can be undone and the status of the woman and the girl reconfigured beyond the restrictions that the verbal text imposes. While I will describe these restrictions in more detail in the following section of this introduction, I proceed to explain my analytical approach to the primary texts.

⁵⁵ See Ann Cvetkovich, “The Utopia of Ordinary Habit: Crafting, Creativity, and Spiritual Practice,” *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 167.

⁵⁶ Mieke Bal, “Introduction,” in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, eds. Mieke Bal, Jonathan V. Crew and Leo Spitzer (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999), 7-11.

Questioning the Psychoanalytical Father: Female Castration, the Power of the Phallus and Butler's Theory of Performativity

Gloeckner, Barry and Bechdel's focus on problematic parent/child relations demands an engagement with psychoanalytical theory concerning the injurious dimension of parent/infant separation on childhood development. This approach will facilitate our understanding of how each autobiographical subject can be embodied beyond insidious trauma and towards self-sufficiency and wholeness that repairs injuries. Sigmund Freud has explained in "Mourning and Melancholia" that what defines a subject as such is his/her experience of the rupture from a state of narcissistic self-sufficiency in his/her conflation with the mother.⁵⁷ Elsewhere, he notes that the end of infantile sexual life and infants' Oedipal attachment to one of their parents is accompanied by "the most painful feelings," continuing to explain that loss "of love and failure leave behind them a permanent injury to self-regard in the form of a narcissistic scar."⁵⁸ Furthermore, Freud points out that elements like "the lessening amount of affection," any "hard words [or] an occasional punishment," children may receive later in their lives, these show them "at least the full extent to which [they were] scorned."⁵⁹ Thus, the initial separation from the mother in birth and the following prohibition on children's sexual desires for one of their parents during the Oedipal phase wound the developing subjects and leave scars on them. In the case of abusive or absent parents, the initial injury is repeated in the child's later life, leading towards what Maria Root describes as insidious trauma.⁶⁰ Freud, however, explains that a means to repair the injury caused by maternal separation lies in children's creativity embodied in their play. As he points out, in playing, children can repeat the situation of separation and gain control and agency over when and how the object (mother) is lost.⁶¹ Childish creative play is associated with adult artistic creativity, where the mother/infant

⁵⁷ See Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *On the History of Post Psychoanalytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology, and Other Works*, Vol. 14, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, eds. James Strachey and Anna Freud, 2nd ed. (London: Vintage, 2001), 237-258. Otto Rank refers to this process as the trauma of birth. See Otto Rank, *The Trauma of Birth*, 2nd ed. (London: Harper Torchbooks, 1973).

⁵⁸ Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920)," in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works*, Vol. 18, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, eds. James Strachey and Anna Freud, 2nd ed. (London: Vintage, 2001), 20.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶⁰ For a brief description of the Oedipus complex, see Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 245-246.

⁶¹ See Freud's discussion on children's *fort-da* game in Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 14-17. For a similar discussion on the reparative function of remembering and repetition in a patient's psychoanalytic session, see also Sigmund Freud, "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through," in *The Case of Schreber, Papers on Technique and Other Works*, Vol. 12, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, eds. James Strachey and Anna Freud, 2nd ed. (London: Vintage, 2001), 144-156.

separation can also be repeated towards reparation.⁶² Moreover, as both Freud and Otto Rank suggest, artistic creativity can also be motivated by Oedipal drives, thus allowing the potential to repeat and gain control over the separation from the father figure as well.⁶³

Melanie Klein has also discussed the reparative function of artistic creativity as an outcome of our relationships with our parents. As she explains, our drive for reparation emerges from our ambivalent feelings of love and hate towards them. Since, in our fantasies as infants, we destroy them when they fail to comply with our desires, a feeling of guilt emerges because of our simultaneous love for them. This love is what evokes our drive to “make good the injuries which we did in fantasy.”⁶⁴ When our loved one, whom we have injured in our fantasies, is not available for us to repair his/her wounds, some of us, as Klein suggests, “displace [our] love” to things and strive towards reparation therein, and the artist belongs precisely in this group.⁶⁵ This thesis situates contemporary American women’s graphic memoirs in this context as well. Nevertheless, while Klein’s notion of reparation concerns the loved other/parent’s injuries and our drive to please them because of our feelings of love and care for them, I also use the term to refer to the healing of the traumatised or injured autobiographical subject/child in artistic creation.

By arguing that the artists’ memories of the canon and their childhood moves towards reparative ends, this thesis investigates, as Monica Pearl puts it in her own discussion on *Fun Home*, “the ways in which art can reconcile – if not propitiate or soothe or balance – our roiling feelings of ambivalence and guilt. For reader and writer.”⁶⁶ As she proceeds to note, this “is one of the things reading does. Art and Literature can function as reparation.”⁶⁷ By shifting attention from the artist’s intentions to the reader’s drives,

⁶² See Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 17. For more on the role of children’s playing and the arts as reparative in relation to maternal separation, see Chapters One and Three in Donald Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1971), 3-34, 53-64; and Chapters Two and Eight in Rank, *The Trauma of Birth*, 20-23, 160-166.

⁶³ For discussions on how play and artistic creativity can be motivated by Oedipal drives, see Sigmund Freud, “Preface to Reik’s *Ritual Psycho-Analytic Studies*,” in *An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, Vol. 17, *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, eds. James Strachey and Anna Freud, 2nd ed. (London: Vintage, 2001), 261; Sigmund Freud, “The Claim of Psychoanalysis to the Interest of Non-Psychological Sciences,” in *Totem and Taboo’ and Other Works*, Vol. 13, *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, ed. James Strachey and Anna Freud, 2nd ed. (London: Vintage, 2001), 187-188; and Otto Rank, “Life and Creation,” in *Art and Artist*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson, 2nd ed. (London: Norton, 1989), 63-64.

⁶⁴ See Melanie Klein, “Love, Guilt and Reparation (1937),” in *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works*, ed. Masud R. Khan, 2nd ed. (London: Hogarth, 1981), 308-312.

⁶⁵ Klein, “Love, Guilt and Reparation,” 321-322.

⁶⁶ Monica B. Pearl, “Graphic Language: Redrawing the Family (Romance) in Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*,” *Prose Studies* 30, no. 3 (2008): 298, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01440350802704853>.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Pearl's comment introduces the reparative aspect of art and literature as an end result that derives from an interactive process between the text and the reader/spectator. This is how I argue that reparation is also played out in contemporary American women's graphic memoirs. Being informed by psychoanalytical theories on infants' attachment to and separation from their parents and the function of play and artistic repetition as reparation, the following discussions demonstrate how each protagonist's strife to survive in the family domain takes place and ultimately results in her move beyond injury and insidious trauma.

In so doing, the rest of this thesis shows that, as Judith Butler explains,

No one has ever worked through an injury without repeating it: its repetition is both the continuation of the trauma and that which marks a self-distance within the very structure of trauma, its constitutive possibility of being otherwise. There is no possibility of not repeating. The only question that remains is: How will that repetition occur, at what site ... and with what ... promise?⁶⁸

As Butler suggests, repetition is crucial for trauma survival. In Gloeckner, Barry and Bechdel's graphic memoirs, we observe the repetition of childhood experiences on the one hand, and of influences from the male literary and artistic canon on the other. This thesis argues that in repeating and reworking each protagonist's abused childhood via male canonical traditions, contemporary American women's graphic memoirs form a cultural discursive formation that undoes the violence that both the protagonists and the women artists have suffered in their marginalisation. In addition, it demonstrates that it is via what Judith Butler describes as the parodic repetition and reiteration of gender and sexuality norms, facilitated by the visual aspect of comics and underscored by their intertextual references, that each protagonist's move beyond trauma is achieved. Thus, Butler's views on performativity and the possibility for the deconstruction of heteronormative gender and sexuality binary divisions will also inform my method of interpretation.⁶⁹

Based on Austin's speech act theory that describes the ability to perform actions with words, Butler explains how legible subjects are constructed discursively in

⁶⁸ Judith Butler, "Sovereign Performatives," in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 1997), 102.

⁶⁹ For Butler's description of gender performativity, see Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988): 519-531, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3207893>. For its influence in autobiography criticism and the perception of autobiographical acts as performative, see Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 214; and Sidonie Smith, "Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance," in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 108-115.

language.⁷⁰ In her discussion of ideological interpellation in *Bodies that Matter*, she explains how heterosexual hegemony produces legible subjects and crafts political and social matters in ways that function for its benefit, rejecting particular individuals as non-subjects.⁷¹ The workings of compulsory heterosexuality are based on a set of norms that naturalise sex, gender and sexuality cohesion, as she further explains. Norms operate “within social practices as the implicit standard[s] of normalization,” and gender is “the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place along with the interstitial forms of hormonal, chromosomal, psychic and performative, that gender assumes.”⁷² “The regulatory norms of ‘sex,’ work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body’s sex [and] sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative.”⁷³ Heterosexuality and gender and sexuality cohesion are fictions, according to Butler, which introduce legible subjects and maintain heteronormative hegemony.

This process, which is described by Butler as the “heterosexual imperative,” also entails the dominance and power of male heterosexuality embodied in the symbol of the phallus against female lack and castration. The female subject is therefore injured in another way through Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic discourses.⁷⁴ While Freud discusses the male genital organ as a sign of self-sufficiency, Lacan discusses the phallus as a linguistic signifier. He explains that it is when we acquire language that the division of genders is marked by the masculine having and feminine being the phallus.⁷⁵ This is the stage that Julia Kristeva describes as the symbolic. The phallic linguistic sign (symbol)

⁷⁰ For Austin’s description of performative speech acts that enact what they express, see John L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975).

⁷¹ Judith Butler, “Preface,” in *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), xi-xii. For Althusser’s theory of ideological interpellation, see Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation),” in *Cultural Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Imre Szeman and Timothy Kaposy (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 204-222. See also Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, eds. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick Hutton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 16-49.

⁷² Judith Butler, “Gender Regulations,” in *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 41-42.

⁷³ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 41-42.

⁷⁴ See for example a description of the “high degree of narcissistic value which the penis possesses” in Sigmund Freud, “Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety,” in *An Autobiographical Study, Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety, the Question of Lay Analysis*, Vol. 20, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, trans. James Strachey, eds. James Strachey and Anna Freud, 2nd ed. (London: Vintage, 2001), 139. For a description of the mutilation of female genitalia and the male fear of castration, see Sigmund Freud, “The Sexual Theories of Children,” in *Jensen’s ‘Gravida’ and Other Works*, Vol. 9, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, trans. James Strachey, eds. James Strachey and Anna Freud, 2nd ed. (London: Vintage, 2001), 217.

⁷⁵ See Jacques Lacan, “The Signification of the Phallus,” in *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1999), 284-289.

marks in this stage the separation of the infant from the maternal body and determines gender divisions and hierarchies as it also introduces paternal dominance and the mother as the castrated other.⁷⁶ In the following discussions, it becomes clear that comics allow the possibility to undo this female wounding in Gloeckner, Barry and Bechdel's manipulation of the medium's visual aspect towards investing female subjects with phallic power, which in heteronormative contexts is always already male. I demonstrate that phallic self-sufficiency and power are parodically adopted to be inscribed on each female subject through different means and towards different ends, which I examine in detail in the following chapters. Ultimately, their inscription achieves the formulation of subversive female subjects in their failure to adhere to heteronormative inscriptions of femininity and female sexuality, and their representation beyond wounding and trauma.

Thus, in this thesis, Freud's views and his discursive formation of the female subject emerge as parts of the male canon that Gloeckner, Barry and Bechdel's graphic memoirs strategically subvert and critique. This is precisely why albeit reproducing the marginalized, silenced position of the woman and the girl in Western culture, Freudian psychoanalysis is useful to my analysis. I show that each contemporary artist challenges and reconfigures the canonical father's views in different ways that lead towards feminist formations of femininity and female sexuality. For example, I explain how the passivity that is ascribed to the female sexual subject is mocked and inverted in Gloeckner's graphic memoirs. I proceed to show how the formation of maternal genitals as associated with the monstrous and the uncanny is reconfigured in Barry's texts to reintroduce the maternal body as a non-threatening space of security. Lastly, I explain how Bechdel's *Fun Home* displays the denaturalization of Freud's Oedipal complex and the binary divisions it introduces with regards to one's gender and sexuality. The visual element of comics is the one that will be shown to primarily allow the aforementioned processes to take place. Such a possibility, however, is not offered by prose memoirs because of what Judith Butler describes as the injury that is inflicted on human subjects by grammar.

Butler describes human subjects' "linguistic vulnerability," and the power of language to wound us because we are "linguistic beings;" that is, we are created via

⁷⁶ Julia Kristeva, "The Semiotic and the Symbolic," in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 47. While I discuss the semiotic stage in more detail in Chapter Two, I briefly refer to the symbolic here to demonstrate how phallic significance emerges with linguistic acquisition so as to point to how the visual element of graphic memoirs can undo the binarism and the male superiority that it entails.

language.⁷⁷ According to her, language and received grammar play a significant role in fixing one's gender in relation to his/her sex, thus performing on the subjects who fail to comply with this cohesion a form of violence. "Words alone," she notes, have "the power to craft bodies from their own linguistic substance [and] the sex/gender distinction is joined with a notion of radical linguistic constructivism."⁷⁸ Elsewhere, she warns that it "would be a mistake to think that received grammar is the best vehicle for expressing radical views, given the constraints that grammar imposes upon thought, indeed, upon the thinkable itself."⁷⁹ For example, in her discussion on gender regulation she describes

The medical interpellation which ... shifts an infant from an 'it' to a 'she' or a 'he,' and in that naming the girl is 'girded,' brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender. But that 'girling' of the girl does not end there; on the contrary, that founding interpellation is reiterated by various authorities and through various intervals of time to reinforce or contest this naturalized effect. The naming is at once the setting of a boundary, and also the repeated inculcation of the norm.⁸⁰

I am including the above extensive quotation because in this thesis I show how Gloeckner, Barry and Bechdel's graphic memoirs push against heteronormative notions of femininity and female sexuality imposed through medical interpellation at birth and constantly reiterated throughout the infant's later life. By so doing, these texts introduce, as I argue, each protagonist as self-sufficient and beyond injury. If grammar establishes phallic dominance self-sufficiency on the one hand, and female castration on the other, in this thesis I show how the visual aspect of comics can undo this linguistic burden. The grammatical processes that name and fix bodies and genders according to the heterosexual binary divisions are, as the following discussions demonstrate, challenged by the visual embodiments of the three autobiographical subjects, and their deconstruction is underscored through each artist's engagement with the literary and artistic male canon.⁸¹

Apart from challenging grammatical subject formations, the visual element of comics invests the autobiographical body with a plasticity that can free the subject from the restrictions of the biological body. Judith Butler explains that

⁷⁷ Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 1.

⁷⁸ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 5.

⁷⁹ Judith Butler, "Preface (1999)," in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2007), xix.

⁸⁰ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 7.

⁸¹ I use the term "embodiment" as defined by Elizabeth El Refaie to denote the "active, cultural process of rendering the body meaningful." In relation to the visual representations of autobiographical subjects, El Refaie introduces the term "pictorial embodiment" to refer to how comics artists engage with their identity "through multiple self-portraits." See el Refaie, *Autobiographical Comics*, 51-52. I will use the term visual and pictorial embodiment interchangeably in this thesis to refer to the same process.

It is through the body that gender and sexuality become exposed to others, implicated in social processes, inscribed by cultural norms, and apprehended in their social meanings. In a sense, to be a body is to be given over to others even as a body is, emphatically, 'one's own.'⁸²

Bodies, according to Butler, are spectacles and sites of exposure that make us vulnerable to external gaze and violence.⁸³ If grammar and our existence within a heteronormative social context can become causes of violence, injury and mutilation, then the visual aspect of comics can open up a space for the proliferation of visual embodiments that are no longer affected by the aforementioned injuries.

In the graphic memoirs interrogated in this thesis, each child protagonist suffers and struggles to survive a version of physical and verbal violence caused by a parental figure within the social network of the family.⁸⁴ In addition, they are injured by parental authority because of the versions of femininity each parent imposes on the respective child. In Gloeckner's *A Child's Life* and *The Diary*, Minnie, the protagonist, is a girl who is interpellated quite early as a sexual being by adult men and whose developing heterosexuality is manipulated by them. In Barry's *One! Hundred! Demons!* and *What It Is*, Lynda is described in relation to a violent mother who abuses her both verbally and physically, as she also imposes on her an unwanted (by the protagonist) tomboy appearance. In contrast, in Bechdel's *Fun Home*, Alison, a tomboy, strives to reclaim her closeted distant and violent father as he is repeatedly depicted forcing her to adhere to a feminine appearance rather than the masculine one she prefers. Thus, apart from their castration described in Freudian psychoanalysis, the female protagonists become injured in the familial context because of their lack of control with regards to the stylisation of and control over their own bodies. Therefore, they underline the significance of the family, and specifically parental authority, as a gendering mechanism.⁸⁵

⁸² Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 20.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁸⁴ The existence of autobiographical subjects within social networks has been defined by autobiography critics as "relationality." The subject is not seen as a unique isolated individual but as always already implicated in such networks. For a definition of relationality, see Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 86; and Paul John Eakin, "Relational Selves, Relational Lives: Autobiography and the Myth of Autonomy," in *How our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 43-98. Eakin describes the challenge of "the myth of autonomy" in autobiography. See also Seyla Benhabib, "Introduction: Communicative Ethics and the Claims of Gender, Community and Postmodernism," in *Situating the Self: Gender Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 1-22.

⁸⁵ For example, Seyla Benhabib explains that being always embedded in social networks, and primarily in the family, shapes our development as gendered beings. See Seyla Benhabib, "Sexual Difference and Collective Identities: The New Global Constellation," *Signs* 24, no. 2 (1999): 335-361, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3175645>. See also Chodorow's discussion on fathers' role in sex-typing their

In the following chapters, I explain how the graphic memoirs reproduce the girl protagonists' injury or trauma within the family domain, but I argue that the verbal/visual combination of comics simultaneously undoes it and introduces Minnie, Lynda and Alison beyond it. I also point out that the revision of the male literary and artistic canon and the parodic manipulation of phallic symbolism facilitate the reconfiguration of each female subject beyond injury. Each protagonist emerges therefore as owning the phallus – and the power and the self-sufficiency that it entails – in contemporary American women's graphic memoirs.

In the first chapter, I show how the female victim of sexual abuse is initially reduced to a mere sexual object in the service of male adult heterosexuality. Nevertheless, I also show how this formation is undone by the way in which Gloeckner's visual depictions attach a carnivalesque phallic prosthesis to the girl protagonist's body to demarcate her survival beyond rape and her self-sufficiency, which rejects the authority of the stepfather/abuser. In the second chapter, I examine how Barry's childish depiction of her autobiographical alter-ego foregrounds a gender ambiguity that confuses the reader with regards to Lynda's being or having the phallus, thus embodying a pre-symbolic existence and conflation with the maternal body. In the third chapter, I examine how Bechdel's representation of Alison's masculine appearance once again rejects heteronormative femininity and confuses readers with regards to her gender demarcation. After describing how phallic imagery functions to express the protagonist's masculinity, I explain how it also allows her Oedipal reconnection with her homosexual father. Thus, I underline the significance of the visual in graphic memoirs, which provides artists with the potential to situate autobiographical bodies in spaces, to modify their shapes, and to attach prostheses on them, in ways that destabilise binary divisions and male phallic dominance as they simultaneously repair their injuries.

Undoing the Norm, Undoing the Canon: Bitextuality, Parody, Pastiche and the Reconfiguration of the Female Subject

The wholeness that these texts invest each subject with is also underscored by their verbal/visual combination, which has been introduced in bitextual theory as a means that conflates distinct categories like gender and sexuality. Hence, my mode of interpretation is

daughters in adolescence and pre-adolescence in Nancy Chodorow, "Object-Relations and the Female Oedipal Configuration," in *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Psychology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 118.

informed by Lorraine Jansen Kooistra's descriptions of bitextual theory as they are reflected in her analysis of fin-de-siècle illustrated novels.⁸⁶ Kooistra describes the gendered division of word and image that has been prevalent in illustration studies. She notes that, in Western culture, "the image is female, the word is male. The marital trope running through illustration studies for the last hundred years employs this sexual model to describe the proper relationship between picture and word."⁸⁷ Similarly, Thomas Mitchell, whose work is emblematic of the contemporary academic turn to and re-examination of the visual, describes the accepted "otherness" of visual image in relation to the verbal text.⁸⁸ He explains that pictorial otherness

takes a full range of possible social relations inscribed within the field of verbal and visual representation [and] reinforces a stereotypical relation ... between the freedom to speak and see and the injunction to remain silent and available for observation ... [Thus, it becomes] transferable from children to women to colonized subjects to works of art to characterizations of visual representation itself.⁸⁹

While Mitchell does not use the term "bitextuality" in his associations of the visual with feminised otherness, his views expressed in his study of the field of representation as a whole, rather than separated between the verbal and the visual, reflect the same argument that Kooistra makes. In bitextual theory, image becomes the "other" of the text, colonised by the masculine, phallic logos, subordinated in the sexual relationship that emerges. The bitextual perspective, as Kooistra suggests, "exploits the physical differences between image and text as art forms, to recognize that these opposing forms have been united in a single structure," or as she characterises it, a marriage.⁹⁰ Meaning is therefore "produced in the intercourse between picture and word and their shared subject matter and cultural context."⁹¹ The critic pushes the bitextual approach beyond the heterosexual marital trope and towards bisexuality to further complicate the representation of genders in the

⁸⁶ Lorraine Janzen Kooistra, "Two Texts, Two Hands, Two Looks," in *The Artist as Critic: Bitextuality in Fin-de-Siècle Illustrated Books* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995), 9-25.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Apart from *Picture Theory*, for more work on the verbal/visual conflation, see also W.J. Thomas Mitchell, *Blake's Composite Art: A Study of the Illuminated Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978). In relation to images as active animated beings that interact with the spectator to introduce their own desires, see W.J. Thomas Mitchell, *What do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁸⁹ Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 162. See also Mitchell, *Blake's Composite Art*, xxii.

⁹⁰ Kooistra, *The Artist as Critic*, 11.

⁹¹ Kooistra, *The Artist as Critic*, 11.

visual/verbal conflation. Bisexuality, she notes, is having two sexes on one body as well as desiring both sexes.⁹²

Associating the bisexual body with the bitextual book, Kooistra explains that:

Like the hermaphrodite, the illustrated book is a hybrid form combining the characteristics of two distinct bodies: pictures and words. Figuring the illustrated book according to a hermaphroditic rather than a marital model dispenses with the apparent rigidity of male/female categories and allows us to rethink image/text relations according to a more fluid continuum of sex and gender roles.⁹³

The fluid continuum that Kooistra describes, and the amalgamation of categories that it entails, is the aspect of comics that facilitates the construction of autobiographical subjects' self-sufficiency and wholeness and their move beyond injury and trauma.

While bitextual theory has not been influential in comics criticism, David Carrier's description of the medium in relation to other "in-between" categories also points to the same potential. Commenting upon the marginalisation of comics throughout the twentieth century and especially upon Fredric Wertham's polemic against them, the critic explains:

We expect the world to fit our preconceived stable categories, and so what falls in between is easily felt, depending on our temperament and politics, to be either exciting or menacing. Hence the fascination with, and fear of, cross-dressing, androgyny, people of 'mixed-race,' comics and other forms of in-betweenness.⁹⁴

Carrier's description of comics as a unified structure of two distinct elements working together in parallel to human forms of in-betweenness points to Kooistra's argument. In-between subjects, like the hermaphrodite, the cross-dresser, and the cross-gender person, are among those who are, according to Judith Butler, injured and violated by grammar and who foreground the heteronormative sexuality, sex and gender correspondence as a lie. By so doing, they, like comics, unsettle distinct categories that function in favour of male dominance, the phallus and the logos, against female subordination, castration and the visual.

Apart from the in-betweenness they embody, Carrier notes that comics function as a unity, in the same way that the human mind and body do.⁹⁵ However, he does not push his discussion further to introduce the medium's potential in expressing the conflation of

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Carrier, *The Aesthetics of Comics*, 70.

⁹⁵ Carrier, *The Aesthetics of Comics*, 73.

sexes, sexualities and genders. Nevertheless, his concluding argument that we understand that comics' unity enriches a narrative rather than deprives it of complexity is what this thesis is arguing for as well.⁹⁶ Simultaneously, it demonstrates that in their bitextuality, comics undo prescribed formations of femininity and female sexuality. Thus, the visual, which is associated with female subjects and renders them silenced, observed and scrutinised, is taken up by contemporary women artists to speak for their autobiographical subjects and to introduce them beyond passivity and trauma. Indeed, it is because of the strong association between women and the visual that I chose to focus on female artists' works.

What Laura Mulvey termed women's "to-be-looked-at-ness," and that women and girls have been created and recreated for centuries in Western culture as passive spectacles under the gaze of the male subject, have been more than established preconceptions in film, visual studies and art history. In 1975, Mulvey argued that "in their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed ... while Man is the bearer of the look."⁹⁷ John Berger, too, explained in *Ways of Seeing* that "men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves."⁹⁸ Gloeckner, Barry and Bechdel will be shown to take up and repeat the visual status of women and girls in their graphic memoirs towards undoing their pre-given status as castrated passive objects and spectacles.⁹⁹ By so doing, contemporary American women's graphic memoirs also demonstrate what Butler describes as "gender trouble," a process associated with Carrier's notion of comics' in-betweenness and Kooistra's views on bitextuality, and which also leads to the reparation of female injury and insidious trauma in the autobiographical performances of each text.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 74.

⁹⁷ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 19-20.

⁹⁸ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1972), 47.

⁹⁹ Undoing the prescribed status of women as spectacles and objects is one of the main tasks of contemporary women's visual art. For feminist criticism on the subject and descriptions of such works, see Janet Wolff, "Reinstating Corporeality: Feminism and Body Politics," in *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 137-138; Darcy Grimaldo Grisby, "Dilemmas of Visibility: Contemporary Women Artists' Representations of Female Bodies," in *The Female Body: Figures, Styles, Speculations*, ed. Laurence Goldstein (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1991, 2001), 70-82; Lisa Tickner, "The Body Politic: Female Sexuality and Women Artists Since 1970," in *Looking on: Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts*, ed. Rosemary Betterton (London, New York: Pandora Press, 1987), 235-253; and Amelia Jones, ed., *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (London, New York: Routledge, 2003). In relation to autobiographical female bodies, see Sidonie Smith, "The Bodies of Contemporary Autobiographical Practice," *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 126-153.

Butler warns us that “to assume that gender always and exclusively means the matrix of the ‘masculine’ and the ‘feminine’ is precisely to miss the critical point that the production of that coherent binary is contingent.”¹⁰⁰ To substantiate her argument, she mentions cases of “‘gender trouble, or ‘gender bending,’ ‘transgender’ or ‘cross-gender,’” which suggest, as noted, that “gender has a way of moving beyond the naturalized binary.”¹⁰¹ It is in the failure to fully reiterate heterosexual norms that Butler identifies the possibility for their subversion.¹⁰² Working from within the heteronormative system then, a subject can radically repeat the norms imposed onto him/her. Hence, as in the case of trauma, transformative repetition is reparative in that it also facilitates the collapse of binary divisions that function in favour of phallic dominance and injure the subjects that fail to adhere to them. Butler proposes that

A strategy to denaturalize and resignify bodily categories ... [can be] a set of parodic practices based in a performative theory of gender acts that disrupt the categories of body, sex, gender, and sexuality and occasion their subversive resignification and proliferation beyond the binary frame.¹⁰³

The aim of this resignification is to “counter the normative violence implied in ideal morphologies of sex and to uproot the pervasive assumptions of natural and presumptive heterosexuality.”¹⁰⁴ Repetition and re-signification of the norm/original takes place in Gloeckner, Barry and Bechdel’s graphic memoirs on two levels: firstly, in how each female autobiographical subject reiterates gender and sexuality norms in her visual embodiments; and secondly, in how influences from the male literary and artistic canon are repeated and reconfigured in the construction of each autobiographical subject within the family domain and in relation to abusive parental figures. Since this resignification is achieved by means of parodic repetition, which Butler describes as a critical strategy in subversive subject formation, defining parody will provide an insight not only in the performance of Butlerian “gender trouble” but also in how the male canon is reconfigured in contemporary American women’s graphic memoirs via a feminist lens.¹⁰⁵

Simon Dentith notes that parody

¹⁰⁰ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 42.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 42-43.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁰³ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xxxiv.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, xxi.

¹⁰⁵ Although I use the term “pastiche” to refer to Gloeckner, Barry and Bechdel’s engagements with the male canon, I provide definitions of parody here because, in this thesis, I use pastiche as invested with parody’s critical stance in parallel with its other characteristics, which I describe in the following sections.

Is one of the principal forms in which a belated culture manages its relationship to its cultural predecessors ... [A] more polemical relation to the cultural past often expresses itself in the practice of “writing back”: the canonic texts of the past are scrutinized, challenged, and parodied in the name of the subject positions (of class, race or gender) which they are seen to exclude.¹⁰⁶

In parody, therefore, the canonical text (the norm in Butler’s schema) is revised to create new meanings. Ingeborg Hoesterey observes that parody is “a work of literature or another art that imitates an existent piece which is well known to its readers, viewers, or listeners with satirical, critical, or polemical intention,” while also noting that “characteristic features of the [previous] work are retained but are imitated with contrastive intention.”¹⁰⁷ Transporting the potential of parody from literature and the visual arts to subject formation within heteronormative social networks, Judith Butler explains that

Parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities. Although the gender meanings taken up in these parodic styles are clearly part of hegemonic, misogynist culture, they are nevertheless denaturalized and mobilized through their parodic recontextualization. As imitations which effectively displace the meaning of the original, they imitate the myth of originality itself.¹⁰⁸

Emerging from within the heteronormative system, therefore, parodic gender reiteration can lead to its deconstruction by pointing to the status of the norm as a fiction. In the concluding chapter of *Gender Trouble*, Butler introduces a set of questions regarding the possibility of parody to be subversive. She asks which parodic performances can “compel a radical rethinking of the psychological presuppositions of gender identity and sexuality [and] a reconsideration of the place and the stability of the masculine and the feminine.”¹⁰⁹ She also wonders “what kind of performance will enact and reveal the performativity of gender itself in a way that destabilizes the naturalized categories of identity and desire,” proceeding to introduce the significance of the body in these processes.¹¹⁰ If we assume that the body “is not a ‘being,’ but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality,” Butler asks, “then what language is left for understanding

¹⁰⁶ Simon Dentith, “Approaches to Parody,” in *Parody, The New Critical Idiom* (London: Routledge, 2000), 29.

¹⁰⁷ Ingeborg Hoesterey, “Introduction,” in *Pastiche: Cultural Memory in Art, Film, Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 13-14. For more definitions of parody, see also Linda Hutcheon, “Defining Parody,” in *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (London: Methuen, 1985), 38; and Margaret Rose, “Distinguishing Parody from Related Forms,” in *Parody: Ancient, Modern and Postmodern* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 72.

¹⁰⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 188.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 189.

¹¹⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 189.

this corporeal enactment, gender, that constitutes its ‘interior’ signification on the surface?”¹¹¹ The medium of comics provides the answers to Butler’s questions.

The way that each autobiographical subject is visually embodied in the graphic memoirs analysed in this thesis through the reconfiguration of the male canon introduces the medium’s possibility for complicated and subversive subject formations. The bodily depictions in each artist’s texts deconstruct, as I will demonstrate, gender divisions as they reconfigure gender and sexuality to introduce the protagonists beyond the wound of femininity and insidious trauma. Thus, in the three artists’ transformative repetition of the canonical past, their graphic memoirs also deconstruct heteronormative gender hierarchies and reveal the performativity of gender with their subject formations. In so doing, they become cultural forms of resistance against heteronormative hegemony and of the authority of the male artistic and literary canon, and this is where their significance lies.

Discussing the role of culture in the construction and preservation of gender identities and stereotypes, feminist critic Janet Wolff has pointed out that:

Art, literature, and film do not simply represent given gender identities, or reproduce already existing ideologies of femininity. Rather they participate in the very construction of those identities. Second (and consequently), culture is a crucial arena for the contestation of social arrangements of gender. Cultural politics, then ... is a vital enterprise, located at the heart of the complex order which (re)produces sexual divisions in society.¹¹²

Women’s art, according to Wolff, undoes the status of the woman and the girl in a given cultural context by formulating and expressing female experiences.¹¹³ In so doing, it becomes a counter-discourse to the previous cultural formations of femininity, and this is what I also argue for in relation to Gloeckner, Barry and Bechdel’s graphic memoirs.

Comics scholar Charles Hatfield has noted that the value of autobiographical comics does not lie on the factuality of the stories they narrate, but on how they are mediated and situated in the cultural context, “on the contact surface between cultural environment and individual identity.”¹¹⁴ For instance, he explains that Justin Green’s *Binky Brown Meets Holly Virgin* functions as a critique against Catholicism by depicting the protagonist’s excessive guilt and simultaneous obsessive masturbations caused by his

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Wolff, *Feminine Sentences*, 1.

¹¹³ Ibid., 10.

¹¹⁴ Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*, 113.

development in a strict Catholic environment.¹¹⁵ In addition, he demonstrates how Art Spiegelman's *Maus* visualises and therefore undercuts "essentialist readings" of people as less than human via the artist's use of the mouse metaphor in the narration of Holocaust experiences.¹¹⁶ Vladek, Art's father, is a Holocaust survivor whose trauma is projected onto his son in Spiegelman's first graphic memoir, which was published in 1986 and won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992.¹¹⁷ *Maus* is a text that signalled the cultural legitimisation of the graphic memoir and triggered the academy's turn to the genre.¹¹⁸ By engaging with the public trauma of the Holocaust and by depicting human beings as animals, *Maus*, as Hatfield explains, introduces a complex critique against the dehumanisation that the Holocaust entailed. While succeeding in demonstrating the potential of autobiographical comics as tools of cultural critique, Hatfield does not refer to women cartoonists' work to explain, for example, how gender and sexuality are negotiated therein.

In *Graphic Women*, Hillary Chute notes that due to its visual element and its association with underground explicit depictions of issues around sexuality, the medium of comics "lends itself to feminist concerns about embodiment and representation."¹¹⁹ Nevertheless, by focusing on the workings of traumatic memory as represented in the fragmented nature of comics and by not investigating further into the influences that complicate Gloeckner, Barry and Bechdel's graphic memoirs, the critic does not demonstrate how they introduce self-sufficient female subjects beyond injury that critique heteronormative subject formations. Simultaneously, she does not show how these texts perform a feminist artistic strife against what Cvetkovich describes as the culture of depression in relation to the marginalisation of women's art. Elizabeth El Refaie has also noted that women artists "are increasingly challenging traditional cultural inscriptions of the gendered body and claiming the right to represent their own physicality ... in a way

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 132-134. For Green's graphic memoir, see Justin Green, *Binky Brown Meets Holy Virgin Mary* (Berkeley, CA: Last Gap Ego-Funnies, 1972).

¹¹⁶ Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*, 139-140. For Spiegelman's graphic memoir, see Art Spiegelman, *Maus: A Survivor's Tale, My Father Bleeds History* (London: Penguin, 2003).

¹¹⁷ See Gardner, "Autobiography's Biography," 16.

¹¹⁸ For examples of *Maus* criticism, see Deborah R. Geis, *Considering Maus: Approaches to Art Spiegelman's "Survivor's Tale" of the Holocaust* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003). See also a selection of essays that includes Marianne Hirsch's discussion of post-memory and the visual in Spiegelman's graphic memoir in Part One, Michael A. Chaney, ed., *Graphic Subjects*, 13-60; Versaci, *This Book Contains Graphic Language*, 81-108; Witek, *Comic Books as History*, 96-120; and Efrat Bloom, "Maternal Loss, the Art of Self-Portrait, and Art Spiegelman's *Maus*," in *Visual Memoirs After the 1970s: Studies on Gender, Sexuality, and Visibility in the Post-Civil War Rights Age*, ed. Mihaela Precup (București: Editura Universității din București, 2010), 121-138. For archival material on the creation of *Maus* and Spiegelman's interviews about comics and its suitability for the expression of Holocaust trauma, see Art Spiegelman, *MetaMAUS*, ed. Hillary L. Chute (London: Viking, 2011).

¹¹⁹ Chute, *Graphic Women*, 19.

that truthfully reflects their own experiences.”¹²⁰ The example she provides to substantiate her argument comes from Aline Kominsky-Crumb’s *oeuvre*. El Refaie refers to Kominsky-Crumb’s ugly depictions of the autobiographical female body as rejecting beauty ideals and less flattering than the artist’s actual appearance.¹²¹ Nevertheless, her observation would be further enriched with a more detailed examination of Phoebe Gloeckner’s graphic memoirs, which focus primarily on the female body as an erotic sexual spectacle and introduce multiple ways in which its visual depiction can unsettle male voyeuristic pleasure, as I explain in the first chapter. In addition, paying attention to gender-ambiguous bodily representations like the ones that I describe in Chapters Two and Three demonstrates El Refaie’s view of the potential of the verbal/visual medium within the expression of “truthful” female experience. Here, it is necessary to clarify that the adverb “truthfully” that El Refaie uses above does not refer to the correspondence of pictorial embodiments to the actual artists, nor to the depiction of events in the graphic memoirs as they happened in reality.

On the contrary, El Refaie introduces the term “authenticity” to denote “an interpretation of events as they are experienced by the artist, with aspects that are quite obviously and deliberately exaggerated, adopted or invented.”¹²² Charles Hatfield also explains that authenticity in autobiographical comics is “emotional rather than literal: that of the present talking to the past.”¹²³ The autobiographical subject is therefore formulated via the older, wiser artist’s perspective, which modifies childhood experiences in a way that mediates their impact on her development and that, as I will explain in the following chapters, leads towards trauma survival. In this thesis, I argue for the potential of the medium of comics, infused with revised elements from the literary and artistic canon, to express, apart from each artist’s emotional truths, truths about the embodied experiences of female gender and sexuality.

¹²⁰ El Refaie, *Autobiographical Comics*, 80.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 80-82.

¹²² Elizabeth El Refaie, “Visual Modality Vs Authenticity: The Example of Autobiographical Comics,” *Visual Studies* 25, no. 2 (2010): 171, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/1472586X.2010.502674>. See also el Refaie, *Autobiographical Comics*, 135-178.

¹²³ Hatfield defines this process as “ironic authentication.” See Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*, 128-129. For similar discussions on what constitutes autobiographical truth and the inescapability of fiction in self-referential narratives, see Paul Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self Invention* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); Timothy Dow Adams, “Introduction: Design and Lie in Modern American Autobiography,” in *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography* (Chapel Hill: University Press of North Carolina, 1990), 1-16; and Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 17-19.

Consequently, I am introducing in the term “authenticity” the possibility offered by the medium of comics to construct autobiographical subjects that perform “gender trouble” and allow trauma reparation as they also undo the pre-given status of the woman and the girl in Western art and literature.¹²⁴ Feminist autobiography critics Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have described women in Western culture as colonised subjects who are constructed via the discourse of the male coloniser.¹²⁵ However, they have also introduced contemporary women’s life narratives as a space where the coloniser’s traditions and values can be explored and questioned and where the “I” that is constructed can be a site of political and cultural intervention.¹²⁶ This is how I argue that the autobiographical subjects discussed in this thesis function as well.

Apart from the field of comics scholarship, therefore, this thesis is also situated next to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson’s work on contemporary women’s life narratives, and specifically those that combine visual and verbal media. In *Interfaces*, a book-length study of such autobiographical acts, the critics explain that studying “women artists as makers of their own display in relation to the history of woman as an object of speculation and specularization” will facilitate our understanding of how they “disrupt that specularity.”¹²⁷ In addition, they note that:

These self-referential displays of visual/textual interface in hybrid or pastiche modes materialize self-enquiry and self-knowledge, not through a mirror of

¹²⁴ For discussions on women’s life narratives as spaces where the status of the woman can be questioned and undone, see Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds., “Introduction: Mapping Women’s Self-Representation at the Visual/Textual Interfaces,” in *Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 1-48; Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds., *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* (London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998); and Leigh Gilmore, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women’s Self-Representation* (London: Cornell University Press, 1995).

¹²⁵ See Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds., “Introduction: Decolonization and the Politics of Discourse in Women’s Autobiographical Practices,” in *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women’s Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), xiii-xxix. For a description of cultural imperialism and the creation of the colonised other therein, see Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xi-xxv.

¹²⁶ Smith and Watson, eds., *Interfaces*, xiii-xxix. The term “life narrative” has been introduced by Smith and Watson to distinguish between canonical male autobiography and other self-referential performances. It is “a general term for acts of self-representation of all kinds in diverse media that take the producer’s life as their subject, whether written, performative, visual, filmic or digital.” See Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 4. For the differences between canonical male autobiography and contemporary “outlaw genres” of life narrative, see Julie Rak, “Are Memoirs Autobiography? A Consideration of Genre and Public Identity,” *Genre* 37, no. 3-4 (2005): 483-504, <http://genre.dukejournals.org/content/37/3-4/483.full.pdf+html>; Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 1-21; and Karen Caplan, “Resisting Autobiography: Out-Law Genres and Transnational Feminist Subjects,” in *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women’s Autobiography*, eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 115-138.

¹²⁷ Smith and Watson, eds., *Interfaces*, 5. While it introduces the potential of women’s verbal/visual autobiographical acts, the collection does not include discussions on contemporary women’s graphic memoirs. With this thesis I am addressing the gap that emerges in *Interfaces*.

seeing and reproducing the artist's face and torso but as the artist's engagement with the history of seeing women's bodies.¹²⁸

By being engaged with the tradition of women's status as objects in Western art and literature, women's life narratives trigger, according to Smith and Watson, the need "to consider how, within such constraints, people are able to change existing narratives and to write back to cultural stories that have scripted them as particular kinds of subjects."¹²⁹ In autobiographical acts that combine visual and textual elements, "directing attention to the interfaces of autobiographical texts illuminates how they affect or mobilize meanings: the textual can set in motion certain readings of the image; and the image can then revise, retard, or reactivate the text."¹³⁰ This is the approach I undertake in my analysis of Gloeckner, Barry and Bechdel's graphic memoirs. By so doing, and by paying attention to how the verbal/visual conflation introduces reconfigured meanings deriving from previous texts of the paternal literary and artistic canon, I will demonstrate that each life narrative is further complicated and enriched.

For this process to be established, however, the reader/spectator's participation is of crucial importance as it is in the interaction of each text with the reading/viewing subject that the graphic memoirs' cultural significance emerges. As Smith and Watson suggest, "autobiographical works at the interface work intersubjectively. That is, they force us as viewers, who are addressed in and by the works to participate actively, and oftentimes uncomfortably, in negotiating the politics of subjectivity."¹³¹ More so this is the case with the graphic memoirs included in this thesis for two reasons: Firstly, because it depends on the reader to identify how previous meanings reappear therein; and secondly, because the fragmented nature of comics, their visual/verbal combination, calls for the interpreter's participation in meaning creation.

Scott McCloud explains that comics essentially invite readers to provide "closure" through their reading, to fill in the gaps that emerge in the transition from one panel to another.¹³² Though influenced by McCloud's definition of "closure," I use the term to refer to the experience of reading a graphic memoir as a whole and of examining how the feminist repetition and recreation of the paternal canon affects the construction of the

¹²⁸ Smith and Watson, eds., *Interfaces*, 7.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹³² McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 67.

narrative and of each autobiographical subject. The reader's drive to repair injuries in Kleinean terms and to provide closure in McCloud's words, introduce meaning formation as an interactive process between text and reader. My shift in this thesis to the reader's participation in meaning/reparation formation reflects and is influenced by the current tendency in visual culture studies to focus on viewers' responses to artworks rather than analysing fixed meanings deriving from artists' intentions as art-historical criticism does.¹³³

As Nicholas Mirzoeff explains, visual culture is "a fluid interpretive structure centred on a response to visual media of both individuals and groups."¹³⁴ The discussions that follow situate graphic memoirs in the field as they also introduce meaning creation as an interactive process between spectators/readers and visual and verbal media on two levels: Firstly, they describe how each contemporary American woman artist's interaction with previous canonical texts is performed within each graphic memoir. Secondly, they introduce the meanings that derived from my own interaction as a reader/spectator with the contemporary texts. Mieke Bal explains that "since viewers bring their own cultural baggage to images, there can be no such a thing as a fixed, predetermined or unified meaning."¹³⁵ This thesis therefore does not claim to construct the correct interpretation of each artist's works. Rather, in underscoring the fluidity of meaning creation, it demonstrates how repetition as interpretation/interaction can become a reparative process both in each protagonist's family strife and in women artists' status in Western culture.

Thus, this thesis introduces the significance of contemporary American women's graphic memoirs in the field of visual studies, and it demonstrates how they perform what Griselda Pollock describes as the "differencing" of the male canon in their interaction with it. Pollock proposes that "differencing" rather than displacing the male canon will expose "its engagement with politics of sexual difference while allowing that very problematic to

¹³³ For the description of meaning creation as an interactive process, see Amelia Jones, ed., "Introduction," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003), 3; Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson, eds., "Introduction," in *Performing the Body Performing the Text* (London: Routledge, 1999), 1-9; and Norman Brison, ed., "Introduction: Art and Intersubjectivity," in *Looking in: The Art of Viewing*, by Mieke Bal (London: Routledge, 2004), 1-40. For descriptions of art historical analytic approaches, see Michael Hatt and Charlotte Klonk, *Art History: A Critical Approach to Its Methods* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006); and Anne D'Alleva, *How to Write Art History*, 2nd ed. (London: Laurence King, 2010).

¹³⁴ Nicholas Mirzoeff, "Introduction: What is Visual Culture?," in *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), 4.

¹³⁵ See Mieke Bal, "Dispersing the Image: Vermeer Story," in *Looking in: The Art of Viewing*, ed. Norman Brison (London: Routledge, 2004), 68-71.

make a difference in how we read art's histories."¹³⁶ She further observes that, as opposed to merely critiquing masculine culture, it is necessary to read it through a feminist perspective to "reconfigure canonical texts for other readings."¹³⁷ For Pollock, and similarly for Butler as explained, a feminist re-vision of the canon/norm is necessary to complicate the gender hierarchies existing therein.¹³⁸ Rosemary Betterton also identifies "a productive space in which to explore questions of how meanings are made and for whom" in visual culture studies.¹³⁹ This process as she points out, will

enable us to understand how those texts are mobilized and made meaningful in different ways by their different women readers, allowing for and legitimating differences in reading as well as interrogating the relations of power between authoritative text and its interpretation.¹⁴⁰

By focusing on the interpreting subject's response to a previous text, different meaning formations are allowed as the authority of the canonical text is undermined. In Gloeckner, Barry and Bechdel's graphic memoirs, interaction becomes reparation as the following discussions show. The injuries caused by psychoanalytic accounts of female castration and by parental abuse and distance in the family domain are repaired in the graphic memoirs. Simultaneously, the graphic memoirs I examine are reparative within the cultural context which marginalises the daughter artists' works against the canonisation of the paternal past.

In the first chapter, I explain how and why Gloeckner reconfigures canonical influences with regards to the formation of the female sexual object in Western culture. I discuss how and why she engages with Robert Crumb, Marcel Duchamp, Edgar Allan Poe and Vladimir Nabokov's works in *A Child's Life* to introduce a de-romanticised version of the underage sexual object. I argue that her second graphic memoir introduces the protagonist as a self-sufficient phallic girl by evoking and reconfiguring meanings spanning from the fin-de-siècle and Aubrey Beardsley and Oscar Wilde's influences in the

¹³⁶ Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*, xiv.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, xiv.

¹³⁸ Feminist poet and philosopher Adrienne Rich also argues that "re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival." Rich's call concerns, however, re-visioning the archive of women's art and literature and creating a maternal canon that will counter that of the fathers. See Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision," *College English* 34, no.1 (1972): 18, www.jstor.org/stable/375215. This thesis, however, argues for the productive engagement of contemporary women artists with the male canon, traces of which I have primarily identified in the texts I examine.

¹³⁹ Rosemary Betterton, "Feminist Viewing: Viewing Feminism," in *Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (London: Routledge, 2003), 13.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

black-and-white illustrated novel, to the French Renaissance visual arts and the construction of the underage female spectacle therein. In the second chapter, I demonstrate how Barry's graphic memoirs repeat and recreate the meanings introduced in William Blake's illuminated scripts to construct the protagonist as a gender-ambiguous child, and how this allows the move beyond the trauma of maternal violence and the representation of a pre-symbolic existence. In addition, I explain how and why Caravaggio's female monster of the Medusa is re-imagined via a feminist lens and how Barry's second graphic memoir is influenced by the Grimms' fairy tales in ways that facilitate the construction of the autobiographical subject as returning in and inhabiting the maternal womb. Lastly, in the third chapter I investigate Bechdel's incorporation of influences from Oscar Wilde and Marcel Proust's works towards the expression of paternal homosexuality in relation to the daughter's female masculinity and how this allows the autobiographical subject's Oedipal reunion with her father. Thus, this thesis demonstrates how Gloeckner, Barry and Bechdel transform the aforementioned traditions in ways that also modify the life narratives they formulate in the medium of comics. If we perceive the canonical fathers' works as the authorities and the originals, then I show that their repetition and reconfiguration performs a process similar to the one Butler describes in her discussion on gender performativity and which concerns the parodic resignification of the canonical text/the norm.

Nevertheless, instead of parody I use the term pastiche to describe the process of repetition and resignification. As Butler suggests, a more appropriate term to refer to the reiterations she describes would be "pastiche," which deconstructs the division between the original and the copy.¹⁴¹ Butler refers to "pastiche" as defined by Fredric Jameson. For Jameson pastiche is "a blank parody," an imitation "without satirical impulse [and] without laughter."¹⁴² However, Butler notes that uncovering the status of heteronormativity – the original and the normal – as fiction can, according to her, become a source of laughter.¹⁴³ In justifying her use of the term "parody," Butler also underscores its critical status. Nevertheless, pastiche can also be parodic in its imitation. If Butler takes up the terms "parody" and "pastiche" from literary and visual analysis to adopt them to performativity theory, it is by re-transporting these two terms to their initial context, in literature and the

¹⁴¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 188-189.

¹⁴² Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), 114. For similar discussions that focus on the imitative aspect of pastiche, see Rose, *Parody*, 72; Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, 38; and Gerard Genette, "Brief Parodies," in *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky, 2nd ed. (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982, 1997), 34-35.

¹⁴³ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 189.

visual arts and specifically in contemporary American women's graphic memoirs, that this thesis argues for the performance of denaturalised subject formations therein.

The repetition of elements from the paternal literary and artistic canon identified in Gloeckner, Barry and Bechdel's texts appear as pastiche arrangements. Even though it has been defined as an imitative repetition of an original by critics, the term "pastiche" is an intertextual process, which as both Richard Dyer and Ingeborg Hoesterey explain, forms a "stylistic medley," a conflation of different elements.¹⁴⁴ Hoesterey introduces pastiche as a fin-de-siècle postmodern element and notes that "one of the markers that set aesthetic postmodernism apart from modernism is that its artistic practices borrow ostentatiously from the archive of Western culture."¹⁴⁵ She observes that "the system of art is characterized by an intertextuality of seeing and innovation, a creative transformation of the archive," which is achieved in the "last quarter of the twentieth century" through the productive exploration of pastiche.¹⁴⁶ Intertextuality, and specifically pastiche, coincides with the proliferation of the graphic memoir at the turn of the century.¹⁴⁷ In this thesis, I argue that interpreting the genre of the graphic memoir via an intertextual approach forms female subjects beyond trauma, as it simultaneously introduces "truthful," in El Refaie's terms, female experiences and subjectivities. I will therefore proceed to describe how intertextual analysis can shed light on how past influences shape contemporary meaning formation.

Intertextuality, as Dyer explains, indicates that "all texts are ineluctably caught up in the languages and conventions they inhabit, beyond specific and/or explicit reference to other texts, beyond authorial intention ... and beyond the narrow confines of great literature."¹⁴⁸ This view was introduced by Roland Barthes in "The Death of the Author" where he describes a text as "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings,

¹⁴⁴ For definitions of pastiche as a stylistic medley, see Ingeborg Hoesterey, "Introduction," in *Pastiche: Cultural Memory in Art, Film, Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 3; and Richard Dyer, "Introduction," *Pastiche* (London: Routledge, 2007), 1.

¹⁴⁵ Hoesterey, *Pastiche*, xi.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 18. Kenneth Plummer also observes the proliferation of sexual personal stories at the turn of the century and the increasing use of the visual and pastiche in their creation. Writing in 1995, in his reference to the visual in such stories, Plummer discusses video productions. However, the graphic memoir can also be situated next to video productions as a cultural tool through which to tell sexual stories via pastiche arrangements, as I will demonstrate in the following chapters. See Kenneth Plummer, "The Shifting Sexual Stories of Late Modernity," in *Telling Sexual Stories: Change and Social Worlds* (London: Routledge, 1995), 131-144.

¹⁴⁷ About the proliferation of the graphic memoir at the turn of the century, see Gardner, "Autobiography's Biography," 1.

¹⁴⁸ Dyer, *Pastiche*, 48.

none of them original, blend and clash.”¹⁴⁹ The text according to Barthes “is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture.”¹⁵⁰ Unlike Barthes’ definition that refers to the broad field of representations as influential and untraceable, the term has been narrowed down by critics to refer to the importance of specific prior texts and to the view that “a work has the meaning it does only because certain things have previously been written.”¹⁵¹

Mieke Bal notes that the process “refers to the readymade quality of signs ... that the maker of images finds in earlier images and texts produced by a culture.”¹⁵² In such cases, according to the art historian the meaning of the previous material,

May have changed, but the new meaning that replaces it will carry the trace of its precursor. The latest artist may reject or reverse, ironize or deconstruct, pluralize or marginalize the meaning of the borrowed motif, but that meaning cannot be undone, ignored or cancelled out.¹⁵³

Its identification, she further explains, is an interactive process between the image and the spectator.¹⁵⁴ In this thesis, it is precisely this notion of intertextuality that I have traced in the graphic memoirs I analyse. However, I use the narrower term “pastiche” to refer to it precisely because it denotes a set of different intertextual influences rather than a unique one.

However, the pastiche I have detected in each artist’s graphic memoirs is not restricted to an imitative repetition without satirical aims, as Jameson notes in his definition of the term and which Butler uses in *Gender Trouble*. In contrast, I am using the term as defined by Richard Dyer, who notes that pastiche can have a parodic meaning; it can mean an inferior version, insulting depiction, idealisation of a style, a form of

¹⁴⁹ Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in *Image – Music – Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, 3rd ed. (London: Fontana, 1984), 146. Critics have also noted that memory is always influenced by external elements, and “suffused with stories we have read and images we have seen, in books and movies and beyond.” See Mark Freeman, “Telling Stories: Memory and Narrative,” in *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, eds. Susannah Radstone and Bill Scharz (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 263; and Anthony Paul Kerby, “Time and Memory,” in *Narrative and the Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 31.

¹⁵⁰ Barthes, *Image – Music – Text*, 146.

¹⁵¹ Jonathan Culler, “Presupposition and Intertextuality,” in *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 103. For a similar discussion, see John Fiske, “Signification,” in *Introduction to Communication Studies*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1990), 166.

¹⁵² Mieke Bal, “Dispersing the Image: Vermeer Story,” 68. For a similar discussion, see also Angela Goddard, “Nautical but Nice: Intertextuality,” in *The Language of Advertising: Written Texts* (London: Routledge, 1998), 69.

¹⁵³ Bal, “Dispersing the Image: Vermeer Story,” 68-71.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

influence and historical recreation, among other functions.¹⁵⁵ Thus, while being repetitive, pastiche can preserve the critical stance of parody, and as they recognize the value of previous works through their specific uses of pastiche, Gloeckner, Barry and Bechdel simultaneously maintain a parodic critical stance towards them. In the following discussions, I will point to the ways in which pastiche as a parodic conflation of different influences allows the three artists to subvert the male dominant texts they choose to engage with. Simultaneously, as Butler's use of parody, pastiche will be shown to lead to subversive reiterations both of the norm and of the male canon in the context of each graphic memoir, which will result in the formation of denaturalized gender and sexuality performances. Hence, in this thesis, I argue that as they undo the authority of the paternal texts through their pastiche arrangements, Gloeckner, Barry and Bechdel's graphic memoirs resignify their meanings towards reparation, and rather than seeking to abolish the previous texts' cultural value, they ask for a place next to them. In addition, this thesis demonstrates that it is in the potential offered by pastiche, and by the bitextual nature of comics, that graphic memoirs construct autobiographical subjects beyond trauma, thus performatively resolving their family strife and repairing their injuries.

Life Narrative in the Comics Form: Why Graphic Memoir?

Hence, I argue for the centrality of memory as pastiche in the struggle to reach the "pleasurable" end of reparation. Since processes of remembering are of central importance in these contemporary texts, I have chosen the term "graphic memoirs" to describe them. Comics scholars have used different terms to refer to the genre, and the continuously changing naming process reflects its transformation into a more sophisticated cultural work: Autobiocomics, autobiographix, comic-book memoir, autobiographical comics and Chute's recent "graphic narrative" reflect its constantly developing nature.¹⁵⁶ Nevertheless, "graphic memoir" entails all the aspects of these life narratives that I am examining in this study. I use the adjective "graphic," as defined by Whitlock and Poletti in their description of autographics, to point to the visual aspect of the memoirs. "Graphic" means being

¹⁵⁵ Dyer, *Pastiche*, 7-8.

¹⁵⁶ For discussions on the name of the genre, see William Bradley, "Graphic Memoirs Come of Age," *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Non-Fiction* 15, no. 1 (Spring, 2013): 161-165, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/fourth_genre_explorations_in_nonfiction/v015/15.1.bradley.html; Versaci, *This Book Contains Graphic Language*, 25-36; Hatfield, *Alternative Comics*, 108-151; el Refaie, *Autobiographical Comics*, 4-5; and Whitlock and Poletti, "Self-Regarding Art," v. Chute's "life narrative" is rather broad for the purposes of this thesis as it deviates from the self-referential character of the texts. See Chute, *Graphic Women*, 3; and Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven, "Introduction: Graphic Narrative," *Modern Fiction Studies* 52, no. 4 (2004): 767-782, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/modern_fiction_studies/v052/52.4chute01.html.

“[d]rawn with a pencil or pen; of or pertaining to drawing or painting ... vividly descriptive, life-like [and] the practice that marks, records or portrays the life.”¹⁵⁷ I also use “memoir” because of its associations with the popular, the construction of marginalised relational subjects, and the narration of fragmented life stories and shameful secrets, as opposed to the unified exemplary narrative that unfolds in canonical autobiographies.¹⁵⁸ Mostly, I use the particular term because it foregrounds the significance of memory in its construction.

“Memoir,” as defined by Julie Rak, best describes Gloeckner, Barry and Bechdel’s texts not only because it foregrounds the significance of memory in the formation of marginalised (female) subjects, but also because it introduces the narrative as both finished and unfinished at the same time. As Rak explains,

Memoir ... can refer to a collection of memories, as when someone says he wishes ‘to write my memoirs,’ but it can also refer to biographical writing about oneself and someone else. It is both finished and unfinished, unofficial and official ... It is about the self in relation to others, or even just about others without being biography or history. Therefore ‘memoir’ describes private and public, official and unofficial writing, writing as a process and writing as a product, all at once.¹⁵⁹

Rak’s definition of the memoir as both finished and unfinished, official and unofficial, about the self as well as the other, describes precisely the texts that I discuss in this thesis. As explained, each autobiographical subject is constructed in the social network of the family and in relation to abusive parental figures. Thus, in narrating the self, these texts also construct the story of the other/parent. In addition, due to their pastiche arrangements, contemporary American women’s graphic memoirs are both official and unofficial at the same time. By engaging with the male canon – officially accepted as the best a culture has to offer in Smith and Watson’s terms – through the “delinquent” medium of comics,

¹⁵⁷ Whitlock and Poletti, “Self-Regarding Art,” v.

¹⁵⁸ For the association of memoir with shameful, scandalous and traumatic secrets told by marginalised subjects, see Julie Rak, “Beyond Auto-Bio-Graphe: Autobiography and Alternative Identities,” in *Negotiated Memory: Doukhorbor Autobiographical Discourse* (Vancouver: The University of British Columbia Press, 2004), 1-32; and the Introduction and Chapter One in Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography*, 1-44. In relation to women’s memoir as a space that allows the public and performative construction of the relational female self, see Helen Buss, “Introduction: Memoir as a Life Narrative Discourse,” *Repossessing the World: Reading Memoirs by Contemporary Women* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2002), 1-23. For descriptions of canonical male autobiography, see Georges Gusdorf, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, trans. James Olney, ed. James Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 28-48; and Philippe Lejeune, “The Autobiographical Pact,” in *On Autobiography*, trans. Katherine Leary, ed. John Eakin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 3-30.

¹⁵⁹ Rak, “Are Memoirs Autobiography?,” 495.

graphic memoirs are infused with and simultaneously undo canonical formality and authority towards reparative feminist ends. Lastly, they are both finished and unfinished because they require readers' participation in meaning formation with their interaction with the visual images and the identification of pastiche arrangements therein. While reading these texts without recognising their intertextual references does not hinder our understanding of each life narrative, as this thesis argues, focusing on and examining them enriches and complicates the development of the narrative and the significance of the graphic memoir as a feminist cultural tool.

Comics have been among the central participants in efforts to deconstruct the boundaries between high and low art since the 1980s and the Pop Art movement when works of popular culture started entering the space of the museum and the gallery, as Art Spiegelman explains.¹⁶⁰ In this study, I argue that comics, and specifically contemporary American women's graphic memoirs, also participate in the turn-of-the-century phenomenon described by Jim Collins as "high pop," which refers to the repetition and transportation of high artistic works from the space of the gallery to low-cost, mass-produced versions aimed at untrained audiences.¹⁶¹ Specifically, via their pastiche arrangements in a low-art marginalised medium and in book forms targeted for mass consumption, these texts refuse to accept the legitimation offered by the space of the art gallery and the museum. Thus, they reject the divisions and hierarchies these institutions reproduce. In addition, they deconstruct the authority of the master/the official and the original, and they do so towards feminist ends: to claim a space in the history of Western art and literature and to introduce each autobiographical subject beyond heteronormative gender and sexuality formations and beyond insidious trauma.

Ingeborg Hoesterey observes the "contamination of genres and styles, the blurring of boundaries between the arts, and between the arts and popular culture" that mark the contemporary artistic production and lead to "a cross-pollination among" different artistic fields.¹⁶² While her observation could easily apply to the genre of the graphic memoir, it refers to postmodern pastiche. Its proliferation, which coincides with the fin-de-siècle increase of graphic memoirs and its incorporation therein, provides a complex body of

¹⁶⁰ For a description of the participation of comics in the Pop Art movement and museum exhibitions of work by comics artists, see Spiegelman, *MetaMAUS*, 203-205.

¹⁶¹ For a description of the Pop Art movement and the phenomenon of High Pop, see Jim Collins, ed., "High-Pop: An Introduction," in *High-Pop: Making Culture into Popular Entertainment* (London: Blackwell, 2002), 1-31.

¹⁶² Hoesterey, *Pastiche*, 119.

work that calls for academic examination and for the application of the “new visual literacy” that Hirsch describes in “Collateral Damage.” The visual/verbal nature of the graphic memoir and the existence of influences from the visual arts, literature and illustrated writing therein demand a comparative, interdisciplinary method of analysis. Hence, apart from perceiving meaning formation as an interactive process between readers and texts, my approach is influenced by the persistence in visual culture studies to deconstruct disciplinary boundaries in interpretation.¹⁶³ Consequently, this thesis situates the significance of contemporary American women’s graphic memoirs in different academic fields: It intervenes in comics scholarship by pushing its boundaries further in its exploration of other traditions beyond that of comics. It situates the graphic memoirs in visual culture studies by focusing on meaning creation as an interactive performance between the reader/spectator and the text and by demonstrating how women artists’ interpretations of previous artworks – both visual and verbal – are performed in the comics medium. In addition, it is situated in the study of contemporary women’s life narratives by showing how women artists as agents of their own subjectivities undo the pre-given status of the woman and the girl in Western culture, and in the academic examination of trauma in relation to the visual by showing the potential of comics infused with pastiche arrangements to function reparatively. Lastly, by introducing women artists’ engagement with and revision of past artistic and literary texts as reparative, it intervenes in the field of intertextual studies and underscores the healing function of repetition within the cultural domain as well.

In the remaining parts of this thesis, I proceed to substantiate my arguments with a close reading of the three case studies, which are addressed in a chronological order starting with each artist’s earliest graphic memoir. In the first chapter, I examine pastiche in Phoebe Gloeckner’s graphic memoirs; in the second I address Lynda Barry’s *One! Hundred! Demons!* and *What It Is*; and in the third, Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*. After summarising my arguments in the concluding section, I also suggest future work that will further investigate intertextuality in contemporary graphic memoirs. By briefly referring to the engagement with maternal traditions in Alison Bechdel’s *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama*, I point to the engagement with literary and artistic traditions beyond those from the paternal canon. In so doing, I underline the potential of such arrangements

¹⁶³ Nicholas Mirzoeff and Amelia Jones have underlined the urgency for the collapse between academic disciplines in visual cultural methods of analysis. See Jones, ed., *The Feminism and the Visual Culture Reader*, 1-3; and Mirzoeff, *Introduction to Visual Culture*, 4.

expressed by the comics medium to speak for marginalised subjectivities and to formulate complex autobiographical performances.

Chapter 1

Sexual Abuse in the Family Domain: Repetition, Recovery and Lolita's Feminist Reconfiguration in Phoebe Gloeckner's Graphic Memoirs

Phoebe Gloeckner's *A Child's Life and Other Stories* and *The Diary of a Teenage Girl: An Account in Words and Pictures* describe the autobiographical subject's sexual development and suffering in the family domain. Minnie, the protagonist, grows up abandoned by her biological father from a very young age.¹ Her mother, even though physically present, is emotionally absent from her daughter's life since she is usually depicted being drunk or under the influence of other drugs.² Thus, she is unable to contribute constructively in Minnie's growing up.³ The gaps that emerge in the protagonist's family allow two of her mother's boyfriends, Pascal and Monroe, to sexualise her during childhood and to sexually abuse her in adolescence. Consequently, the first version of insidious trauma I examine in this thesis emerges from the daughter's sexual violation by the father figures, and by her continuous and exaggerated interpellation as a sexual being. To a different extent, in their mediation of Minnie's domestic trauma, Gloeckner's graphic memoirs demonstrate, as I will show, a similar but at the same time subtler form of sexual violation by engaging with male canonical influences and traditions, which have contributed to the cultural formation of the woman and the girl as silenced and passive sexual spectacles, available in the service of adult male heterosexuality. Gloeckner's artistic decision to strategically engage with such artistic and literary narratives generates a second case of insidious sexual trauma that

¹ For example, in *A Child's Life* we learn that John, Minnie's father, does not live with his children. He also repeatedly misses chances to meet with them, thus demonstrating his indifference. His behaviour is harmful for the protagonist who is depicted crying at one such incident and the gap that emerges in the family structure because of his absence is filled in by men who repeatedly sexualise the girl protagonist. See Gloeckner, *A Child's Life*, 34.

² For instance, the chapters "Honni Soit Qui Mal Y Pense," and "An Object-Lesson in Bitter Fruit," describe the mother's inability to defend the protagonist when one of her boyfriends, Pascal, sexualises the girl. In the first case she agrees with him when he tells her that the platonic mother/daughter play is incestuous and that Minnie is transferring her libido onto her mother. In the second instance she passively observes him forcing Minnie to answer his questions about the size of her female fellow-students' breasts. See Gloeckner, *A Child's Life*, 22-26, 47-52.

³ The mother's absence and the two stepfathers' over-presence in Minnie's life reflect the situation that Judith Herman and Lisa Hirschman describe in their discussion on father/daughter incest cases in American families. See Judith Herman and Lisa Hirschman, "Father-Daughter Incest," *Signs* 2, no.4 (1977): 741, www.jstor.org/stable/373208.

takes place in the public cultural domain and affects the woman reader/spectator of the aforementioned texts. In this chapter, I argue that by performing Gloeckner's strategic interaction with and revision of those formulations for the purposes of Minnie's autobiographical narrative, the two graphic memoirs eventually repair both the protagonist's private trauma and the public, cultural one. I show that reparation, which concerns the autobiographical subject's move beyond sexual suffering on the one hand, and the reconfiguration of the female sexual body in artistic and literary discourses on the other, is achieved in how Gloeckner critically subverts such male misogynist traditions through her pastiche arrangements.

In the first part of this chapter, I describe Minnie's sexual suffering and I examine how the use of pastiche in *A Child's Life* enriches the narrative of the protagonist's developing sexual awareness in the domestic sphere. I investigate Gloeckner's revision of Marcel Duchamp's installation *Étant Donnés* to show how it introduces the protagonist's premature familiarisation with adult male sexuality. I also analyse her references to, and the autobiographical avatar's interaction with, Edgar Allan Poe and Vladimir Nabokov's works, which create the underage girl as a sexually available being for adult male family members. After describing how these texts affect Minnie, I proceed to argue that in *The Diary* there are instances when the protagonist moves beyond her status as a castrated, sexual victim under the authoritative gaze of the father figure. I interrogate the formal characteristics of the graphic memoir, which evoke the tradition of the Victorian black-and-white illustrated book and I suggest that in so doing they allude to Minnie's fin-de-siècle predecessor, *Salome*, whose new version appears in the autobiographical avatar's visual embodiments. Lastly, I examine Gloeckner's parodic repetition of the Renaissance painting *Gabrielle d'Estrées and her Sister, the Duchess of Villars*, to show how the narrative is situated in, as it simultaneously modifies artistic representations of the adolescent female spectacle that stretch back to the sixteenth century. Hence, I demonstrate that Gloeckner's feminist revision of these influences constructs Minnie as a phallic girl, whose wholeness and self-sufficiency transport her beyond the wound of female castration and sexual trauma. In addition, I propose that Gloeckner's reconfigurations undo the authority of the father figure and subvert misogynist artistic and literary formations of the female sexual object.

Underground Comics and High Art and Literature: Mediating the Daughter's Sexualisation

PHOEBE



Fig. 1-1: "Phoebe," p. 4, from *A Child's Life and Other Stories* by Phoebe Gloeckner, published by Frog Books/North Atlantic Books, copyright © 1998, 2000 by Phoebe Gloeckner. Reprinted by permission of publisher.

Despite their incorporation of canonical literary and artistic fathers, *A Child's Life* and *The Diary* also preserve their association with the tradition of underground autobiographical comics. Hence, they demonstrate the progression of the genre in the years around the turn of the century, which as this chapter shows, complicates the autobiographical narrative and underscores its potential for feminist statements.⁴ The connection between Gloeckner's texts and the underground scene emerges because of their obscene subject matter that concerns the protagonist's sexual abuse and problematic family life. Moreover, *A Child's Life* begins with Robert Crumb's introduction and his visual representation of young Phoebe. As explained, Crumb is one of the initiators of underground autobiographical comics and his work is known for its depictions of women and girls' sexual violation. Gloeckner – the artistic daughter – chooses to begin her first graphic memoir by providing a version of the autobiographical subject that is constructed through the counter-canonical father's vision. In his introduction to the book Crumb notes,

The truth is that I'm just like all the other despicable males that appear in these comic stories. I, too, lusted after the young, budding artist-cartoonist from the moment I first met her, when she was 16 or 17 years old. I, too, desired to subject the beautiful, intense young girl to all sorts of degrading and perverse sexual acts.⁵

Crumb's verbal text provides us with an insight into his sexual fantasies about the adolescent female spectacle. His visual depiction of the girl, reproduced above (fig. 1-1), shows how her body is filtered through and created by the male artist's imagination. Elizabeth El Refaie points out that Crumb's ideal female sexual objects are "women with grotesquely large buttocks" and thighs, who engage in "various forms of what can only be described as more or less consensual sexual assault."⁶ While Phoebe's picture is not obscene, it transforms her by investing her with large buttocks and thighs, and in so doing it demarcates how the medium of comics becomes a tool that modifies the female body in a way that brings it closer to the artist/spectator's ideal sexual object. Combined with the introduction that describes Crumb's sexual fantasies about the girl, the brief visual/verbal

⁴ Gloeckner's autobiographical comics first appeared in the *Twisted Sisters* together with Aline Kominisky-Crumb's work. For discussions on Gloeckner's obscene subject matters and her contribution in women's underground comics, see Robbins, *From Girls to Grrrlz*, 116; and Kominisky-Crumb, *Need More Love*, 136-153.

⁵ Robert Crumb, "Introduction," in *A Child's Life and Other Stories*, by Phoebe Gloeckner (Berkeley, CA: Frog Books, 2000), 5.

⁶ El Refaie, *Autobiographical Comics*, 80.

narrative constitutes an early example of the daughter's violation, which derives from the underground comics tradition, and specifically from Crumb's sexualising gaze.⁷

Nevertheless, in the proceeding stories it is the daughter herself who speaks from her marginalised position, and this is how I argue that Gloeckner's narratives repeat the misogynist meanings of male underground work against itself. In addition, by pastiching together influences from male high art and literature, which introduce female objects similar to those created in Crumb's texts, and with her use of the countercultural medium of comics, Gloeckner rejects the division between high and low culture by critically underscoring the objectification of the female body in both fields. Thus, pastiche functions parodically to critique, to question and reconfigure male-dominated formations of the silenced, passive female body in literary and visual texts. In Gloeckner's modification of male discourses in ways that make them speak the girl's perspective the original meanings are questioned and subverted as paternal authority is also challenged.

Apart from the cultural sexualisation and objectification of the female body, in reading Gloeckner's graphic memoirs we come across visual images that introduce Minnie's sexual trauma in the private family domain in a way that takes us out of our comfort zone. Being highly charged with what Tobin Siebers describes as the "excessive expressivity of images," they force us to become voyeurs and to see what takes place in a case of childhood sexual abuse in the dark, private spaces of an American household. In *Graphic Women* Hillary Chute points out that Gloeckner's visual images are "confrontational and confusing" and they "convey a deep-seated sense of horror and taboo."⁸ One of the taboo issues Chute focuses on concerns the sexual abuse of the adolescent daughter by the father figure, Monroe. Even though he is not Minnie's

⁷ Apart from the underground scene, mainstream comics also contributed to the formation of the woman as a sexual being in the post-war America through the representations of super heroines. For example, Andrew Deman notes that Wonder Woman "privileges aesthetic over function" as her "strapless bathing suit costume is far from sensible [and her] high-heeled, knee-high boots tap into a common sexual fetish and also create a more sexually appealing visual representation in the comics form by allowing the illustrator to draw [her] with an arched back and extended leg." See Andrew J. Deman, "The Intervening 'I': Phoebe Gloeckner's Graphic Memoir and the Destruction of Visual Pleasure," in *Visual Memoirs After the 1970s: Studies on Gender, Sexuality, and Visibility in the Post-Civil War Rights Age*, ed. Mihaela Precup (București: Editura Universității din București, 2010), 156. Richard Reynolds also explains that superhero comics were influenced by, and reproduced women's representations in pinups and pornographic films of the 1940s. See Richard Reynolds, "Costumed Continuity," in *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1994), 34. For visual representations and the history of Wonder Woman from the mid-century American context to today, see Robert Greenberg and George Perez, *Wonder Woman: Amazon, Hero, Icon* (New York: Universe Publishing, 2010).

⁸ Chute, *Graphic Women*, 61.

biological father, Chute chooses the word “incest” to describe the autobiographical subject’s trauma to introduce the family as the context of sexual violence.⁹

In this chapter I investigate sexual violence in Gloeckner’s narratives beyond the physical abuse of rape, to point to the ways in which Minnie is injured by familial and cultural discourses that interpellate her as a sexual objectified being. In her discussion with Peggy Orenstein about *The Diary*, her second graphic memoir, Phoebe Gloeckner explains that “Minnie had been bombarded with adults who had no boundaries and were overtly sexual with children. You get used to that,” she proceeds to point out, “and after a certain point you think of yourself and value yourself solely as a sexual being.”¹⁰ This is precisely the process that both graphic memoirs describe. Minnie is constantly depicted alongside paternal figures, who are expected to be protective and loving towards her, but eventually harm her by sexualising and taking advantage of her. Given her mother’s absence, the protagonist becomes what the father figures see and interpellate her as: a sexual object available for their satisfaction.

It is in the process of Minnie’s interpellation as a sexual being that the childhood narratives in *A Child’s Life* implicate the artistic and literary canonical fathers through Gloeckner’s pastiche arrangements and they do so for two reasons. The first one is to mediate Minnie’s premature familiarisation with the status of the stepfather figure as a sexual being, and hence to underline the sexual dynamics of the family relations. The second reason is to introduce her familiarisation with cultural discourses that construct the alluring adolescent and pre-adolescent girl – the Lolita figure – as sexually available for male family members. In so doing, the graphic memoir performs what I describe, based on Freud’s theory, as the daughter’s seduction that is caused by the fathers in the domestic private domain – Pascal and Monroe – and by the canonical fathers in the cultural sphere. Private and public memories are therefore constantly conflated to formulate Minnie’s suffering and to make a feminist intervention in literary and artistic formations of the female sexual spectacle that eventually repairs the injuries of female objectification.

Apart from Crumb’s influence, in *A Child’s Life* Gloeckner repeats and reconfigures Marcel Duchamp’s installation *Étant Donnés* to construct Minnie’s early

⁹ Chute, *Graphic Women*, 66.

¹⁰ Phoebe Gloeckner quoted in Peggy Orenstein, “A Graphic Life,” *The New York Times*, August 5, 2001, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/08/05/magazine/a-graphic-life.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.

familiarisation with paternal sexuality.¹¹ The chapter entitled “Hommage à Duchamp” explicitly acknowledges the influence of the artistic predecessor, but it proceeds to radically transform its previous meanings towards the mediation of Minnie’s sexualisation by Pascal. Hillary Chute also refers to the connection between Duchamp and Gloeckner’s works.¹² However, she does not explain the cultural significance of the installation and how Gloeckner’s version intervenes in the history it represents, to introduce a feminist take on the sexual spectacle and to narrate Minnie’s insidious sexual trauma. To explain how Gloeckner revises *Étant Donnés* and how “Hommage” marks a shift in the history of the spectacle in high art I proceed to examine Duchamp’s installation in more detail.

When spectators enter the space where *Étant Donnés* is exhibited the first element they see is a wooden door. When they approach to take a closer look they notice two holes on it, which invite them to observe what lies behind, thus triggering their voyeuristic or scopophilic drive. Sigmund Freud explains that scopophilia, the pleasure in looking, or the curiosity to look, derives from an infantile drive to observe sexual happenings within the family domain and specifically, the sexual life of the parents.¹³ In film theory, and according to Laura Mulvey’s influential essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” because gazing is an active penetrating process, the owner of the gaze is always already male due to his ownership of the phallus. In contrast, the woman becomes the passive object due to her castration.¹⁴ This is precisely the idea that *Étant Donnés* displays in an exaggerated way. Once spectators look through the peepholes on the door, one at a time, they observe within the frame of the broken wall the blatant representation of a three-dimensional female nude body with its genitals in full display.¹⁵ The woman’s body is situated in an open space near a waterfall and lying on dried branches. Spectators can also see her left breast and her arm raised and holding a lit lamp, but her face is cut off from their view. The Duchampian woman in *Étant Donnés* becomes therefore coded with excessive “to-be-looked-at-ness” and emerges as the female spectacle *par excellence*. Being situated in a ravine and holding an illuminating lamp underscore her role as a

¹¹ For photographic reproductions of the installation, see <http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/65633.html>.

¹² Gloeckner, *A Child’s Life*, 71.

¹³ Sigmund Freud, “Wish Fulfilment,” in *The Complete Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey ed. James Strachey (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1971), 220-225.

¹⁴ See Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 20.

¹⁵ The woman is made from plaster covered with leather and this provides a more realistic effect to the installation. For more information on the process of its creation see Dawn Ades, Neil Cox and David Hopkins, “Étant Donnés,” in *Marcel Duchamp* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999), 190.

spectacle. Simultaneously, that her head is cut off from viewers' visual field reduces the woman to a mere body, and specifically to her genitals, which constitute the most striking aspect of the installation. Like the tradition of male underground autobiographical comics, Duchamp's high-artistic installation reproduces the woman's status as a sexual object, passive and silenced, under the penetrating voyeuristic gaze of the male spectator.¹⁶

Dalia Judovitz points out that *Étant Donnés* places "emphasis on spectatorship as voyeurism, on visual fascination and seduction."¹⁷ In addition she explains that

The violence of this work appears to lie less in its deliberate exhibitionism and voyeurism than in the fact that the spectator is put face-to-face with his or her desire to look, to be fascinated, and to consume sexuality as an image. In the context of the museum where everything is on display, however, the display of sexuality takes an ironic turn.¹⁸

By forcing spectators to face the nude female genitals, Duchamp's installation also obliges them to recognise their desire and sexual pleasure in looking. Taking place in a high-artistic respectable institution, this process destabilises the boundaries between experiencing art and pornography, which is usually consumed in privacy.¹⁹ As I proceed to argue in this chapter, one of the meanings created in *Étant Donnés* that Gloeckner's feminist revision preserves in *A Child's Life* concerns precisely the way in which we are forced to face our voyeuristic drives in watching a nude sexual body. Nevertheless, in the context of the graphic memoir our consumption of sexuality as an image becomes a disturbing process because it mediates an occasion of father/daughter voyeuristic interaction. Duchamp's ironic stance is therefore transformed into a mechanism that implicates us as viewers in the dynamics of Minnie's sexualisation by the father figure in the domain of the family.

While Judovitz's argument correctly points to Duchamp's ironic negotiation of the voyeuristic drive, which re-appears in *A Child's Life*, it does not refer to how *Étant Donnés* reproduces the gender relations in looking and being looked at, as described in Mulvey's schema; it is the woman, after all, who is the objectified

¹⁶ For a description of the Duchampian woman's passivity under the always already male spectator, see also Herman Parret, "Preface," in *Les Transformateurs Duchamp/ Duchamp's Trans/Formers*, by Jean-François Lyotard, Herman Parret, Dalia Judovitz, 2nd ed. (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2010), 36.

¹⁶ Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 19-20.

¹⁷ Dalia Judovitz, "Introduction: Unpacking Duchamp," in *Unpacking Duchamp: Art in Transit* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 8.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁹ For a discussion on the destabilised boundaries between pornography and art in relation to depictions of the nude female body see Lynda Nead, "The Female Nude: Pornography, Art, and Sexuality," in *Sex Exposed: Sexuality and the Pornography Debate*, eds. Lynne Segal and Mary McIntosh (London: Virago, 1992), 282-284.

spectacle. Hence, we can argue for the status of the installation as a misogynistic mid-century representation of the female body.²⁰ Nevertheless, if we focus on its exaggeration and if we trace its artistic predecessor, it becomes possible to introduce a counter-argument as well, one that introduces *Étant Donnés* as a parodic artwork that critiques an older canonical piece. It is in its parodic, critical aspect that it becomes similar to, as it simultaneously remains very different from Gloeckner's version in *A Child's Life* and "Hommage." While I discuss her version in the following section, I will now proceed to refer to the artistic ancestor to demonstrate its initial meanings, how they were transformed by Duchamp and how they re-emerge completely reconfigured through Gloeckner's feminist revision, to construct Minnie's familiarisation with paternal sexuality. As Gloeckner's new version mediates the autobiographical subject's insidious trauma and her seduction by the father figure, I show that it also destabilises Mulvey's schema, by presenting us with a female gaze, and specifically, the underage daughter's gaze on the father figure as a sexual being.

The nineteenth-century artistic predecessor of Duchamp's mid-century installation and Gloeckner's turn-of-the-century graphic memoir, is Gustave Courbet's *The Origin of the World*.²¹ It was painted in 1866 and is currently exhibited in the Musée d'Orsay.²² The painting depicts a close-up realist view of a woman's genitals. It was commissioned by the Turkish ambassador in Paris, Khalil Bey, to be held in his palace as a part of his private collection. Hence, it is male sexual desire, and specifically voyeuristic desire, that triggered the creation of the painting, the misogynistic depiction of a vagina, of the woman as less than a person.²³ For years the painting was held and displayed in secrecy by its owners, who also kept it hidden behind other artworks, thus reproducing the privacy of the voyeuristic process during the consumption of pornographic material. The exposure of Duchamp's woman in the public domain, both in the artwork itself, since the woman is situated in an open field,

²⁰ *Étant Donnés* is currently exhibited in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Duchamp worked on it from 1946 to 1966 in secrecy and left a box with instructions for the installation to be revealed only after his death. Ades, Cox and Hopkins, *Duchamp*, 190.

²¹ For a photographic reproduction of Courbet's painting, see http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in-focus/search.html?no_cache=1&zoom=1&tx_damzoom_pi1%5BshowUid%5D=2406.

²² Shuli Barzilai, "A Brief History of *The Origin of the World*: Courbet and Lacan," in *Lacan and the Matter of Origins* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 10. For a discussion on the pornographic/high-artistic conflation the painting embodies and a reference to its first commissioner and its secret owners see also Linda Nochlin, "Courbet's *L'Origine du Monde*: The Origin without an Original," *October* 37 (1986):76-86, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/778520>.

²³ Barzilai, *Lacan and the Matter of Origins*, 9.

and in the space of the art gallery, exposes and mocks the secret voyeuristic consumption of what falls in the domain of heterosexual pornography.²⁴

Drucilla Cornell defines pornography as

The explicit presentation and depiction of sexual organs and sexual acts with the aim of arousing sexual feeling through either (a) the portrayal of violence and coercion against women as the basis of heterosexual desire or (b) the graphic depiction of a woman's body as dismembered by her being reduced to her sex and stripped completely of personhood as she is portrayed in involvement in explicit sex acts.²⁵

Similarly, Catharine MacKinnon describes pornography as “the sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures or words that also includes women presented as dehumanized sexual objects [and] in postures of servility or submission or display.”²⁶ Like underground male autobiographical comics, *The Origin* also demonstrates the dehumanisation of the female person and her reduction to her genitalia in the service of male voyeuristic pleasure thus falling in the domain of pornography. *Étant Donnés* ironically exaggerates this pornographic scene and transports it in a high-artistic institution, thus mocking the boundaries that exist between the two categories. The same process takes place more implicitly if we take into consideration the history of *The Origin*. Its initial private ownership and its current exhibition in a museum underscore the permeability of the boundaries between art and pornography. Nevertheless, in both cases the woman emerges as an identity-less body, reduced to the Freudian castrated wound.

Feminist art historian Linda Nochlin reads *The Origin* via a psychoanalytic lens and notes that because it depicts the mutilated female genitals, it can evoke the male spectator's fear of castration.²⁷ Building on Nochlin's argument, Shuli Barzilai explains that the painting is “not only a ‘pussy shot’ that would deliver the female body to the male gaze for delectation.”²⁸ In contrast, she notes,

The Origin of the World also reenacts the story of Genesis by presenting the creation of woman out of male materials. In other words, the origin of the world is not to be found in the represented image, in the partial figure of the

²⁴ For a discussion on Courbet's influence in Duchamp's work, see Jerrold Seigel, “Desire, Delay, and the Fourth Dimension,” in *The Private Worlds of Marcel Duchamp: Desire, Liberation and the Self in Modern Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 111-114.

²⁵ Drucilla Cornell, “Pornography's Temptation,” in *The Imaginary Domain: Abortion, Pornography and Sexual Harassment* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 106.

²⁶ Catharine MacKinnon, “Misogyny's Cold Heart,” in *Are Women Human? And Other Dialogues* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2006), 89.

²⁷ Nochlin, “Origin Without an Original,” 77.

²⁸ Barzilai, *Lacan and the Matter of Origins*, 11.

female nude, but rather in the male artist-creator-originator who gives shape and meaning to that body as to the blank matter of a canvas surface.²⁹

Hence, although it has the potential to evoke castration anxiety, and to visually present the significance of the maternal womb as the place of all human origin, Courbet's painting eventually affirms male ownership of the phallus and dominance in the same way that the Medusa does in Freud's interpretation of the myth: the vagina – the origin – is created by the male creator for the voyeuristic pleasure of the male spectator, who can affirm his ownership of the phallus by penetrating it with his gaze.³⁰

Commenting upon patriarchal formations of the female nude in Western visual arts Lynda Nead explains that representations “created by male artists not only testify to patriarchal understandings of female sexuality and femininity, they also endorse certain definitions of male sexuality and masculinity.”³¹ Building on Nead's argument, and if we accept Janet Wolff's view that culture discursively produces gendered and sexual identities, we can explain how Courbet's painting and Duchamp's installation produce masculine and feminine sexualities in ways that reproduce heteronormative gender hierarchies. They introduce the former as active and penetrating and the latter as passive and objectified. Despite being a parodic exaggeration, therefore, it is in Courbet's tradition that Duchamp's installation is situated. As Shuli Barzilai suggests, *Étant Donnés*, as a display of *The Origin*, “simultaneously participates in a pattern of misogyny in which art cannot easily be differentiated from fetishism, pornography, or the profanation of the female body, and stands outside or beyond that pattern.”³² Having described the history behind Duchamp's installation and its cultural significance in its parodic engagement with Courbet's influence in nineteenth-century realist nudes, I now proceed to examine how Gloeckner revises the former's artwork in *A Child's Life*. In so doing, I show how as she embeds her work in the aforementioned traditions, she simultaneously reconfigures them towards constructing the silenced, objectified female spectacle's personhood, experience and gaze. In addition, I point out how Gloeckner's work questions and undoes the passivity

²⁹ Barzilai, *Lacan and the Matter of Origins*, 11.

³⁰ For Freud's analysis of the Medusa Myth, see Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 273-274. I refer to the myth in this chapter to point to how both the female genitals and their artistic equivalent embodied in Medusa's head cause a threat of castration but they affirm male ownership of the phallus. In Courbet's painting the vagina becomes a source of artistic inspiration and the object of the male spectator's voyeuristic pleasure. In Freud's analysis Medusa's gaze, which turns men into stone, connotes stiffness and therefore suggests erection. In both cases therefore, male authority is established. While I briefly refer to the figure of the Medusa here, I examine it in more detail in the next chapter.

³¹ Nead, “The Female Nude,” 283.

³² Barzilai, *Lacan and the Matter of Origins*, 18.

and objectification that comes with the female lack of the phallus in Freudian psychoanalysis and this is how Freud emerges as part of the male canon that the two graphic memoirs subvert.

The title page of “Hommage à Duchamp” (fig. 1-2) shown below depicts Minnie talking with her sister and looking at the bathroom door. “Hey, Look,” she notes, “the glass has been knocked out of the door! We can see into the bathroom.”³³ As readers/spectators we are presented with a close-up image of the two girls and we look from their perspective at the background of the picture, where there is a door made from a large wooden frame and stained glass. A part of the glass surface is broken and thus triggers our and the two girls’ voyeuristic curiosity, since it allows us to penetrate with our gaze the private domestic space. The two holes on Duchamp’s wooden door are transformed by Gloeckner into a broken glass and whereas in *Étant Donnés* spectators had visual access to an open field, the hole on the bathroom door can provide insight into the most private space of a family house. The public exaggerated voyeuristic process that Duchamp’s installation evokes is transported back to the private domain. In addition, the spectators in this case are the two underage girls and what they are about to gaze at does not concern an unknown person-less body, but a family member. This is precisely why Gloeckner’s reproduction of the Duchampian treatment of voyeuristic drives becomes discomforting and disturbing: because it presents an example of active paternal sexuality and its injurious effect on the child protagonist.

In his discussion on scopophilia Freud describes children’s drive to watch sexual happenings in their parents’ lives.³⁴ In so doing, he invests children with a version of sexuality, which has been repressed in Western culture by its insistence to produce children as asexual beings.³⁵ In Gloeckner’s texts we can identify Minnie’s developing childhood sexuality that is nevertheless manipulated by the father figures. By mediating an experience of sexualisation and sexual abuse, where the child is not only a silenced passive object, Gloeckner’s graphic memoirs construct the daughter’s sexual trauma in a way that

³³ Gloeckner, *A Child’s Life*, 27.

³⁴ Freud, *The Complete Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, 225.

³⁵ For descriptions on the imposition of silence on children’s sexuality, see Michel Foucault, “The Repressive Hypothesis,” in *The Will to Knowledge*, Vol. 1, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1976, 1998), 38-42, Freud, *The Complete Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, 312 and James R. Kincaid, “Inventing the Child and Sexuality,” in *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting* (London: Duke University Press, 1998), 73.

destabilises her commonly accepted passivity. The first step of this process takes place by the mediation of Minnie's voyeuristic curiosity for what takes place in the bathroom.

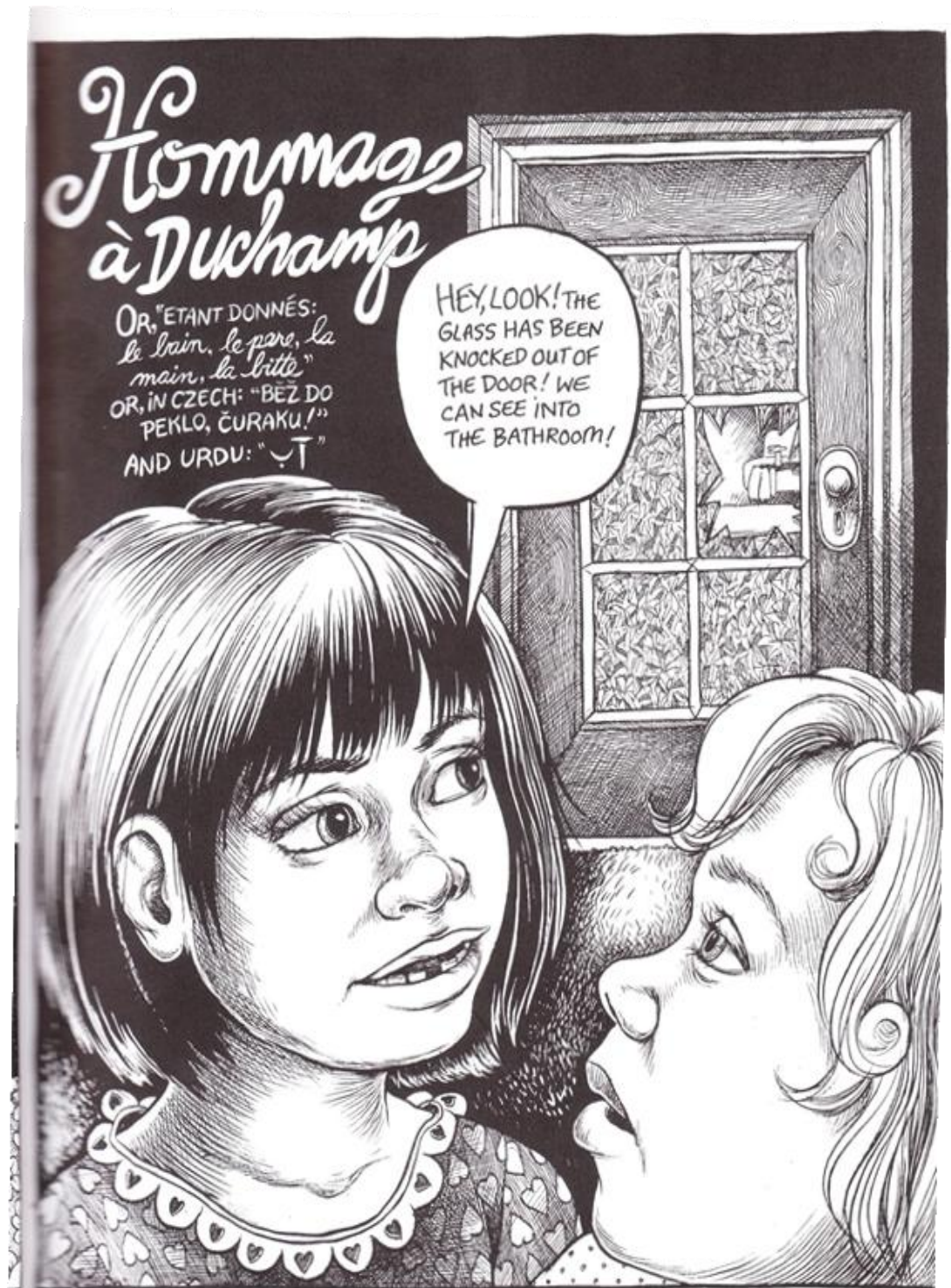


Fig. 1-2: "Hommage à Duchamp" p. 27, from *A Child's Life and Other Stories* by Phoebe Gloeckner, published by Frog Books/North Atlantic Books, copyright © 1998, 2000 by Phoebe Gloeckner. Reprinted by permission of publisher.

While in the title page we still do not see inside, the subtitle of the chapter “Or, *Étant Donnés: le Bain, le Pere, la Main, la Bitte*” foreshadows what is about to follow.³⁶ Hillary Chute translates the subtitle as “the bath, the father, the hand, the cock.”³⁷ The given elements in Duchamp’s installation – the illuminating glass and the waterfall – are replaced by four words that describe a private space, “the bath,” a family member, “the father,” and two body parts, “the hand” and “the cock.” Gloeckner’s word choice situates obscene sexual matter within the domain of the family and associates it with the father figure. The voyeuristic dynamics of Courbet and Duchamp’s artworks are applied in the father/daughter pair and *Étant Donnés* is reconfigured to construct the beginning of what is about to develop into a case of incestuous trauma for the protagonist. Being situated above Minnie’s head, whose large eyes look curious and innocent, the title evokes a disturbing oxymoronic feeling in readers that will escalate on the following page, reproduced below (fig. 1-3).

The full-page panel in “Homage” moves further into the scene described in the title page of the chapter. We approach the bathroom door with the two girls and we are situated at the same eye-level with them. Together we watch Pascal, the father-figure, sitting on the edge of the bathtub in a scene of masturbation. His head and erect penis are disproportionately large and Gloeckner’s subtitle is transformed in this panel into a confrontational visual presence: the father figure is introduced as a sexual being. The sharp edges of the broken glass and the cloth hanging on the sink that functions as a symbolic representation of flaccid male genitals contradict and intensify the effect of the stepfather’s penile erection.³⁸

³⁶ Gloeckner, *A Child’s Life*, 27. While Gloeckner’s choice of French for the title is an element preserved from the artistic predecessor, I have found no evidence with regards to the choice of Urdu and Czech for the following translations. Nevertheless, I read them as means which invest the incident with global dimensions by suggesting that similar cases of incest take place in different geographical areas beyond the boundaries of the U.S. Indeed, Gloeckner insists that her texts aim to formulate collective rather than personal stories. “I aspire,” she notes “to create characters who can be universally understood despite being constructed with details so numerous that they could only refer to a particular situation . . . It is not my story. It’s our story.” See Phoebe Gloeckner, “Autobiography: The Process that Negates the Term,” in *Graphic Subjects: Critical Essays on Autobiography and Graphic Novels*, ed. Michael Chaney (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 179.

³⁷ Chute, *Graphic Women*, 71. Chute explains that the absence of activity in Duchamp’s female spectacle becomes “confrontational presence” in Gloeckner’s male one, but does not proceed to explain the significance of this difference with regards to the negotiation of the female body as spectacle in Western art and the cultural violation/injury that this process constitutes.

³⁸ For more on Gloeckner’s use of phallic imagery in this particular panel, see Chute, *Graphic Women*, 72.



Fig. 1-3: "Hommage à Duchamp," p. 28, from *A Child's Life and Other Stories* by Phoebe Gloeckner, published by Frog Books/North Atlantic Books, copyright © 1998, 2000 by Phoebe Gloeckner. Reprinted by permission of publisher.

Unlike Duchamp's woman, Pascal's body is strong, fully captured and his active sexuality is shown both by his masturbation and by the fact that he looks back at the two girls and readers, who are forced to voyeuristically interact with the spectacle. We are therefore engaged with Minnie and her sister, in a process where father/daughter relations become overtly sexual, despite being restricted in the visual field. This is how Gloeckner's reconfiguration of *Étant Donnés* attempts to destabilise the masculine and female positions in relations of looking and being looked at. Pascal holds a place conventionally attributed to women, and the underage girls are placed in the position of the spectator. Nevertheless, his active gaze, his masturbation and his grotesquely large, erect penis maintain his dominance.

In his discussion on male pinups targeted towards women spectators, Richard Dyer explains that a disruption of balance takes place when placing a male model in the role of the spectacle and a woman in that of the spectator, because this distribution violates "the codes of who looks and who is looked at (and how)."³⁹ Nevertheless, he adds that "some attempt is instinctively made to counteract this violation" and the spectacle's return of the gaze to the female spectator is one such example.⁴⁰ "Muscularity," he further explains, "is the sign of power – natural, achieved, phallic."⁴¹ Preserving it therefore maintains male dominance. In addition, being depicted during an activity contradicts the female spectacle's pre-given passivity and works towards visually embodying male agency, and power.⁴² Thus, in the male spectacle's interaction with the female spectator, sexual hierarchies are preserved, despite the reversal of roles that takes place.

Pascal preserves the male spectacle's power on all the levels described by Dyer, with a further stress on the activity of male sexuality. His disproportionately large and erect penis is also explicitly displayed. Dyer explains that in male pinup photographs "the penis can never live up to the mystique implied by the phallus," hence attention is placed on muscles and other phallic symbols.⁴³ In Gloeckner's depiction of Pascal the penis exaggeratingly mediates what Dyer describes as the mystique of the phallus, which embodies male (sexual) dominance and self-sufficiency. Indeed, apart from the bathroom panel, throughout *A Child's Life* visual representations of grotesquely large erect penises

³⁹ Richard Dyer, "Don't Look Now: The Instabilities of the Male Pin-Up," in *Only Entertainment* (London, Routledge, 1992), 104.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 114.

⁴² Ibid., 110.

⁴³ Ibid., 116.

prevail and they are accompanied with female objectification and sexual degradation.⁴⁴ Hence, even though I argue that in *The Diary* phallic visual imagery is manipulated towards Minnie's recovery from her injuries, its over-presence in *A Child's Life* has a different outcome: it underscores phallic authority and dominance even in the visual, non-linguistic field of its bitextual medium.

Elizabeth Grosz explains that

The phallus and penis can only be aligned if there are those who lack it. It is assumed only on the basis of division and dichotomy represented by the lack attributed to women. The penis can only enhance ... men's narcissism because it constitutes their corporeal unity in relation to women's incompleteness. The penis comes to represent tangibly the differences between the sexes as other organs, in our culture, do not, enabling it to function on an imaginary level to signify presence and absence or fullness and privation ... [The] phallus is not a 'neutral' term functioning equally for both sexes ... As the word suggests, it is a term privileging masculinity, or rather, the penis.⁴⁵

According to Grosz's reading, the self-sufficiency, power and completeness that the phallus represents are always already attributed to male subjects within heteronormative systems of subject formation. This is the idea that *A Child's Life* reproduces as well, in the effort to construct the injuries caused by Minnie's sexualisation and suffering in the family domain. In the bathroom panel, the two girls and readers are familiarised with an obscene visual depiction of male heterosexuality and all the power relations that it reproduces.

The dominance of the father figure is both sexual and sexualising. If we keep in mind Freud's definition of childhood scopophilic drives, we can detect the ways in which the panel that shows Pascal's masturbation also stimulates the two girls' voyeuristic pleasure. In addition, interpreting the scene informed by Freud's views on children's Oedipal drives towards the parent of the opposite sex can point to how Minnie's gaze can be read as an implication of her sexual desire for the paternal phallus. If Minnie's unconscious sexual drives are directed towards the father figure, then seeing Pascal in the scene of masturbation can trigger her desire for him, for his phallus. Even though her sexual activity is not visually embodied in the same way that Pascal's is, we as readers can identify it in our interpretation of the panel. This is precisely how *A Child's Life* achieves our defamiliarisation in relation to gender positions in relations of looking and being

⁴⁴ "Minnie's 3rd Love, or: 'Nightmare on Polk Street'" and "Homage" include some of Gloeckner's most disturbing visual depictions of phallic erections. See Gloeckner, *A Child's Life*, 27-32, 70-81.

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Grosz, "Sexual Relations," in *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1990), 122.

looked at. Unlike Duchamp and Courbet's always-already male spectators, we come across the voyeuristic gaze of the daughter towards the father figure. As Hillary Chute explains, the bathroom panel sets in motion "undecidable directions and tenors of looking (shame, desire, confusion). Minnie and her sister are both attracted and repulsed, and we watch them as we watch ourselves, aware of our own spectatorship."⁴⁶ As the panel reproduces the effect of Duchamp's installation in relation to our confrontation with our voyeuristic drives, it simultaneously introduces the girls' gaze and visually embodies the first example of what Freud described as the daughter's seduction in the family domain. I now proceed to refer to Freud's theory of seduction and its subsequent silencing, to show how Gloeckner's first graphic memoir, and specifically the masturbation scene, displays what Freud himself veiled by rejecting his female patients' accounts of sexual violation in the family domain as lies. Thus, I point out that as it reconfigures Duchamp's artwork, the particular scene performs a combination of the daughter's Oedipal drive towards the father, and the latter's seduction of the former. As it does so, it challenges the canonical psychoanalytic silencing of the daughter by allowing her to speak her experience.

In 1896 Freud argued that one of the causes of hysteria is "a memory related to sexual life."⁴⁷ He explained that genital stimulation caused by the sexual abuse of children younger than ten years old is not experienced as traumatic at the moment of its occurrence, but later in adolescence, when the individual will have acquired sexual knowledge to interpret the event as traumatic. In so doing, Freud introduced the delayed formation of trauma that he defined as the *Nachträglichkeit*, and the significance of adult, usually paternal, sexual abuse in children's later development and mental health, thus formulating his "seduction theory."⁴⁸ The scene depicted in the bathroom panel (fig. 1-3) in "Hommage" does not include an example of physical sexual contact between Minnie and Pascal. The sexual dynamics are restricted in, and mediated to readers via, the visual field. Nevertheless, in his description of events that take place in puberty and can trigger the repressed unconscious memory of childhood sexual abuse, Freud notes that "later traumas ... can vary in their intensity and nature, from actual sexual violation to mere sexual overtones or the witnessing of sexual acts in other people."⁴⁹ If we perceive the witnessing of adult sexual acts as traumatic, then we can point to the ways in which Pascal's

⁴⁶ Chute, *Graphic Women*, 72.

⁴⁷ Freud, *Early Psychoanalytic Publications*, 152.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 164

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 166.

masturbation can function as an example of Freud's seduction theory and how it can be traumatic for the two girls. The particular panel therefore visually embodies the complexities of incestuous voyeuristic interactions by suggesting the ways in which the daughter can be traumatised and sexually stimulated at the same time. Hence, we can understand the image as the uncensored "authentic," in El Refaie's terms, representation of Minnie's truthful experience in her witnessing of active paternal sexuality.⁵⁰

Indeed, as it provides us with the girls' gaze the panel also demonstrates their inability to process the event as traumatic at the moment of its occurrence. After watching Pascal and running away, Minnie and her sister assume that he was probably washing his penis.⁵¹ However, for adult readers the scene is charged with traumatic overtones and with sexual dimensions that the girls lack the knowledge to identify. Thus, it is in Gloeckner's later repetition of the event in her graphic memoir and in our interaction with the text that the trauma effect of the bathroom scene is produced and demonstrates how Minnie's relationship with her stepfather becomes injurious. Even though the dialogue between the two girls is laconic, the visual aspect of the bathroom panel formulates their trauma and uncovers a violent display of paternal sexuality. Hence, the panel reacts to the discursive formation of the woman and the girl as silenced objectified spectacles by repeating and resignifying the meanings of Duchamp and Courbet's works to express the daughter's sexualisation by the father figure in the domestic domain.

At the same time, "Hommage" challenges Freud's later rejection of his seduction theory. Despite initially acknowledging children's seduction by adults in their domestic environment, Freud went on to reject his hysteric patients' accounts as lies and to come up with the Oedipus theory, which describes children's sexual instincts towards their parents.⁵² As Jeffery Masson explains, once "Freud had decided that these seductions had never occurred [and] that the parents had not done anything to their children in reality ... an act was replaced by an impulse, a deed by a fantasy."⁵³ Sexual abuse became a figment

⁵⁰ I interpret the scene in the same way that Marianne Hirsch reads Spiegelman's *In the Shadow of No Towers* in "Collateral Damage" as I have explained in the introduction of this thesis. My reading nevertheless, focuses on how the underage daughter's private everyday sexual trauma is mediated through the visual medium of comics, and thus shifts attention from the public to the private domain and from Caruth's definition of traumatic events to Maria Root's notion of insidious trauma.

⁵¹ Gloeckner, *A Child's Life*, 29.

⁵² See Freud, *Early Psycho-Analytic Publications*, 160.

⁵³ Jeffrey Masson, "Freud's Renunciation of the Seduction Theory," in *The Assault on Truth: Freud and Child Sexual Abuse* (London: Fontana, 1992), 113. *The Assault on Truth* provides a detailed analysis of Freud's seduction theory and the reasons which led to its later rejection.

of the hysterical daughter's imagination and was caused by her sexual instincts towards her father. Her account was found unreliable and hence in Freud's script, as in Duchamp and Courbet's artworks, she became silenced so as to establish once again paternal phallic authority.

In her discussion on Freud's rejection of the seduction theory, Christine Froula introduces the term "hysterical cultural script" to refer to "the cultural text that dictates to males and females alike the necessity of silencing woman's speech when it threatens her father's power. This silencing," she notes, "insures that the cultural daughter remains a daughter, her power suppressed and muted."⁵⁴ Froula further suggests that Freud rejected/silenced the daughters' accounts because his theory received negative reactions within psychoanalytic circles, thus putting his professional security in jeopardy.⁵⁵ Transporting the "hysterical cultural script" from the field of psychoanalysis to that of literature, to discuss role of women in Western literary history, Christine Froula explains,

For the literary daughter – the woman reader/writer as daughter of her culture – the metaphysical violence against women inscribed in the literary tradition, although more subtle and no less difficult to acknowledge and understand, has serious consequences. Metaphysically, the woman reader of a literary tradition that inscribes violence against women is an abused daughter. Like physical abuse, literary violence against women works to privilege the cultural father's voice and story over those of women, the cultural daughters, and indeed to silence women's voices.⁵⁶

Froula's observation applies not only in the field of literature but also in that of the visual arts. While I refer to the construction of the daughter in literary works by canonical fathers in the following section of this chapter, it is important to note that Courbet and Duchamp's engagement with the female body demonstrate precisely what Froula describes above: the artistic silencing of women and the maintenance of male authority and dominance.

Gloeckner, as an artistic daughter and reader of the canonical paternal artworks that discursively violate and silence women, does not remain restricted within the gender and sexuality formations they prescribe. In her feminist engagement with male traditions she critically reconfigures their metaphysical violence to mediate Minnie's suffering. By incorporating these influences and preserving its connection with the misogynist

⁵⁴ Christine Froula, "The Daughter's Seduction: Sexual Violence and Literary History," *Signs* 11, no. 4 (1986): 623, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174136>.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 269. For a discussion on the rejection of Freud's seduction theory in psychoanalytic circles see also Masson, *The Assault on Truth*, 134-138.

⁵⁶ Froula, "The Daughter's Seduction," 633.

underground comics, *A Child's Life* demonstrates how an artistic daughter (Gloeckner) can produce a text that is influenced by, as it simultaneously radically resignifies the violation of those previous texts to mediate the trauma of the female objectified spectacle.



Fig. 1-4: "An Object Lesson in Bitter Fruit," p. 47, from *A Child's Life and Other Stories* by Phoebe Gloeckner, published by Frog Books/North Atlantic Books, copyright © 1998, 2000 by Phoebe Gloeckner. Reprinted by permission of publisher.

Apart from the field of visual arts, Gloeckner also turns to the literary canon, to construct the autobiographical avatar's injurious sexualisation by the father figures. The panel above (fig. 1-4) shows Minnie, at the age of eight, sitting in her room and reading Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. On her right side we also see an open book with a collection of Edgar Allan Poe's works. Poe and Nabokov form a lineage in literary tradition that spans from the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century American cultural context and it is known for presenting sexualised versions of adolescent and pre-adolescent girls. Gloeckner's reference to their works functions in the same way that her parodic incorporation of Duchamp's installation did: it intervenes and makes a shift in their tradition by presenting a sexualised girl that is not filtered through a male artist's imagination. Simultaneously, it shows the effects of the cultural sexualisation of the girl on Minnie, the autobiographical subject. In this chapter, I propose that Minnie's familiarisation with literary formations of the girl as a sexual being results in her premature self-perception as such. In addition, I suggest that by providing the sexualised girl with personhood and mediating her feelings, *A Child's Life* offers a de-romanticised version of the stories that Poe and Nabokov's works mediate. To explain the shift that takes place in Gloeckner's graphic memoir in relation to the literary sexualisation of the daughter, I proceed to examine the connection between two literary fathers' works and how they discursively form the girl as a passive, silenced sexual object.

Gloeckner's nineteenth-century predecessor, Edgar Allan Poe is notoriously known for his marriage to his cousin Virginia Clemm. As Marie Bonaparte explains in her psychoanalytic interpretation of his works, Poe thought of marrying Virginia when she was only twelve years old and he was twenty-five.⁵⁷ The wedding took place a year later but it was unlikely that the two consummated their relationship because his "child-wife," Virginia, was suffering and eventually died from tuberculosis.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, Bonaparte proceeds to explain that the "innocent Virginia, small, consumptive, part-angel and soon dying, came nearest to [Poe's] sexual ideal."⁵⁹ The girls and women who appear in his poems and short stories, which Minnie is depicted to have read (fig. 1-4), share similar characteristics with his young sickly bride. Karen Weekes notes that Poe's feminine ideal

⁵⁷ Marie Bonaparte, "With Mrs. Clemm at Baltimore – The First Tales," in *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation*, trans. John Rodker (London: Imago, 1949), 72.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 77, 139.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

entails being vulnerable, sickly and even dying.⁶⁰ A representative example of his vulnerable, dying female characters can be found in his poem “Annabel Lee” that was written during the time of Virginia’s death. According to Bonaparte, “overwhelmed by grief over his dying Virginia and, again, plagued by the repressed sado-necrophilistic drives she aroused,” Poe turned to morphine and alcohol to fight his drives and “to his third drug, ink” to write an early version of the poem.⁶¹

In “Annabel Lee” the male speaker describes his love for “a child” that was destroyed because angels in heaven became envious of it. Due to this envy Annabel died, leaving her lover alone. Because their love was strong, however, it was preserved as the speaker proceeds to explain after the girl’s death. To remain connected with her soul as the last lines of the poem inform us, he slept during the night on her grave.⁶² Consequently, the girl in Poe’s poem comes out as a voiceless and vulnerable person-less figure, whose death becomes erotic for her lover. As Weekes further explains,

Poe’s female characters [are]... a *tabula rasa* on which the lover inscribes his own needs ... Poe never truly wrote about women at all, writing instead about a female object ignoring dimensions of character that add depth or believability to these repeated stereotypes of the beautiful damsel.⁶³

In Poe’s poems and short stories the daughter is silenced, sexualised and created through the eye of the male beholder. Her account is not provided and she comes forth primarily as a passive vulnerable erotic object. By becoming familiarised with Poe’s female characters and with the paedophilic relationships that unfold in his works, Minnie demonstrates precisely what Froula describes as the implicit violation of the cultural daughter by the literary father. In its pastiche arrangements, therefore, *A Child’s Life* repeats the cultural violation of the female body that inflicts injuries on female readers by moving from the depiction of the woman as a fragmented body part, to the girl’s literary formation as a sexual, passive object first in Poe’s stories and poems and then in Nabokov’s novel, *Lolita*.

The narrator in *Lolita*, Humbert Humbert, describes his sexual fascination with pre-adolescent and adolescent girls, whom he describes as nymphets or Lolitas. In

⁶⁰ Karen Weekes, “Poe’s Feminine Ideal,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Kevin J. Heyes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 148.

⁶¹ Bonaparte, *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, 125.

⁶² For the poem, see Edgar Allan Poe, “Annabel Lee,” in *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin, 1982), 957-958.

⁶³ Weekes, “Poe’s Feminine Ideal,” 152. For Poe’s short story “Eleonora,” and his poem “Lenore,” which are also representative examples of such female depictions see Poe, *The Complete Tales and Poems*, 649-653, 946-947.

addition, he offers a detailed account of his sexual affair with a twelve-year old girl, Dolores Haze. The Lolita figure emerges therefore as a figment of his imagination that is embodied in different girls throughout his lifetime, as a prototype, which some of the girls he encounters resemble.⁶⁴ In describing Lolita, the nymphet, Humbert notes,

Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travellers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac) ... The little deadly demon... stands unrecognized by [other children,] and unconscious herself of her fantastic [sexual] power.⁶⁵

That the Lolita can be identified only by a much older adult man suggests that her recognition and formulation as such lies precisely in the male subject, who will distinguish her through his gaze among others. According to Humbert, Lolita's most sexually alluring aspect is the beauty of her youthful female body, thus she emerges first and foremost as a sexual object.⁶⁶

What further excites the narrator about his Lolita, Dolores Haze, is the incestuous aspect of his attachment to her.⁶⁷ In order to justify his otherwise illicit desire for her, Humber makes a reference to Poe's marriage with his young cousin, Virginia Clemm, thus embedding the poet in the fictional realm of the mid-century novel and in so doing he establishes the connection to the literary forefather.⁶⁸ When Humbert sees Dolores, he decides to marry her mother to be close to her and when she dies he is able to approach the girl sexually.⁶⁹ Like Pascal in *A Child's Life*, he also becomes embedded in the family structure as a father figure and explains that "with an incestuous thrill, [he] had grown to regard her as [his] child," and that during their sexual affair Dolores occasionally called him "dad," and referred to their sexual intercourse as "incest."⁷⁰

Humbert's narrative introduces Lolita's childish sexual awareness as allowing her to seduce him.⁷¹ Nevertheless, in reading the novel we do not have access to the girl's experience of the sexual affair. As Ellen Pifer points out, Humbert's imagination eclipses

⁶⁴ For examples of such girls, see Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*, 2nd edition (London: Corgi, 1978) 16, 24, 44.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 18, 19.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 74.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 139, 143.

“the child’s identity in order to evoke the tantalizing nymphet.”⁷² Elsewhere, Pifer explains that Nabokov’s children are “far from genderless angels, but” Dolores’ sexual awareness at the age of twelve is manipulated by the monstrous father figure.⁷³ While *Lolita* refuses to introduce the girl protagonist as asexual, thus reacting against the Western imposition of children’s asexuality, it also represents the adult narrator’s effort to naturalise his affair with her. In reading this novel at the age of eight (fig. 1-4), Minnie prematurely familiarises herself with the girl’s status as a sexual being available for the stepfather’s sexual satisfaction. Hence, apart from the adults in her family who are overtly sexual with children, as the bathroom panel (fig. 1-3) suggests, Minnie reads canonical literary work that reproduces paedophilic and quasi-incestuous phenomena. Being surrounded by discourses that construct girls as sexual objects she starts perceiving herself as such too. Hence, the panel in which she is depicted reading *Lolita* comes to demonstrate the end of Minnie’s sexually unaware childhood. In addition, it shows how Gloeckner’s strategic use of pastiche performs a critique of Poe and Nabokov’s canonical literary formations of the silent sexual girl.

Apart from the reading material it includes, Minnie’s transition from a sexually innocent childhood to sexual awareness is demonstrated by the incorporation of dolls in the panel. On the right side, we observe a dismembered one with a broken leg, detached from her body, and pierced by an arc. The doll also has a rope around its neck, one that functions to prevent it from falling on the ground but that could also be interpreted as a means of suffocation. The brutal mutilation it seems to have suffered can be seen as a metaphorical representation of a rather violent end to Minnie’s sexually unaware girlhood; the doll has after all a childish figure. Next to it we see a cat excreting, hence suggesting a further devaluation of the childhood that is disassociated from sexual awareness. In contrast, next to Minnie we see another doll lying on the floor. This is, however, a naked Barbie-like doll, tall and skinny, with long black hair, big breasts, long slim legs and slender arms. Its existence closer to the protagonist demonstrates her exploration of the sexual Barbie-like female body, which is also associated with what Gili Durham describes as the *Lolita* phenomenon, which points to the significance of Nabokov’s fictional girl in the broader U.S. culture.

⁷² Ellen Pifer, “The *Lolita* Phenomenon from Paris to Tehran,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov*, ed. Julian W. Connolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 192.

⁷³ Ellen Pifer ed., “Nabokov’s Novel Offspring: *Lolita* and her Kin,” in *Vladimir Nabokov’s Lolita: A Casebook* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 93.

Referring to the current media sexualisation of girls in Western countries, Durham notes that “the first myth of the Lolita effect is the translation of girls’ sexuality into visual metaphors of sex work.”⁷⁴ The Lolita prototype is primarily a visual being. By stylising their bodies in ways that visually present and therefore offer their sexual availability, girls enter, according to Durham, a process that resembles the politics of sex work, thus further reproducing their status as sexual objects/spectacles. Durham also notes that twelve-year-old girls believe that the perfect female body should look like Barbie.⁷⁵ This phenomenon, named after Nabokov’s nymphet, results in girls’ premature adaptation of a version of adult female sexual availability. This process is also demonstrated by Minnie’s depiction (fig. 1-4). Her eyebrows are slightly lifted while she is reading, her nose is small and elegant, her big eyes are half-closed, she has long black eyelashes and she is wearing a very short skirt. The influences embedded therein and the way Gloeckner draws her protagonist bring her forth as a child who simultaneously looks sexually appealing and embodies Nabokov’s nymphet. Hence, Gloeckner’s panel demonstrates how the mid-century literary girl, the Lolita, came to influence Minnie’s self-perception as a sexual being. In addition, it implicitly points to how Nabokov’s girl reflects and names a broader cultural sexualisation of girls in Western countries and specifically, in the U.S.⁷⁶

Returning from the public to the private, domestic domain and in Minnie’s room, apart from the literary discourses that construct the girl’s sexual availability for the father figure, Pascal’s contribution in her self-perception as a sexual being is also implied by his speech balloon in the panel (fig. 1-4). The speech balloon is located in the part that depicts the protagonist’s deteriorating innocent childhood. When Minnie responds to his call, Pascal asks her about the size of her fellow-students’ breasts and on the following page he tells her that “there’s something very sexy about her,” further noting that “women think [he is] pretty cute” and that he has “a tight little ass.”⁷⁷ Similarly to his visual depiction in the bathroom scene (fig. 1-3), Pascal is drawn with grotesquely large genitals that are also clearly defined through his jeans. That the panel is entitled “Stepfatherly Counsel,” once again introduces the incestuous aspect of Pascal and Minnie’s relationship and demonstrates the continuous interpellation of the protagonist as a sexual being. Both the

⁷⁴ Gili, M. Durham, “The First Myth: If You’ve Got it, Flaunt it,” in *The Lolita Effect: The Media Sexualization of Young Girls and What We Do About It* (London: Duckworth Overlook, 2009), 85.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 85-95.

⁷⁶ For a description of media representations of the Lolita figure see Debra Merskin, “Reviving Lolita? A Media Literacy Examination of Sexual Portrayals of Girls in Fashion Advertising,” *American Behavioural Scientist* 48, no.1 (2004): 119-129, <http://abs.sagepub.com/content/48/1/119>.

⁷⁷ Gloeckner, *A Child’s Life*, 53.

canonical literary and artistic fathers I have examined so far, and the stepfather in the family domain, repeatedly formulate the girl as a sexual being. Being bombarded with such discursive formations, Minnie becomes prey for her mother's second boyfriend Monroe during her adolescence.

The stories that describe Minnie's adolescence in *A Child's Life* demonstrate the beginning of her sexual experimentation and entail a sequence of obscene and disturbing representations of her sexual suffering and violation. Like Courbet, Duchamp and Crumb's visual works, Gloeckner's images introduce the girl protagonist as a mere object, silenced, violated and passive. For example, "Minnie's 3rd Love or: Nightmare on Polk Street" shows her sexual exploitation by her friend Tabatha for drugs and money, and an incident in which she is naked and passed out on a bed, with her genitals exposed as a man with an erect penis removes her tampon to have sex with her.⁷⁸ Another panel shows her in a dark laundry room, kneeled on the floor, crying and pleading with Monroe to tell her that he loves her, to which he replies, "of course I love you – what man wouldn't give anything to be fucking a 15-year old. Tell me again how you love to suck my dick – you love to suck it don't you?"⁷⁹ Monroe is drawn standing, with his pants down and his disproportionately large and erect penis in front of Minnie's face, forcing her head towards it so that she will give him a blowjob.⁸⁰ While exaggeratedly reproducing the status of the girl as a sexual object, *A Child's Life* unsettles male spectators' voyeuristic gaze precisely because it also mediates the victim's injuries. As Andrew Deman suggests, "by rendering the story from the woman's point of view ... Gloeckner is able to assert her own subjectivity and the reader is able to experience the collateral damage that accompanies sexual objectification."⁸¹ In its pastiche arrangements, however, *A Child's Life* does more than destabilise male voyeuristic pleasure.

Gloeckner's pastiche combinations of Crumb, Duchamp, Poe and Nabokov's works connect her graphic memoir to their traditions as they simultaneously subvert them. By having agency over how the female autobiographical subject is formed, and by constructing the events in a way that mediates her own experience of it, Gloeckner invests Minnie with identity and humanity, aspects that the canonical fathers' women and girls

⁷⁸ Gloeckner, *A Child's Life*, 70-81.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* I refer to the man as Monroe because even though he is not named in the panel, the laundry-room scene is recreated in *The Diary* where we get more information. For the incident in *The Diary*, see Gloeckner, *The Diary*, 137.

⁸¹ Deman, "The Intervening 'I,'" 159.

lack. The female object is no longer a *tabula rasa* that projects adult men's sexual desires and fantasies. The suffering that comes with girls' sexual manipulation by adult men, and specifically father figures, becomes exaggaratingly mediated in the visual images of the book. The romanticised incest described by Nabokov's narrator becomes a brutal, disturbing account of suffering and degradation in "Minnie's 3rd Love." The "hysterical cultural script" produced in the literary and artistic fathers' works is revised in Gloeckner's text to mediate the daughter's injuries. The visual images of the graphic memoir speak on Minnie's behalf and mediate the traumatic outcome of her experience.

Inscribing Sexual Pain on the Body: Embarking on Reparation

The pain and the injuries inflicted on the autobiographical subject by her sexualisation and sexual suffering become inscribed on her body as an illness in the very beginning of *A Child's Life*. Just after Robert Crumb's representation of Phoebe (fig. 1-1), we see the artist's self-portrait with *pemphigus vulgaris* as the illustration below shows (fig. 1-5).⁸² *Pemphigus vulgaris* is an autoimmune illness that affects the surface of the skin and creates blisters and wounds, thus making the body appear as though it is decomposing. Gloeckner, a professional medical illustrator, brings forth the diseased body to metaphorically represent the experience of sexual abuse and to pathologise the autobiographical subject's suffering.⁸³ In her reading of this particular self-portrait, Chute argues that Phoebe's decomposing depiction reflects the girl's shattered subjectivity and her shame for her non-normative experiences.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, the blisters and the wounds can be read as visual representations of Phoebe's psychic injuries. If we keep in mind that the body renders us vulnerable to external violence in a social context and that it belongs both to us and to others, and if we accept Butler's views on the injurious function of language, then Phoebe's self-portrait introduces the female body as a screen on which her psychic wounds become inscribed.

⁸² While the autobiographical subject is named Minnie in the graphic memoirs, to describe the female subject in Crumb's visual representation and Gloeckner's self-portrait I use the artist's first name, Phoebe, because Crumb includes that in his introduction and the self-portrait refers to the artist and not her autobiographical persona.

⁸³ About the significance of medical illustration in Gloeckner's work, see Chute, *Graphic Women*, 64.

⁸⁴ Chute, *Graphic Women*, 62.



6 SELF-PORTRAIT WITH PEMPHIGUS VULGARIS, 1987

Fig. 1-5: "Self-Portrait with Pemphigus Vulgaris," p. 6, from *A Child's Life and Other Stories* by Phoebe Gloeckner, published by Frog Books/North Atlantic Books, copyright © 1998, 2000 by Phoebe Gloeckner. Reprinted by permission of publisher.

Phoebe is injured both by cultural discursive formations of the woman and the girl as objectified, passive sexual spectacles and by paternal violence in the domestic domain. Her adolescent sexual pain is marked on her body. Being situated at the beginning of *A Child's Life* the self-portrait functions as a flash-forward that metaphorically represents the outcome of the stories that follow and mediate trauma and abuse. If we perceive the marks of *pemphigus vulgaris* as the surfacing symptoms of the autobiographical subject's psychic wounds then Gloeckner, the artist/medical illustrator, can examine them in order to diagnose them and find the appropriate treatment, which begins in the self-portrait itself as it will become clear, and escalates in *The Diary*. The close-up take on Phoebe's skin covers her breasts and Gloeckner's drawing line starts decomposing from the girl's waist down. Hence, it does not visually embody her genitals and refuses to provide voyeuristic pleasure to spectators. Even though the autobiographical subject is nude, she cannot be injured by the sexualising gaze of the father. While in the following stories, and especially in "Minnie's 3rd Love," her visual depictions reduce her to a Freudian castrated hole, the open boundaries on her skin now underscore her human suffering rather than her female mutilation.

In Gloeckner's conflation of the medical and the artistic realms the autobiographical subject's injuries are diagnosed and the process of their treatment begins in the sick Phoebe's rejection of the male spectator. Hence, the self-portrait points to the reparative function of art and to the possibility for the cure of insidious sexual trauma within the cultural domain and beyond medical circles. In her study on cultural representations of everyday insidious trauma, Ann Cvetkovich explains that her aim is to "seize authority over trauma discourses from medical and scientific discourse in order to take it back in the hands of those who make culture."⁸⁵ This is precisely the process that Phoebe's self-portrait performs as well. Gloeckner reiterates medical discourses of illness in her art towards the injured autobiographical subject's reparation. In *The Body in Pain* Elaine Scarry writes that,

If the felt attributes of pain are (through one means of verbal objectification or another) lifted into the visible world, and if the referent of these now objectified attributes is understood to be the human body, then the sentient

⁸⁵ Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 20.

fact of a person's suffering will become knowable to a second person, [and it will enter] a realm of shared discourse.⁸⁶

In becoming a shared discourse the expression of pain can be a political, and in Gloeckner's case, a feminist statement against what Froula describes as the daughters' cultural violation. By repeating and turning the daughter's painful sexual seduction and violation into shared experiences, the process of reparation begins in the particular portrait, even as the autobiographical subject is still in pain. As it embarks on the autobiographical subject's reparation, the self-portrait also demonstrates how Gloeckner reiterates patriarchal subject formations to destabilise them once again.

In the portrait Phoebe has her head turned away and her eyes closed, thus reproducing the artistic convention that the female spectacle should avert her gaze from the (male) spectator due to her chastity and inferiority.⁸⁷ Despite repeating a patriarchal convention, Gloeckner's self-portrait simultaneously undoes it by depicting the autobiographical body as decomposing. Her illness, which deforms her skin, evokes Mikhail Bakhtin's definition of the grotesque and introduces a disturbing spectacle. The subversiveness of grotesque bodies is identified in Bakhtin's discussion of the Medieval carnival as a process through which hierarchies and order are destabilised. According to him, the grotesque body can be a diseased body, one whose boundaries are open to the world, its genitals exposed and its characteristics exaggerated and caricatured to mock hierarchies and perform a critique against ideal, classical bodily representations by showing what is supposed to be concealed.⁸⁸ Philip Thomson also observes that due to its "fundamental element of disharmony" the grotesque provokes "delight in novelty and amusement at a divergence from the normal [that] turns to fear (and anger) when ... norms are seriously threatened or attacked."⁸⁹ The grotesque thus becomes an "aggressive weapon," whose "shock effect ... may ... be used to bewilder and disorient, to jolt [the reader] out of accustomed ways of perceiving the world and confront him with a radically different, disturbing perspective."⁹⁰ If this is the potential offered by grotesque sick and open bodies, apart from psychic pain, Phoebe's illness reacts against the daughter's

⁸⁶ Elaine Scarry, "Introduction," in *The Body in Pain: The Making and the Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 9-13.

⁸⁷ In relation to women's aversion of the gaze in contrast to male spectacles, see Dyer, *Only Entertainment*, 194. See also Nancy M. Henley, "Don't Look Now: Eye Contact," in *Body Politics: Power, Sex and Nonverbal Communication* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1977), 163.

⁸⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin, "The Grotesque Image of the Body and Its Sources," in *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, London: M.I.T. Press, 1968), 303-367.

⁸⁹ Philip Thomson, "Towards a Definition," in *The Grotesque* (London: Methuen & Co, 1972), 21-24.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

previous cultural formation by the fathers. Indeed, Janet Wolff and Mary Russo introduce the grotesque as means through which subversive female embodiments can take place, ones that destabilise preconceived ways of seeing, and patriarchal constructions of female sexuality and gender.

Wolff notes the repression of aspects of bodily existence like sexuality, illness and birth in classical bodily representations and points out that if the repressed aspects of the body explode “into visibility,” a possibility for “political revolution and moral transgression” is created.⁹¹ She further suggests that “any body politics ... must speak about the body, stressing its materiality and its social and discursive construction, at the same time as disrupting existing regimes of representation.”⁹² Wolff assigns this task primarily to feminist artists and cultural workers, who “can engage in the challenging and exhilarating task of simultaneously affirming those identities, questioning their origins and ideological functions, and working towards a non-patriarchal expression of gender and the body.”⁹³ Mary Russo too, explains how the exposure of non-ideal naked female bodies is considered threatening and dangerous.⁹⁴ She observes that when openly exposing nude old and large female bodies, women are believed to have done “something wrong.”⁹⁵ Moreover, she notes that the experience of being a woman is different than the one represented in Western male-dominated art and literature.⁹⁶ As Lynda Nead explains, since the nineteenth century,

Examining the female body internally and externally, medicine and art, anatomy and the life class, offered a thorough surveillance of femininity, regulating the female body through the definition of norms of health and beauty. The collaborative effects of medicine and art have continued unabated throughout the twentieth century and it is only in recent feminist art and performance work that the power and ideological function of these two discourses have begun to be challenged.⁹⁷

⁹¹ Wolff, *Feminine Sentences*, 125.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 138.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Mary Russo, “Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory,” in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Theory*, eds., Katie Conboy et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 318.

⁹⁵ Russo, “Female Grotesques,” 319.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 320.

⁹⁷ Lynda Nead, “Lessons of the Life Class,” in *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1992), 48. Elaine Showalter also notes that in the nineteenth century from psychoanalysis and the examination of the female hysteric’s body, to gynaecology and the invention of the speculum, and to art and the depiction of nude female models, male doctors and artists are obsessed with investigating and conquering the mysteries of the female body. See Elaine Showalter, “The Woman’s Case,” in *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Virago, 1992), 131.

Gloeckner's self-portrait with *pemphigus vulgaris* incorporates as it also unsettles male-dominated traditions of medicine and art that have been reproducing a particular ideal for the female body.⁹⁸ The female ideal has been constructed since the nineteenth century as young, beautiful, healthy, passive and available under the gaze of male authority: of the doctor, the psychoanalyst, the artist and more broadly, the father figure. However, Gloeckner's use of the aforementioned traditions functions towards feminist ends and falls within the category of feminist art that Nead describes above. Gloeckner uses the tools she has been provided with by male-dominated traditions to undo pre-given notions of femininity and female sexuality and to free the female body from the authoritative gaze of "the father" (both the literal and the metaphorical). If we perceive the "imagination of the female body [as] a socially shaped and historically 'colonized' territory," in agreement with Susan Bordo, then Gloeckner's self-portrait, a pastiche arrangement of subversive repetitions of medical and artistic discourses, rebels against and undoes the power of patriarchal colonisation as it visually embodies sexual trauma.⁹⁹ In the following section of this chapter, I argue that after the autobiographical subject's injuries have been diagnosed in *A Child's Life*, *The Diary* performs their reparation by representing Minnie as a powerful phallic girl, who violates and castrates the abusive father figure.

Repetition as Recovery in *The Diary*: Minnie as a Phallic Girl

The Diary narrates in detail the events that took place when Minnie was fifteen years old and focuses primarily on her affair with her mother's boyfriend, Monroe. The book is composed of the autobiographical subject's diary entries and letters, which are interrupted by comic strips, portraits and illustrations. Hillary Chute explains that *The Diary*

Is structurally both a 'real' and a 'fake' diary ... About one-half of Gloeckner's own real diary from 1976-1977 is reproduced intact – word for word – in the book ... The other half ... – while events may match her actual teenage experience – Gloeckner wrote as an adult author, reforming the former diary's narrative structure.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Theresa Tensuan discusses women's graphic memoirs of illness and notes that Gloeckner's "critical illustrations," like the self-portrait with *pemphigus vulgaris*, "deploy the seemingly dispassionate visual idiom of scientific illustration to illuminate – with discomforting detail – the ways in which systems of representation... simultaneously reveal and re-inscribe the metaphorical and material violence enacted on women's bodies." See Theresa Tensuan, "Up from Surgery: The Politics of Self-Representation in Women's Graphic Memoirs of Illness," in *Graphic Subjects*, ed. Michael Chaney (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 182.

⁹⁹ Susan Bordo, "Introduction: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body," in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*, 10th ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 21.

¹⁰⁰ Chute, *Graphic Women*, 74. Chute's comment and large parts of her discussion on Gloeckner's graphic memoirs focus on the factuality of the events described therein. She refers to interviews she had with

Chute's comment introduces two different perspectives on the events described in the book: that of the adolescent girl who was living through the affair and that of the adult, wiser and detached artist. As a result of the two distinct takes on the events, we often come across young Minnie's feelings and thoughts about Monroe, a combination of love towards him, vulnerability and confusion.¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, in this chapter I suggest that we also see her reconstructed as a threatening erotic spectacle, eventually freed from the abusive stepfather's gaze, and able to castrate him and own the paternal phallus and the self-sufficiency that it entails. I suggest that the traumatic events in *A Child's Life* are repeated Gloeckner's second graphic memoir in ways that provide Minnie with control over them. This repetition achieves the autobiographical subject's move beyond victimhood and the reparation of her injuries. I also argue that *The Diary* simultaneously undoes the violence and objectification the female body has suffered in Western art and pornography, an element that is exaggeratingly reproduced in *A Child's Life* as well. I propose that *The Diary* succeeds in repairing Minnie's injuries and the cultural insidious trauma of female objectification through the feminist reconfiguration of the Lolita figure. I further point out that the new version of the underage erotic spectacle is formulated via the repetition and resignification of pornographic and artistic discourses that stretch back to the in the fin-de-siècle tradition of black-and-white illustrated novel and the Renaissance visual arts.

As it will become clear, in both fields the adolescent female body is once again constructed as a *tabula rasa*, existing primarily to express and serve male voyeuristic pleasures and sexual anxieties. Thus, in *The Diary* Gloeckner uses pastiche as a strategic move that focuses on the aforementioned traditions to rework them through a feminist eye so as to make them speak Minnie's insidious sexual trauma during adolescence and her survival beyond it. The repetition of these male discourses functions reparatively because as I explain, it introduces the female subject beyond castration, passivity and wounding primarily through the graphic memoir's visual register. In the following discussions, I suggest that the Freudian phallus and the self-sufficiency and power that it entails are used parodically in Minnie's visual representations so as to detach her from her pre-conceived status as an underage sexual object.

Gloeckner that demonstrate the truth value of the latter's account. However, as explained in the introduction, focusing on such aspects does not provide an insight into the workings of pastiche and the potential of the medium of comics to construct the autobiographical subject beyond trauma, towards wholeness and self-sufficiency.

¹⁰¹ For example Minnie is often worried that Monroe will abandon her because he is bored by her and often wonders if he knows how much she loves him. For such examples, see Gloeckner, *The Diary*, 162,186.

The first element from *A Child's Life* that is radically repeated in *The Diary* is the pornographic content, which also shifts from the visual to the verbal register.¹⁰² In addition, it is not used to describe the objectified girl. On the contrary, in some of her diary entries Minnie uses obscene vocabulary to describe her sexual desires and to refer to her male sexual partners like Monroe and Ricky, her boyfriend from school. For example, on Tuesday the 27th of April she writes, "Ricky kissed me today ... I really want him to fuck me my god I am always so horny I hope he can tell ... All in all he's absolutely gorgeous. Drool drool. I wonder how big his cock is groaaaaaaan."¹⁰³ Next, she writes the words "cock," "men" and "fuck," thirteen times each, and concludes with, "Monroe that stupid fucker. Nice dick though."¹⁰⁴ Her descriptions, therefore, construct her sexual partners in a similar way that canonical fathers' artistic and literary formations of the girl and the woman do. Monroe and Ricky are formulated as voiceless sexual objects, reduced to their genitals, and existing to satisfy the protagonist's sexual desires. The cultural violation of the female body and its reduction to a castrated hole is repeated and transformed in Gloeckner's second graphic memoir to describe the male sexual object, and to imply a destabilisation of gender roles in the pornographic and artistic distributions of agency and sexual desire.

Indeed, Susan Rubin Suleiman explains that pornographic language in women's fiction introduces the possibility of subversion. She observes that when women artists take up the language of male pornographers to construct their own sexual desires, the possibility for a feminist statement against the position of the woman in pornography is created and she notes that,

What is involved here is a reversal of roles and of language, in which the docile and/or bestial but always silent, objectified woman of male pornographic fiction suddenly usurps both the pornographer's language and his way of looking at the opposite sex ... [The] significance [of such work lies] in the usurpation of four-letter words to talk about a woman's sexual desires and fantasies ... Women writers [become] *les voleuses de langue* – the thieves of language, or more exactly, the usurpers and subverters of a certain kind of male language.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰² Peggy Orenstein explains that obscene visual images do not appear in *The Diary* so as to allow its better marketability. See Orenstein, "A Graphic Life."

¹⁰³ Gloeckner, *The Diary*, 56.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Susan Rubin Suleiman, ed., "(Re)Writing the Body: The Politics and Poetics of Female Eroticism," in *The Female Body in Western Art: Contemporary Perspectives* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 9-10.

What we observe in Gloeckner's second graphic memoir with regards to the use of obscene language is precisely a reversal of roles in terms of pornographic representation of men and women. By taking up such a vocabulary to describe her sexual partners and her sexual desires as a teenager, Minnie attempts to perform a kind of violence towards the dominating and abusive father figure of *A Child's Life*. Her sexual suffering and her enforcement into degrading sexual acts as the one depicted in the laundry-room panel are repeated in *The Diary* in ways that introduce Minnie in control of the situation.¹⁰⁶ In this case she has sexual desires which Monroe, as a sexual object, is there to satisfy. In his objectification, he becomes the *tabula rasa* on which the young diarist/adult artist's desires are projected. *The Diary* therefore shows how heterosexual pornographic language can be used subversively towards reparative ends and in so doing it takes a stand in the feminist pornography debate, against the prohibition of pornography.

Andrea Dworkin's polemical work against all pornography is summed up in the following statement: "We will know that we are free when pornography no longer exists. As long as it does exist, we must understand that we are the women in it: used by the same power, subject to the same valuation, as the vile whores who beg for more."¹⁰⁷ Similarly Catharine MacKinnon argues that pornography functions performatively; it creates the subjects it describes and reproduces violence against women.¹⁰⁸ However, Gloeckner's use of pornographic language uncovers the restrictions that the aforementioned views impose on feminist thought because Minnie's obscene vocabulary shows the potential of the objectified female sexual being to move beyond victimhood in her usurpation of pornographic vocabulary. As Judith Butler notes

What pornography delivers is what it recites and exaggerates from the resources of compensatory gender norms, a text of insistent and faulty imaginary relations that will not disappear with the abolition of the offending text, the text that remains for feminist criticism relentlessly to read. To read such texts against themselves is to concede that the performativity of the text is not under sovereign control. On the contrary, if a text acts once, it can act again, and possibly against its prior act.¹⁰⁹

Butler's view is also supported by feminist critics who argue against Mackinnon and Dworkin's views. For example, Drucilla Cornell calls for the need to protect women's

¹⁰⁶ For example, the laundry-room scene is described as an incident of passionate love making between Minnie and Monroe. See Gloeckner, *The Diary*, 137.

¹⁰⁷ Andrea Dworkin, "Whores," in *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (London: Women's Press, 1981).

¹⁰⁸ See Katherine Mackinnon, "Defamation and Discrimination," in *Only Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 1-42.

¹⁰⁹ Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 69.

sexual privacy that she describes as the “imaginary domain.”¹¹⁰ Cornell explains that it is crucial to protect women’s experimentation with their sexuality, even if it takes place in pornography because

Sex and sexuality are formative to one’s being, and ... the struggle to become a person is inseparable from the psychic space needed to truly play with imposed and assumed sexual personae. Imposed sexual shame severely limits psychic space for free play with one’s sexuality, if it does not cut it all together.¹¹¹

To insist that all pornography should be banned because it produces shameful “vile whores,” as Andrea Dworkin suggests, is therefore to refuse the potential for women’s development as sexual beings through their engagement with pornographic discourses. In contrast, Cornell points out that

Feminism must struggle to clear the space for, rather than create new barriers to, women’s exploration of their sexuality ... Feminism, particularly in the complex area of sexuality, demands that we live with the paradox that we are trying to break the bonds of meanings that have made us who we are as women.¹¹²

Gloeckner’s use of pornographic vocabulary in *The Diary* does precisely what Cornell describes above. It marks a shift in the tradition of Western heterosexual pornographic discourses in how it subversively repeats them to construct the violated girl beyond sexual trauma. Indeed, Cornell notes the significance of re-imagining pornography to make it speak women’s desires and suggests that this struggle “should be carried out by women artists.”¹¹³ Furthermore, in her discussion on women’s rape in pornography settings the critic points out that a “raped woman must have the right to re-imagine herself beyond the trauma of rape if she is to recover at all.”¹¹⁴ Gloeckner’s narratives negotiate issues of sexual child abuse and rape within the family domain. In so doing, they transport the power and gender relations of pornography into the familial structure and specifically in the stepfather/stepdaughter relationship, and this is why their obscene, pornographic visual and verbal accounts are doubly disturbing. Nevertheless, it is precisely in the space

¹¹⁰ Cornell, *The Imaginary Domain*, 8.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 99. Similarly, Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby explains that “if visibility continually risks perpetuating the objectification of women, invisibility in itself provides no simple or easy answers,” and proposes that women artists should take responsibility for feminist visual representations of the female body. Grigsby, “Dilemmas of Visibility,” 100. For a similar discussion, see also Linda Williams, “A Provoking Agent: The Pornography and Performance Art of Annie Sprinkle,” in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, eds. Katie Conboy, Nadia Melinda, et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 377.

¹¹³ Cornell, *The Imaginary Domain*, 105.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 106.

provided in a feminist use of pornographic discourses and in their repetition and resignification by Gloeckner, that the autobiographical avatar is re-imagined beyond her status as a victim in *The Diary* and towards a phallic self-sufficiency and wholeness.

Minnie's transformation into a sexually active adolescent girl and the form of Gloeckner's second graphic memoir evoke and reconfigure two distinct traditions that are associated with the formation of the underage erotic female spectacle: firstly, the fin-de-siècle black-and-white illustrated book and specifically Oscar Wilde's theatrical play *Salome*, and secondly, the Renaissance painting *Gabrielle d'Estrées and her Sister, the Duchess of Villars*. In this chapter I argue that both influences I have identified as embedded in the structure of *The Diary* are transformed to embody Minnie as a new Lolita figure that emerges beyond the colonisation of the paternal gaze and towards the reparation of insidious trauma caused both in the familial and in the cultural domain. To explain how this process takes place I discuss Wilde's play and Aubrey Beardsley's illustrations that introduce a radical version of Salome, Minnie's fin-de-siècle Lolita ancestor. Next, I examine the Renaissance painting and Gloeckner's parodic revision to show how they demonstrate Minnie's gradual development from her problematic sexual attachment to the father figure, to a powerful female subject that is able to visually castrate him and to ultimately own a carnivalesque version of the paternal phallus.

While Hillary Chute characterises *The Diary* as “an innovative genre-crossing narrative in an uncharted form,” Peggy Orenstein explains that among Gloeckner's various influences in the composition of the book are Victorian illustrated novels.¹¹⁵ Black-and-white illustration proliferated in fin-de-siècle Britain and was inspired by Aubrey Beardsley's artistic vision.¹¹⁶ As explained, the nineteenth century was an era during which women came under the scrutiny of the male gaze, both artistic and medical. Male preoccupation with and surveillance of the female body led to a cultural obsession and fear of female sexuality and desire. Bram Dijkstra's brilliant account of fin-de-siècle visual representations of women demonstrates the misogynistic spirit under which the female body – both adult and underage – was created in the hands of male artists.¹¹⁷ It is in this context that Courbet's *Origin* was first commissioned and when Oscar Wilde's illustrated *Salome* was published.

¹¹⁵ See Chute, *Graphic Women*, 74; and Orenstein, “Graphic Life.”

¹¹⁶ See Kooistra, *The Artist as Critic*, 33.

¹¹⁷ Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

The book version of Wilde's play that is illustrated by Aubrey Beardsley brought to life what critics consider as the most radical version of the adolescent female sexual spectacle in Western art. The play parodically recreates the biblical narrative of Salome, the underage princess who seduced her stepfather, King Herod, to trick him into decapitating John the Baptist.¹¹⁸ Salome, like Minnie and the Nabokovian *Lolita* is therefore also implicated in a semi-incestuous voyeuristic interaction with the father figure.¹¹⁹ While the reference to her is brief and laconic in the gospel, in the context of fin-de-siècle art, she became a fully-fleshed entity and the obsessive preoccupation of painters and authors, with her most radical version appearing in Wilde's play and Beardsley's black-and-white illustrations.¹²⁰ The English translation of *Salome* was issued in 1894 and contains Beardsley's artistic visions of the adolescent biblical princess.¹²¹ In the play the young princess is presented as a voracious being that threatens and punishes those who fail to comply with her sexual desires. While Poe and Nabokov's girls are silent and passive, Wilde's Salome is given full agency. Nevertheless, because of her transgression she loses her girlness and is eventually punished with death. In this chapter I suggest that by adopting the form of Victorian black-and-white illustrated books to construct Minnie's narrative in *The Diary*, Gloeckner situates her work in the same tradition to mark a shift in how the adolescent female spectacle is constructed therein. If we perceive *The Diary* as an heir to Wilde's illustrated *Salome*, then we need to examine how the play constructs the

¹¹⁸ For the relevant excerpt of the gospel see Matthew, "The Death of John the Baptist," in *The Gospel of Matthew*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 214. For an analysis of the "identity-less" girl of the gospel as a mirror image of her mother, see Bettina Liepowitz Knapp, "Herodias/Salome: Mother/ Daughter Identification," in *Women in Myth* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 99. While the Old Testament is rich with dangerous and sinful women, among whom Eve, Jezebel and Judith, it is Salome's youth and her participation in a semi-incestuous relationship with King Herod, her stepfather and powerful patriarchal figure that renders her an ancestor both to Minnie and to Nabokov's *Lolita*.

¹¹⁹ For descriptions of Wilde's Salome and her association with the mid-century *Lolita* in Nabokov's tale, see Eric Rothstein, "Lolita: Nymphet at Normal School," *Contemporary Literature* 41, no. 1 (2000): 24, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1208963>; and Philippe Julian, "The Erotic Chimera," in *Dreamers of Decadence: Symbolist Painters of the 1890s* (New York: Praeger, 1971), 109. For a discussion on the repetition of the quasi-incestuous stepfather/stepdaughter relationship in *Salome* and *Lolita* and the disappearance of the princess's childish characteristics in Wilde's play, see Richard A. Kaye, "Salome's Lost Childhood: Wilde's Daughter of Sodom, Jungstil Culture and the Queer Afterlife of a Decadent Myth," in *The Nineteenth Century Child and Consumer Culture*, ed. Dennis Denisoff (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 120.

¹²⁰ For descriptions of Salome's fin-de-siècle come-back see Knapp, *Women in Myth*, 84-110; Toni Bentley, "The Wilde Story," in *Sisters of Salome* (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 2005), 19; and Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, "'Here's Looking at You, Kid': The Empowering Gaze in Salome," *Profession* (1998): 11-22, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25595633>. For a collection of fin-de-siècle paintings with pedophilic subject matter and their analysis, see the chapter "Gold and the Virgin Whores of Babylon; Judith and Salome: The Priestesses of Man's Severed Head," in Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, 354-401.

¹²¹ See Robert Ross ed., "A Note on Salome," in *Oscar Wilde-Salome*, by Oscar Wilde (London: John Lane, 1912), xvi.

princess and how her transformed version reappears in the context of the contemporary turn of the century, embodied in Minnie.

In Wilde's play, Salome is aware of her role as a sexual spectacle, and the power she has to seduce the father figure, King Herod. She even admits to recognising his sexualising incestuous gaze onto her, thus evoking once again the masterplot of the daughter's sexualisation by the father figure in the family domain.¹²² Nevertheless, she is not passive in her objectification. In contrast, she dances for Herod to manipulate him into decapitating John as a punishment for the latter's refusal to succumb to her sexual desires.¹²³ This is why Toni Bentley argues that "Salome became a feminist through Wilde, achieving her emancipation by embracing her own exploitation. She grasped her freedom through irony, not tyranny, though manipulation of reality rather than protest about reality."¹²⁴ Salome works, therefore, as a feminist performance artist from the position attributed to her within the patriarchal society to achieve her goals and to punish both the father figure for his sexualising gaze and John, the object of her desire, who refuses to comply with her wishes. Her early feminism, however, even in Wilde's radical, parodic revision of the gospel, is punished at the end. Herod is replaced into his position of authority and orders Salome's death. The closing act of the play finishes with a description of the soldiers who "rushed forward and crushed beneath their shields Salome."¹²⁵ As her transgression fails, patriarchal dominance and paternal authority remain, after all, intact in the script of Wilde's play.

Aubrey Beardsley's visual embodiments of the princess stress her transgression by presenting her as a monstrous, masculinised woman. *The Climax* is one of the examples of how Salome is filtered through his artistic vision and transformed into a grotesque terrifying spectacle.¹²⁶ Salome is floating in space and holding John's decapitated head. Even though Wilde's play underlines her beauty, Beardsley's illustrations present a monstrous, gender-crossing woman. Her face has masculine characteristics while John's decapitated head is more effeminate, similar to a dead version of the Medusa monster. In his analysis of the Medusa myth, Freud argues that decapitation means castration.¹²⁷ If Salome has achieved John's beheading, then she has also succeeded in symbolically

¹²² Oscar Wilde, *Oscar Wilde-Salome*, ed. Robert Ross (London: John Lane, 1912), 11.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹²⁴ Bentley, *Sisters of Salome*, 30.

¹²⁵ Wilde, *Salome*, 82.

¹²⁶ For a reproduction of Beardsley's *The Climax*, see <http://www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/beardsley/30.html>.

¹²⁷ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 273.

castrating him. By holding his head, she also comes to own the phallus, the symbol of masculine authority, power and self-sufficiency. John's head on the other hand, looks much like the decapitated head of the female monster of the Medusa, the artistic representation of the female genitals according to Freud.¹²⁸ His eyes are closed, thus being deprived of their lethal power to turn their onlookers into stones and his flaccid snake-like hair contributes to the visualisation of absence of any form of activity. In Beardsley's artistic vision Salome's sexual desire for John becomes threatening and castrating.¹²⁹ It feminises and objectifies the holy man as it repairs Salome's castration injury by providing her with the phallus. Nevertheless, in her self-sufficiency the princess loses her femininity. In *The Climax* therefore female sexual agency entails masculinisation, hence preserving gender dichotomies, despite the effort to undo them.

In the following section I explain how Gloeckner's adaptation of black-and-white-illustration also succeeds in constructing Minnie as a threatening phallic spectacle that challenges the dominance of the father figure, who is also her abuser. Unlike *A Child's Life*, which follows the conventional formal stylistics of comics, in being composed by prose text occasionally interrupted by visual images, *The Diary* allows space for the girl protagonist's private thoughts to be heard. If we keep in mind that the book is composed of her diary entries – both real and fictional – then we can explain how Gloeckner subversively repeats the canonical fathers' tradition in black-and-white illustration. Peggy Orenstein describes diaries as the “quintessential literary form of female adolescence,” further noting that “there is virtually no tradition of diarists among teenage boys.”¹³⁰ By presenting a distinctly adolescent female genre in a form inherited from fin-de-siècle artistic fathers, *The Diary* succeeds in introducing the girl's take on her developing sexuality and her incestuous sexual interaction with the father figure, and it mediates a female experience that is not filtered through male desires and fantasies. Simultaneously, it

¹²⁸ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 273-274.

¹²⁹ For more examples and descriptions of Beardsley's women and the artist's role in Victorian sexual politics, see Linda Gertner Zaltin, *Aubrey Beardsley and Victorian Sexual Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990). Beardsley is also notoriously known for his obscene sexual imagery. While this is a common characteristic between his work and Gloeckner's graphic memoirs, I am not discussing it as an influence because I focus on Salome in Wilde's play and I situate Gloeckner's obscene subject matter in the tradition of the American underground comics scene. For discussions on Beardsley's obscene works, see Stephen Calloway, “All Obscene Drawings,” in *Aubrey Beardsley* (London: V & A Publications, 1998), 160-184; and Colette Colligan, “Aubrey Beardsley's Libidinal Line: Japonisme, Art Nouveau, and Obscenity,” in *The Traffic in Obscenity From Byron to Beardsley: Sexuality and Exoticism in Nineteenth Century Print Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 129-161.

¹³⁰ Orenstein, “Graphic Life.”

breaks the hysterical cultural script by modifying the prototype of the voracious sexual adolescent spectacle, Salome, which emerged out of Wilde and Beardsley's artistic visions.

Even in the cases when the autobiographical subject is visually embodied as phallic and threatening, she preserves her girlness, and her self-sufficiency does not entail masculinisation or monstrosity. Gloeckner's playful engagement with the visual aspect of the memoir introduces in *The Diary* different forms of phallic symbolism that repair Minnie's injuries without depriving her of her femininity. Thus, the Freudian view that the phallus is always already male is parodically deconstructed, at the same time as Monroe and Minnie's visual embodiments mockingly undo Freudian binary divisions with regards to female lack and male self-sufficiency. As mentioned, in *A Child's Life* phallic visual imagery functioned towards exaggeratingly mediating paternal dominance in parallel with the daughter's degradation and sexual trauma. In *The Diary*, however, and in Gloeckner's creation of Minnie as a new version of Beardsley's Salome, phallic imagery is repeated subversively to be inscribed on the female autobiographical body. As Minnie comes to own the phallus, Monroe becomes a castrated awkward spectacle. Hence, while she is not reconnected with the father figure in the graphic memoir, reparation is achieved because her Oedipal drive for the paternal phallus is eventually satisfied. If insidious trauma emerges in the cultural and familial context by the fathers' sexualisation and sexual violation of the daughters, then reparation is achieved by Gloeckner's undoing both of the previous artistic scripts and of the Freudian castrated female body in relation to the self-sufficient male one.

The panel reproduced below (fig. 1-6) demonstrates precisely how Minnie is transformed into a phallic girl, while Monroe becomes visually castrated. In this panel the stepfather and the stepdaughter are both naked after having sex. The male spectacle is depicted with his back turned to readers and his gaze towards Minnie, in an awkward position, trying to put on his underwear. Minnie on the other hand is standing straight up, looking back at Monroe and the readers through the corner of her eye, with her middle finger raised. His body takes up more space than Minnie's but her presence is more dominant because her posture and her decisive and angry look contradict his clumsy pose. Hillary Chute observes that "self-consciously naked, Minnie extends her middle finger: to Monroe, but also perhaps to the readers ... The point of view of the illustration – not with

Monroe – is in fact behind him, uncovering him.”¹³¹ In this panel, the way the father figure and the daughter are visually embodied undoes the paternal dominance that prevailed in *A Child’s Life*. Being situated in the panel with their backs at readers, Monroe and Minnie do not reproduce the exaggeratedly gendered divisions and hierarchies that the phallic imagery of Gloeckner’s first graphic memoir performed. In this case we do not face blatant depictions of male and female genitalia and thus the hierarchies in the incestuous pair are destabilised.

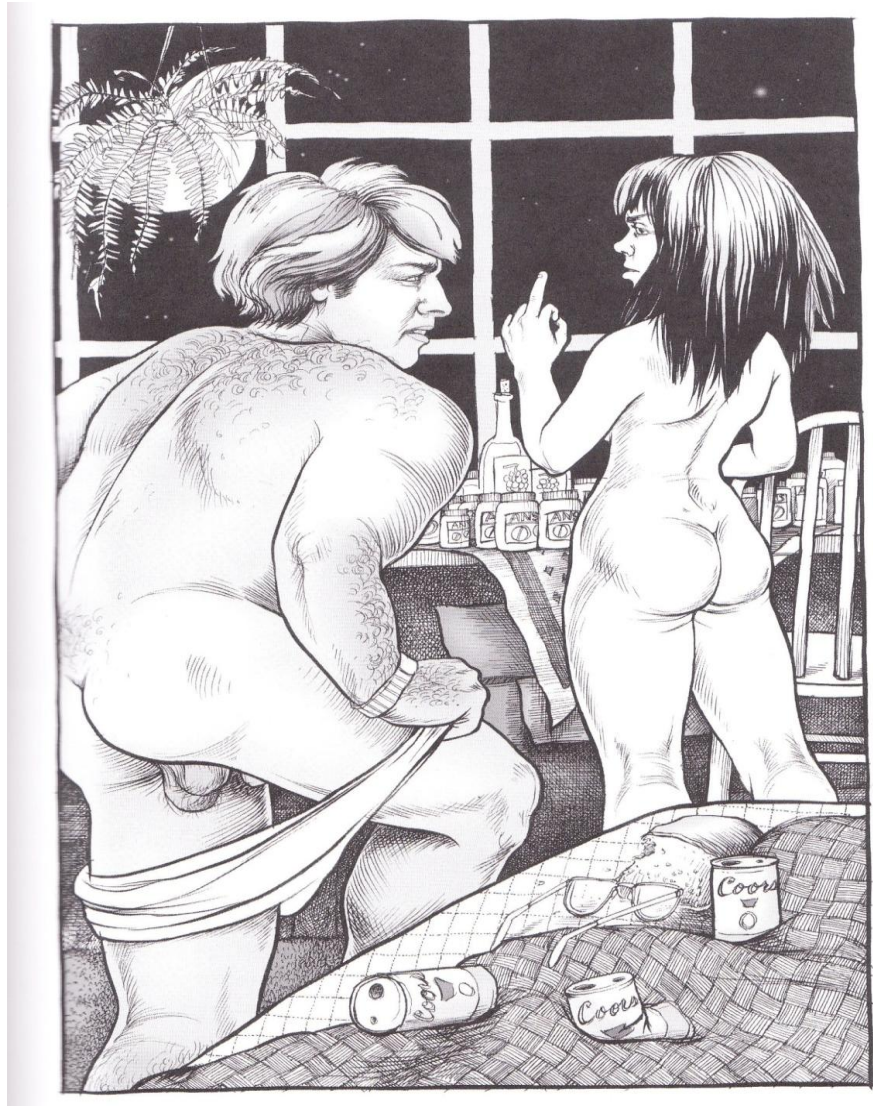


Fig. 1-6: “He Said He Didn’t Like Stupid Little Chicks Like Me Trying to Manipulate Him,” p. 79, from *The Diary of a Teenage Girl: An Account in Words and Pictures* by Phoebe Gloeckner, published by Frog Books/North Atlantic Books, copyright © 2002 by Phoebe Gloeckner. Reprinted by permission of publisher.

¹³¹ Chute, *Graphic Women*, 81.

To further add to this destabilisation, in this panel Minnie is the one invested with phallic power. By raising her middle finger, she does not only display her deprecation of Monroe and for readers' gaze as Chute notes. If the phallus can be embodied in different body parts as Elizabeth Grosz suggests, then Minnie's raised finger becomes a phallic symbol.¹³² In contrast, the way Monroe is placed in the panel renders him visually castrated and passive since we only see his buttocks. The stepdaughter's ownership of the phallus against the stepfather's lack is also reflected by the objects around Monroe and Minnie. The bottle of wine next to her raised arm mirrors the phallic symbolism. Similarly, the shape of the flowerpot over Monroe's head reflects the lack he is invested with. In addition, his muscularity functions towards the opposite end of what Dyer describes in his discussion on male pinup photos and which Pascal's depiction in "Homage" (fig. 1-3) reproduces. Monroe is grotesquely large, awkward and clumsy. His huge bodily dimensions in contrast to Minnie's beautiful slender body render him a ridiculous spectacle. Hence, he does not fit into the category of the male spectacle described by Dyer. His masculine power and control are lost.

As Suzanne Moore notes in her analysis of the excessively muscular man, the "Stalone type," in cases of excessive muscularity, muscles as signifiers of masculinity "turn into a kind of grotesque masquerade of manhood ... [resulting in a] ridiculous enterprise."¹³³ This is precisely what happens in the panel above (fig. 1-6). Monroe's grotesquely large bodily dimensions contradict Minnie's posture. The opposition between the two spectacles further underscores his visual castration against the autobiographical subject's self-sufficiency. The male object of desire is visually mutilated in Gloeckner's black-and-white illustration, similarly to John's decapitation by Salome in Beardsley's *Climax*. Minnie's traumatic sexual relationship with the father figure is repeated, therefore, in a way that invests Minnie with control over it. By raising her middle finger to Monroe she is reconfigured beyond her problematic attachment to him. Unlike the trauma that is inscribed on the visual images of *A Child's Life*, *The Diary* introduces her beyond the injuries of rape and female lack. Monroe's visual castration, on the other hand, demonstrates a version of violence inflicted on his body by Gloeckner's artistic vision. Hence, in the context of the graphic memoir we observe a reversal of roles and the

¹³² For Grosz's discussion on how different body parts can function as phallic symbols see Grosz, *Jacques Lacan*, 125.

¹³³ Suzanne Moore, "Here's Looking at You Kid!" in *The Female Gaze: Women as Viewers of Popular Culture*, eds., Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment (London: Women's Press, 1988), 53-54.

stepfather becomes the *tabula rasa* on which the stepdaughter Minnie/Gloeckner's desires and fantasies are projected. While *A Child's Life* performs the daughter's traumas and their diagnosis therefore, *The Diary* repairs them. In so doing it simultaneously transforms the tradition of black-and-white illustrated book and the formulation of the masculinised, monstrous fin-de-siècle Lolita figure, Salome. The peak of the daughter's reparation and self-sufficiency, and her complete rejection of the father figure, is demonstrated by Gloeckner's revision of the Renaissance painting *Gabrielle d'Estrées and her Sister, the Duchess of Villars* that I proceed to describe.¹³⁴

Gabrielle d'Estrées and her Sister, the Duchess of Villars was created by an anonymous artist from the school of Fontainebleau circa 1594 and it is currently exhibited in the Louvre museum in Paris. The painting shows two sisters, Gabrielle on the right side and the duchess of Villars on the left, in an intimate scene that takes place in their bath. The two female spectacles are depicted from their waists up; they are both nude and their bodies face spectators. Simultaneously, they boldly return their gazes as the duchess encircles and pinches Gabrielle's nipple. Thus, like the previous artistic and literary influences I have discussed, this painting also engages with the status of the female body as an erotic spectacle. In addition, investigating the historical person of Gabrielle d'Estrées demonstrates that she embodies the Renaissance equivalent of the Lolita figure. In this chapter, I show that in its incorporation of a parodic version of the painting, *The Diary* achieves the escalation of Lolita's feminist revision and Minnie's reparation, as it is also intervenes in the history of the underage female spectacle that stretches back to the sixteenth century French visual arts. By so doing, I want to underscore the significance of Gloeckner's graphic memoirs because as they mediate the complexities of Minnie's insidious trauma, they repeatedly engage with and revise male-dominated canonical traditions from the U.S. and the European cultural centres that formulate the female body as a silenced, passive object. In their revisions, they repair the abused daughter's injuries and they demonstrate the possibilities allowed by the verbal/visual medium for the expression of contemporary artists' interaction with past artistic and literary subject formations. In the following section, I refer to the historical events that introduce Gabrielle as a Lolita figure and I explain how they are implied in the painting. Next, I proceed to describe Gloeckner's parodic engagement with it and I argue that it achieves Minnie's

¹³⁴ For photographic reproductions of the painting, view the online Louvre museum collection at <http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/gabrielle-destrees-and-one-her-sisters>.

embodiment as a self-sufficient phallic female subject, who rejects and mocks the authority of the father figure.

Gabrielle d'Estrées was born in 1573 and moved to King Henri's court when she was fifteen years old.¹³⁵ Rose-Marie and Rainer Hagen note that her youthful beauty reached the Renaissance ideal and they point out that she had various affairs from the time she first arrived at the court.¹³⁶ Gabrielle also became sexually involved with the French King, who was significantly older than her.¹³⁷ According to Katherine Crawford, in 1592 she gave birth to his son since his wife, Marguerite, could not have children and in so doing she established his masculinity that was put into question because of his lack of successors.¹³⁸ Henri fell in love with Gabrielle and went against the French Church and populace in his decision to divorce his wife and marry her. Nevertheless, his young mistress died mysteriously after giving birth to their fourth child as Crawford explains.¹³⁹ Gabrielle's story therefore repeats the Lolita masterplot during the Renaissance, since it describes the seduction of a considerably older father figure by a young sexually alluring girl.

Crawford notes that the painting entails a "message ... intended for the king, as a viewer of the image, if not the owner of it."¹⁴⁰ Henri, the patriarchal figure, Gabrielle's sexual partner, spectator and owner of the painting is not present in the image but the ring she holds with her right hand implicates him as it was a present he gave her to seal their engagement.¹⁴¹ The two nude female bodies exist for the voyeuristic pleasure of the king. Rebecca Zorach identifies a homoerotic dimension in how the Duchess pinches Gabrielle's breast, an act that also signifies the latter's illicit pregnancy.¹⁴² Nevertheless, she explains that "for the men who depicted or wrote about lesbian encounters in the court of France, such stories are always in the eventual service of heterosexuality [and they] have the

¹³⁵ Rose Marie Hagen and Rainer Hagen, "Two Cool Beauties in the Tub, School of *Fontainebleau*: Gabrielle D'Estrées and One of Her Sisters, c. 1600," in *What Great Paintings Say*, Vol.2, trans. Karen Williams and Michael Husle (Köln, London: Taschen, 2003), 204.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ With regards to Henri's age, see Ronald Love, "Mother and Son, December 1553 to August 1572," in *Blood and Religion: The Conscience of Henri IV, 1553-1593* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 18.

¹³⁸ Katherine B. Crawford, "Politics of Promiscuity: Masculinity and Heroic Representation at the Court of Henry IV," *French Historical Studies* 26, no. 2 (2003): 236, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/french_historical_studies/v026/26.2crawford.html.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 234.

¹⁴¹ Hagen and Hagen, *What Great Paintings Say*, Vol.2, 206.

¹⁴² Rebecca Zorach, "Desiring Things," *Art History* 24, no.2 (April 2001): 199, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-8365.00260/pdf>.

approximate status of modern lesbian pornography for men.”¹⁴³ Like Courbet’s painting, *Gabrielle d’ Estrées and her Sister, the Duchess of Villars* demonstrates the permeability of the boundaries between high art and pornography. While in the Renaissance it was a pornographic piece privately owned by the king, today it is a canonical work exhibited in the Louvre and it introduces the female body in the service of male voyeuristic desire.

In Gloeckner’s reading, as performed in *The Diary*, the painting is parodically recreated in the counter-cultural medium of comics to construct the escalation of Minnie’s rejection of the father figure’s authority as a sexual partner and a spectator. Minnie as a new Gabrielle is no longer owned or controlled by the gaze of the father. She becomes a self-sufficient phallic girl, who finds sexual pleasure in her auto-erotic engagement with her own body. In the illustration shown below (fig. 1-7), Minnie is alone, possibly in her bathroom, standing naked in front of a mirror, with a towel around her head and Noxzema cream on her face, pinching her own nipple and looking at herself. The ring held by Gabrielle d’ Estrées decorates Minnie’s neck, excluding any implications for a union with a male figure of authority. Attention and desire focus on the self as demonstrated by her auto-erotic touch on her breast. By touching her nipple, Minnie explores the sensuality of her body and appreciates its beauty for her own sexual pleasure. Her gaze in the mirror and the praising of her masqueraded reflection ignores the male spectator and demonstrates a narcissism that refuses to provide voyeuristic pleasure. The mirroring that takes place invites readers either to identify with her in narcissistically appreciating the sensuality of her body while masqueraded, or to reject it. However, failing to appreciate it in the way that she does, is to remain restricted within patriarchal discourses that refuse to accept anything but the male-dominated versions of ideal female beauty and to become implicated in the daughter’s cultural violation as described by Christine Froula.

Minnie’s depiction with Noxzema cream demonstrates what is not supposed to be shown in artistic and pornographic representations of the female body, thus evoking Bakhtin’s descriptions of the carnival. Her facial cream functions as a mask, which if associated with the carnival, causes laughter as well as the disturbance of societal hierarchies.¹⁴⁴ In Medieval carnival, laughter is caused by clownish masquerades that mock hierarchical figures like the king.¹⁴⁵ According to Bakhtin, the mask “is connected

¹⁴³ Zorach, “Desiring Things,” 199.

¹⁴⁴ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 11.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 200.

with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with the merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity ... [it] is related to transition, metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries [and] to mockery.”¹⁴⁶ Additionally, Timothy Hyman points out that the mask can free “the individual from class and even from gender.”¹⁴⁷ Being invested with the power to be subversive, Minnie’s masks, the Noxzema cream and the towel on her head, show the rejection of patriarchal cultural formations of the female body. Simultaneously, they function as feminist tools that allow the creation of a new version of Gabrielle d’ Estrées and to a different extent, a new Lolita figure that is set free from the sexualising gaze of the father figure.

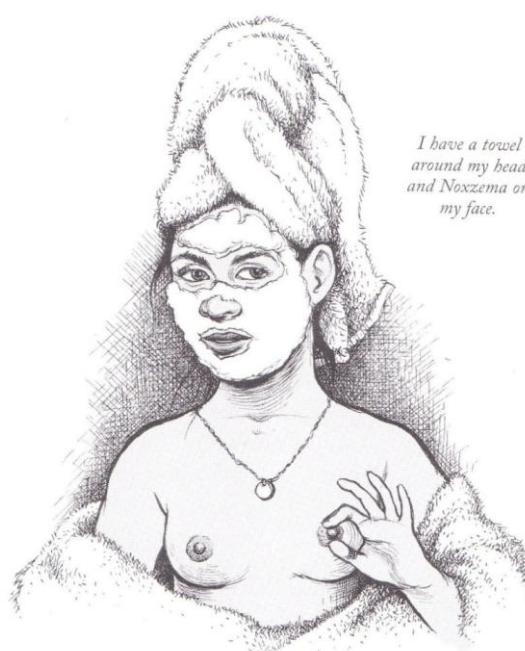


Fig. 1-7: “I Have a Towel on my Head and Noxzema Cream on my Face,” p. 163, from *The Diary of a Teenage Girl: An Account in Words and Pictures* by Phoebe Gloeckner, published by Frog Books/North Atlantic Books, copyright © 2002 by Phoebe Gloeckner. Reprinted by permission of publisher.

¹⁴⁶ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 40.

¹⁴⁷ Timothy Hyman, “A Carnival Sense of the World,” in *Carnavalesque* (London: Hayward Gallery Publishing, 2000), 16. In his reference to contemporary uses of the grotesque, Hyman refers to Robert Crumb’s comics because of their exaggerated depictions of genitals and the obsessive engagement with sexual intercourse. Hence, he introduces Crumb’s art as a contemporary representative in the history of the grotesque and the carnival. With this analysis I also add Gloeckner’s grotesque depictions of genitals and bodies, which beyond the representation of the protagonist’s sexuality also intervene in the history of Western art and literature to perform a feminist revision of the female spectacle and the Lolita figure.

Mary Russo discusses the significance of the grotesque and the carnivalesque in the creation of female experience in art and notes that the “masks and voices of carnival resist, exaggerate and destabilize the distinctions and boundaries that mark and maintain high culture and organized society.”¹⁴⁸ In addition, she notes that the carnival is

Set apart from the merely oppositional and the reactive; carnival and carnivalesque suggest a redeployment or a counterproduction of culture, knowledge, and pleasure. In its multivalent oppositional play, carnival refuses to surrender the critical and cultural tools of the dominant class, and in this sense, carnival can be seen above all as a site of insurgency, and not merely withdrawal.¹⁴⁹

Gloeckner’s carnivalesque version of Gabrielle demonstrates precisely a mocking “redeployment” of the cultural tools that she, as an artistic daughter was provided with by the canonical fathers. The Renaissance text is once again read against itself. The towel on Minnie’s head as a phallic symbol invests her with self-sufficiency and deconstructs the passivity and the lack ascribed to the (underage) female spectacle. Minnie is active and she returns the gaze, both to herself and to the reader/spectator, thus shifting her voyeuristic attention from the father to the self.¹⁵⁰ Monroe, the father figure, is neither included nor implied in this panel as the autobiographical subject’s sexual drive is targeted towards herself. While in *A Child’s Life* he was dominant and abusive, in *The Diary* we observe his gradual objectification and eventual rejection.¹⁵¹ He is initially presented as a sexual object in Minnie’s use of pornographic language, proceeding to appear as a castrated awkward spectacle (fig. 1-6) and to completely disappear in the parodic version of the Renaissance painting (fig. 1-7). The protagonist is no longer attached to him. If her desire for the paternal phallus was the cause of her objectification and injuries, by owning it as a new Gabrielle d’ Estrées, Minnie mocks and rejects both the paternal power and female/maternal castration and passivity that emerge with the Oedipal stage.

Her narcissistic gaze in the mirror also becomes a feminist tool if we interpret it through Freud’s psychoanalytic perspective that demonstrates how a girl’s autoerotic engagement with her body deconstructs the male spectator’s power over her. Thus, in *The*

¹⁴⁸ Russo, “Female Grotesques,” 325.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ With my comment I refer to the bathroom panel in “Homage,” where the voyeuristic interaction between Minnie and Pascal suggests the stimulation of the daughter’s Oedipal drive towards the father figure. In so doing I want to point to the transition that takes place in *The Diary* and demonstrates the reparation of Minnie’s sexual injuries.

¹⁵¹ I refer to the laundry-room panel in “Minnie’s 3rd Love” and the representation of Monroe’s dominance through his grotesquely large phallic erection and his enforcement of Minnie in unwanted sexual acts.

Diary, the Freudian script that introduces narcissism as a predominantly female psychic illness underscores Minnie's autoerotic self-sufficiency which transports her beyond paternal violence both the actual and the metaphysical one. According to Freud, narcissism is "the attitude of a person who treats his own body in the same way in which the body of a sexual object is ordinarily treated – who looks at it ... strokes it and fondles it till he obtains complete satisfaction through these activities."¹⁵² Narcissism, therefore, concerns the transference of sexual desire from an external object to the self and it is a condition mostly affecting women. For Freud, a woman who looks at herself erotically automatically abandons the gendered role of the passive female spectacle. In her act of auto-eroticism she is invested with phallic sexual agency, thus becoming desirable but also threatening for men.¹⁵³ If Minnie owns the phallus and turns her desire for an external love object (the father figure) to herself, then she also rejects his sexual authority over her. Despite being influenced and constructed through various discourses that promote the notion of the girl as a sexual spectacle, Minnie's narcissism embraces the particular position for her own voyeuristic pleasure. Thus, the autobiographical subject is constructed beyond the injuries of sexual trauma and repetition achieves recovery.

In her discussion on women's feminist art in the 1970s, Lisa Tickner asks what alternatives would exist if women were the makers of art, to counter "the virgins ... whores ... and Lolitas with which we are familiar [and] the masculine preoccupation with the pubescent girl that runs from Lewis Carroll to Balthus, Bellmer and Ovenden."¹⁵⁴ Gloeckner's graphic memoirs provide answers to Tickner's questions and demonstrate the potential of the bitextual medium of comics in relation to the reconfiguration of the Lolita figure and the reparation of the sexually abused daughter's traumas. While repeating pornographic and artistic discourses that reduce the female body, both the adult and the underage, to a mere sexual object in the service of male heterosexuality, they simultaneously succeed in reconfiguring them against their previous subject formations. As Tickner explains,

We cannot pull out of thin air a new and utopian art – or a new and utopian sexuality: both must be arrived at through struggle with the situation in which

¹⁵² Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction (1914)," in *Freud's 'On Narcissism: An Introduction,'* eds. Joseph Sandler, Ethel Spector Person, et al. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 3.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

¹⁵⁴ Tickner, "The Body Politic," 238

we find ourselves. Art does not just make ideology explicit but can be used, at a particular historical juncture, to rework it.¹⁵⁵

This is precisely what Gloeckner's graphic memoirs do. Both *A Child's Life* and *The Diary* are infused with modified paternal canonical traditions that produce and reproduce the silencing and the sexual objectification of the female subject/daughter. In their repetition and recreation of these influences the contemporary texts succeed in mediating the daughter's sexualisation in the domestic and the public domain. After the diagnosis of trauma that takes place in *A Child's Life*, *The Diary* repeats the same events to invest the girl protagonist with control over them and to achieve reparation, which concerns the daughter's reformulation beyond paternal violence. Remembering the past – the artistic/literary and the familial one – allows the abused daughter's move beyond injury. Gloeckner, as an artistic daughter/reader, engages with the canonical fathers in a productive way so as to formulate a female autobiographical "I" that counters its previous cultural formations. In her graphic memoirs Lolita speaks for herself, and in speaking she exposes the abusive fathers, she breaks the "hysterical cultural script" and ultimately castrates the paternal abuser. This is precisely why I argue for the value of Gloeckner's graphic memoirs as feminist reparative tools.

¹⁵⁵ Tickner, "The Body Politic," 248-49.

Chapter 2

Re-Visioning Blake, the Brothers Grimm and Caravaggio's Influences: Barry's Childish Vision and the Artistic Embodiment of the Mother/Infant Unity

Lynda Barry's *One! Hundred! Demons!* and *What It Is* were published in 2002 and 2009 respectively and they focus on the problematic relationship between the protagonist and her abusive, distant mother. As her father is absent, it is Lynda's cohabitation with her mother that emerges as the second version of insidious childhood trauma that is explored in this thesis, as I proceed to explain.¹ While the two texts construct other traumatic events that took place during the autobiographical subject's childhood, they nevertheless repeatedly return to maternal estrangement and violence and Lynda's efforts to cope with it.² In this chapter, I examine how insidious trauma caused by maternal distance is overcome and how an imaginary reunion of the mother/daughter pair is achieved via the verbal/visual combination of comics and Barry's pastiche arrangements. Barry's insidious trauma demands a different use of pastiche than the one I have previously analyzed. In this chapter, I examine Barry's strategic decision to reconfigure and reproduce formal influences and meanings from William Blake's illuminated poetry, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio's painting, the *Medusa*, and the brothers Grimm's fairy tales. I argue that Barry chooses to revise the aforementioned texts because they engage either explicitly or implicitly with the mother/infant unity and with maternal monstrosity. Since trauma stems from maternal violence in Barry's graphic memoirs, I suggest that the reparation it calls for concerns the negotiation and reconfiguration of the monstrous violent mother figure in relation to her child. I demonstrate, therefore, how Barry's interaction with, and transformation of, the aforementioned works leads to the autobiographical subject's formulation beyond the injury of maternal estrangement and violence. Additionally, I

¹ For examples of brief references to the father, see Barry, *What It Is*, 26, 92; and Barry, *One! Hundred! Demons!*, 101.

² For example, "Resilience" constructs an incident of implied child sexual abuse, its repression and afterwardsness and the repetition of trauma during the protagonist's adolescence. See Barry, *One! Hundred! Demons!*, 71-72. Since this chapter focuses on the mother/daughter bond however, I do not address the issue of childhood sexual trauma in Barry's texts. For a detailed analysis of the subject see Chute, *Graphic Women*, 99-114; and Lynda Barry and Susan E. Kirtley, "Scrapbooking the Self: Autofictionalography in *One! Hundred! Demons!*," in *Lynda Barry: Girlhood through the Looking Glass* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 163-167.

argue that Barry's pastiche arrangements parodically undo the perfection of the previous texts and the artistic and psychoanalytic formation of the maternal body as monstrous. In so doing, they function reparatively in the cultural domain, both by deconstructing divisions between high (male) art and amateur (female, childish) creations and by introducing a feminist take on maternal monstrosity. Thus, Barry's graphic memoirs underscore the cultural significance of contemporary women cartoonists' work and they react to what Cvetkovich describes as women artists' cultural depression.

In the following discussion, after identifying and describing maternal violence and estrangement in Barry's texts, I proceed to demonstrate how the graphic memoirs function reparatively for the autobiographical subject's injuries. In both books Lynda, the narrator, often comments upon her mother's hostility towards her. For example, in *One! Hundred! Demons!* she notes that she was "terrified of [her] mother" because she "was unpredictable and quite violent."³ Despite her terror, she also loved her mother and was hurt by her behaviour.⁴ In *What It Is*, the abusive environment the autobiographical avatar was living in is introduced in more detail, and both parents are constructed as both emotionally and physically violent. "My parents," the narrator notes, "worked, shouted, drank, belted, and were broke. They had affairs and secret lives my two brothers and I had no part in, and if they could turn back time to the days before we were born, I believe they would have."⁵ Although both her parents were abusive, after her father's abandonment, Lynda grows up in a domestic environment where her mother's violence becomes over-present. Hence, her childhood family life becomes an example of insidious trauma, the boundaries of which are difficult to chart, and where violence and suffering become parts of the victim's everyday life, and cause continuous emotional distress and anxiety. Lynda's feelings of rejection also reflect Sigmund Freud's accounts of how the infantile primary narcissistic wound is repeated during a person's later life in parents' abusive and distant behaviour.

Despite referring to the problematic mother/daughter bond, existing criticism on Barry's graphic memoirs has failed to show how the formal characteristics of the graphic memoirs and the pastiche arrangements therein can introduce the autobiographical subject

³ Barry, *One! Hundred! Demons!*, 91.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁵ Barry, *What It Is*, 26. This is one of the brief references to the father in *What It Is*, but it does not provide insight into any potential bond between him and the protagonist to be performed in the book. In contrast, it also stresses Lynda's feeling of rejection by both parents.

beyond her injuries. For example, in her two articles on *One! Hundred! Demons!*, Melinda de Jesús focuses on Lynda's maternal Filipino-American cultural heritage, and argues that the distance between the mother and the daughter is maintained and unresolved in Barry's first graphic memoir.⁶ In *Graphic Women*, Hillary Chute only makes a passing reference to Lynda's abusive mother therefore neglecting to point to the ways in which the child protagonist's trauma can be repaired.⁷ This chapter addresses this critical gap and shows that by examining the reconfiguration of Blake, Grimms and Caravaggio's influences in the texts we can identify performances of Lynda's reconnection and conflation with the maternal body. It also argues that Barry's playful interaction with the canonical fathers' works in the verbal/visual medium emerges as reparative in the cultural context that devalues women's work. In the following section, I examine Blake's eighteenth-century illustrated poetry and its repetition in the contemporary texts to substantiate my arguments.⁸

Differencing Blake's Tradition: Recreating the Divine State via a Childish Lens

If we perceive Blake's visual/verbal narratives as contributing factors in Barry's artistic vision, then we can explain how his perception of the human state before the fall from heaven, embodied in his bitextual narratives, re-appears in the contemporary context to facilitate the formation of Lynda beyond her separation with the mother.⁹ In Blake's vision, existence in heaven is associated with the existence in the maternal womb. Thus, it allows the possibility of artistically capturing the reconnection of the broken mother/daughter bond in Barry's graphic memoirs.¹⁰ Commenting upon Blake's

⁶ See Melinda de Jesús, "Of Monsters and Mothers: Filipina American Identity and Maternal Legacies in Lynda J. Barry's *One Hundred Demons*," *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism* 5, no. 1 (2004): 1-26, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/meridians/v005/5.1de_jesus.html; and Melinda de Jesús, "Liminality and Mestiza Consciousness in Lynda Barry's 'One Hundred Demons,'" *MELUS* 29, no.1 (2004): 219-252, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4141803>.

⁷ See Chute, *Graphic Women*, 119.

⁸ In *What It Is* Barry cites a section from Blake's "Auguries of Innocence" and her autobiographical alter-ego is shown as having read his works. See *What It Is*, 28, 132. When interviewed, Barry also describes Blake as one of her favourite and most influential artists. See Lynda Barry, "Monkeys, Cephalopods and Creative Play: Barry on *Picture This*," Jeff VanderMeer, *Omnivoracious*, November, 30, 2010, <http://www.omnivoracious.com/2010/11/monkeys-cephalopods-and-creative-play-lynda-barry-on-picture-this-an-amazon-2010-top-10-selection.html>.

⁹ For Blake's illuminated prose and poetry see William Blake, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, Vol. 2, *The Illuminated Books*, ed. Andrew Lincoln, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); and William Blake, *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion*, Vol. 1, *The Illuminated Books*, ed. Morton D. Paley, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998). In this chapter see fig. 2-1 and fig. 2-3 for representative examples.

¹⁰ Joseph Witek describes Blake's illuminated poetry as a predecessor of comics. See Witek, *Comic Books as History*, 6. Nevertheless, Barry's graphic memoirs demonstrate a clearer connection to Blake's tradition both

illuminated poetry, Thomas Mitchell has noted that “the function of his composite art” is to satirise and expose “the illusion of a dualistic nature,” and to overcome “the fall into a divided Nature with a ‘Resurrection to Unity.’”¹¹ In *Jerusalem*, one of his prophetic illuminated narratives, Blake’s speaker explains that by accepting the masculine/feminine separation as permanent, individuals enter a path that leads to destruction and death as it also contradicts the state of heavenly unity, where all the divisions of the fallen world are conflated.¹² As Mitchell notes, in “Blake’s myth sexes are, like time and space, soul and body which they personify, illusions that have arisen with the fall of consciousness from primal unity.”¹³ Reflecting Kooistra’s views on the bitextual element of illustrated texts, and Carrier’s notion of comics’ in-betweenness, Mitchell suggests that Blake’s myth is embodied via the verbal/visual amalgam of his texts. The critic’s choice of the term “primal unity” to refer to the situation before the fall can be argued to point to another, more specific unity: that between the infant and his/her mother, before the entrance into the symbolic realm and the acquirement of language.¹⁴ Thus, understanding how Blake’s divine state is represented via the formal characteristics of his works, will allow us to identify the ways in which Barry’s texts reproduce and reconfigure the same state, to express the protagonist’s strife to reclaim the mother figure.

As explained in the introduction, the division of genders emerges at birth with what Judith Butler describes as a linguistic constructivism that fixes sex and gender cohesion. What Blake describes as the divisions of the fall start to emerge once an individual is born and becomes interpellated as a subject by heteronormative discourses, at the moment when he/she becomes a “linguistic being.” In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Julia Kristeva describes subjects’ entry into the symbolic order, and the acquirement of language against their existence in the semiotic realm, as a state of conflation between self and other, where linguistic determinism that leads to gender divisions does not apply, and which is associated with the maternal body. As she points out, “the kinetic functional stage

due to their unconventional style that stretches the boundaries of the comics medium and due to their subject matter, as I proceed to argue.

¹¹ Mitchell, *Blake’s Composite Art*, 31.

¹² See Blake, *Jerusalem*, 272-273, 284.

¹³ Mitchell, *Blake’s Composite Art*, 32.

¹⁴ Julia Kristeva explains that the symbolic “and therefore syntax and all linguistic categories ... is a social effect of the relation to the other, established through the objective constraints of the biological (including sexual) differences and concrete, historical family structures.” See Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 29. In this chapter I examine how Blake and Barry’s texts performatively undo the restrictions of the symbolic via their verbal/visual conflations, which aim, as I argue, towards an imaginary reconnection with the maternal body.

of the semiotic precedes the establishment of the [linguistic] sign” and its “functions and energy discharges ... connect and orient the body to the mother.”¹⁵ If we keep in mind that the set of divisions that Blake’s illuminated poems struggle to deconstruct are those that emerge with the separation from the mother’s body at birth, then it could be suggested that the Blakean paradise – the divine state – embodies a metaphorical return to the womb, the semiotic *chora* in Kristeva’s terms, where the aforementioned divisions collapse.¹⁶

Indeed, Otto Rank has suggested that the “ensuing expulsion from Paradise ... has become ... the symbol of the unattainable blessed primal condition [and] represents ... a repetition of painful parturition, the separation from the mother ... to which men and women are subjected in the same way.”¹⁷ If the myth of the fall is a repetition of the birth situation and if art can also repeat this separation towards recovery, as explained in the introduction, then Blake’s verbal/visual texts, and his artistic vision of paradisiacal existence, become examples of how a reconnection with the mother is embodied via artistic creativity. Blake’s conflation of the verbal and the visual, the gender-ambiguous characters that appear in his works, and his calligraphy, which I proceed to describe, reflect a state where linguistic determinism and binary divisions are undone. Thus, his illustrated texts come to embody the conflation with the maternal body. This is precisely the aspect of Blake’s work that I am arguing is influential in Barry’s repetition of the mother/daughter estrangement in her graphic memoirs and that allows Lynda’s visual embodiment beyond injury.

The “primal unity” that Mitchell identifies in Blake’s works and the gender conflation that it entails are embodied via a version of cross-dressing that re-appears in Barry’s graphic memoirs and is performed on two levels apart from the verbal/visual combination that each artist uses as a medium: firstly, in the visual embodiments of gender-ambiguous characters; and secondly, in the use of calligraphy which introduces prose text as visual image. In addition, *What It Is* introduces a third version of cross-dressing by conflating Blake’s high-artistic work with female, domesticated traditions of scrapbooking. By so doing, Barry’s graphic memoirs repair the injury caused by the autobiographical subject’s rupture from the maternal body and they function reparatively in the cultural domain.

¹⁵ Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 27.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁷ Rank, *Trauma of Birth*, 113.

One example from Blake's illuminated poetry that demonstrates the gender ambiguity existing before the fall from heaven comes from *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* and it is the verbal/visual formulation of the poem "The Little Boy Found."¹⁸ I have chosen this example because, apart from demonstrating the aforementioned gender-ambiguity, it also refers to the problems children have when they enter the corrupted world of experience, where they suffer because of adults' negligence and violence. "The Little Boy Lost," which precedes this poem in *Songs*, describes the story of a young boy who was abused and abandoned by his father.¹⁹ In "The Little Boy Found," the abandoned boy is crying and wandering alone at night in the woods, but God comes to his rescue to take him back to his mother, the person who embodies security and love for the child.²⁰ Hence, the separation between the mother and the infant is repeated in the poems in ways that allow the eventual reconnection between the two. On a different level, if the child exists in the corrupted world of human divisions, God who comes from heaven to his rescue should embody the state of existence before the fall, what Blake envisaged as the "primal unity," which entails the conflation between the sexes and between the self and the (m)other. Indeed, while in the poem God is mentioned with the third person pronoun "he," in the visual image the angel-like figure that represents him looks more like a woman than a man. Thus, God's visual embodiment confuses the reader with regards to gender demarcation and points to the undecidability of pre-symbolic wholeness. If God has been constructed through the restrictions of grammar and the imposition of patriarchal religious mythology as a "he," Blake's visual depiction allows the detachment of God from this masculine gender demarcation, thus demonstrating the potential of visual imagery to deconstruct restrictions that violate, in Butler's words, subjects by imposing heteronormative binary divisions.

Thomas Mitchell explains that Blake's supposedly female characters are "associated consistently with bodily coverings – drapery, garments, embroidery, and the weaving process itself – which suggests that the naked figure beneath these 'integuments' will be perceived of as masculine."²¹ He also explains that his "female nudes ... tend to

¹⁸ For the illustrated poem "The Little Boy Found," see plate 14 in Blake, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, 54. The plate number refers to the reproduction of the illustrated version of Blake's poem and the following page number to the prose rendition provided by the editor of the collection.

¹⁹ For the poem, see plate 13 in Blake, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, 50-51.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 52-53.

²¹ Mitchell, *Blake's Composite Art*, 50.

have masculine traits.”²² Thus, our speculations about Blake’s characters – both vested and nude – in the state before the fall, are constantly undermined, since their visual embodiments underscore the non-duality and the conflation of genders in heaven – in the maternal body. Indeed, commenting upon *Jerusalem*, Tom Hayes notes that the prophesy “is about the painful necessity of choosing division over wholeness. All hermaphrodites ... must finally put off their ‘maternal humanity,’ their union with the mother [and] they must accept their separateness, their loneliness, their alienation from” her.²³ Nevertheless, during their existence in the state before separation, their gender-ambiguity, their hermaphroditism as Hayes describes it, embodies precisely the existence of the self in conflation with the mother, and this is achieved primarily through the visual element of Blake’s narratives. As Nicholas Williams explains, for Blake, human language, like those who use it, is also fallen and “it becomes genderless only when worked into its utopian form. But if the medium is still the inescapably gendered language of the fallen world ... within the limits of this ideological language a genderless utopia is struggling to express itself.”²⁴ The expression of genderless utopia, associated with the maternal and the pre-symbolic state is allowed by the plasticity with which the visual aspect of Blake’s illuminated poetry invests human bodies, and by the manipulation of garments in their gendered stylisation. Indeed, it is the ability of dressing, and specifically of a version of cross-dressing, that allows Blake’s characters to cause gender trouble and to undermine the linguistic constructivism of the symbolic order.

In *Vested Interests*, Marjorie Garber explains how cross-dressing processes cause anxiety because, like comics narratives, they put forth a “category crisis ... a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits of border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another.”²⁵ In addition, she observes that transvestism reflects the undecidability of maternal castration because it conceals the status of being or having the phallus.²⁶ If the signifying power of the phallus as a marker of sexual difference and maternal lack emerges when the child enters the symbolic order and

²² Mitchell, *Blake’s Composite Art*, 50.

²³ Tom Hayes, “Blake’s Androgynous Ego-Ideal,” *English Literary History* 71, no. 4 (2004): 154, <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/elh/v071/71.1hayes.html>.

²⁴ See Nicholas M. Williams, “The Discourse of Women’s Liberation in Vindication of the Rights of Woman, Europe and the Visions of the Daughters of Albion,” in *Ideology and Utopia in the Poetry of William Blake* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 72.

²⁵ Marjorie Garber, “Introduction: Clothes Make the Man,” in *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 16.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 121.

the Oedipal phase, then by concealing the status of (masculine) having and (feminine) being, cross-dressing subjects can be argued to evoke the pre-symbolic, pre-Oedipal conflation with the mother. In Garber's words, cross-dressers introduce "'seeming,' or 'appearing'" in the place of "'having,' or 'being,' the phallus" and in so doing they introduce the "nostalgia for originary 'wholeness' – in the mother, in the child."²⁷ Since primal unity is associated with the mother/infant conflation, and the ability to perceive the self as continuous with the (m)other, one must see through children's eyes, as Blake's poems suggest, to be able to perceive it.²⁸

For Blake, an adult person enmeshed in the world of experience, gender division and corruption is not able to reach through his/her perception the state before the fall. In contrast, it is only if we see with children's eyes, if we see ourselves as fused with the (m)other via a pre-symbolic, pre-Oedipal sight, that we will be able to understand the divine state. Indeed, in *Jerusalem* children are often shown to guide adults via their innocent vision to spaces of security.²⁹ Zachary Leader explains that Blake's illuminated texts, in their verbal/visual conflation, encourage readers to interact with them via a childish perspective.³⁰ He explains how *Songs of Innocence* undermines the adult experience of reading and guides readers to have a playful approach to its stories, similar to that which children have in their interaction with fairy tales and children's books.³¹ If we perceive children's interactions with illustrated fairy tales as forms of playing, then it can be suggested that by evoking a childish perspective in readers, the visual/verbal element of *Songs* also allows them to participate in the repetition of the mother/infant separation to achieve reconnection.³² Indeed, in "The Little Boy Found" after the anxiety of being lost

²⁷ Garber, *Vested Interests*, 121.

²⁸ I am referring to the state where the infant has not yet started to perceive the self as a separate identity before what Lacan describes as the mirror stage. According to the psychoanalyst, the mirror stage "manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body image to a form of its totality ... to the assumption of an alienating identity." See Jacques Lacan, "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience," in *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*, ed. John Storey, 2nd ed. (Essex: Pearson Education, 2006), 287-292. Donald Winnicott also describes infants' perception of themselves as continuous with the (m)other in his discussion of transitional objects. See Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 1-5.

²⁹ For such examples see plates 84 and 91 in Blake, *Jerusalem*, 272-273, 284.

³⁰ See Zachary Leader, "Children's Books, Education and Vision," in *Reading Blake's Songs* (London: Routledge, 1981), 1-36. With regards to the childish vision Blake's songs promote see also Heather Glen, "'Poetic Simplicity': Blake's *Songs* and Eighteenth Century Children's Verse," in *Vision and Disenchantment: Blake's Songs and Wordsworth Lyrical Ballads* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 8-11.

³¹ Leader, *Reading Blake's Songs*, 91.

³² I am referring to the psychoanalytical views on playing as repetition of the mother/infant rupture towards the infant's recovery, which I have described in the introduction.

the boy is eventually rescued and reunited with his mother. Separation is therefore repeated towards reparation.

Moreover, if *Songs* allows an imaginative reconnection with the maternal by evoking a childish mode of perception, then the gender-ambiguous figure of God also demonstrates children's ability to perceive subjects beyond clear gender divisions, that is, closer to the pre-symbolic stage. In this chapter, I argue that in Barry's graphic memoirs it is precisely this childish mode of perception that is repeatedly used to formulate the autobiographical subject beyond maternal estrangement and insidious trauma. As it does so, it also critically undermines the Freudian binary division between genders because it conceals the autobiographical subject's ownership or lack of the phallus in her visual representations. Moreover, Blake's perfectly crafted artwork is transformed through Barry's vision in a way that underscores the significance of childish vision in the art-making process itself. Her graphic memoirs present us with simplistic visual/verbal compositions as the panel below shows (fig. 2-1), which also motivate readers to engage with them in a playful mode, as they foreground Lynda's gender undecidability. Hence, the autobiographical avatar's visual embodiments transport her beyond the injury of female castration and towards the return into the pre-symbolic conflation with the maternal. As they do so, while recognising the value of Blake's work, Barry's comics also deconstruct his artistic authority by preserving an imperfect childish approach in her drawing and writing styles.

A representative example of how Lynda is depicted as a child in *One! Hundred! Demons!* and *What It Is* is shown on the left side of the panel below (fig. 2-1). The captions at the bottom of the panel with the words "before" and "after" demonstrate the permeability of gender divisions. As they function towards Lynda's embodiment in the pre-symbolic state, her visual depictions also underscore the superficiality of gender demarcation. More specifically, the left half of the panel demonstrates an example of category crisis by introducing the female autobiographical subject to look like a boy. Lynda's tomboy look, the colours of her clothes and her short hair confuse the reader with regards to her gender.³³ In addition to the blue colour of her clothes, the green and yellow

³³ Sandra Salmans explains that baby clothing was neutral for centuries and it was only after World War II that genders were colour-coded and baby boys wore trousers while girls wore dresses. See Sandra Salmans, "When an It is Labelled a He or a She," *New York Times*, November 16, 1989, <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/11/16/garden/when-an-it-is-labeled-a-he-or-a-she.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.

colours of the background are neutral with regards to gender demarcation. Thus, without the narrator's captions, it could be assumed that she is a boy. On the contrary, what Lynda perceived as an ideal girly appearance entails having long hair, playing with dolls and wearing a dress, which despite its colour distinctly connotes femininity in Western culture. Hence, the panel (fig. 2-1) demonstrates the significance of garments and material goods in the construction of gendered subjects.



Fig. 2-1: Lynda Barry, panel 2, "Girlness," p. 185, *One! Hundred! Demons!* (Sasquatch Books, 2002.) Copyright © 2002 by Lynda Barry. All Rights Reserved. Used with permission.

Nevertheless, if we pay attention to Barry's drawing style throughout the two books, it becomes clear that it is her childish perspective on the autobiographical avatar that brings forth the significance of clothes in a rather exaggerated way as it marginalises the importance of the body as a marker of gender differentiation. Indeed, apart from their hair, the objects they hold and the clothes they wear, the two Lyndas are identical. The simplicity of Barry's painting style does not allow readers to make inferences with regards to the protagonist's gender based on her bodily features and facial characteristics. Michael Taussig notes that facial characteristics and genitalia are connected in relation to gender demarcation, but whereas the former are exposed the latter are concealed by our clothes.³⁴ However, Lynda's face undoes this connection and is situated in an in-between space by being stripped of the details that could potentially indicate gender. In addition, due to her

³⁴ Michael Taussig, "Crossing the Face," in *Border Fetishisms: Material Objects in Unstable Spaces*, ed. Patricia Spyer (London: Routledge, 1998), 227.

cross-dressed appearance as a tomboy, the autobiographical child avatar visualises the undecidability of gender division and veils the status of appearing to have or to be the phallus. Like Blake's gender-ambiguous characters, therefore, Lynda's visual embodiments represent a pre-Oedipal wholeness as they also performatively conceal the injury of female castration, thus parodically unveiling the restrictions of Freud's views on female lack.

Commenting upon Barry's drawing style, Ozge Samanci notes that the artist's use of brush in *One! Hundred! Demons!* establishes a "children's drawing aesthetic" as it renders "contour lines non-uniform" and leads to the lack of detail in the drawn figures.³⁵ Moreover, she observes that Barry's "conscious ignorance of ... human anatomy and her distortion of the human body imply a childish cruelty" against it.³⁶ However, what Samanci fails to note is that it is precisely this childish perspective on the body, the omission of bodily characteristics that could demarcate one's gender and sex that facilitates the representation of Lynda as embodying the state before the rupture from the maternal body. Lynda's tomboy look, like Blake's gender-ambiguous characters, deconstructs the gender restrictions imposed by grammar and the phallus as a marker of sexual difference. Additionally, it rejects heteronormative femininity ideals imposed with a baby's birth, its interpellation as a girl and the process of "girling" that takes place throughout its life. Thus, by transforming the gender-ambiguity of Blake's characters in the state before the fall through a childhood lens, Barry's visual embodiments of Lynda demonstrate that it is only through children's eyes that one can reach the divine state and the imaginary conflation with the maternal.

Another element that emerges as cross-dressed in the two artists' works is their verbal text, which is introduced in the form of calligraphy and mirrors the category crisis their characters embody. By so doing it performs, as I proceed to explain, an effort within the symbolic to construct what Nicholas Williams has described as a "sexual utopia," the state of flux with the maternal body. To show how calligraphy deconstructs the divisions between visual image and verbal text in the same way that the verbal/visual combination of

³⁵ Ozge Samanci, "Lynda Barry's Humor: At the Juncture of Private and Public, Invitation and Dissemination, Childish and Professional," *International Journal of Comic Art* 8, no. 2 (2006), <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=526a383a-b4a9-4ff9-9c14-82a14a46e7c1%40sessionmgr115&vid=2&hid=108>.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

bitextual narratives does, I will turn to Kimberly Elam's definition of the term. Elam defines handwritten calligraphy as

A form of drawing based on the linear strokes and marks made by the hand. These strokes and marks are organized in a common system of construction that forms the individual visual signs of the alphabet, which in sequence, become words.³⁷

Being simultaneously a visual and a verbal image, calligraphic text, like the cross-dressing characters in Blake and Barry's works, refuses to conform to the binary divisions embodied in the verbal/visual separation. An example from Blake's work is the title page of the *Songs of Innocence*.³⁸ Like the calligraphy in "The Little Boy Lost" but rather more exaggeratedly, it demonstrates how Blake's verbal text is simultaneously a pictorial one. The capital letters of the word "songs" have decorative tails that are transformed into flames and branches that fuse the text with the visual background. Moreover, small human figures are distributed on each of them and the word "Innocence" engraved and printed in small cursive letters invests the verbal text with an instability that further underlines its visual aspect. The conflation between the verbal and the visual in Blake's text mirrors therefore the undecidability of his gender-ambiguous characters and embodies on yet another level the state before the fall.

Similarly, Barry's handwritten calligraphy, also introduces letters as pictures but once again through a childish artistic take.³⁹ Initial letters in almost every chapter of *One! Hundred! Demons!* and in some of the autobiographical sections in *What It Is* are drawn as visual images. Additionally, Barry's words are written in both small cursive letters with decorative tails and with capital plain letters. Hillary Chute has commented upon the artist's calligraphy and noted that,

On a first glance one might suspect that this shifting lends emphasis to the denotative meaning of a sentence or that it works to imply its spoken quality ... Yet this shifting is enacted to 'break up' the actual visual surface of the text ... The prose ... also works at the visual level decoratively, containing a rhythm on its surface that is unconnected from the plot it establishes.⁴⁰

While Chute identifies the function of the text on a visual level, it is also necessary to note how prose reflects the conflation of divisions embodied in the verbal/visual separation. If

³⁷ Kimberly Elam, "Handwritten Typography," *Expressive Typography: The Word as Image* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1990), 25.

³⁸ For the title page of *Songs of Innocence*, see plate 3 in Blake, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, 14.

³⁹ See for example the initial letter in fig. 2-3.

⁴⁰ Chute, *Graphic Women*, 110- 111.

we are to perceive, as Mitchell and Kooistra have suggested, the visual element of illustrated texts as corresponding to the female, the (m)other and the body and the verbal text to the male, the self and the mind, then by reproducing Blake's tradition in calligraphy, Barry's graphic memoirs deconstruct such divisions and introduce the fluidity and undecidability of primal unity.

Chute suggests that Barry's calligraphy connects "her work to avant-garde experimentation, particularly to Dada, whose purveyors ... made use of typographic innovations ... in order to call 'attention to the visual representation of language as an element in the production of meaning.'"⁴¹ She proceeds to distinguish between avant-garde experimentation, which sought "the removal of the visible human hand from the style of letterforms," and Barry's, whose aim is the opposite.⁴² However, she does not make references to Blake's influence in Barry's graphic memoirs. Hence, she fails to situate the latter's work in the longer tradition of illustrated writing, which stretches back to the eighteenth century and becomes transformed by her artistic vision to recreate the autobiographical subject beyond the wound of female castration and beyond the separation with the mother.

Apart from the visual and verbal cross-dressing, *What It Is* introduces pre-symbolic wholeness in a way that also captures the peak of Barry's feminist re-imagination and reconfiguration of Blake's tradition in illustrated writing. By so doing, Barry's pastiche also deconstructs the division between the original and the copy, the master artist and the imitator, high and low art, thus introducing the phenomenon that Jim Collins described as High-Pop. In the following part, I describe Blake's complex art as it is embodied in his illuminated manuscripts and I explain how it is conflated with the domesticated, amateur female tradition of scrapbooking in *What It Is*. Hence, I show how scrapbooking is cross-dressed to appear similar to the canonical father's work.

Andrew Lincoln points out that there were only a few copies of Blake's manuscripts available when they were first produced and they were very expensive because "the method of production tended to restrict sales."⁴³ Zachary Leader describes

⁴¹ Chute, *Graphic Women*, 112.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Andrew Lincoln, ed., "Introduction," in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, Vol. 2, *The Illuminated Books*, by William Blake (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991, 1998), 9.

this method and notes that Blake's manuscripts were produced "in a form he called 'Illuminated Printing.'⁴⁴ He further explains that

A complicated and delicate process of relief etching (largely if not solely, of Blake's own invention) was used to transfer poem and design to copperplate; individual pages were then printed in an ordinary press and painted by hand. Blake issued copies separately, and never printed more than a few copies of any book at a time.⁴⁵

The process of illuminated printing underscores the complexity of Blake's work. The beautifully engraved calligraphic text in parallel with the detailed visual embodiments of his characters, form an end result that comes from a difficult and prolonged procedure. The production of the illustrated manuscripts, undertaken from beginning to end solely by the artist himself, was an elaborate and time-consuming process that led to the increased price of the end product and the restricted number of copies, which are currently exhibited in museums and public libraries.⁴⁶

Barry's repetition and reconfiguration of Blake's work becomes a fraudulent copy because it incorporates in the process of creation a distinctly feminine amateur creative process. Simultaneously, it undoes the canonical work's perfection by underlining the amateur childish perspective on artistic creation. While the end result of the pages in *What It Is* and *One! Hundred! Demons!* is very similar to the pages of Blake's illuminated texts, the differences in the creative processes introduce a domesticated version. The page reproduced below (fig. 2-2) is a representative sample of how the pages of *What It Is* are composed. The bright colours, the use of calligraphy and decorative branches and frames are elements that introduce Barry's work as an heir of Blake's traditions. However, the feminist revision of his work lies in the unconventional material Barry uses to produce an end result that "appears" to be similar to his illuminated manuscripts.

⁴⁴ Leader, *Reading Blake's Songs*, xix.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ For catalogues of the currently existing copies of Blake's original works and their holding institutes, see Morris Eaves, Robert N. Essick and Joseph Viscomi, eds., *Works in the William Blake Archive*, <http://www.blakearchive.org/blake/indexworks.htm?java=no>.

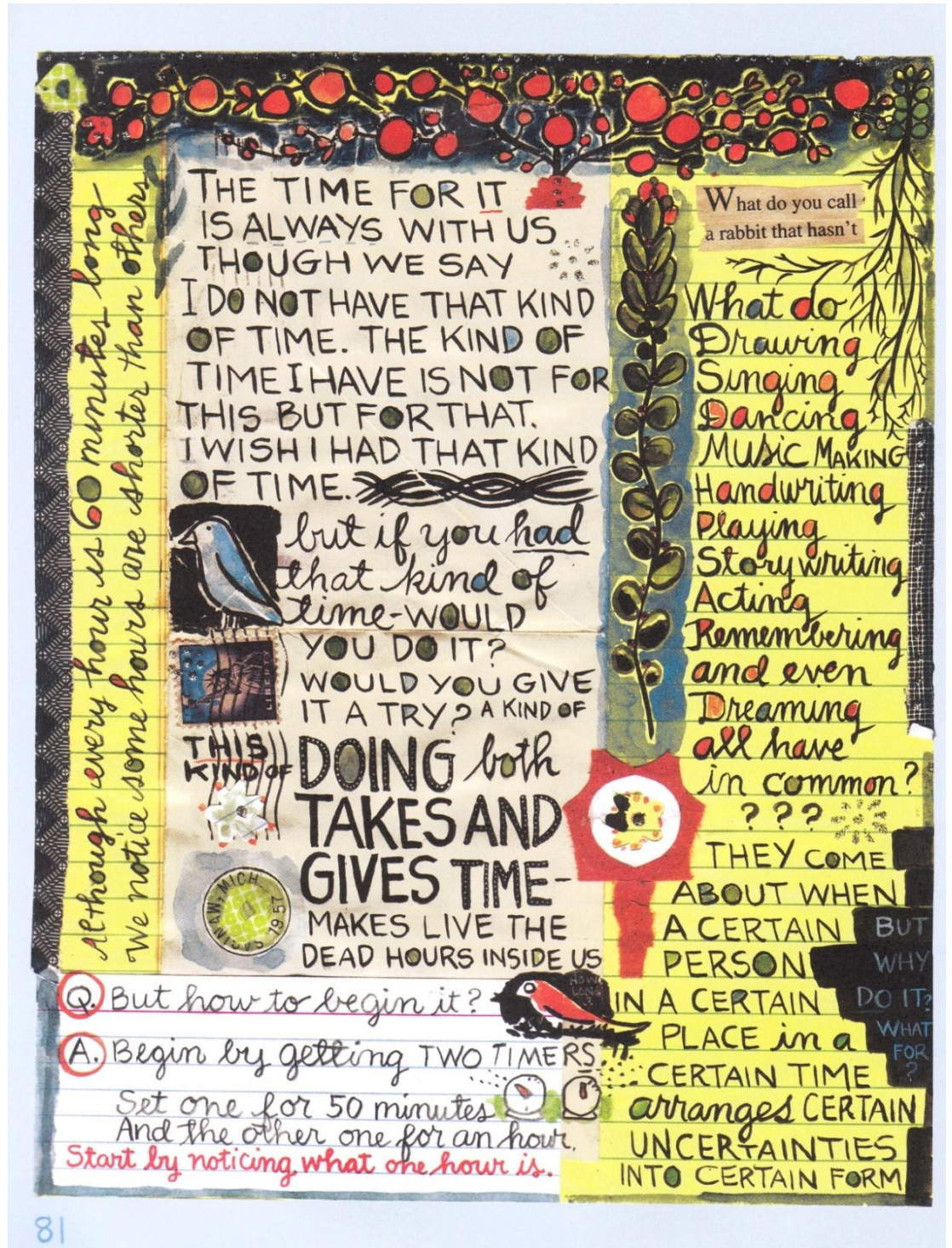


Fig. 2-2: Lynda Barry, p. 81, *What It Is* (Drawn and Quarterly, 2009). Copyright © 2009 by Lynda Barry. All Rights Reserved. Used with permission.

Apart from the autobiographical narrative that *What It Is* mediates, it also includes pages that function as individual artworks and address readers to stimulate their creativity by posing various questions about the creative process. In so doing, they underscore the significance of reader participation in meaning formation as they also emerge as a form of interactive playing. The page above (fig. 2-2) is one such an example. “The time for it” in the first line of the text alludes to the title of the graphic memoir – *What It Is* – and the narrator explains that allowing oneself time to “do it,” will arrange “certain uncertainties into form.”⁴⁷ If we perceive the uncertainties and the unknown as the state before fall, the pre-symbolic union with the mother, then it is precisely this state that takes form in the creative process in Barry’s second graphic memoir. Since language does not exist in the pre-symbolic state, our experience therein remains unknown and unspeakable, an uncertainty in Barry’s terms. As I proceed to show, apart from asking readers about the creative process Barry’s second graphic memoir also demonstrates the actual artistic capturing of the unknown mother/infant continuum.

Hence, what is suggested by Lynda’s gender ambiguous visual embodiments and the calligraphic text with regards to the return to the pre-symbolic will be shown to become explicitly constructed in *What It Is* via the autobiographical avatar’s playful artistic imagination. In the page (fig. 2-2), we are asked, “but why do it? What for?”⁴⁸ Why should we try to “arrange certain uncertainties into certain form[?]”⁴⁹ If we keep in mind that art and playing function towards reparation from maternal separation, this becomes precisely the answer to the question we are called to answer. Indeed, this is the process in which Barry’s graphic memoirs are engaged too and it escalates, as I will argue, in *What It Is* and the artist’s feminist revision of Caravaggio’s *Medusa* and the formulation of the graphic memoir as a fairy tale. Nevertheless, the pre-symbolic conflation of genders and categories and the reconnection with the maternal are also embodied in Barry’s cross-dressed version of the female tradition of scrapbooking into a form that appears as Blake’s complicated illuminated poetry. Thus, her graphic memoirs’ bitextual element is pushed even further than the combination of words and visual images and the formation of words as pictures.

If we pay close attention to the page (fig. 2-2), apart from calligraphy and the use of decorative visual images which situate the contemporary works in Blake’s tradition,

⁴⁷ Barry, *What It Is*, 81.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

we can also identify the material Barry used to write and draw on: yellow legal paper, an envelope, a piece of white lined paper, small pieces of fabric, a long strip of black coloured paper that functions as a frame on the left side of the page and two other pieces of paper, possibly cut out of a book or a newspaper. This page is a sample of how Barry's pages are constructed in *What It Is*. The same process is also followed in two-page collage interludes introduced before the beginning of each chapter in *One! Hundred! Demons!*. Moreover, in the book's "Outro" the adult autobiographical avatar comments upon the materials she uses in her art and notes: "I like to paint on legal paper or on the classified section of the newspaper or even pages from old books! I will try any paper, typing paper, wrapping paper even paper bags!"⁵⁰ Barry's use of unconventional material underlines the Do-It-Yourself character of her works and introduces artistic creativity as an everyday domestic process. Simultaneously, it situates her work in the long history of women's domestic – and rejected by the male canon – craft arts. The artist collages various materials together and paints on yellow legal paper. Next, she scans her creations to maintain their three-dimensionality and thus, as Chute explains, to preserve their domesticated character in the final products.⁵¹ Chute further notes that Barry's collages have similarities with those that emerged out of

The Pattern and Decoration movement of the 1970s, in which artists like Miriam Schapiro and Joyce Kozloff mixed fabric and paint and explored the use of everyday materials, putting pressure on mainstream concepts of art that devalued ornamentation and handcraft as 'women's work.'⁵²

Chute's comment points to the associations between Barry's work and the recent tradition in women's art that stretches to the 1970s. However, it fails to distinguish between the ways in which the Pattern and Decoration movement's artists sought validation by the high-artistic institute of the art gallery, and Barry's rejection of such validation.⁵³ The cartoonist refuses to exhibit her work in art galleries and makes it publically available in mass-produced book forms, aimed at untrained readers. In addition, her insistence on

⁵⁰ Barry, *One! Hundred! Demons!*, 224.

⁵¹ Chute, *Graphic Women*, 110.

⁵² Ibid. Hillary Chute also provides a detailed description of the various "waste" materials incorporated in Barry's graphic memoirs.

⁵³ For discussions on the Pattern and Decoration movement and representative artists, see Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds., "Miriam Schapiro and 'Femmage': Reflections on the Conflict Between Decoration and Abstraction in Twentieth Century Art," in *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1982), 315; and Norma Broude, "The Pattern and Decoration Movement," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, eds. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 225. For descriptions and representative examples of such artworks, see Nina Felshin, "Women's Work: A Lineage, 1966-94," *Art Journal* 54, no. 1 (1995): 71-85, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/777511>.

preserving its amateur, childish end result further destabilises the boundaries between art and non-art and reacts against canonical rejections of gendered forms of creativity.⁵⁴

Ann Cvetkovich identifies creativity in contemporary women's visual arts and specifically in the female process of crafting as a significant means of survival in "a depressive culture," which rejects women's art as unworthy.⁵⁵ She notes that the contemporary craft movement is "in dialogue with ... second-wave feminisms of the 1970s and post-Second World War domestic cultures, as well as with longer histories of women's culture and industrial culture extending back to the eighteenth and nineteenth century."⁵⁶ Indeed, women's crafts have been rejected for centuries as inappropriate amateur forms of art and remained restricted within the domestic space since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as Talia Schaffer explains.⁵⁷ Cvetkovich describes the reparative power of women's craft art in a context that constantly devalues it, but her discussion concerns works exhibited in museums and art galleries.⁵⁸ While she refers to Barry's *What It Is* as a how-to book for fighting the feeling of depression through everyday creative activities, she does not equally address its potential as feminist reparative art.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, by conflating Blake's tradition with female/childish amateur processes, the graphic memoir refuses to remain restricted within matrilinear circles, as it also embodies the imaginary pre-symbolic return in its formal characteristics.

Apart from the bitextual, cross-dressing aspects of Barry's graphic memoirs, Lynda's reunion with the maternal body and her survival beyond insidious trauma escalate, as I proceed to show, in *What It Is*, and in the artist's reconfiguration of maternal monstrosity in her interaction with Michelangelo da Caravaggio's *Medusa*, and through the fairy tale element with which the book is invested. Once again, it is the preservation of a childish perspective and mode of interaction with Barry's second graphic memoir that will

⁵⁴ Barry explains it took a lot of effort on her behalf to persuade her publishers to accept *One! Hundred! Demons!* for publication because of the way it looks. See Barry and Kirtley, *Girlhood through the Looking Glass*, 152.

⁵⁵ Cvetkovich, *Depression*, 159. For a description of feminist craft arts, the marginality of certain processes and materials and the demand for respect in the contemporary art world, see also Glenn Adamson, "Feminism and the Politics of Amateurism," in *Thinking Through Craft* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 151.

⁵⁶ Cvetkovich, *Depression*, 171.

⁵⁷ See Talia Schaffer, "'Not at All Akin to That Hometown Cult': The Domestic Craftswoman and the Aesthetic Connoisseur," in *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 73-121.

⁵⁸ See for example her discussions and visual reproductions of Seila Pepe and Alison Mitchell's works in Cvetkovich, *Depression*, 177-189. Pepe and Mitchell's work, for example, the latter's *Hungry Purse: The Vagina Dentata in Late Capitalism*, also negotiate the return to the maternal body via installations composed by knitted arrangements.

⁵⁹ See Cvetkovich, *Depression*, 204, 211.

allow us to construct Lynda's return into the maternal *chora*. Beginning from *One! Hundred! Demons!*, where the narrator explains the significance of reading/interpreting fairy tales as a form of childish play that repeats the separation from the mother towards reparation, we proceed to *What It Is*, a book that structured as a fairy tale and requires readers to adopt childish, playful perspective in their interaction with it. By so doing, as my analysis will show, the graphic memoir allows us to identify the peak of the autobiographical avatar's reconnection to the maternal body.

This reconnection is achieved by the fusion and feminist reconfiguration of influences by Blake, Caravaggio and the brothers Grimm, because their works engage either implicitly or explicitly with the return to the maternal body, as they also underscore the necessity of childish vision to do so. In the following section of this chapter, I explain how Barry's narrator underlines the significance of childish vision in relation to the repetition and recovery from maternal separation by describing infants' transitional objects and the reading of fairy tales as a form of play. Next, I describe the autobiographical avatar's fairy tale reading as a coping mechanism in the abusive domestic environment. I end by demonstrating how *What It Is* performs, in its fairy-tale structure, the autobiographical avatar's return into the maternal womb that is embodied in Barry's feminist reconfiguration of maternal monstrosity. By so doing, I argue that Barry's graphic memoirs productively engage with paternal canonical traditions in a way that allows the autobiographical subject's move beyond trauma.

Apart from the artistic male-dominated traditions that are parodically modified by Barry, another dominant formation of the woman is critiqued and undermined. In addition to questioning the Freudian division between female lack and male ownership of the phallus, Barry's graphic memoirs transform the psychoanalytical inscription of the maternal body, and specifically of the maternal genitals, as monstrous, terrifying and as associated with the uncanny. Hence, Freud, Rank and Lacan's texts emerge as parts of the male canon that is challenged through Barry's childish artistic vision towards the reparation that entails the reunion of the autobiographical subject with the maternal body. Barry's graphic memoirs come to demonstrate, therefore, the potential of the medium of comics for feminist interventions in the longer history of Western canonical culture, and for the expression "authentic," in El Refaie's terms, female experiences.

Grimms' Fairy Tales and Abuse Survival: Mastering Maternal Estrangement via Reading as Playing

While playing has been identified in psychoanalytic circles as reparative with regards to the trauma caused by the infant's separation from the mother, Donald Winnicott was the first to introduce the notion of the transitional object and to associate it with playing and artistic creativity, a process which *One! Hundred! Demons!* and *What It Is* also recreate.⁶⁰ Winnicott has noted that transitional objects and phenomena allow the gradual detachment of the infant from the mother after weaning, by acting as a partial substitution of the maternal breast in the infant's imagination.⁶¹ According to Winnicott, the disturbance of the continuity established between a mother and an infant during lactation is a source of anxiety for the latter, who seeks to overcome the separation with the use of objects or phenomena that embody the mother/infant bond.⁶² Initially, infants use their thumb as a replacement of the maternal breast, and later they use other objects, such as blankets and teddy bears.⁶³ Thus, once again it is children's ability to perceive the self as conflated with the other that allows the transitional object to embody the mother/infant bond, and babies come to perceive themselves in "the intermediate area between the subjective and that which is objectively perceived."⁶⁴ In order for such objects to embody the maternal breast in continuation with the infant, babies need to activate their imagination and creativity.⁶⁵ Thus, transitional objects and phenomena emerge as infants' first creative activities, and it is only in the creative interaction between the infant and the object that the latter gains the meaning of the mother/infant unity.

Winnicott explains that transitional objects are "gradually allowed to be decathected, so that in the course of years [they become] not so much forgotten as relegated to limbo."⁶⁶ They lose their initial "meaning and ... become diffused, have become spread out over ... the whole cultural field ... into ... play, and ... artistic creativity."⁶⁷ If we perceive transitional objects and phenomena as embodiments of the

⁶⁰ Barry cites Winnicott's work on children's transitional objects and playing as influential for her second graphic memoir. See Barry, *What It Is*, 212.

⁶¹ See Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 1-25. I am not using the term "breast" literally, but to refer to the maternal figure and her role in the infant's development and his/her entrance into the symbolic. As breastfeeding is not the only process through which infants are fed, I am using Winnicott's views as representing the mother/infant pre-symbolic relationship.

⁶² Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 3.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

mother/infant bond, then their transformation into the field of playing and artistic creativity has the same potential. Indeed, both Freud and Rank have described children’s play and adult artistic creativity as reparative with regards to the mother/infant separation, as I have explained in the introduction.

The importance of transitional objects is first introduced in Barry’s works in the chapter “Magic Lanterns” in *One! Hundred! Demons!*, which transports readers back to an infantile mode of reaction in relation to human/object relationships. In the panel reproduced below (fig. 2-3), the narrator explains: “Many of us had something we were attached to when we were very little. A blanket or a toy or even a certain spot on our bedpost that we liked to touch as we were falling asleep.”⁶⁸ Proceeding, she remembers that “protecting this part of ourselves was worth getting in trouble for, this part of ourselves that lived in the bunny or the bear.”⁶⁹ By the end of the chapter she notes that “there are accidents. Things drop. Things are left behind. The twins, the lovers, the child and its mother are separated. What looked like a rag contained all these things and more.”⁷⁰ According to the narrator, with the loss of transitional objects, a break also emerges in the relationships they embody, one of which is the bond between the mother and the infant. By losing the transitional object, the child also loses his/her ability to maintain control over the separation from the mother, and so the initial rupture is repeated once again.



Fig. 2-3: panels 1 and 2, “Magic Lanterns,” p. 148. *One! Hundred! Demons!* (Sasquatch Books, 2002.) Copyright © 2002 by Lynda Barry. All Rights Reserved. Used with permission.

⁶⁸ Barry, *One! Hundred! Demons!*, 148.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 153. Gamman and Makinen introduce the term “anthropological fetish” to describe such objects and refer to the mother’s collection of a child’s memorabilia as an example. However, I use the term transitional object primarily because of its association with playing and creativity and because of Winnicott’s influence in Barry’s work. For a definition of the anthropological fetish, see Lorraine Gamman and Merja Makinen, “Three Types of Fetishism: A Question of Definition,” in *Female Fetishism: A New Look* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1994), 27.

Further into the chapter, the narrator moves beyond the description of infantile transitional objects to identify the repetition of the mother/infant separation in the reading of books and, specifically, of fairy tales. “There are a thousand versions of it in books and movies,” she notes.⁷¹ “Love takes so many forms and has so many outcomes. Why are we moved by stories...? When we finish a good book why do we hold it in both hands and gaze at it as if it were somehow alive?”⁷² The picture below the narrator’s comments shows Lynda as an adult reading a fairy tale and crying. By noting that a good book becomes alive in our interaction with it, Lynda points to how a reader’s creative interaction with the book can invest it with meanings that move beyond its status as an object, and concern the replay of human bonds, among which that between the infant and the mother. Emerging from infants’ transitional objects and spanning to reading fairy tales as playing and artistic creativity, the repetition of maternal separation towards reparation, becomes a masterplot that can be repeated throughout a person’s life and this is precisely what Barry’s graphic memoirs do.

Ozge Samanci points out that among the themes of Barry’s work are the attachment to the mother and transitional objects. She identifies the repetition of Lynda’s attachment to her abusive mother in her adult life, specifically in her relationship with an offensive boyfriend. Additionally, she briefly refers to “Magic Lanterns” in *One! Hundred! Demons!* as a chapter that acknowledges the significance of transitional objects.⁷³ However, Samanci does not proceed to show how creativity, art and play can imaginatively restore the problematic mother/daughter bond. Hillary Chute also refers to Winnicott’s views on playing as influential for Barry. She notes that playing “is both the explicit theme, and the form of *What It Is*, a book ... which allows itself the space, both literal and metaphorical, to play with words and images, unfurling questions to which it does not know the answers.”⁷⁴ Moreover, she explains that *One! Hundred! Demons!* “evokes both artists’ books and children’s pop-up books, juxtaposing and rendering unstable ... the discernible line between childhood and adulthood.”⁷⁵ Nevertheless, like Samanci, Chute also fails to point to how playing and creativity, associated with fairy tale reading, can have a reparative power. Interpreting graphic memoirs in relation to children’s

⁷¹ Barry, *One! Hundred! Demons!*, 154.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ See Samanci, “Lynda Barry’s Humor.” In relation to Lynda’s repetition of maternal abuse through her offensive boyfriend, see Barry, *One! Hundred! Demons!*, 14-24.

⁷⁴ Chute, *Graphic Women*, 127.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 112.

literature, however, can enrich and complicate our understanding of the meanings contemporary graphic memoirs have the potential to create, as Charles Hatfield points out.⁷⁶

The influence of fairy tales in Barry's graphic memoirs is shown by the narrator's repetitive comments about their usefulness during her childhood and adulthood. For example, in the final chapter of *One! Hundred! Demons!* she explains that, as a child, she had only three books that she read repeatedly: Grimms' and Anderson's fairy tales and *Heidi*.⁷⁷ In *What It Is*, too, the narrator explains that reading stories by the brothers Grimm helped her to survive in an abusive family environment during her childhood, and the autobiographical avatar is often depicted with fairy tales in her hands.⁷⁸ If we keep in mind that reading such texts is a form of imaginative play, then their central significance in Lynda's childhood is associated with how she struggles to reclaim her lost mother via her interaction with these texts. This process continues through to Lynda's adulthood when the narrator explains that Grimms' tales helped her find the solution to her artistic impasse.⁷⁹ If artistic creativity is also associated with the mother/infant bond, then by losing inspiration one also loses the ability to repeat and gain control over the separation with the mother. To regain this control, as the narrator once again suggests, it is necessary to adopt a childlike approach to artistic creation, similar to the one that reading fairy tales and Blake's *Songs* stimulates.

While Winnicott does not refer to reading children's illustrated fairy tales as a form of creative play, critics note that that "children's literature is always already child's play, even when play is not thematized."⁸⁰ Furthermore, specialists in children's literature point out the significance of fairy tales for children who live in abusive families. For example, in her discussion of the Grimms' stories, Linda Degh notes that when neglected children read fairy tales where the child hero struggles with parental abandonment and

⁷⁶ See Charles Hatfield, "Comic Art, Children's Literature, and the New Comic Studies," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 30, no. 3 (2006): 360-382, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/lion_and_the_unicorn/v030/30.3hatfield.html.

⁷⁷ Barry, *One Hundred Demons*, 213.

⁷⁸ See for example Barry, *What It Is*, 27-28, 40.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁸⁰ Kenneth B. Kidd, "Psychoanalysis and Children's Literature: The Case for Complementarity," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 28, no. 1 (2004): 123, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/lion_and_the_unicorn/v028/28.1kidd.html. In relation to children's fiction as imaginative play, see also Margaret Rustin and Michael Rustin, "Introduction: Deep Structures in Children's Fiction," in *Narratives of Love and Loss: Studies in Modern Children's Fiction* (London: H. Karnac, 1987, 2001), 3.

violence and he/she is ultimately saved, they gain the power to cope with their own familial problems in their belief that they too will be eventually rescued.⁸¹ Similarly, Maria Tatar notes that “in the imaginative world opened up by fairy tales, children escape the drab realities of everyday life and indulge in the cathartic pleasures of defeating those giants, stepmothers, ogres, monsters, and trolls also known as the grown-ups.”⁸² Thus, fairy tales like William Blake’s *Songs* can become sites where the mother/infant separation – also entailed in maternal violence and estrangement – can be repeated towards reparation and imaginative reconnection.

Indeed, referring to the role of old fairy tales in her childhood, the narrator notes that they “have transformational capabilities ... They can’t transform your actual situation but they can transform your experience of it.”⁸³ She explains that the inanimate fictional worlds of fairy tales would become alive via her childish imaginative interaction with the graphic memoirs. By participating in the worlds of fairy tales, as the narrator explains, she was able to cope with the abusive domestic environment she was living in, thus reproducing Degh and Tatar’s views on abused children’s interactions with Grimms’ fairy tales. The page below (fig. 2-4) demonstrates the above view as the narrator notes that we “don’t create a fantasy world to escape reality, we create it to be able to stay ... [We] have always done this, used images to stand and understand what otherwise would be intolerable.”⁸⁴ Moreover, its visual images depict the autobiographical avatar’s imaginative engagement with Grimms’ fairy tales. While she is reading, possibly in the living-room of her house, the flames and the creatures around her function as decorative elements that also fuse the world of her domestic environment with that of the fairy tale. Flames and decorative spiral lines are repeated patterns both in Blake and in Barry’s work.

⁸¹ Linda Degh, “Grimm’s *Household Tales* and its Place in the Household: The Social Relevance of a Controversial Classic,” in *Fairytales as Ways of Knowing: Essays on Märchen in Psychology, Society and Literature*, eds. Michael M. Metzger and Katharina Mommsen (Bern: Peter Lang, 1981), 13-19.

⁸² Maria Tatar, “Preface to the Expanded Second Edition,” in *The Hard Facts of the Grimms’ Fairy Tales*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), xviii.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 39-40.

⁸⁴ Barry, *What It Is*, 40.

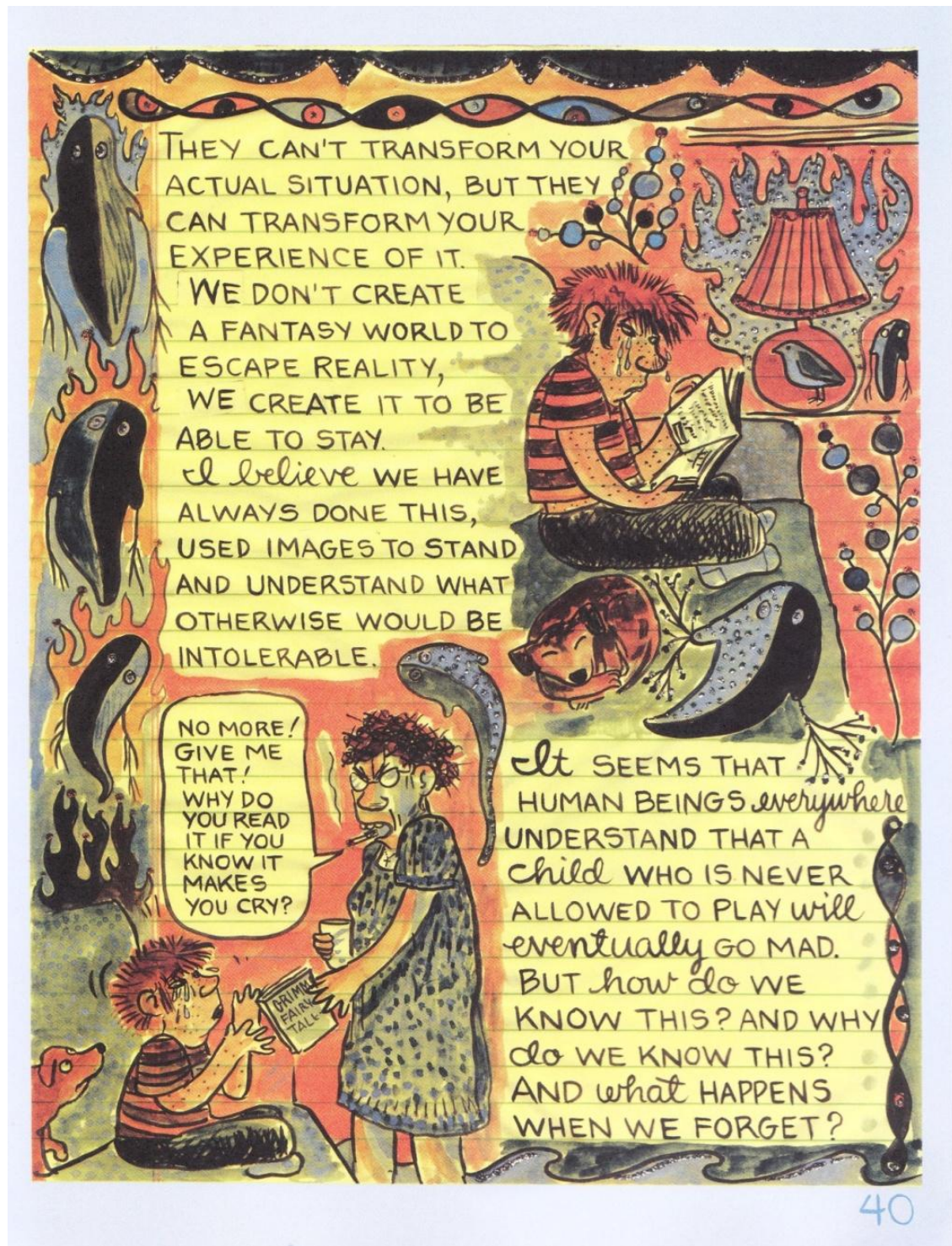


Fig. 2-4: Lynda Barry, p. 40, *What It Is* (Drawn and Quarterly, 2009). Copyright © 2009 by Lynda Barry. All Rights Reserved. Used with permission.

According to Mitchell, in Blake's illuminated texts these patterns connote "infinite transformation" and movement that cannot be seen in nature.⁸⁵ Additionally, they visualise Lynda's anxiety in the process of reading, thus pointing to the seriousness of her interaction with the fairy tale, where the mother/infant separation has the potential to be repeated towards its reparation. Hence, on this page, Blake and Grimms' influences in children's illustrated books and fairy tales are conflated to visually embody the protagonist's struggle to survive in an abusive family environment and to conflate the fictional realm of the fairy tale with the one that *What It Is* describes. Nevertheless, on the same page we see Lynda's mother taking away the protagonist's book because it makes her cry; in so doing she deprives Lynda of the means through which she can survive the abusive reality in her house by reaching catharsis in the world of the fairy tale. By taking the fairy tale away, her mother deprives her of the ability to repeat and own control over maternal separation. Being deprived of the fairy tale as a transitional object, Lynda is no longer able to play and returns back to the domestic abusive reality.

Elsewhere in *What It Is*, the narrator identifies the inability to play, and thus to put one's imagination and creativity into practice, with writer's block. She notes that not "being able to play is misery" and proceeds to explain that writers call this inability a "writer's block."⁸⁶ Like Barry's narrator, Ann Cvetkovich refers to depression as a "a blockage, or an impasse, or being stuck," and explains that creativity, "a form of movement ... that manoeuvres the mind inside or around an impasse, even if that movement sometimes seems backward or like a form of retreat," can function as a treatment.⁸⁷ She notes that this impasse is associated with a continuous rejection and devaluation of a person, as I have also explained in the introduction. Both Cvetkovich and Barry's texts introduce creativity as a means of recovery from what the former describes as depression and the latter as inability to play/writer's block, both of which are connected with the notion of insidious trauma. In Barry's graphic memoir, the rejection Lynda feels by her mother and the abuse she suffers in the domestic environment emerge as causes of her inability to play as a child and the loss of her artistic inspiration as an adult. The negative thoughts she has about her work and her belief that it is not good enough repeat the negative and insulting comments she received by her mother about her drawings during her childhood.

⁸⁵ See Mitchell, *Blake's Composite Art*, 61-64.

⁸⁶ Barry, *What It Is*, 52.

⁸⁷ Cvetkovich, *Depression*, 21.

For example, when she sees one of Lynda's drawings of the Medusa, her mother asks her why she draws ugly faces and describes her work as a waste of paper.⁸⁸ Similarly, the negative thoughts that hinder Lynda's creativity during her adulthood repeatedly tell her that her art sucks, is useless and a waste of time and paper.⁸⁹ If we perceive maternal neglect and rejection as causes of Lynda's depression and her insidious trauma, it is via her creative interaction with fairy tales that she can move around this source and towards its reparation as a child and as an adult. Having described fairy tales' reparative function, *What It Is* ultimately becomes a fairy tale itself to transform maternal violence/monstrosity through a feminist revision of Caravaggio's *Medusa* that will reunite Lynda with the maternal body. Hence, I proceed to examine how and why the canonical painting and maternal monstrosity are resignified through Barry's feminist vision to achieve the pleasurable end of the mother/infant reconnection.

Reinventing Female Monstrosity: The Medusa, the Magic Cephalopod and the Sea-Ma

While the mythical monster of the Medusa does not exist in Grimms' fairy tales, Maria Tatar points out that the two brothers transformed myths in their tales by "bringing [them] down to earth and inflicting them with human rather than heroic terms."⁹⁰ Additionally, she observes that:

Fairy tales put a familiar spin on the stories in the archive of our collective imagination ... [They] take us into a reality that is familiar in the double sense of the word – deeply personal and at the same time centred on the family and its conflicts rather than what is at stake in the world at large.⁹¹

Indeed, Freud also analyses Grimms' tales, and specifically the "The Little Red Cap" and "The Wolf and the Seven Little Kids," with regards to children's anxieties about their parents within the context of family dynamics, and he notes that the figure of the wolf comes to represent the primal father in children's dreams.⁹² Borrowing from the canonical

⁸⁸ See Barry, *What It Is*, 63.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 128-130.

⁹⁰ Tatar, *The Hard Facts of Grimms' Fairy Tales*, xiv.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, xiv-xv.

⁹² See Sigmund Freud, "The Occurrence in Dreams of Material from Fairy Tales," in *Case History of Schreber, Papers on Technique and Other Works*, Vol. 12, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, eds. James Strachey and Anna Freud, 2nd ed. (London: Vintage, 2001), 279-287. In this chapter I am investigating how female monstrosity is associated with the figure of the mother. For the two fairy tales, see Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm, *Grimm's Household Tales*, Vol. 1, trans. Margaret Hunt, ed. Andrew Lang (London: George Bell, 1982), 20-23, 110-113.

fathers' fairy tales, *What It Is* also negotiates the subject of mythical monstrosity in relation to the family, and specifically to the mother.

The page below (fig. 2-5) includes a collage arrangement that precedes the book's autobiographical section, which describes Lynda's familiarisation and imaginative play with the monster of the Gorgon, otherwise known as the Medusa. Therein, as well as in the preceding collage arrangement, some of the questions addressing readers concern the existence and purpose of monstrosity. Readers are called to think about what monsters are, where they come from and why they leave us.⁹³ The page shown below engages readers with the following questions: "Why are there monsters in so many old stories? True or False? Wherever there are people, you will find stories of monsters. Why do we need them?"⁹⁴ At the bottom we see a piece of paper with the phrase "once upon a time" written on it. As the starting point of fairy tales, this particular phrase connects the topic of monstrosity with children's books. The dark colours of the page, the skulls and the ghostlike figures collaged therein have the potential to evoke uncanniness, thus creating a feeling similar to Lynda's anxiety in the process of reading fairy tales. Therefore, the formal elements of the collage arrangement evoke once again a childish mode of experiencing the graphic memoir that allows for the transformation of female monstrosity towards the creation of the protagonist's imaginative return to the maternal womb.

To explain how the arrangement (fig. 2-5) introduces a representation of the maternal womb, it is useful to turn to Freud's definition of the uncanny. My reference to the uncanny and to Freud, Lacan and Rank's views on maternal monstrosity will allow us to demonstrate how Barry's second graphic memoir repeats and ultimately undoes the monstrosity that the maternal vagina has been invested with in the aforementioned psychoanalytical fathers' texts. While the representation of the maternal body in the page above introduces it as monstrous and terrifying, I will proceed to explain how it is transformed through Barry's artistic vision into a positive creative force.

⁹³ Barry, *What It Is*, 60.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 61.



Fig. 2-5: Lynda Barry, p. 60, *What It Is* (Drawn and Quarterly, 2009). Copyright © 2009 by Lynda Barry. All Rights Reserved. Used with permission.

According to Freud, the “subject of the uncanny is ... undoubtedly related to what is frightening – to what arouses dread and horror.”⁹⁵ He further explains that uncanny fear “leads back to what is known, old and familiar.”⁹⁶ He associates the emergence of uncanny feelings with “the idea of being buried alive ... a transformation of another phantasy which originally had nothing terrifying about it at all ... [that] of intra-uterine experience.”⁹⁷ For the aforementioned effect to emerge, Freud explains that the boundaries between imagination and reality collapse:

Something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or ... a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes ... The infantile element in this ... is the over-accentuation of psychological reality in comparison with material reality – a feature closely aligned to the belief of the omnipotence of thoughts.⁹⁸

The infantile element that Freud describes above is precisely the dominance of imagination and creativity over adult reason embodied in the childish perspective that *What It Is* has the potential to evoke in readers. If, for the uncanny feeling to appear, a person needs to conflate the imaginary with the real and to invest a symbol with the actual dimensions of the element it stands for, then the process of its emergence becomes similar to that of transitional phenomena in playing. Additionally, if the uncanny is associated with the return to the maternal uterus, the *unheimlich* place that was the “former *Heim* [home] of all human beings,” then, like the transitional object, it has the potential to denote the continuity between the mother and the child. Freud describes the above phenomenon, as well as the sight of female genitals, as terrifying.⁹⁹ Elsewhere, the psychoanalyst describes female sexuality as “a dark continent for psychology.”¹⁰⁰

Taking up Freud’s notion of spatial darkness, feminist critics have noted the formulation of the maternal vagina as a dark grotesque cave.¹⁰¹ For example, Rebecca Munford discusses the menstruating heroine in Gothic narratives and notes that the

⁹⁵ Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny,” in *Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. James Strachey, ed. Neil Hertz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 193.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁹⁷ Freud, “The Uncanny,” 220.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 221. The term *Unheimlich* is the German word included in Freud’s original text. Its word-to-word translation in English is “unhomely” and, as the translator explains, “uncanny” is not an exact equivalent. I am referring to the German term to underline the significance of the primary “home” that is associated with the maternal womb, according to Freud.

⁹⁹ See Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 273-274.

¹⁰⁰ Freud, *An Autobiographical Study*, 212.

¹⁰¹ See for example Mary Russo, “Introduction,” in *Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, Modernity* (Abington: Routledge, 1994, 2009), 2-3; and Rebecca Munford, “Blood, Laughter and the Medusa: The Gothic Heroine as a Menstrual Monster,” in *Menstruation: A Cultural History*, eds. Andrew Shail and Gillian Howie (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005), 267-268.

maternal womb in such stories is associated with “dark, dank, visceral spaces beneath/outside” the paternal secure tower, which entail dangers as “they represent an unknown territory.”¹⁰² Munford proceeds to explain that the maternal womb as a dark cave is a space of patriarchal colonisation to be penetrated and examined by male authorities who “attempt to categorize and circumscribe both [the female] body and [the female] narrative.”¹⁰³ If we perceive the intrauterine return as an uncanny process and the space of the maternal womb as the dark, frightening territory of the unknown, then Barry’s collage (fig. 2-5) visually recreates an artistic version of the maternal cave. By so doing it reproduces the patriarchal formation of the maternal body, which, as I proceed to explain, it ultimately subverts. Apart from the darkness in the image, the creatures that exist therein and the questions about the monsters foreground the connection between the monstrous cave and the terrifying maternal uterus.

Otto Rank discusses the infantile anxiety after the separation with the mother and the desire for a return to the womb, where the infant had “an experience of extreme pleasure.”¹⁰⁴ Nevertheless, he proceeds to point out that this desire is repeated during adulthood in neurotic patients as a form of sexual impotence because it is translated into castration anxiety. He explains that during intercourse the male patient becomes impotent because he perceives the vagina to bear teeth and to have the power to castrate his phallus.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, he refers to the existence of the vaginal castrating monster’s existence in children’s fairy tales like the “The Little Red-Cap” and “Hansel and Gretel,” where the primal mother is portrayed “as an animal which swallows the children and shows how the post-natal situation of bodily need (hunger) is continually replaced by new representations of the womb and its unstinting supply of food.”¹⁰⁶ As Shuli Barzilai explains, Jacques Lacan also describes the primal mother of infantile fantasy as a devouring monster that threatens to consume the child. For Lacan, “before any battering, splitting, cleavage takes place ... the subject is barred behind the deathly dentata, the tooth-studded mouth of the mother,” who is therefore introduced as a terrifying monster.¹⁰⁷ She becomes

¹⁰² Munford, “Blood, Laughter and the Medusa,” 265.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 268.

¹⁰⁴ See Rank, *The Trauma of Birth*, 48-49.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 109. For a discussion on devouring maternal monsters in Grimms’ fairy tales, see Tatar, *The Hard Facts of Grimms’ Fairy Tales*, 139-145.

¹⁰⁷ Barzilai, *Lacan and the Matter of Origins*, 214.

someone who continually seeks that which she will suck in and devour ... who possibly appears before the child like an open mouth or muzzle ... and who, in another image of unappeasable hunger resembles the petrifying Gorgon ... [The] maternal mouth [therefore correlates] with the phantom counterpart of the life-giving womb.¹⁰⁸

The Lacanian description of the primal mother as a Gorgonic monster will facilitate our understanding of maternal monstrosity in *What It Is*.¹⁰⁹ The collage arrangement that introduces the dark maternal cave also includes a large octopus, or rather a cephalopod, in central position, surrounded by smaller but similarly shaped creatures.¹¹⁰ Within the large cephalopod a smaller one is reproduced and is surrounded by small human eyes looking back at readers as well as towards other directions. On its right side we see another ghostly figure holding a baby, and on its left side slightly towards the bottom of the page we can identify two more monstrous forms with smaller baby-like beings attached to their bodies. If the maternal womb is seen in psychoanalysis as a dark uncanny space that is also compared to devouring monsters with sharp teeth, who suck in and eat up infants, then the cephalopod and the other creatures embody precisely this maternal monster. While we do not see the mouth of the large cephalopod, if we pay attention to the figure that holds the baby, we can observe its open mouth and the sharp teeth that embody precisely the terrifying *vagina dentata* of the primal mother and the infantile fantasy of intrauterine return as described by Freud, Rank and Lacan.

Literary critics explain that the cephalopod can also be used as an artistic symbol of the maternal womb. For example, Gerard Cohen-Vrignaud provides a lucid description of the representation of female sexuality and agency in the figure of the cephalopod spanning from Victor Hugo's *Toilers of the Sea*, published in 1866, to Ian Fleming's James Bond villain, the Octopussy. He describes the "cephalopodian visualization of female anatomy" and notes that the cephalopod is a metaphorical construction of the *vagina dentata*.¹¹¹ He points out that "the bewildering combination of tentacles, sanction cups and

¹⁰⁸ Barzilai, *Lacan and the Matter of Origins*, 218. I am including Barzilai's English translations of Lacan's account of the monstrous mother, given originally in French in *Seminar IV* and *Seminar XVII*.

¹⁰⁹ In relation to the all-devouring primal mother in infantile fantasies see also Barbara Creed, "Medusa's Head: The Vagina Dentata and Freudian Theory," in *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), 109.

¹¹⁰ I am using the term cephalopod because it is a generic term used by Barry to name the octopus-like creatures that exist in her graphic memoirs.

¹¹¹ Gerard Cohen-Vrignaud, "On Octopussies, or the Anatomy of Female Power," *Differences* 25, no. 1 (2012): 33-34, <http://differences.dukejournals.org/content/23/1/32.full.pdf+html>.

orifice subtly triggers the immemorial confusion of men faced with a female anatomy.”¹¹² Cohen-Vrignaud introduces the parallelism between the cephalopod and female genitalia in relation to the threatening and destructive potential of emancipated female sexuality in patriarchal contexts. Nevertheless, via his observation we can suggest that the cephalopod in *What It Is* is an artistic metaphorical equivalent of the monstrous maternal uterus. The association of the maternal with the monstrous also takes place in the autobiographical section that follows and reintroduces the significance of play in relation to the survival beyond maternal abuse.

Within this autobiographical section, the narrator describes the Gorgon, who, as Lacan and Freud explain, is also associated with the terrifying toothed vagina.¹¹³ In the following section, I examine Barry’s incorporation of Caravaggio’s painting of the Medusa/Gorgon in Lynda’s narrative to show how it visually constructs the mother/infant bond, as well as how it is reimagined in *What It Is* via Barry’s childish artistic vision towards the visual embodiment of the autobiographical avatar beyond the separation from the maternal body. Hence, I will show how the pre-symbolic return to the womb that Barry’s Blakean elements reflect reaches its peak in her second graphic memoir’s fairy tale element and in its reconfiguration of maternal monstrosity. Preserving the childish perspective that allows the conflation of the fictional with the real and the self with the (m)other will show how the autobiographical subject is constructed beyond insidious trauma and how the *vagina dentata* is transformed into the place of security and bliss that it initially was, thus repairing Lynda’s injuries.

The narrator in *What It is* explains that she became familiar with the female monster as it was constructed in the 1964 British horror film *The Gorgon* at the age of eight years old.¹¹⁴ Peter Hutchings notes that in the film “the figure of the woman [is] significantly split ... into two characters, Carla, the romantic lead, and the Gorgon.”¹¹⁵ Additionally, he observes that *The Gorgon* is representative of the shift that took place in the mid-1960s “with the collapse of certain patriarchal structures” away from the preoccupation with masculinity and towards a broader exploration of “sexuality and gender

¹¹² Cohen-Vrignaud, “On Octopussies, or the Anatomy of Female Power,” 41.

¹¹³ For Freud’s description of the Medusa as an artistic symbolism of the female genitals, see Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 273-274.

¹¹⁴ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 65.

¹¹⁵ Peter Hutchings, “1956-1964: Hammer and Other Horrors,” *Hammer and Beyond: The British Horror Film* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1993), 83.

roles.”¹¹⁶ The film therefore reproduces the social anxiety caused by the gradual emancipation of women during this particular period by visualising the monstrous female threat against the male hero through the figure of the Gorgon.



Fig. 2-6: Lynda Barry, p. 65, *What It Is* (Drawn and Quarterly, 2009). Copyright © 2009 by Lynda Barry. All Rights Reserved. Used with permission.

¹¹⁶ Hutchings, *Hammer and Beyond*, 54, 83.



Fig. 2-7: Lynda Barry, p. 66, *What It Is* (Drawn and Quarterly, 2009). Copyright © 2009 by Lynda Barry. All Rights Reserved. Used with permission.

In Barry's graphic memoir, instead of being presented with a still image from the film, we come across Caravaggio's version of the Medusa (fig. 2-6). Barry's choice is noteworthy because, apart from reproducing Blake's stylistics in the low-cultural medium of comics and on yellow legal paper, the pastiche arrangement on this particular page also introduces a high-artistic painting in the place of a low-art film in constructing Lynda's life narrative, and in so doing, it alludes to two examples of how maternal monstrosity is formulated via cultural discourses. Caravaggio's painting is preserved at the Uffizi gallery in Florence.¹¹⁷ As a museum piece over 400 years old, it is invested with the status of high art. However, Barry's mass-culture reproduction points once again to the fusion of categories and the artificiality of the divisions between high and low art, which is put in productive use for the formation of the autobiographical subject beyond insidious trauma and as conflated with the secure maternal body.

The choice of Caravaggio's painting is important because the process of its creation introduces Medusa as a gender-ambiguous facially cross-dressed figure, similar to Blake's characters in the divine state and Barry's child autobiographical avatar. In the original, Caravaggio's own facial characteristics are represented in the female monster's face. As Mieke Bal explains, Caravaggio used the reflection of his own face in a mirror and based the face of the Medusa on that.¹¹⁸ By painting a female monster with male facial characteristics, he created a visual representation that is also gender-ambiguous. Facial features once again become forms of disguise and marks of undecidability. Hence, apart from representing the *vagina dentata*, Caravaggio's Medusa also embodies a pre-symbolic gender undecidability that points to the conflation between the mother and the infant.¹¹⁹

Graham L. Hammill notes that "sex is central in Caravaggio's aesthetic and historical project insofar as it doesn't signify" and it is not "contained nor reduced by the

¹¹⁷ Mieke Bal, "Space, Inc.," in *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 135.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 135.

¹¹⁹ For a discussion on the gender ambiguity of Caravaggio's Medusa and the infantile fantasies of the all-devouring mother see Laurie Schneider, "Donatello and Caravaggio: The Iconography of Decapitation," *American Imago* 33, no.1 (1976): 76-91,

<http://pao.chadwyck.co.uk/articles/displayDirectPdf.do?pageRange=&format=blackandwhite&id=1011-1976-033-01-000003&header=SCHNEIDER%2C+LAURIE%2C%0D%0A%09%3Cbi%3EDonatello+and+Caravaggio%3A+The+Inconography+of+Decapitation%3C%2Fbi%3E%2C+%0D%0A%09American+Imago%2C+%0D%0A%0933%3A1+%281976%3ASpring%29+%0D%0A%09p.76>

civilizing process's organization of sexual difference."¹²⁰ According to Hammill, the painter's poses in his paintings, including that of the Medusa, embody "a demand that resists easy recognition and conscription by a group who wants to read them as transmitting its sense of identity and value."¹²¹ Caravaggio's Medusa represents the conflation between the painter's reflection and the radical other of female maternal monstrosity. Additionally, it raises a significant question: Who is the creator and who is the creation? Is it the painter who created the maternal monster or the other way around? If the Medusa stands for the maternal vagina, and if the male artist's facial characteristics are embodied in his painting of the monster, then the undecidability that emerges with regards to the self/other creator/creation embodies precisely yet another symbolic imaginary intrauterine return.

By using the mirror to paint the monster, Caravaggio also evokes the myth of the Medusa, where the particular object is significant as it leads to the monster's death.¹²² Medusa was a female monster whose gaze turned men into stone. Perseus was asked to bring her head to Polydektes as a gift, thus he needed to find a way to kill her by avoiding her gaze, which would turn him into stone.¹²³ Gods warned him that the only way he would be able to murder her was by deceiving her into looking at her own reflection in a mirror.¹²⁴ At the end, Perseus managed to find a way to turn her gaze against herself, and thus paralyse and decapitate her. In using the mirror to create the painting of the lethal (m)other, Caravaggio repeats the myth but instead reunites with rather than destroys the maternal monster.

The mythical story also reappears in the artist's painting of the Medusa on a wooden shield. According to the mythical narrative, after "Perseus slew [the monster] ... Athena embossed her shield with [her] head" to terrify male spectators, as Barbara Creed explains.¹²⁵ Creed argues that by doing so, Athena aimed at striking "terror into the hearts of men as well as reminding them of their symbolic debt to the imaginary castrating

¹²⁰ Graham L. Hammill, "History and the Flesh: Caravaggio's Queer Aesthetic," in *Sexuality and Form: Caravaggio, Marlowe, and Beacon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 63- 66.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹²² Stephen R. Wilk, "The Myth of Perseus and Medusa," in *Medusa: Solving the Mystery of the Gorgon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 21. Wilk also provides a detailed analysis of the variations of the myth.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ Wilk, *Medusa: Solving the Mystery of the Gorgon*, 21.

¹²⁵ Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine*, 166.

mother.”¹²⁶ Creed’s discussion underlines the terrifying power of the maternal monster against male spectators but does not refer to how its protective aspect can be used towards feminist pleasurable ends and to what happens when a woman or a girl is in the place of the spectator. This is precisely what Lynda’s interaction with the Medusa demonstrates in *What It Is*. By incorporating Caravaggio’s painting on the round shield, Barry’s collage preserves its protective element. To achieve the transformation of the monster into a protector, the child protagonist enters once again a process of creative playful interaction with the film and, in the context of the graphic memoir, with the high-artistic painting.

The narrator explains that she sat through the film twice when she was eight years old because the first time the monster was decapitated she looked away.¹²⁷ Once again, the visual arrangement (fig. 2-6) reproduces Blakean formal characteristics so as to visually construct the conflation between reality and Lynda’s imagination. The autobiographical avatar here looks at Medusa’s decapitation. She is in the middle of the page, and on the top right side we see Caravaggio’s monster. At the bottom we come across a version of the dead monster, infiltrated via Barry’s childish artistic vision. Her eyes are closed and no longer threatening to return the gaze to her spectators. The decapitated monster is painted in a blue colour, thus alluding back to the previous collage arrangement (fig. 2-5) and its blue cephalopods and other creatures embodying different versions of maternal monsters. The blood that flows from Medusa’s neck is transformed into a decorative flame demarcating, as Mitchell explains, a continuous movement and imaginative transformation. Thus, like Athena’s use of Medusa’s head on her shield, Lynda’s interaction with the monster does not end with her death. Contrarily, it is precisely after facing the terrifying event of decapitation that Lynda is able to constructively use the Medusa in her creative play with her.

In her discussion of the monstrous feminine in horror films, Barbara Creed explains that by turning the gaze away from terrifying moments “the spectator is able momentarily to withdraw identification from the image on the screen in order to reconstruct the boundary between self and the screen and reconstitute the self that is

¹²⁶ Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine*, 166. Freud also describes the castration threat that Medusa’s head evokes in male spectators but proceeds to explain that being turned into stone denotes stiffness and therefore symbolises erection, hence establishing the male spectator’s phallic ownership. His discussion does not refer to women spectators or to children’s anxiety with regards to the primal mother. See Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 273-274.

¹²⁷ Barry, *What It Is*, 65.

threatened with disintegration.”¹²⁸ Creed further argues that female spectators’ possible identification with the monster depends on the extent to which they “wish to be terrified and/or terrify.”¹²⁹ She proceeds to explain that because female monstrosity has been created by male discourses, a female spectator’s potential identification with her in the context of the horror movie cannot provide adequate information that could demonstrate a feminist approach to it.¹³⁰ However, Lynda’s interaction with the Gorgon introduces precisely what Creed describes as an impossibility. The Gorgon in Barry’s graphic memoir no longer represents the castrating mother. She becomes a protective creature that allows Lynda to cope with her mother’s abusive behaviour. In *What It Is* the *vagina dentata* is revised and the original home ultimately becomes once again a space of security. In contrast, the only monstrous aspect of the mother figure is her abusive hostile behaviour towards her. One of the ways the young autobiographical avatar tries to cope with it is via her imaginative play with the maternal monster.

The narrator remembers that the monster that scared her the most during her childhood was the Gorgon. “I hated the thought of her,” she notes, “but she was often in my mind.”¹³¹ *What It Is* therefore demonstrates how the girl protagonist responds to the myth of the female monster as it proceeds to describe a playing process in which the Medusa is also involved. As in her reading of fairy tales, after learning about her, Lynda brings the Gorgon to life via her imagination and makes her a participant in her everyday playing processes. The fictional realm of the myth is therefore fused with the reality of the graphic memoir towards reparative ends. The narrator remembers:

I made plans for how to defend myself from her [;] I’d scare myself with the thought of seeing her behind me in the mirror – of accidentally looking at her face. She paralyzes you. You have to cut off her head without looking at her face. Sometimes I managed – and some other times she got me. I’d practice being paralyzed, and turned into stone.¹³²

If we accept Geigh and Tatar’s views with regards to children who identify abusive parents with fairy tale monsters, then it could be suggested that in being familiarised with the Gorgon, Lynda also gains an opportunity to make the same identification. Thus,

¹²⁸ Barbara Creed, “Horror and the Monstrous Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection,” *Screen* 27, no.1 (1986): 65,

<http://screen.oxfordjournals.org/content/27/1/44.full.pdf+html?searchid=1&hits=10&resourcetype=HWCIT&maxtoshow=&RESULTFORMAT=&FIRSTINDEX=0&fulltext=monstrous%20feminine%20creed>.

¹²⁹ Creed, *Monstrous Feminine*, 155.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Barry, *What It Is*, 61.

¹³² Ibid..

by occasionally succeeding in killing the terrifying monster, she is also able to cope with abuse and survive in the problematic domestic sphere in the hopes of being eventually saved too.

The identification of maternal abuse with female monstrosity in *What It Is* escalates in two consecutive pages of the graphic memoir (fig. 2-6 and fig. 2-7). The first page depicts Lynda in a cinema looking at the Medusa. If we observe the next one closely, we will notice that the distribution of characters is very similar to the previous. Lynda is situated in the same position but in her home. At the bottom of the page, the previously dead beheaded Medusa vanishes; she is transformed into a ghost and, ultimately, into the mother figure. The female monster is therefore replaced with a visual representation of the mother. The curls on her head and her open mouth, paralleled with her angry look and eyeglasses, introduce her as frighteningly monstrous like the Medusa. Additionally, her monologue causes reactions on Lynda's behalf similar to those that the mythical monster evokes in her spectators. Since her gaze turns them into stones, spectators try to avoid it at all costs. Similarly, the mother's order to her daughter to look at her when she talks suggests that the protagonist averts her gaze. The word "slap" and Lynda holding her red cheek denote physical abuse in addition to the verbal one. At the end, the protagonist's mother tells her to move, and the word, in capital letters and underlined, points to Lynda's stillness in front of her. Like the male spectators of the Medusa, Barry's autobiographical avatar freezes at the sight of the maternal monster.

The adult narrator's comments further illustrate the mother/monster association. As she explains,

That I had a very Gorgon-like mother never occurred to me, and if it had, I would have been lost. Did the Gorgon help me love my mother? I think she helped me very much. We never need certain monsters more than when we are children. And a furious woman with terrifying eyes and snakes for hair was the perfect monster for me.¹³³

By introducing the similarities between the abusive mother and the Medusa, Barry's graphic memoir underscores the reparative aspect of Lynda's creative play with the monster. In addition, it provides answers to the questions that address readers (fig. 2-5) and that concern the necessity of monsters. It explains that they emerge to help children cope with abusive reality. By repeating maternal estrangement and abuse in her interaction with

¹³³ Barry, *What it Is*, 66.

the female monster, Lynda is able to survive within the problematic familial domain. The mother/monster conflation that *What It Is* performs in its collage arrangements and in the autobiographical narrative evokes infantile anxieties about the all-devouring *vagina dentata* as it also mediates children's identification of adults with the evil monsters they find in myths and fairy tales.

For the processes described above to take place, the childish perspective is essential because it conflates distinct categories and creates the self/(m)other bond via transitional objects and playing. Indeed, Melanie Klein notes that

The child's fear of being devoured, or cut up, or torn to pieces, or its terror of being surrounded and pursued by menacing figures, [is] a regular component of its mental life; and we know that the man-eating wolf, the fire-sweeping dragon, and all the evil monsters out of myths and fairy-stories flourish and exert their unconscious influence in the phantasy of each individual child, and it feels itself persecuted and threatened by those evil shapes ... I have no doubt from my own analytic observations that the real objects behind those imaginary, terrifying figures are the child's own parents, and that those dreadful shapes in some way or other reflect the features of its father and mother, however distorted and phantastic the resemblance might be.¹³⁴

Children's projection of parental characteristics on monsters that appear in fairy tales and myths can be used towards reparative ends, as *What It Is* demonstrates. In her creative play and her repetition of maternal separation and violence, Lynda is able to cope with the actual abuse she suffers. The monstrous *vagina dentata* – the Gorgon and the cephalopod – becomes, therefore, a coping mechanism both in her childhood play and in her adulthood artistic creativity, as I will proceed to explain.

The cephalopod and the Gorgon, two different variations of the maternal monster, are revised in *What It Is* and *One! Hundred! Demons!* to become protective shields for Lynda, who is ultimately restored in the pre-symbolic space of security, the maternal uterus. The association between the cephalopod and the Medusa does not lie only in their embodiment of different versions of the maternal genitals. Critics have also noted that the Medusa's terrifying appearance derived from cephalopodian looks. In Barry's graphic memoirs, and specifically in *What It Is*, the association between the two monsters is foreshadowed via the existence of multiple eyes looking at readers on the terrifying dark cephalopod's body (fig. 2-5), thereby evoking the Medusa's terrifying lethal gaze. As Frederick Elworthy explains, the Gorgon myth appeared mostly at locations near the sea

¹³⁴ Klein, *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works*, 249.

and with abundant cephalopods nearby; hence, he suggests, the Medusa's head is an artistic terrifying version of the creature.¹³⁵

This assumption is further discussed by Stephen Wilk. Apart from the similarities in appearance between Medusa's snake hair and an octopus' legs, as well as their terrifying eyes, he also refers to the ability of the octopus to escape from danger by ejecting ink. As he points out, "the octopus can secrete an inky fluid, which not only obscures vision, but also saturates the surrounding water with its scent, further confusing the predator about the location of the octopus. In the confusion created by the ink cloud, the octopus escapes."¹³⁶ In the former case, the cephalopod is able to escape by blurring water as the ink it ejects also disables the sight of its predators. Similarly, Medusa's gaze prevents those who want to kill her from doing so by turning them into stone, thus allowing her escape. Likewise, Barry's childish artistic gaze at the female monster is performed in her graphic memoirs through her use of the cephalopodian weapon, ink, which allows for the autobiographical avatar's imaginative return to the womb and her escape from maternal violence.¹³⁷ The cephalopod and the Medusa are seen from a feminist perspective that undermines their deadly dimensions and subverts psychoanalytic and mythical constructions of female monstrosity. Thus, Barry's vision introduces what Pollock describes as the "differencing" of Western cultural formations of female monstrosity in her adaptation of Blake, Caravaggio and Grimms' traditions.

This transformation and its centrality in Barry's work is shown by the repetitive occurrence of her emblematic cephalopod on almost every page of both *One! Hundred! Demons!* and *What It Is*, either in central position or in a more marginal place.¹³⁸ Apart from aiding her as a child to recover from maternal abuse, the Gorgon/cephalopod emerges

¹³⁵ Frederick T. Elworthy, "A Solution of the Gorgon Myth," *Folklore* 14, no.3 (1903):213-215, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1254169>.

¹³⁶ Wilk, *Medusa*, 103.

¹³⁷ The motif of the *vagina dentata* in relation to the mother/daughter relationship is also addressed in "The Aswang" in *One! Hundred! Demons!* where the female dog with sharp teeth who devours children is the Filipino equivalent of the Medusa. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine the Filipino myth, the recurrence of female monstrosity demonstrates Barry's preoccupation with the maternal in relation to the monstrous. See Barry, *One! Hundred! Demons!*, 86-97. Melinda de Jesús briefly describes the Aswang myth and points out that the monster kills unborn infants while they are in their mothers' wombs by eating up their livers. However, she does not refer to the Aswang's association with the maternal *vagina dentata*, thus failing to demonstrate the parallels between the monster and the mother in Barry's graphic memoir. See de Jesús, "Of Monsters and Mothers," 7. For an analysis of the Asian mythical female monsters and the Aswang as versions of the *vagina dentata* see Kenneth Paul Tan, "Pontianacs, Ghosts and the Possessed: Female Monstrosity and National Anxiety in Singapore Cinema," *Asian Studies Review* 34, no. 2 (2010): 151-170, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/10357821003802037>.

¹³⁸ See for example, Barry, *One! Hundred! Demons!*, 148.

as a creative muse for the autobiographical avatar too. Its presence escalates in the final pages of her second book where the narrator describes her creative block, hence her inability to play as an adult. It is precisely at this point that the cephalopod becomes a guiding force that helps Lynda repair it.

As she explains, in the process of artistic production the negative thoughts that hindered her creativity were questions about the quality and the worthiness of her work.¹³⁹ The moment when Lynda starts thinking to force her creativity to be re-stimulated to produce good enough drawings, she starts reacting as an adult and is led to failure.¹⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the page reproduced below (fig. 2-8) shows precisely the answer to the question about what is missing from her creative process: her reading of fairy tales. In her struggle to find out what causes her creative block, Lynda is sitting on a pile of books covering psychoanalysis, ancient Greek mythology, religion and literature but the book that she holds is, once again, that of Grimms' tales. While the pile beneath her demonstrates the innumerable influences that shape her work, thus reflecting Barthe's notion of intertextuality as a web of intractable previous texts, Grimms' stories, Greek mythology and Blake's illuminated manuscripts take up a top place as influential for her work. This is what I have also demonstrated throughout this chapter. Simultaneously, I have explained how those influences are reworked towards the autobiographical subject's move beyond insidious trauma, and how they repair the wound caused by maternal separation and the injury of female castration. Barry's pastiche arrangements demand, as they simultaneously evoke, a childish, playful mode of interaction with her texts that will introduce the solution to her creative block and her reconnection with the mother.

¹³⁹ Barry, *What It Is*, 130.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 132.



Fig. 2-8: Lynda Barry, p. 132, *What It Is* (Drawn and Quarterly, 2009). Copyright © 2009 by Lynda Barry. All Rights Reserved. Used with permission.

As the narrator points out (fig. 2-8), the riddle of what is missing from her approach to artistic production, and what causes her artistic block, could not be solved by thinking her way out of it. “If anything,” she notes, “just the opposite was true.”¹⁴¹ By reading a fairy tale Lynda starts remembering what allows creative play and artistic production. The process of un-thinking and returning to an infantile and childish approach to art is precisely what allows the stimulation of imagination and creativity and the solution to writer’s block. It is also the process that allows the imaginative reunion with the mother and that transforms the terrifying return into the *vagina dentata* into a pleasurable experience. This is implied by the cephalopod’s depiction at the top right side of the page. It fits into a square box and holds safely in its tentacles a baby monkey who is peacefully sleeping in an embryonic position, thus visually embodying Barry’s vision of the maternal womb. The negative thoughts embodied in the ghostlike figures that prevent Lynda from her creative play note that the protagonist is “getting closer” to the solution of the riddle.¹⁴² If we keep in mind that artistic creation and playing repeat the mother/infant separation, then the page described above shows precisely Barry’s final repetitions that foreground the achievement of the mother/infant pair’s reunion.

A few pages into the narrative (fig. 2-9) the answer to the riddle about the cause of Lynda’s creative block is explicitly stated in the graphic memoir’s visual/verbal combination. The narrator explains: “That strange floating feeling of being there and not being there came back ... To be able to stand not knowing long enough to let something alive take shape! Without the two questions so much is possible. To all the kids who quit drawing... come back!”¹⁴³ The narrator’s comment takes us back to her previous descriptions of how we can put “certain uncertainties into certain form” (fig. 2-4). The unknown and the uncertain, the intrauterine, pre-symbolic experience is gradually formulated via a childish artistic vision. Indeed, Lynda explains that for creative play to take place, one must stop consciously thinking of the quality of his/her work and let him/herself free. If creativity and play are associated with transitional objects and phenomena in which the mother/infant continuation exists in infants’ interaction with them, then it could be argued that the “floating feeling of being there and not being there,” the forgotten conflation between the self and the (m)other, is precisely what is achieved through and allows artistic creativity. Like the sleeping monkey (fig. 2-8), Lynda as an

¹⁴¹ Barry, *What It Is*, 132.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

adult is also transported back into the maternal womb and the infantile perception of the self/other conflation. Thus, the unknown comes to gain form. Being held securely in the cephalopod's tentacles, the autobiographical avatar is guided towards working through and ultimately breaking her artistic block. The text that Lynda draws – “abracada[bra]” – alludes to the magical element of the process, its fairy tale aspect and the significance of childish imagination in the creative process that allows the reconnection with the mother.



Fig. 2-9: Lynda Barry, p. 135, *What It Is* (Drawn and Quarterly, 2009). Copyright © 2009 by Lynda Barry. All Rights Reserved. Used with permission.

Apart from the cephalopod, another creature that embodies Barry's feminist reconfiguration of the maternal monster is the Sea-Ma (fig. 2-10), who also exists in both of her graphic memoirs and is shown below. The Sea-Ma can be interpreted as a variation of the Medusa figure because of her open mouth, her distinct teeth and the multiple eyes that look towards different directions. She can be both a sea-monster but also a sea-mother, thus once again pointing to the conflation of the maternal with the monstrous, which is nevertheless transformed in Barry's texts into a non-threatening cartoony character. What is also noteworthy about the Sea-Ma is that like the cephalopod, who holds the monkey and Lynda in its tentacles, she is also painted with a small embryonic creature attached to her body, specifically to the stomach area. In addition, she also lives in the water, an element that, as Otto Rank explains, symbolises the amniotic fluid.¹⁴⁴ Hence, the creature becomes a different version of the maternal monster, which simultaneously visually embodies the return in the womb and the conflation of the self with the mother. In so doing, it performs a childish feminist repetition and reconfiguration of Caravaggio's terrifying Medusa in the same way that the cephalopod does. While in the canonical painting it was the monster's facial transvestism that embodied the mother/infant conflation, in Barry's version it is the infiltration of the monster through the artist's childish lens of interpretation that achieves the same end result.



Fig. 2-10: Lynda Barry, "Contents," p.1, *One! Hundred! Demons!* (Sasquatch Books, 2002). Copyright © 2002 by Lynda Barry. All Rights Reserved. Used with permission.

¹⁴⁴ Rank, *The Trauma of Birth*, 124.

In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Hélène Cixous explains that “you only have to look at Medusa straight on to see her. And she is not deadly. She is beautiful and she is laughing.”¹⁴⁵ It is this gaze at the maternal monster that Barry’s texts perform as they also revise patriarchal discursive formations of the terrifying *vagina dentata*. In so doing, they also underscore the idea that the mother/infant rupture is the cause of and can be repaired by creative processes embodied in transitional objects and phenomena, as well as in play and artistic creativity. Remembering and reconfiguring the female monster and Lynda’s experiences ultimately succeeds in formulating pre-symbolic wholeness and the reconnection with the lost mother. Simultaneously, Barry’s graphic memoirs intervene in the tradition of illustrated writing, reflected in Blake’s work and of the visual arts as shown via Caravaggio’s painting, to introduce a feminist take on the subject of intrauterine return and the mother/infant conflation by underlining the cultural value of the childish and the imperfect in artistic creation.

This chapter has shown how Lynda Barry’s pastiche arrangements perform feminist readings of artistic and psychoanalytical canonical fathers’ works, which concern the mother/infant unity and the representation of the maternal vagina. These arrangements aim towards embodying, via the bitextual verbal/visual element of her graphic memoirs, an imaginary return into the maternal womb, thus leading towards reparation. This chapter begun by demonstrating how the Blakean vision of the existence in Paradise becomes a metaphorical expression of the intrauterine experience and how this state is reflected in the formal elements of the canonical fathers’ works. By describing how Barry’s contemporary texts repeat and recreate those formal characteristics, I have argued that despite the maternal abuse and distance they narrate, they succeed in embodying the autobiographical subject beyond maternal separation. In the second part of the chapter, I focused on the escalation of the mother/daughter conflation via Barry’s feminist re-visioning of Caravaggio’s *Medusa*. I have explained how the incorporation of the maternal monster in Lynda’s childhood narrative is influenced by and evokes the brothers Grimm’s work in the field of children’s fairy tales, and I have pointed out how their influence is also associated with the repetition of the mother/infant relationship towards reparative ends.

By so doing, I am situating Barry’s graphic memoirs within the aforementioned male canonical traditions, which they revise to underscore the cultural significance of the

¹⁴⁵ Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1. no. 4 (1976): 885, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173239>.

amateurish, the imperfect and the childish in artistic creation, which has been rejected in Western canonical circles. In addition, I have shown, in agreement with Charles Hatfield, that reading Barry's graphic memoirs via the lens of children's literature and childhood psychoanalysis enriches and complicates the meanings we can derive from them rather than marginalising their status as autobiographical performances. In the following chapter, I will proceed to discuss the construction of the father/daughter pair in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*. I will examine how the graphic memoir undoes normative versions of the Oedipal complex to perform, via Bechdel's pastiche arrangements, the autobiographical subject's reunion with her distant father. In addition, I will show how it demonstrates the productive utilisation of the male homosexual literary and artistic canon for the formation of the lesbian daughter's narrative. In so doing, as it refuses to remain restricted within the matriarchal past, it also demonstrates how the present interaction with the paternal past can perform complex and denaturalised gender and sexuality performances towards the reconnection of the closeted homosexual father and the masculine lesbian daughter.

Chapter 3

Reclaiming the Father in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*: Wilde, Proust and the Reinvention of Lost Time

Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* introduces the third version of insidious trauma I investigate in this thesis by relating memories from the protagonist's childhood in her Gothic Revival family home, and the difficulties of growing up with a closeted homosexual, distant, and often violent father. While the mother is also present in Alison's development, *Fun Home* focuses on the protagonist's problematic relationship with her father, Bruce.¹ Given that it is the father's distancing and abusive behaviour that creates the autobiographical subject's trauma, I propose that the reparation can be achieved through the satisfaction of the daughter's Oedipal drive towards him. In this chapter, I demonstrate how Alison's Oedipal desire for the father is implied at the beginning of the narrative. Next, I examine how and why paternal abuse is remembered in relation to the Gothic Revival family home and the imposition of heteronormative gender appearances. I then proceed to investigate Bechdel's pastiche arrangements and her artistic decision to focus on fin-de-siècle and early-twentieth century male homosexual texts to reconfigure their meanings and the significance of her family home, and thus, to achieve reparation. I argue that she strategically engages with the aforementioned part of the canon because it will allow the construction of Bruce as a fin-de-siècle aesthete and of the spaces he inhabits, before and after his death, as performative works of art that visually embody his homosexuality. In addition, I explain how the conflation of Bruce's spatial artworks with the autobiographical subject's representations performs the reconnection of the father/daughter pair. I suggest that this bond is facilitated by Bechdel's use of Wildean Aestheticism and the Victorian language of flowers, and that it is performed throughout the graphic memoir. In the last section of this chapter, I examine the escalation of this Oedipal

¹ Bechdel's second graphic memoir, *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama*, was published in 2012. It focuses on the protagonist's adulthood and her relationships with her mother and her sexual partners. In addition, it refers to her mother's reactions to *Fun Home* and to the process of creation of her second graphic memoir. Both the subject matter and the drawing style are quite different from those of *Fun Home*. Hence, though I briefly refer to *Are You My Mother?* in this chapter and in the conclusion, I focus on Bechdel's first graphic memoir to provide a substantial analysis of the use of pastiche in the construction of the father/daughter bond.

dynamic in Bechdel's re-appropriation of Proustian transposition, metaphor and transubstantiation. I suggest that the reconfiguration of these influences visually embodies Bruce's secret homosexuality and Alison's female masculinity, and it constructs a denaturalised version of the Freudian Oedipal complex that demonstrates the lesbian daughter's erotic drive towards the parent of the opposite sex. In doing so, *Fun Home* introduces Freud's Oedipus theory as a part of the male canon that is strategically critiqued and undermined in contemporary women's graphic memoirs.

While critics have referred to the intertextual nature of *Fun Home*, they have failed to explain how Bechdel's reconfiguration of traditions by canonical homosexual fathers allows the construction of an Oedipal bond between Alison and Bruce. For example, Elizabeth El Refaie notes that the intertextual references in the text construct the love-hate relationship the protagonist had with her father.² However, she proceeds to note that, while identifying these references is not necessary in our understanding of the narrative, it can increase our ability to identify with the protagonist in our shared knowledge.³ Hillary Chute focuses on Bechdel's references to James Joyce's *Ulysses* and explains how they allow the construction of Alison's "creative apprenticeship to her father."⁴ Julia Watson refers to the "sexual kinship" of Bruce and Alison and the "wealth of Modernist literary references" in *Fun Home* that transform comics "into a form of multitextual pastiche."⁵ Additionally, she identifies Bechdel's refusal of "a coming out narrative of rebellion against paternal authority that opts for a pre-Oedipal fusing with the maternal."⁶ She notes that instead, "Bechdel bonds with her [father] and revises her childhood yearning for erotic connection into a recognition of how she is like him."⁷ In this chapter, I also argue that Alison bonds with her father in *Fun Home*. Nevertheless, I reject the view that her identification with Bruce excludes the potential for an erotic connection with him. I examine Bechdel, the lesbian artistic daughter's choice to interact with the canonical homosexual fathers' artistic and literary influences to build Alison's Oedipal relationship with her father in the graphic memoir. I demonstrate that even though Bechdel introduces her autobiographical subject's awareness of the lesbian literary heritage, it is through her reconfiguration of male homosexual texts that the reconnection of the autobiographical

² See El Refaie, *Autobiographical Comics*, 219.

³ Ibid.

⁴ See Chute, *Graphic Women*, 213-217.

⁵ Julia Watson, "Autographic Disclosures and Genealogies of Desire in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*," *Biography* 31, no.1 (Winter 2008): 28-32, <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/biography/v031/31.1.watson.html>.

⁶ Ibid., 42.

⁷ Ibid.

subject with the father figure is achieved.⁸ In addition, I show how Bechdel's pastiche parodically translates elements from high literature into the visual register of the low medium of comics, and how this transformation produces complex gender and sexuality performances that reject heteronormative hierarchies.

Masculine Daughters, Homosexual Fathers: Can the Oedipus Complex Take Place?

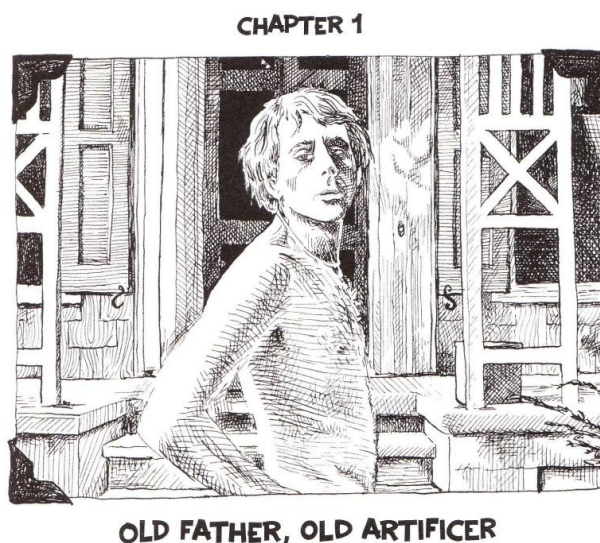


Fig. 3-1: Alison Bechdel, "Old Father, Old Artificer," p. 1, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (Jonathan Cape, 2006). Copyright © 2006 by Alison Bechdel. All Rights Reserved. Used with permission.

That *Fun Home* demonstrates Alison's perspective of her father as an erotic object is suggested by Bruce's depiction in the title page of the first chapter "Old Father, Old Artificer" reproduced above (fig. 3-1). Bruce is standing in front of the Bechdel family home. He is depicted from his waist up, with his right hand leaning on his waist, naked, returning an alluring gaze to the camera and looking more like an erotic spectacle rather than a paternal figure. Bechdel's crosshatch lining and the occasional omission of the outer line that shapes Bruce's body introduces him as bleeding into the house and conflating with it. The erotic perspective on Bruce is therefore constructed in the very beginning of the graphic memoir. The conflation between Bruce and the house is repeated throughout *Fun Home*. As I proceed to explain, while it initially hinders the father/daughter relationship, it is ultimately reconfigured through Bechdel's artistic vision to facilitate the erotic bond between him and Alison.

⁸ With regards to Alison's awareness of the lesbian canon, see Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 205-207, 217.

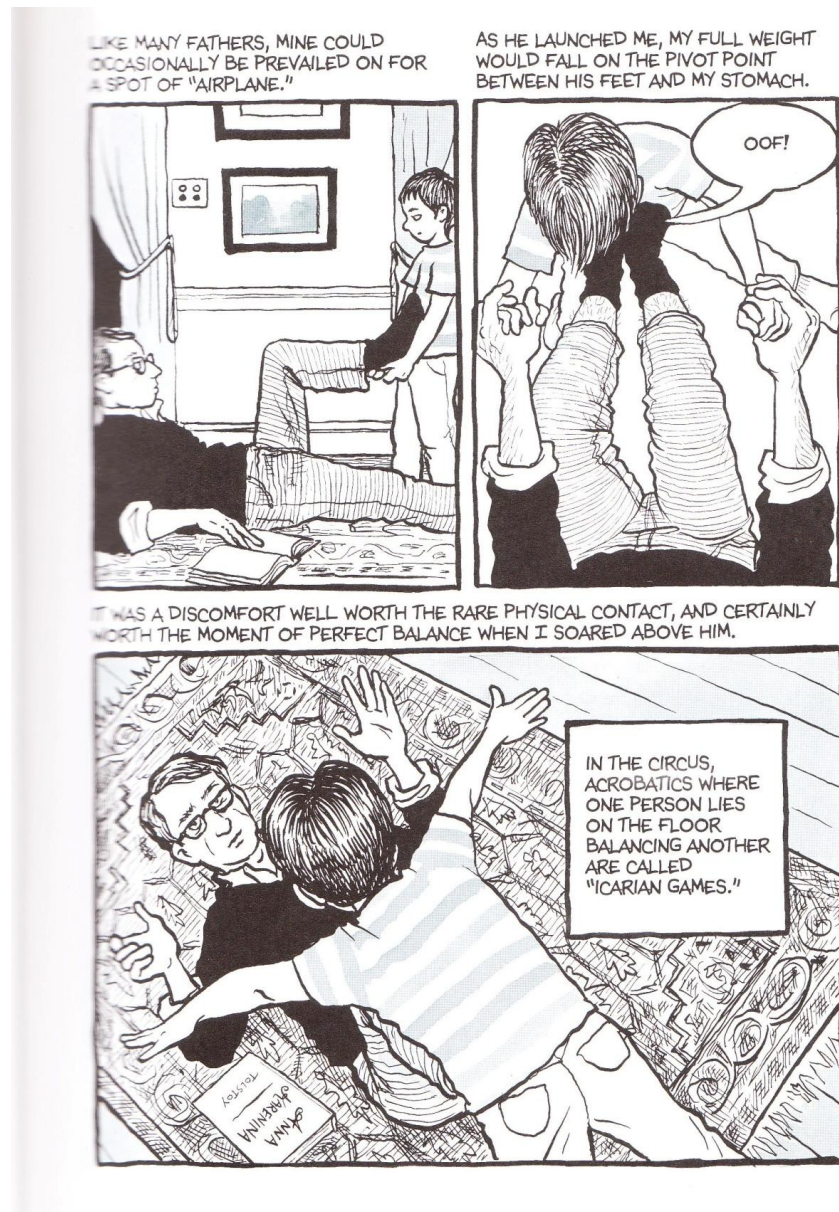


Fig. 3-2: Alison Bechdel, "Old Father, Old Artificer," p. 3, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (Jonathan Cape, 2006). Copyright © 2006 by Alison Bechdel. All Rights Reserved. Used with permission.

Apart from the title page of Chapter One, the significance of the house in parallel with the erotic dynamics between the father/daughter pair is also shown in the first pages of the autobiographical narrative. The panel above (fig. 3-2) shows Bruce's engagement in a game with Alison. He is lying on the floor, trying to balance the autobiographical avatar by pushing his feet against her stomach in their effort to play "airplane."⁹ The narrator notes that "it was a discomfort well worth the rare physical contact, and certainly worth the

⁹ Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 3.

moment of perfect balance when I soared above him.”¹⁰ Alison’s comments about the simultaneous pleasure and discomfort caused by the physical contact with her otherwise distant father, combined with their visual depiction, invest the incident with sexual overtones. Indeed, Julia Watson observes that “the erotics of the father-daughter relationship are visually suggested” in this particular scene.¹¹

Sigmund Freud’s analysis of children’s acrobatic games with family members further substantiates this view. Freud explains that “children are delighted by such experiences and never tire of asking to have them repeated.”¹² As he further notes,

Analytic research has shown that in addition to organ-pleasure there is another factor which contributes to the delight taken by children in acrobatic performances ... This other factor is a memory-image, often unconscious, of an observation of sexual intercourse, whether between human beings or animals.¹³

Hence, Alison’s depiction in a scene of acrobatic games with Bruce introduces the father/daughter pair through a sexual lens. During this process, Bruce is depicted lying on a Persian carpet on the floor of the Gothic Revival house and, once again, the way he is drawn conflates him with the background. However, the house here hinders the father/daughter intimacy. When Alison loses her balance and falls, their game stops rather abruptly, and the protagonist’s pleasure is interrupted because Bruce’s attention is caught by the dirt he spots on the carpet. “This rug is filthy,” he tells Alison, “go get the vacuum.”¹⁴ Alison’s response, “again!” demonstrates a repetitive pattern in Bruce’s obsessive preoccupation with the house, which results in creating a distance between the two. Furthermore, by lying on the floor throughout this incident, Bruce is constantly touching the surfaces of the house, in opposition to the “rare physical contact” he has with his daughter. Having established the daughter’s erotic perspective of the father figure and its disturbance by the latter’s preoccupation with the domestic space, I continue to discuss Freud’s theory on the Oedipal complex, which refers to children’s erotic drives towards their parents, to show how it is undone in Bechdel’s graphic memoir.

As I have briefly mentioned in the Introduction and in Chapter One, the Oedipal complex is a universal phenomenon that marks the first erotic desires of infants towards the

¹⁰ Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 3.

¹¹ Watson, “Autographic Disclosures and Genealogies,” 35.

¹² Sigmund Freud, “The Material and Sources of Dreams,” in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey, ed. James Strachey, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 375.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 4.

parent of the opposite sex and fixes their heterosexual object choices. Freud explains that for boys between the age of two and five, the “choice of an object [takes place] in conjunction with a corresponding attitude of rivalry and hostility towards the father.”¹⁵ This process recedes at the age of five, when the sexual impulses of children are repressed and enter a latency period.¹⁶ Elsewhere, Freud notes that “the outcome of the Oedipus attitude in a little girl may be an intensification of her identification with her mother (or the setting up of such an identification for the first time) – a result which will fix the child’s feminine character.”¹⁷ Apart from heterosexual orientation, therefore, the Oedipal complex also fixes masculine and feminine gender according to one’s biological sex. The daughter who goes through the regular Oedipal phase identifies with the mother. She gains a feminine character and a passive approach to, and desire for, the father.¹⁸

In Alison’s case, however, the identification with the mother that fixes the daughter’s femininity does not take place because she is visually embodied as a tomboy and a masculine woman.¹⁹ Hence, Alison’s Oedipal relation to her father becomes problematic. Freud explains that apart from the normal Oedipal complex, there are also deviations that lead to same-sex object choices. As he points out, “analysis very often shows that a little girl, after she has had to relinquish her father as a love-object, will bring her masculinity into prominence and identify herself with her father ... instead of with her mother.”²⁰ Identification with the father depends, according to Freud, “on whether the masculinity in [the girl’s] disposition ... is strong enough.”²¹ The masculine girl identifies with the father and desires the mother as an erotic object, emerging therefore as homosexual.²² As Barbara Creed notes, “Freud’s lesbian is a woman who desires to be a man ... [and] refuses to relinquish her pre-Oedipal phallic love for the mother.”²³ Even though Alison is a

¹⁵ Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 245.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 244.

¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, “The Ego and the Id,” in *The Ego and the Id and Other Works*, Vol. 19, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey, eds. James Strachey and Anna Freud, 2nd ed. (London: Vintage, 2001), 33.

¹⁸ The heteronormative process described by Freud is exaggeratedly played out in Gloeckner’s graphic memoirs and in Minnie’s sexualisation by, and sexual attachment to, the father figure. However, I do not refer to the Oedipal complex in detail in Chapter One because I focus on the daughter’s seduction and violation. I refer to it in more detail in this chapter because I want to show how the binary gender and sexuality divisions it produces are undone in Bechdel’s graphic memoir.

¹⁹ See, for example, her depictions in fig. 3-5 and fig. 3-11, which demonstrate this repetitive pattern from Alison’s childhood to her adulthood.

²⁰ Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, 32.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Barbara Creed, “Lesbian Bodies: Tribades, Tomboys and Tarts,” in *Sexy Bodies: The Strange Carnalities of Feminism*, eds. Elizabeth Grosz and Elspeth Probyn (London: Routledge, 1996), 94.

masculine lesbian, she is introduced in *Fun Home* in ways that mediate her Oedipal drive for the father. Her masculinity, therefore, becomes a means through which to erotically approach the homosexual Bruce by being similar to his objects of desire, the young men with whom he has secret affairs.²⁴

Monica Pearl explains that the protagonist does not identify with her mother, Helen, who represents heteronormative femininity in the text, since such an identification would result in a heterosexual object choice because Helen, like Bruce, desires men.²⁵ Apart from Alison's same-sex desire, however, *Fun Home* also introduces her desire for her father, which stems from their common love for masculine beauty. As the narrator points out, "between us lay a slender demilitarized zone – our shared reverence for masculine beauty. But I wanted muscles and tweed like my father wanted velvet and pearls – subjectively, for myself. The objects of our desire were different."²⁶ While Bruce's "reverence" of masculine beauty is associated with his homosexual object choice, Alison's is, as she points out, "subjective." She wants her own beauty to be masculine and, consequently, similar to that of her father's erotic objects.

Judith Halberstam explains that female masculinity, the masculinity that Alison's visual depictions embody, can be a basis through which to "explore a queer subject position that can successfully challenge hegemonic models of gender conformity."²⁷ Indeed, in this chapter, I perceive the autobiographical subject's masculinity as a factor that works towards undoing the Oedipal complexes that Freud describes and the divisions they prescribe. By so doing, I argue that it also allows the possibility for her reunion with her father. In her description of the Oedipal dynamic in *Fun Home*, Monica Pearl suggests that, like Oedipus who kills his rival parent and marries his mother, Alison's rival parent, Bruce, is also eventually killed, albeit at a time when the protagonist is far beyond the age when the Oedipal complex appears.²⁸ Indeed, only four months after Alison's announcement that she is a lesbian, her father dies, leaving open the space for her to claim

²⁴ Quite early in the first chapter the narrator explains that her father had sex with teenage boys. See Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 17. I am using the term "masculinity" to describe a gender representation constructed through bodily stylisation and clothing choices, one that causes gender confusion and detaches Alison from heteronormative notions of femininity.

²⁵ See Pearl, "Graphic Language," 295.

²⁶ Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 99.

²⁷ Judith Halberstam, "An Introduction to Female Masculinity: Masculinity without Men," in *Female Masculinity* (London: Duke University Press, 1998), 9.

²⁸ Pearl, "Graphic Language," 295.

the maternal love object.²⁹ In her following discussion, Pearl also points to the existence of both masculine and feminine dispositions in individuals to explain the processes of identification that take place for Alison.³⁰ She notes that

The reason the normal Oedipal process might not work for [her] is that the expected resolution on the Oedipus complex is the renunciation of the incestuous desire for the parent of the opposite sex and identification with the parent of the same sex. In this case Alison's identification is indeed not only with the parent of the same sex but with her opposite sex parent's disposition, not his desires.³¹

In this chapter, I argue that Alison's identification with Bruce's masculine dispositions does not prevent the demonstration of her Oedipal attachment to him, which challenges the Freudian binary model as it also undoes heteronormative gender and sexuality formations. Freud describes the "universal bisexuality of human beings," and notes that in "all of us throughout life, the libido normally oscillates between male and female objects."³² While he describes original bisexuality to justify the cases of inverted Oedipal complexes, which result in homosexual object choices, in this chapter I refer to it to introduce the possibility for the artistic performance of Alison's Oedipal reclaiming of her father despite her lesbianism. If we are all originally bisexual, then Alison can also desire her rival parent, whose rivalry does not remain restricted within the Oedipal dynamics.

In the following section, I describe in detail Bruce's distant and abusive stance towards his daughter, which repeats his Oedipal rivalry during her childhood, adolescence and young adulthood. Indeed, it becomes clear that it is with his paternal prohibitive authority in the family domain that he inflicts injuries on the autobiographical subject and turns her childhood into another example of insidious trauma. His desire to impose onto her a heteronormative feminine appearance constantly fails. Alison refuses to renounce her masculinity and the maternal love object, thus preserving the father/daughter antagonism. At the same time, however, she and her father are presented via an erotic lens (fig. 3-1 and fig. 3-2) and they become sexually conflated in the pages of *Fun Home* and through Bechdel's pastiche arrangements. Bruce's domain, the family home, is reconfigured towards the reparation of trauma that his injurious behaviour/authority causes. While it is initially presented as a cause for Bruce's distance, in the same way that

²⁹ See Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 59.

³⁰ Pearl, "Graphic Language," 295.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 294-295.

³² Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 157-158.

Alison's masculine appearance is, both the house and her masculinity eventually allow her Oedipal reconnection with him in the context of the graphic memoir.

Maintaining Perfection in the Gothic Revival House and the Bechdel Family

Bruce's violence against his children is usually caused by their failure to comply with his orders regarding the decoration and maintenance of order in the Gothic Revival family home and the preservation of certain appearances associated with heteronormative family life. For example, in the first chapter, one of Alison's brothers struggles, and eventually fails, to hold straight a huge Christmas tree so that his father can see its ideal position from afar. As a result, Bruce becomes enraged and starts hitting the boy while Alison runs to escape his anger.³³ Similarly, when he finds one of his decorative vases slightly out of place, he is depicted beating up Alison, who is only four years old, as the narrator explains that in their home "something vital was missing. An elasticity, a margin for error."³⁴ Bruce's obsession with maintaining the perfection of the house emerges therefore as a distancing factor in his relationship with his children, who find it incomprehensible and harmful.

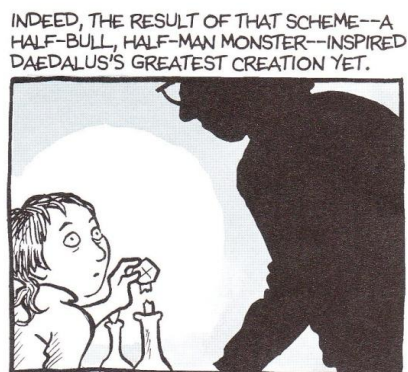


Fig. 3-3: Alison Bechdel, "Old Father, Old Artificer," panel 1, p. 6, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (Jonathan Cape, 2006). Copyright © 2006 by Alison Bechdel. All Rights Reserved. Used with permission.

In her description of paternal domestic violence, the narrator introduces Bruce as the mythical Dedalus and the house as a labyrinth.³⁵ She notes that, like her father, "Dedalus, too, was indifferent to the human cost of his projects," and the accompanying

³³ See Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 11-12.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁵ For a description of the Dedalus and Icarus myth, see Ovid, "The Art of Love," in *The Art of Love and Other Poems*, trans. John H. Mozley (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979, 1999), 33, 66, 67.

visual image depicts her father hurting her brother.³⁶ The comparison points to Bruce's ignorance of his children in contrast to his focus on the house. The narrator also refers to the mythical monster, the Minotaur, a half-human, half-man creature that emerged out of Pasiphae's sexual encounter with the white bull.³⁷ In the visual image of the panel, reproduced above (fig. 3-3), Alison is terrified and situated at the left side of a panel, the largest part of which is covered by Bruce's black shadow on the wall. This distribution combined with the narrator's reference to the Minotaur leads readers to draw parallels between the monster and paternal anger, which is visually recreated as an overwhelming, terrifying shadow on the surfaces of the house.

Proceeding with the myth, Alison explains that Dedalus "hid the minotaur in the labyrinth – a maze of passages and rooms opening endlessly into one another ... and from which, as stray youths and maidens discovered to their peril ... escape was impossible."³⁸ The Minotaur's monstrosity and the complexity of Dedalus' labyrinth are introduced in parallel to Bruce's inexplicable anger and violence and the Gothic Revival family home, respectively. However, unlike the maidens and youths led to the labyrinth to be eaten up by the monster, Alison eventually manages to escape. As she explains, "my mother, my brothers, and I knew our way around well enough, but it was impossible to tell if the Minotaur lay beyond the next corner."³⁹ Like Barry's narrator in *One Hundred Demons*, Alison also describes the tension and anxiety caused by the unpredictability of parental anger and violence, the continuity of insidious trauma, and the inability to set a boundary around the traumatic experience. Her description constantly connects paternal anger with the domestic space, thus pointing to its function as a distancing factor in the father/daughter relationship. Nevertheless, since insidious trauma is caused by closeted paternal homosexuality and it is associated with the family home in *Fun Home*, it demands a different use of pastiche. This is precisely why Bechdel focuses on the homosexual male canon to achieve the reunion of the homosexual father with the lesbian daughter.

The second cause of Bruce's anger and violence against Alison relates, as explained, to his effort to impose onto Alison a heteronormative femininity, which she repeatedly rejects. For example, to introduce the contradiction between her own and her father's tastes, Alison notes: "I was Spartan to my father's Athenian. Modern to his

³⁶ Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 11.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

Victorian. Butch to his Nelly. Utilitarian to his Aesthete.”⁴⁰ As the first panel reproduced below (fig. 3-4) shows, while Bruce is concerned with home decoration and the fine arts, Alison wears a helmet, holds a gun and pretends to be a soldier. By so doing, she embodies a Spartan, militaristic masculine look as opposed to her father’s Athenian, effeminate interests. In the second and fourth panels, she has very short hair and wears a T-shirt and trousers instead of girly clothes and accessories. However, that she is modern and utilitarian against her father’s Victorian aesthete style is not demonstrated by how her father looks. Bruce’s homosexuality, and what Alison describes as effeminacy, is not indicated by his bodily stylistics. In contrast, Bruce looks quite masculine in his representations in the panels below. The contradiction between the tastes of the two is shown by Alison’s inability to fit into the anachronistic environment of the late Victorian family home. Hence, like his anger, which is visually inscribed on the walls, Bruce’s tastes are also projected onto the domestic space. The house therefore becomes an extension, a screen that projects his feelings, tastes and, as I proceed to demonstrate, his sexual desires, and this is why Alison feels uncomfortable in it as a child.

Bruce’s effort to impose heteronormative femininity onto Alison despite her disagreement is demonstrated quite early in the book. In “Old Father, Old Artificer,” Bruce tries to fix how Alison looks according to what he believes to be an appropriate girly appearance (fig. 3-4, panel 3). While the narrator’s caption informs us that she was “butch to his nelly,” Bruce forces the autobiographical avatar to wear a yellow turtleneck so that the necklines of the dress and the shirt will match. This process persists throughout Alison’s childhood and adolescence. For example, the two panels below (fig. 3-5) show Bruce holding a flower painting and asking Alison where her barrette is. Alison is wearing a military jacket and her frustrated look indicates her irritation with her father’s order to put on the girly accessory. In the following panel, he forcibly pulls Alison’s hair back, while she notes that a crewcut would also prevent it from falling in her eyes. When she leaves the house, the protagonist removes the accessory and meets her male cousins to play basketball with them.⁴¹ However, when she returns to the paternal domain, the family home, her father realises that she took the barrette off; he becomes enraged and forces Alison to wear it with the threat that if she removes it again he will beat her.⁴²

⁴⁰ Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 15.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 97.

I WAS SPARTAN TO MY FATHER'S ATHENIAN. MODERN TO HIS VICTORIAN.



BUTCH TO HIS NELLY.

UTILITARIAN TO HIS AESTHETE.



Fig. 3-4: Alison Bechdel, "Old Father, Old Artificer," p. 15, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (Jonathan Cape, 2006). Copyright © 2006 by Alison Bechdel. All Rights Reserved. Used with permission.



Fig. 3-5: Alison Bechdel, “In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower,” panels 2 and 3, p. 96, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (Jonathan Cape, 2006). Copyright © 2006 by Alison Bechdel. All Rights Reserved. Used with permission.

Moving into Alison’s adolescence and young adulthood, the narrator describes a similar incident that takes place five years later. During their preparation for a wedding, Alison wears the “least girly dress in the store” and her sneakers.⁴³ Bruce reacts by telling her that she cannot wear those particular shoes and that he wishes they had “some sort of straw hat” for her.⁴⁴ Lastly, “seven years after that” Alison wears a skirt her father had bought for her, and he urges her to put on pearls.⁴⁵ When she rejects his wish, he becomes enraged. “What are you afraid of?” he asks her, “being beautiful? Put it on goddamn it!”⁴⁶ The protagonist replies to her father’s angry questions with the request to “leave [her] alone.”⁴⁷ Similarly to his persistence and failure to maintain perfection in the appearance of the house, Bruce also abusively insists, but eventually fails, to preserve Alison’s feminine looks. This is precisely what I have described as the continuity of the father/daughter rivalry that emerges from the Oedipal phase and continues through to Alison’s young adulthood, thus reproducing a problematic rupture between the father/daughter pair. Bruce’s struggle to impose his paternal authority clashes with his daughter’s strife to perform her masculinity and emerges as a cause of insidious trauma.

⁴³ Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 98.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Commenting upon the role of fathers in their daughters' sexual development, Nancy Chodorow notes that they influence their "feminine, heterosexual orientation."⁴⁸ She points out that

The father's role is crucial to his daughter's development during her Oedipal period and during preadolescence and early adolescence (another period when heterosexual orientation is being negotiated.) ... Fathers generally sex-type their children more consciously than mothers along traditional gender-role lines and ... they do encourage heterosexual behavior in their young daughters.⁴⁹

The examples from *Fun Home* that I have described above demonstrate precisely Bruce's effort to "sex-type" his daughter in her childhood and in her adolescence. However, his effort is a failed one because of Alison's refusal to adhere to it. In the graphic memoir too, Bechdel does not draw the protagonist as Bruce's ideal would be, but in ways that preserve her masculinity. Thus, Alison's refusal to adhere to heteronormatively feminine representations is an element that problematises the appearance of the ideal family, which Bruce wants to preserve, as the narrator explains.⁵⁰

The association between Bruce's effort to maintain the perfect house and the perfect family has been commented upon by critics who interpret the house as a cover-up of his homosexuality. For example, Robin Lydenberg argues that,

Driven to achieve an interior décor that (unlike his all-too real progeny) might be at least 'slightly perfect' ... Bruce Bechdel attends to the most minute authentic details. The cumulative effect of such precision eventually makes his projected fantasy of societal norms of domesticity, gender and class 'fully operational.'⁵¹

Lydenberg's reference to the imperfection of Bruce's children could apply to Alison, who fails to reach heteronormative femininity, thus rendering the appearance of familial and domestic perfection unattainable. The association between the appearance of the house and of the family is commented upon by the narrator, too. Alison describes her father as "an

⁴⁸ Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, 118.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ In relation to Bruce's desire to maintain the appearance of the ideal family, see Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 13, 16.

⁵¹ Robin Lydenberg, "Under Construction Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*," *European Journal of English Studies* 16, no.1 (2012): 61, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13825577.2012.655158>. See also Hélène Tison, "Drag as Metaphor and the Quest for Meaning in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*," *GRAAT*, no. 1 (2007): 26-39, <http://www.graat.fr/bechdel003aaaa.pdf>. For a similar description of a "tragic artifice and masquerade" in Bruce's closeted homosexuality, see Ariela Freedman, "Drawing on Modernism in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*," *Journal of Modern Literature* 32, no. 4 (2009): 131, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_modern_literature/v032/32.4.freedman.html.

alchemist of appearance, a savant of surface, a Dedalus of décor.”⁵² She further notes that Bruce “used his skilful artifice not to make things, but to make things appear what they were not,” and the visual image below shows him taking a picture of what appears to be, but is not, a heteronormative family.⁵³ The narrator proceeds to reveal her father’s secret by noting that he “appeared to be an ideal husband and father, for example. But would an ideal husband and father have sex with teenage boys?”⁵⁴ Alison’s comment summarises Bruce’s lifetime struggle: He used his skill and paternal authority to make things appear what they were not. He wanted to construct the appearance of himself as a heterosexual father, of his family as a heteronormative one, of Alison as a feminine daughter, of the Gothic Revival house as the perfect home. However, he fails and his failure is associated with his sexual desire for underage boys, in parallel with his daughter’s failed femininity. As I will demonstrate, the house, which the narrator describes as an incomprehensible labyrinth, Bruce’s homosexuality and Alison’s female masculinity are constructively used in *Fun Home* to reunite the father/daughter pair.

Similarly to Bruce’s anger that was previously inscribed on the walls of the family home, the narrator also associates the lie of her father’s heterosexuality with the house and its excessive decoration by asking: “What function was served by the scrolls, tassels, and bric-a-brac that infested our house? If anything, they obscured function. They were embellishments in the worst sense. They were lies.”⁵⁵ Immediately afterwards, Alison provides a description of her father as “morally suspect” and reveals that Bruce’s immorality stems from his secret sexual desire for teenage boys.⁵⁶ For the narrator, useless ornamentation suggests something suspicious, a moral delinquency, which as we find out early in the graphic memoir is associated with paternal same-sex desire. As readers, we are therefore called to make inferences, to provide what Scott McCloud describes as closure, and to interpret the house as a medium that has the potential to be inscribed with Bruce’s homosexuality.

Thus, the domestic space has a double function, and while its purpose is to veil paternal same-sex desire through its associations with heteronormative family life, it can also reveal it. This potential becomes possible if we interpret the domestic space as Bruce’s

⁵² Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 6.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

anachronistic fin-de-siècle aesthetic artwork. Indeed, the narrator describes her father as a Victorian aesthete and explains that the Gothic Revival house was built in 1867, thus temporally locating the house in the time period that the Aesthetic movement reached its peak.⁵⁷ Annette Fantasia also points to the associations between the Bechdel house and fin-de-siècle aestheticism by discussing *Fun Home* in relation to the late Victorian Paterian *bildungsroman*, where “the material décor of childhood home [is] fundamental to the protagonist’s ... [aesthetic] development.”⁵⁸ The critic also introduces Bruce as a Paterian aesthete.⁵⁹ However, by not making references to Wilde’s aestheticism in relation to home decoration, she fails to point to how the house becomes a visual embodiment of Bruce’s homosexuality. This possibility is only briefly mentioned by Janet Larson, Francesca Saggini and Anna Enrichetta Soccio, who point out that the family home only “imperfectly conceals ... the father’s same-sex desires,” without further explaining how it does so and how this can facilitate an Oedipal connection between the father and the daughter in the context of *Fun Home*.⁶⁰ To perceive the house beyond its status as an incomprehensible labyrinth and as an artistic rhetorical expression of male same-sex desire it is necessary to interpret it with an awareness of fin-de-siècle Wildean aestheticism. As I will explain, it is the rhetorical potential that Wildean aestheticism offers with regards to the artistic expression of closeted male homosexuality that will allow Bruce’s reunion with Alison, thus functioning reparatively.

Late Victorian Aestheticism and Male Homosexuality: Recreating Bruce’s Dwelling Places towards a Father/Daughter Oedipal Connection

In her study on the Victorian Aesthetic movement, Elizabeth Aslin explains that “beginning with the work of a few architects and designers in the [1860s, the Aesthetic movement] gathered force until, in the eighties, it embraced every art form from the greetings card to domestic architecture.”⁶¹ She further points out that the term “aesthetic,” “defined as meaning the science of the beautiful or the philosophy of taste, was brought to

⁵⁷ Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 8, 15.

⁵⁸ Annette Fantasia, “The Paterian Bildungsroman Reenvisioned: ‘Brain-Building’ in Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*,” *Criticism* 53, no. 1 (2011): 83, <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/criticism/v053/53.1.fantasia.html>.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁶⁰ Janet Larson, Francesca Saggini and Anna Soccio, “Housing Fictions in Time: An Introduction,” *European Journal of English Studies* 16, no. 1 (2012): 4, <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13825577.2012.655160>.

⁶¹ Elizabeth Aslin, “Introduction,” in *The Aesthetic Movement: A Prelude to Art Nouveau* (London: Elek, 1969), 13.

England at the beginning of the nineteenth century.”⁶² In *Fun Home*, Bruce’s focus on decorative beauty is incomprehensible for young Alison. In the first chapter (fig. 3-4, panel 4), the protagonist tries to dust a chair with complicated engravings, which make her task harder, and asks her father: “What’s the point of making something that’s so hard to dust?” Bruce’s answer that “it’s beautiful,” points to an aspect of the chair that moves beyond its utility, towards the aesthetic beautification of the family home.⁶³

Bruce is constantly depicted trying to restore and preserve the anachronistic beauty of the house both in interior and exterior spaces. The narrator explains that the house was her father’s “greatest achievement,” and that “the gilt cornices, the marble fireplace, the crystal chandeliers, the shelves of calf-bound books – these were not so much bought as produced from thin air by [his] remarkable legerdemain.”⁶⁴ The three panels below (fig. 3-6), demonstrate Bruce’s attention to every aspect of interior design, from the right positioning of furniture to the appropriate floral wallpaper patterns, and from engraved sofas and chairs to floral candle holders on the walls and flower arrangements on the tables. After seeing the interior spaces, readers are guided outside to see the frames that decorate the roof of the house and the garden, which Bruce transformed from a “barren yard ... into a lush, flowering landscape,” as Alison explains.⁶⁵ Bruce’s attention to the beautification of the domestic space introduces the possibility of deconstructing the division between fine and applied arts, thus enabling us to see the house as a work of art.⁶⁶

Indeed, Aslin observes that “aesthetes laid down standards of colour, of ornament and of form for all aspects of art and domestic decoration,” and refers to William Morris and Oscar Wilde as two of the most significant supporters of the movement.⁶⁷ That the Bechdel family home is a representative example of the houses that emerged out of the Aesthetic movement is shown by Morris’ influence in its decoration. In her interview with Hillary Chute, Bechdel explains that a William Morris wallpaper pattern, which decorated the walls of her house, also decorates the endpapers of the first edition of the book.⁶⁸ As

⁶² Aslin, *The Aesthetic Movement*, 14.

⁶³ Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 15.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶⁵ Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 10.

⁶⁶ With regards to the conflation between fine and applied arts, and specifically to house architecture and design, Aslin notes that by the 1880s the periodical *Queen* published “descriptions of artistic houses in book form as *Beautiful Houses*.” See Aslin, *The Aesthetic Movement*, 10.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 15, 42.

⁶⁸ Alison Bechdel, “An Interview with Alison Bechdel,” by Hillary L. Chute, *Modern Fiction Studies* 52, no. 4 (2006): 1008, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/modern_fiction_studies/v052/52.4chute02.html.

mentioned, the narrator also contextualises the emergence of the house in the latter half of the nineteenth century, when the aesthetic movement started to reach its peak. Aslin notes that the Gothic Revival style was predominant during the 1870s in the Aesthetic movement's approach towards architecture, and William Morris was one of its most loyal followers.⁶⁹ While Morris' influence is clear in the appearance of Alison's family home, it is its association with Oscar Wilde's presence in fin-de-siècle aestheticism that will demonstrate, as explained, how the Bechdel house can be interpreted as a medium that outs Bruce's homosexuality.

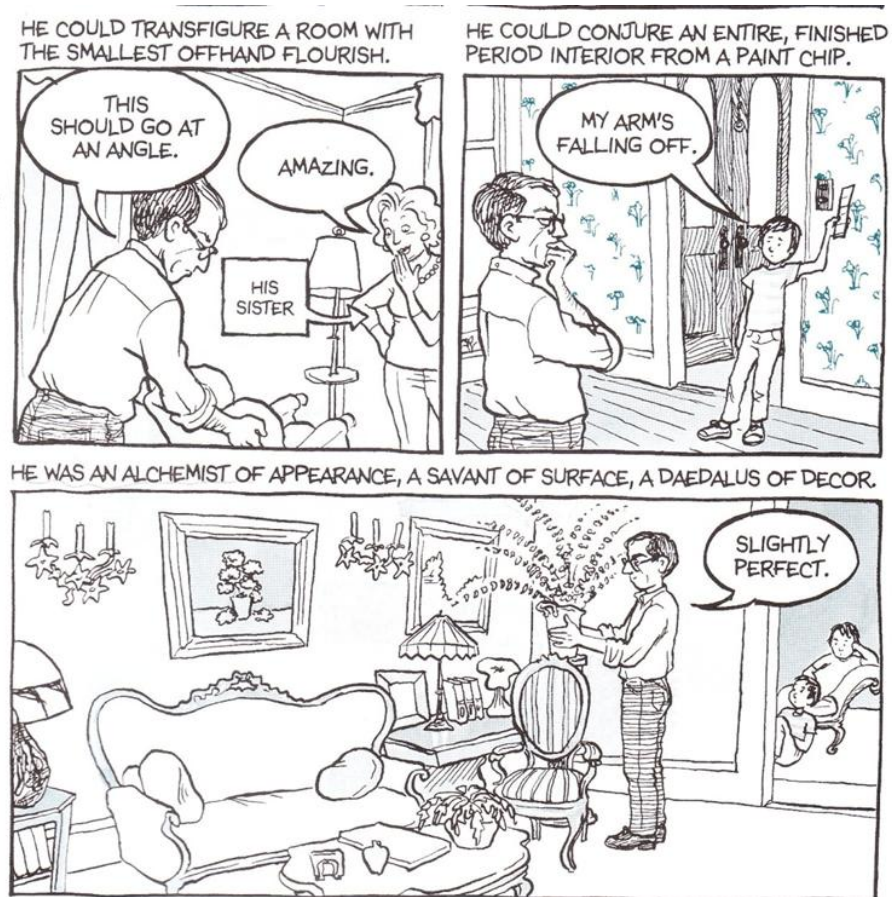


Fig. 3-6: Alison Bechdel, "Old Father, Old Artificer," panels 3, 4 and 5, p. 6, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (Jonathan Cape, 2006). Copyright © 2006 by Alison Bechdel. All Rights Reserved. Used with permission.

Aslin describes Wilde as "a most effective apostle of aestheticism," who wrote and lectured "on all aspects of the decorative arts and dress reform," both in Britain and in the United States, "with such a zeal that, while the most serious aspects of the Art Movement

⁶⁹ Aslin, *The Aesthetic Movement*, 36.

are forgotten, the mention of the eighteen-nineties conjures with it an image of Oscar Wilde.⁷⁰ She associates Wilde and Morris' influences by noting that in 1877 the latter "delivered his first lecture on 'The Decorative Arts' and a number of his ideas appear in Wilde's lectures masquerading as original thoughts, notably the famous injunction to 'have nothing in your houses which you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful.'"⁷¹ Richard Ellmann also comments upon Wilde's focus on the beautification of the domestic sphere, noting that his lectures "The House Beautiful" and "The Decorative Arts," "offered practical applications of aesthetic doctrines" on the matter.⁷² Despite the similarities between Wilde and Morris' ideas, it is the former's aestheticism that is always already a sign of homosexuality.

The illegitimacy of Wilde's homosexuality became connected with his art during and after his trials. Wilde was arrested, accused and imprisoned for being a homosexual in 1895. As Regenia Gagnier explains, in his trials, "his perceived position as both a spokesperson for art and an example of sexual deviant resulted in a remarkable elision in the public domain of art and sexuality and thus in the creation of a new category of aestheticism."⁷³ Gagnier further explains that

[Wilde's] works were given equal time with his sexual practices during the trial, aestheticism came to represent a distinct and private realm of art and sexuality ... In the art world, Wilde's homosexuality, contrary to mainstream notions of 'productive' or 'purposive' sexuality, likewise contributed to his particular formulation of aestheticism, including his explicit rejections of Victorian notions of the natural ... of the purposive ... and of the productive.⁷⁴

Gagnier's description of Wildean art as unproductive and without purpose is similar to Alison's comments about Bruce's house decorations as useless embellishments and lies. However, even though Alison as a child was unable to understand their usefulness, if we associate them with Wildean aestheticism, then Bruce's ornaments can visually construct and encode his homosexuality in the same way that fin-de-siècle Wildean aestheticism does. As Gagnier explains, Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a novel that describes a

⁷⁰ Aslin, *The Aesthetic Movement*, 97.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁷² Richard Ellmann, "Indoctrinating America," in *Oscar Wilde* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 193.

⁷³ Regenia Gagnier, ed., "Sexuality, the Public, and the Art World," in *Critical Essays on Oscar Wilde* (New York: Macmillan, 1991), 23.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 23- 24.

young man's perverse idolatry for his own portrait and the male painter's praise of his beauty, was "used as evidence" against him during the trials.⁷⁵

In *The Picture*, male homosociality and narcissism in parallel with extravagant, luxurious lifestyles are elements that encode the existence of homoerotic desire.⁷⁶ While not explicitly stating it, Wilde's art, as *The Picture* shows, became a vehicle that encoded male homosexuality in a similar way that Bruce's house does, as I will further argue. In Ed Cohen's words,

Wilde and his contemporaries . . . were beginning to articulate strategies to communicate – both to themselves and to others – the experience of homoerotic desire[;] their texts enact and virtually embody this desire. But since these men were also writing within a larger culture that not only denied but actively prosecuted such embodiments, they were forced to devise ways to mediate their expressions of passion.⁷⁷

Cohen introduces the processes that structure new codes for the expression of male homosexuality during the fin-de-siècle. However, as Alan Sinfield points out, it is after Wilde's trials that it has become commonplace to interpret Wilde's works as always already embodying homosexual desire. According to Sinfield, "our interpretation [of Wilde's work] is retroactive; in fact, Wilde and his writings look queer because our stereotypical notion of male homosexuality derives from Wilde and our ideas about him."⁷⁸ If we take a similar approach to the Bechdel home, that is, if we interpret it with an awareness of Bruce's homosexuality, and of the devices fin-de-siècle aesthetes used to encode male same-sex desire in their art, it will be possible to read it as an embodiment of his closeted secret. Its recreation in the pages of *Fun Home*, in parallel with the presence of the autobiographical subject, will be shown to allow the construction of a sexual co-existence of the father and the daughter.

⁷⁵ Gagnier, "Sexuality, the Public, and the Art World," 29. For the expression of homoeroticism in Dorian's obsession with his portrait and the praise of male beauty in *Dorian Gray*, see Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. Joseph Bristow, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). *The Picture* also provides descriptions of interior spaces extravagantly and luxuriously decorated, similarly to the Bechdel family home. In *Fun Home*, there is one brief reference to Wilde's *Picture* and an extensive description of Wilde's trials in parallel to Bruce's hearing at the court when he was accused of serving alcohol to minors. See Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 165-180. With these references, the parallelism between Bruce and Wilde further substantiate our view of the former as a nineteenth-century homosexual aesthete.

⁷⁶ For a lucid analysis of how male homosexuality is encoded in *The Picture*, see Ed Cohen's discussion in *Critical Essays on Oscar Wilde*. Ed Cohen, "Writing Gone Wilde: Homoerotic Desire in the Closet of Representation," in *Critical Essays on Oscar Wilde*, ed. Regenia Gagnier (New York: Macmillan, 1991), 68-87.

⁷⁷ Cohen, "Writing Gone Wilde," 83.

⁷⁸ Alan Sinfield, "Preface," in *The Wilde Century: Effeminacy, Oscar Wilde and the Queer Moment* (London: Cassel, 1994), vii.

While the inscription of homosexuality on aesthetic interior spaces and home decoration has remained largely unnoticed by critics, in “Space, Surface, Self: Homosexuality and the Aesthetic Interior,” Michael Hatt explains that “one of the most celebrated symptoms of Aestheticism is the Aesthetic interior, the self-conscious creation of a beautiful home,” a space “where private (homosexual) desire and public self were integrated.”⁷⁹ Hatt connects homosexuality with visibility and points out:

The wish to be able to identify homosexuality, which, by its very nature, can remain hidden, required the consolidation of specific visual signs and types, and the Aesthete provided a perfect home for visualizing this urge. It not only realized a wish to make homosexuality visible, it was also a reminder that the homosexual was not ordinary.⁸⁰

The invention of visual codes to speak homosexuality is associated, as Hatt explains, with the interior decoration of the domestic sphere. In his description of the extravagant, luxurious decorations of Wilde’s library in the house where the artist lived with his wife and children, the critic notes that aesthetic interior space becomes “a visualization of integrated selfhood whereby a family residence [can] include homosexual desire.”⁸¹ As he further suggests, the aesthete is reflected on the surfaces of his house and this is how the “dialectic of self and space collapses into intrasubjectivity or narcissism.”⁸² The house emerges, therefore, as performative of the aesthete’s homosexuality, becoming what Deirdre Heddon and Jennifer Gonzalez describe as “autotopography,” a spatial autobiographical performance, a metaphorical writing of the self on space.⁸³ An aspect of the Bechdel home decoration that speaks Bruce’s homosexuality is the excessive existence of flowers both in the interior and in the exterior space. In *Fun Home*, we can perceive flowers as signifiers of male homosexuality if we are aware of Wilde and other fin-de-siècle aesthetes’ use of the Victorian language of flowers.

⁷⁹ Michael Hatt, “Space, Surface, Self: Homosexuality and the Aesthetic Interior,” *Visual Culture in Britain* 8, no.1 (2007): 105, <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=c1203606-7f2f-44e6-90c4-bc4d4188da73%40sessionmgr111&vid=2&hid=106>.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 117.

⁸³ For definitions of autotopography, see Deirdre E. Heddon, “Autotopography: Graffiti, Landscapes and Selves,” <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/023/heddon.htm>; and Deirdre Heddon, “One Square Foot: Thousands of Routes,” *Journal of Performance Art* 29, no. 2 (2002): 40-50, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/performing_arts_journal/v029/29.2heddon.html. See also Jennifer Gonzalez, “Autotopographies,” in *Prosthetic Territories: Politics and Hypertechnologies*, eds. Gabriel Brahm, Jr., and Mark Discoll (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 133-149. Gonzalez’s definition of autotopography focuses mostly on objects rather than actual spaces as autotopographic, thus deviating from Heddon’s descriptions. However, it is also useful in our understanding of how Bruce’s objects function rhetorically to express his homosexuality.

That flowers can function as symbols for human sexuality is commented upon by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, where he explains that blooming flowers can represent sexual innocence and the contrary.⁸⁴ In the Victorian fin-de-siècle context, according to Alison Syme, the “language of flowers” was used in sexology and art to express alternative sexualities. During that time she notes,

At stake was something [too] difficult to attain and too risky ... to formulate directly: the naturalization of alternative sexualities and identities. In the last few decades of the nineteenth century, sexologists frequently used botanical and zoological examples of hermaphroditism to explain both the ‘latent organic bi-sexuality of each sex’ and the varieties of sexual behaviour ‘inverts’ exhibited.⁸⁵

Syme uses the term “inverts” to describe individuals with same-sex desire at the turn of the nineteenth century. Sexual inversion is one of the first theories that emerged in the scientific efforts to describe human homosexuality. The nineteenth-century sexologist Havelock Ellis notes that sexual inversion “leads a person to feel like a person of the opposite sex.”⁸⁶ Thus, the male invert, for example, believes himself to be a woman and, preserving heterosexual object choice, sexually desires men. Michel Foucault explains that the late nineteenth-century homosexual or invert became a type, to be scrutinised by medical and legal authorities.⁸⁷ It is precisely in this time of scrutiny and exploration of deviant sexualities that Syme observes a move from the previous association of flowers with female reproductive organs to their use as media through which to describe and understand homosexuality.⁸⁸ “Inverts,” as she points out, “were not only identified with hermaphroditic flowers ... they were also imagined as pollinators.”⁸⁹ Shifting her discussion from the science of sexology to the artistic field, she notes that “whether identifying as pollinators or plants, invert artists working in diverse disciplines mobilized the ideas of cross-fertilization and the hermaphroditic sexuality of flowers to ‘naturalize’

⁸⁴ Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 430.

⁸⁵ Alison Syme, “Introduction: The Birds and the Bees,” in *A Touch of Blossom: John Sargent and the Queen Flora of Fin-de-Siècle Art* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 12.

⁸⁶ See Havelock Ellis, “Introduction,” in *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, Vol. 2, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: F.A. Davis Company, 1933), 2. For a description of the different theories that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century to describe deviant sexuality, see George Chauncey, Jr., “From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality,” *Samlagundi*, no. 58/59 (1983): 114-146, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40547567>.

⁸⁷ See Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 42-43.

⁸⁸ While I refer to the term “invert” in my discussion on Alison’s masculinity, I use the word “homosexual” to describe Bruce since I am focusing on the expression of same-sex desire rather than the visual demonstration of effeminacy. The model of sexual inversion seems to conflate the two in the belief that a man is always already feminine in his same-sex desire, thus it is inappropriate to describe Alison’s father in this chapter.

⁸⁹ Syme, *A Touch of Blossom*, 12.

sexual inversion.”⁹⁰ Syme observes that “Oscar Wilde was identified with various flowers: lilies, daisies, daffodils, sunflowers, and green carnations.”⁹¹ Ari Adut also notes that “by the end of the [1880s], Wilde was already going around in public with a carnation boutonniere – the badge of French homosexuals.”⁹² By wearing the green carnation in public, Wilde became a spectacle of male homosexuality during the fin-de-siècle, visually encoding what scientific and medical discourses were in the process of naming. His carnation spoke his homosexuality.⁹³

In *Fun Home*, Bruce’s constant preoccupation with flowers is demonstrated in every aspect of home decoration. As mentioned, Morris’ floral wallpapers decorate the walls. Furthermore, he makes sure to introduce flower portraits and floral arrangements everywhere in the house (fig. 3-6). The narrator notes that “of all [his] domestic inclinations, [her] father’s decided bent for gardening was the most redolent to [her] of that other, more disturbing bent.”⁹⁴ Her description of her father’s obsession as “redolent” and of home decoration as “disturbing,” suggests its connection with Bruce’s secret homosexuality without making an explicit statement about it. With her following comment, however, the narrator explicates the speculation: “What kind of man but a sissy could possibly love flowers so ardently?” she asks and proceeds to further explain:

Our home was an efflorescence of bulbs, buds and blooms, flowers wild and cultivated, native and imported, flowering vines and trees ... Silk flowers, glass flowers, flower paintings and, where any of these failed to materialize, floral patterns. At Easter, dad would paint goose eggs with twining tea roses.⁹⁵

The panels below (fig. 3-7) visually recreate the narrator’s description of the prevailing presence of flowers in the family home. In the garden, the plants are enormous in relation to Alison who is watering them. Moving to the interior space, the panel shows the floral pattern of the wallpaper, a flower painting on the wall and a flower shaped vase, which Alison is trying to clean with a bored and unwilling look on her face. In the last panel, Bruce is depicted painting an egg with floral patterns in great detail. Hence, while he is

⁹⁰ Syme, *A Touch of Blossom*, 12.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁹² Ari Adut, “A Theory of Scandal: Victorians, Homosexuality, and the Fall of Oscar Wilde,” *American Journal of Sociology* 111, no. 1 (2005): 227, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/428816>.

⁹³ Flowers as signifiers of homosexuality also appear in Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The name of the painter who homoerotically praises Dorian’s beauty is Basil, and the young model observes a scene of pollination of a lilac by a bee before he goes into the painter’s studio. See Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 23.

⁹⁴ Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 90.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

silent about his homosexuality in *Fun Home*, Bruce's floral arrangements can be read as its rhetorical articulations and spatial performances.



Fig. 3-7: Alison Bechdel, "In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower," p. 90, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (Jonathan Cape, 2006). Copyright © 2006 by Alison Bechdel. All Rights Reserved. Used with permission.

In the *History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault describes the imposition of silences around specific sexual matters, like homosexuality, and notes that:

Silence itself – the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers – is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies. There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case.⁹⁶

Bruce is a closeted homosexual father who refuses to speak about his homosexuality and struggles to maintain the appearance of the ideal husband and father in the small town of Beech Creek. However, if we draw parallels between Wildean Aestheticism and his preoccupation with the Gothic Revival home and flowers, it is possible to suggest that, despite his silence, the house becomes a discursive formation of his homosexuality. The house as Bruce's art becomes the way in which he can speak his same-sex desire. Indeed, building on Foucault's observation, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains that sexual silence is as performative as the speech act of coming out. However, in order for such silences to be interpreted, two interlocutors need to have "mutual ... established practices of interpretation."⁹⁷ If the readers of *Fun Home* share homosexual aesthetes' practices of interpretation, then they can participate in the construction of a visual expression of Bruce's homosexuality in the house, which is also reproduced in the graphic memoir.

Apart from reproducing Bruce's constant preoccupation with flowers, *Fun Home* also performs the daughter artist's use of the flower vocabulary to inscribe on the house the danger of her father's imprisonment due to his sexual relations with an underage boy, as seen in the chapter entitled "The Ideal Husband." The title introduces a flashback to the first chapter, where the narrator observes that her father "appeared to be an ideal husband and father" but had sex with teenage boys.⁹⁸ Simultaneously, it alludes to Oscar Wilde's play with the same title to foreground the connection between Bruce and Wilde. The play, first staged in 1895, describes the scandal caused by Mr. Chiltern's corruptibility. Like Bruce, the Wildean hero also appeared to be the ideal husband, but his excessive desire for

⁹⁶ Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge*, 17.

⁹⁷ See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Introduction: Axiomatic," in *Epistemology of the Closet* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 4.

⁹⁸ Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 17.

money led to the eventual revelation that he was not.⁹⁹ “The modern mania for morality” that Lady Markby ironically describes and that “everyone has to pose as a paragon of purity, incorruptibility and all the other seven deadly virtues,” is reproduced in *Fun Home* in Bruce’s struggle to pass as an ideal husband.¹⁰⁰ Like Mr. Chilterns, whose greediness is ultimately revealed, in “The Ideal Husband,” Bruce’s desire for underage boys leads to his legal entanglement and is in danger of being uncovered. Alison explains that her father had to appear in court due to what she speculates to have been sexual relations with underage boys.¹⁰¹ In parallel to her descriptions, she also informs readers about Wilde’s trials, an event that became, as explained, a turning point in the fusion of aestheticism and homosexuality.¹⁰² Thus, the parallelism between Wilde and Bruce is substantiated.

The inscription of the aforementioned events on the domestic space and their expression in the language of flowers takes place on two levels. Firstly, the chapter includes a police report, which, as the narrator informs us, contains the accusation of serving alcohol to a minor.¹⁰³ When she describes Bruce’s hearing, she observes that “the magistrate stuck strictly to the liquor charge. But a whiff of the sexual aroma of the true offence could be detected in the sentence.”¹⁰⁴ Alison’s word choice, her identification of “a whiff of sexual aroma” in the sentence, evokes her previous comments about her father’s “redolent” interest in gardening, thus implicitly constructing associations between the two.¹⁰⁵ Secondly, in parallel to Bruce’s legal adventure, the narrator also describes a storm that caused damage to the garden of the house:

Two silver maples had been snapped in half, two apple trees and an oak were blown to bits. The maples had sheltered the west side of our house for over a hundred years, and left, as fallen trees do, a void so absolute you couldn’t possibly have imagined it beforehand.¹⁰⁶

⁹⁹ If we keep in mind Cohen’s observation with regards to Wilde’s art and the need for secret codes that speak male homosexuality, then Mr. Chiltern’s illicit behaviour could be read as such an example. The difference between Wildean secret encoding of homosexuality and the one that reappears in *Fun Home* is that in the latter readers are initially called to speculate about it, and the narrator proceeds to explicitly speak about her father’s secret, thus guiding us to see the house as a Wildean aesthetic performance of Bruce’s homosexuality.

¹⁰⁰ See Oscar Wilde, “An Ideal Husband,” in *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 180.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 161.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 166.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 180.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 178.



Fig. 3-8: Alison Bechdel, "The Ideal Husband," p. 178, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (Jonathan Cape, 2006). Copyright © 2006 by Alison Bechdel. All Rights Reserved. Used with permission.

The physical destruction of the trees in the garden, shown in the full-page panel above (fig. 3-8), coincides with the possible destruction that was about to emerge after the magistrate's decision in Bruce's hearing. The storm, the narrator explains, was an isolated event that focused only on their garden:

None of the neighbors had much damage. It was as if the tornado had touched down precisely at our address. Yet the house itself had escaped harm, as had the garage and cars ... In this light the ring of downed trees conveys a theme

less of destruction than of narrow escape ... But one more narrow escape was yet to happen.¹⁰⁷

The escape that was yet to happen refers to Bruce's avoidance of imprisonment as the charges against him were dismissed.¹⁰⁸ *Fun Home* therefore demonstrates how the flower vocabulary can be used to visually narrate the danger that the revelation of Bruce's secret would entail. Additionally, it introduces aspects of Gothic Revival House as rhetorical devices that have the power to say to the knowing reader what the silent homosexual father does not.

As Roland Barthes explains,

[An] object effectively serves some purpose, but it also serves to communicate information; we might sum it up by saying that there is always a meaning which overflows the object's use ... If we are to study the meaning of objects, we must give ourselves a sort of shock of detachment, in order to objectivize the object, to structure its signification ... To do this is to resort to an order of representations in which the object is presented in a simultaneously spectacular, rhetorical, and intentional fashion, which is advertising, the cinema, or even the theatre.¹⁰⁹

The detachment Barthes describes as essential in our interpretation of objects beyond their utility is also necessary in our understanding of the visual rhetorics of Bruce's homosexuality because it is through them that the sexual reunion of the father/daughter pair is performed in the graphic memoir. The reader, therefore, and the spectator of the Bechdel house need to be detached enough to be able to decipher the performance of paternal same-sex desire in relation to the daughter's masculinity.

If we keep in mind that the house functions as a spectacular discursive expression of Bruce's homosexuality, then by being embedded with Alison's representations as a tomboy and a masculine woman and with the narrator's captions in the pages of *Fun Home*, it facilitates the sexual connection of the father/daughter pair. As explained, Kooistra, in agreement with Mitchell, describes the operation of a sexual mode in illustrated novels, which casts "the text in the traditional [masculine] role of mastery, authority and activity, and the image in the traditional [feminized] role of [otherness,] submission, reflection and ornamentation."¹¹⁰ Despite the invalid suggestion of inequality between the verbal/visual elements of illustrated texts, I refer to the masculine/verbal,

¹⁰⁷ Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 179.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 180.

¹⁰⁹ Roland Barthes, "Semantics of the Object," in *The Semiotic Challenge*, trans. Richard Howard (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 182-184.

¹¹⁰ Kooistra, *The Artist as Critic*, 10.

feminine/visual distribution for two reasons: firstly, to point to the transgression of boundaries that takes place in *Fun Home* as Alison – the daughter – is reflected primarily through the narrator’s prose text, and Bruce – the father – through the feminised visual aspect, and via the inscription of his homosexuality on the house. Hence, *Fun Home* reproduces Hatt’s views on the associations of homosexuality with the visual. Secondly, to explain how this distribution is used constructively towards the creation of a sexual bond between the father and the daughter. Identifying the pastiche combinations of the Victorian language of flowers and Wildean Aesthetic approaches to home decoration in the Bechdel house allows the visual embodiment of Bruce’s homosexuality. Thus, apart from his body, the house itself emerges as a rhetorical device that speaks his secret desire. By being embedded with the autobiographical subject, it visually constructs a sexual amalgamation between the father and the daughter.

Apart from the narrator’s captions, formed by rectangular boxes with capital plain letters, and unlike the excessively decorated house, Alison is, as explained, depicted as a tomboy and a masculine woman in the autobiographical avatar’s representations, thus appearing as her father’s ideal sexual object, the young men he desires. That *Fun Home* underlines Alison’s masculine gender representation is also demonstrated by the narrator’s use of the term “invert” to describe herself. As she notes, “I’ve always been fond of this antiquated clinical term. It’s imprecise and insufficient, defining the homosexual as a person whose gender expression is at odds with his or her sex.”¹¹¹ While she uses the term in relation to herself and her father as inversions of each other in terms of their masculine and feminine tastes, the term “sexual invert” points precisely to a gender representation that is in opposition to the heteronormative feminine one Bruce tries to impose onto her. The narrator’s definition of the term, a paraphrase of the one given by Havelock Ellis, shifts attention from a person’s sexual orientation to their gender identification. In relation to the female invert, Ellis notes:

The commonest characteristic of the sexually inverted woman is a certain degree of masculinity or boyishness ... There is ... a very pronounced tendency among sexually inverted women to adopt male attire when practicable ... In such cases ... the wearer feels more at home in them.¹¹²

Unlike Bruce, whose passing as an ideal husband does not allow a bodily representation that would reject the appearance of heteronormative masculinity, Alison can be described

¹¹¹ Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 97.

¹¹² Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, 244- 245.

as a sexual invert, precisely because of her insistence to dress up with what Ellis describes as “male attire” that preserves boyishness and masculinity. Commenting upon sexual inversion in *Female Masculinity*, Judith Halberstam notes that

[As] a theory of homosexuality [inversion] folded gender variance and sexual preference into one economical package and attempted to explain all deviant behavior in terms of a firm and almost intuitive belief in a binary system of sexual stratification ... To reconstitute the history of female masculinity, we actually have to accept that the invert may not be a synonym for ‘lesbian’ but that the concept of inversion both produced and described a category of biological women who felt at odds with their anatomy.¹¹³

By distinguishing between the lesbian and the female invert, Halberstam’s description also moves from sexual orientation towards gender construction and representation. In *Fun Home*, despite Alison’s lesbianism, it is her persisting masculine gender constructions that allow her Oedipal reclaiming of Bruce, which is suggested by his depiction as an erotic spectacle and by the father/daughter acrobatic games at the beginning of the graphic memoir (fig. 3-1 and fig. 3-2).

Alison’s masculine identification escalates in “The Ideal Husband,” where her father’s secret desire for adolescent boys almost surfaces. Apart from Bruce’s legal entanglement, another event that takes place is that Alison starts to menstruate. The narrator remembers that she got her first period at the end of June when she was thirteen years old but decided not to tell anyone about it.¹¹⁴ Like her father, who keeps his homosexuality secret, Alison is engaged in an effort to ignore and veil the event. Firstly, she notes that she kept the sanitary napkins her mother gave her “in the furthest recess of [her] closet,” thus evoking the vocabulary of the closet – associated with the secret of homosexuality – for the distinctly female experience of menstruation. Moreover, she explains that “there was always the chance that by ignoring it, it would go away. Although this strategy was not working with [her] breasts.”¹¹⁵ Alison’s puberty, accompanied by the development of her breasts and menstruation, finds the protagonist in denial and discomfort with these biological processes, thus evoking Halberstam and Ellis’ views on the invert as a person who feels at odds with his/her biological sex.

¹¹³ Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, 82.

¹¹⁴ Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 158.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

The protagonist's discomfort was also translated in the diary she kept, where she did not mention the event of her menstruation at all the first time it happened.¹¹⁶ After her second period came, however, she was "faced with incontrovertible evidence" and felt "obliged to enter it."¹¹⁷ Nevertheless, what she wrote was, "I think I started to ning or something."¹¹⁸ The narrator explains that she "encoded the word menstruating according to the practice [she]'d learned in algebra of denoting complex or unknown quantities with letters."¹¹⁹ By so doing, she translates her menstruation into a neologism, following a process that is similar to that of fin-de-siècle aesthetes, who devised new codes to communicate their homosexuality. By translating the fact of her menstruation in a way that cannot be recognised by anyone else apart from herself, Alison simultaneously conceals it in her diary. Like her father's flowers and Wilde's carnation, "ning" renders her menstruation both present and absent in her diary. For it to come to existence, one needs to share Alison's interpretation system and to know what her neologism signifies.

The effort to veil her menstruation is pushed even further by the protagonist, since she proceeds to describe another activity with the same word in her diary, and thus to further inscribe her masculinity. As she explains,

So certain was I of ning's indecipherability that I used it three years later to camouflage an entirely different biological event. Although I did not allude to masturbation in my diary until I was sixteen, I begun the assiduous practice of that activity soon after I got my first period.¹²⁰

Alison moves from the unspeakability of her menstruation to its translation into "ning," a term she also uses to describe her masturbatory habits, thus creating a conflation between the two processes. By so doing, she deviates from the normal development of a heterosexual feminine girl beyond the Oedipal phase. In his binary passive/active schema of human sexuality, Freud argues that girls give up clitoral stimulation and masturbation during their adolescence, because being a masculine activity it has to be abandoned to leave space for proper femininity to develop.¹²¹ Alison reacts to the passivity ascribed to girls in the Freudian text and, by using the same word to signify her menstruation and her masturbation habits, she transforms her diary into a Wildean aesthetic text that speaks the unspeakable and undoes the burden of the biological female body. In "The Ideal Husband,"

¹¹⁶ Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 159.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 168.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹²¹ Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, 255.

Alison explains that her first masturbation took place while she was drawing a male basketball player at the age of thirteen and points out,

I didn't know then that there was a word for the oddly gratifying motion of rocking back and forth in my chair as I drew on my desk. The new realization that I could illustrate my own fantasies filled me with an omnipotence that was in itself erotic. In the flat chests and slim hips of my surrogates, I found release from my own increasing burden of the flesh.¹²²

Alison therefore expresses her fantasies in her art. It is through her drawings that she can identify with the male basketball player and escape “the burden” of her own female flesh, her growing breasts and her menstruation.

In the same chapter, a friend asks Alison to watch a football game with her. When she responds that she hates football, her friend clarifies that they should go to see people and not the game itself, possibly suggesting an interest in meeting boys.¹²³ However, Alison prefers to stay at home for a chance of cross-dressing as a man for the purposes of an acting game she had devised.¹²⁴ In “The Ideal Husband,” therefore, the adolescent Alison is constructed in ways that underscore her masculine identifications. By being constructed as an adolescent tomboy in a chapter that describes her father’s speculated affair with an underage boy and by inhabiting the domestic spaces that function as expressions of his homosexuality, Alison is erotically reunited with him in the pages of *Fun Home*. This is precisely why reproducing in detail the aesthetic decorations of the family home is essential in Bechdel’s graphic memoir. It is by focusing on and reconfiguring her father through a Wildean aesthetic understanding that Bechdel creates a text that reunites the distant father/daughter pair.

As Monica Pearl notes, Bechdel’s attempt to point to Bruce’s “love of decor and design in an illustrated memoir is not necessarily to countermand the project of artfully concealing and conveying truths, information, or realities, but to recapitulate that very project.”¹²⁵ In discussing the role of the visual representations of the family home in the graphic memoir, she suggests that

Bechdel’s negotiation between drawing and writing can be read ... as a way of negotiating [the] arts of her father’s. It might be said that Bechdel, in constructing images of the house her father spent his adult life decorating –

¹²² Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 170.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 181.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 183.

¹²⁵ Pearl, “Graphic Language,” 291.

the very same arches and flagstones and moldings – is taking command of – and altering in her own style – the practice that was her father’s realm. In fact, though, these drawings are not decoration or artful embellishment; they are integral to the text, integral to the story, are the story.¹²⁶

Pearl’s observation introduces Bruce, the fin-de-siècle aesthete, as an artistic forefather whose art, like that of the graphic memoir, is situated in the visual field. The reason why the drawings of the house are essential in the narrative is precisely because it is through them that Alison communicates with her father. It is in their arts and aesthetic tastes that their desires are embodied, and it is also there that Alison can reject the heteronormative bodily stylistics of femininity to approach the masculine ideal of her father’s sexual desire.

This process persists even after Bruce’s death, when the spectacular rhetorics of the house collapse with his absence. Specifically, the deconstruction of the house as a visual performance of Bruce’s homosexuality ends when Alison is informed about it by her mother.¹²⁷ As the narrator explains, after she found out about her father’s secret she went back home for a visit. However, on her return she realised that “home, as [she] had known it, was gone. Some crucial part of the structure seemed to be missing, like in dreams [she] would have later when termites had eaten through all the floor joists.”¹²⁸ Paternal homosexuality is now inscribed on Bruce himself, and the house is no longer infused with the particular meaning.



Fig. 3-9: Alison Bechdel, “That Old Catastrophe,” panel 1, p.82, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (Jonathan Cape, 2006). Copyright © 2006 by Alison Bechdel. All Rights Reserved. Used with permission.

¹²⁶ Pearl, “Graphic Language,” 121.

¹²⁷ For Alison’s dialogue with her mother that reveals Bruce’s homosexuality, see Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 58-59.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 215-216.

Alison returns to the house again after her father's death. As the panel above (fig. 3-9) shows, Bruce's library, a space where the narrator speculates that her father used to sexually seduce his "more promising high school students," is now inhabited by the three women: Alison, her girlfriend Joan, and her mother Helen.¹²⁹ In her reading of the scene, Janine Utell observes that, unlike Bruce's secret desires, "Joan and Alison's erotic intimacy is ... made visible in the family home."¹³⁰ Alison's lesbianism and masculinity are immediate, out and inscribed on her body. While the three women are sitting in the library, Alison's mother gives Joan a book of poetry by Wallace Stevens from the library.¹³¹ As the narrator explains, "over the years, my mother has given away or sold most of dad's library. She began immediately after the funeral, bestowing a book on Joan."¹³² Helen therefore initiates the deconstruction of the family home's rhetorics. She is the one who reveals Bruce's secret to Alison and consequently, she has to be the same person who will embark on the deconstruction of the house as a performance of Bruce's homosexuality. By taking out Bruce's books, by selling the library, and ultimately the house itself, Helen also puts an end to the significance of the house as a Wildean artwork. Thus, she is introduced as the rival parent who stops the child's sexual desires for the parental love-object.

Nevertheless, after Bruce's death we move from the family home to the cemetery and his grave, where the Oedipal relationship between Alison and her father is posthumously maintained. The title page of the chapter, "A Happy Death" (fig. 3-10), shows a photograph of Bruce's grave, decorated by an American flag and flowers. As Alison notes, "his headstone was an obelisk, a striking anachronism among the ungainly granite slabs in the new end of the cemetery."¹³³ Like the family home, therefore, the tombstone is also distinguished from the rest, and once again the narrator makes suggestions about her father's homosexuality being demarcated by the obelisk by noting that "it's also a shape that in life [her father] was unabashedly fixated on."¹³⁴ The phallic shape of the obelisk in combination with Alison's comment can point precisely to Bruce's

¹²⁹ Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 61.

¹³⁰ Janine Utell, "Intimacies in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*: The Case of Joan," *The Comics Grid* (Oct. 2011), <http://www.comicsgrid.com/2011/10/intimacies-fun-home/>.

¹³¹ Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 82.

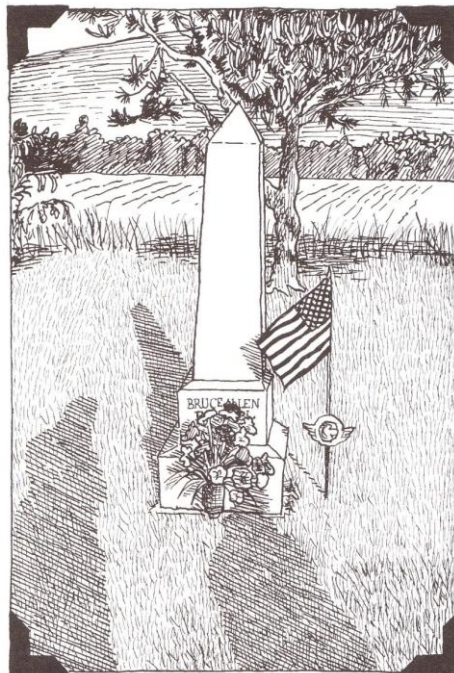
¹³² *Ibid.* In Bechdel's second graphic memoir, *Are You My Mother?*, the family home and the father are not discussed apart from a reference to how Helen had put the house on sale seven years after Bruce's death. See Bechdel, *Are You My Mother?*, 263.

¹³³ Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 29.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

same-sex desire. Indeed, in his discussion on sex and religious worship and symbolism, Richard G. Badger points out that the obelisk symbolises an erect phallus and the worship of male deities.¹³⁵ However, Alison does not make further connections and instead she informs us that Bruce had a collection of obelisks at home. His justification for his obsession with them was that they symbolise life.¹³⁶ Like the family home, however, the obelisk too has the potential to reveal Bruce’s homosexuality if the reader/spectator knows its rhetorical significance.

CHAPTER 2



A HAPPY DEATH

Fig. 3-10: Alison Bechdel, “A Happy Death,” p.25, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (Jonathan Cape, 2006). Copyright © 2006 by Alison Bechdel. All Rights Reserved. Used with permission.

To further associate the grave with the Gothic Revival house as an aesthetic performance of Bruce’s homosexuality, the narrator notes that her father’s ultimate obelisk would be “carved from fleshy, translucent marble, like the tombstones in the old part of the cemetery,” and we are introduced with a visual equivalent with the date 1870 engraved on it.¹³⁷ Bruce’s ideal obelisk, therefore, like the family home, is situated in the decades

¹³⁵ Richard G. Badger, “Symbolism,” in *Sex Worship and Symbolism*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Gorham Press, 1922), 36.

¹³⁶ Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 29.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

approaching the end of the nineteenth century, thus continuing to represent Bruce's anachronistic aestheticism, as the house did before his death. Richard V. Francaviglia describes the different forms of tombstones that appear in American cemeteries. As he explains in his study, "the cemetery in the United States is a microcosm of the real world and binds a particular generation of men to the architectural and perhaps even spatial preferences and prejudices that accompanied them throughout life."¹³⁸ He observes that during the Victorian period, and more particularly from the 1880s to 1905, "the popularity of the obelisk ... reached its peak."¹³⁹ Peggy McDowell and Richard Meyer also explain that the revival styles – demonstrated in the Bechdel home—are also "applicable to commemorative arts."¹⁴⁰ The obelisk, as they note, belongs precisely to these revival styles.¹⁴¹

If we are to consider the space occupied in the cemetery as a postmortem embodiment of Bruce's aestheticism and homosexuality, then the arrangement of objects there could be argued to articulate particular meanings and, by disturbing their order, their rhetorical function can collapse as well. Adult Alison's effort to preserve the grave as Bruce's ideal could therefore suggest an attempt to simultaneously maintain the rhetorics of his homosexuality. When she goes to the cemetery to visit her father's grave years after his death, the protagonist finds a flag there. As she notes,

On one occasion I found it desecrated with a cheesy flag, placed there by some well-meaning armed services organization. I javelined this, ugly brass holder and all at the edge of the cemetery ... There was some fleeting consolation in the sheer violence of my gesture.¹⁴²

The panel below (fig. 3-11) is the last one in the chapter and shows a distanced perspective of the cemetery with Alison lying on her father's grave after having thrown the flag away and having restored it to its ideal status. Her visual depiction preserves her masculine gender construction during her adulthood and the narrator notes: "My father really was down there, I told myself. Stuck in the mud for good this time."¹⁴³ While during his life aspects of Bruce's personality existed in and were inscribed on the house, with his death

¹³⁸ Richard V. Francaviglia, "The Cemetery as an Evolving Cultural Landscape," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 61, no. 3 (2005): 501, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1467-8306.1971.tb00802.x/pdf>.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 507.

¹⁴⁰ Peggy McDowell and Richard Meyer, "The Rise of Memorial Art in America," in *The Revival Styles in American Memorial Art* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1994), 4.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 133-144.

¹⁴² Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 52-53.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 54.

his existence moves to the graveyard. His obelisk becomes his permanent home. As Otto Rank explains in his association of grave building and house building,

If man continues to live as such in the soul (spirit), he needs a house with the necessary household implements ... In fact, from the standpoint of the living, the corpse which continues its life as a soul is more in need of a house, a safe dwelling place, than the living man.¹⁴⁴

If we perceive Bruce's obelisk as his postmortem dwelling place, then by preserving it as he would want it, unspoiled by external objects that disrupt its function, adult Alison preserves the potential for her Oedipal reunion with him once again. The way she is situated in the final panel of the chapter demonstrates precisely the preservation of one such reunion. If he is "down there" as the narrator points out, then by lying on top of him, Alison is reunited with her father, and her position evokes their acrobatic games during her childhood (fig. 3-2). While in the first case both Bruce and Alison were physically present in the house and the former was conflated with it by Bechdel's drawing style, in this case he is no longer physically present beneath Alison but embodied in the space of the grave.

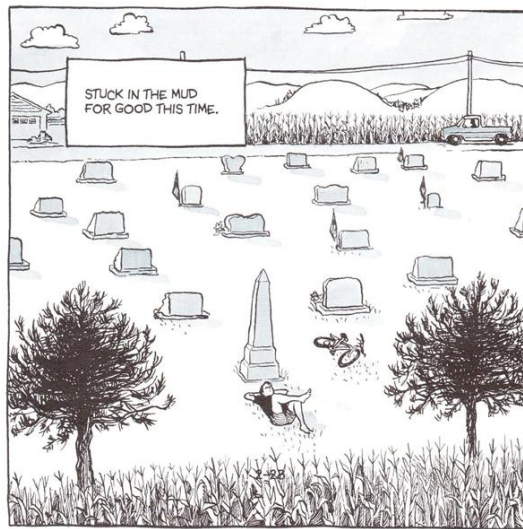


Fig. 3-11: Alison Bechdel, "That Old Catastrophe," panel 2, p.54, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (Jonathan Cape, 2006). Copyright © 2006 by Alison Bechdel. All Rights Reserved. Used with permission.

¹⁴⁴ Rank, *Art and Artist*, 161.

Julia Watson argues that the erotic dimension of the relationship between Bruce and Alison as shown in the acrobatic games scene develops with the shift of Alison and Bruce's sexual desires to other love-objects in their adulthood.¹⁴⁵ However, as this chapter has demonstrated, in *Fun Home*, the sexual connection between the father and the daughter is preserved throughout their lives and after Bruce's death, and it is structured in the book's very building blocks, its words and visual images. This connection becomes more concrete in the chapter that re-appropriates elements from Marcel Proust's multivolume novel *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* translated into English as *Remembrance of Things Past*, where a set of identifications introduces the father/daughter pair as an erotic one. Proust is, like Wilde, one of the most significant homosexual literary fathers.¹⁴⁶ Bechdel's engagement with his work next to the performance of Bruce's Wildean aestheticism demonstrates an innovative and productive revision of elements from the male homosexual literary canon that leads towards the connection of Alison with her father.

Reconfiguring Proust and Remembering the Father/Daughter Pair: Bruce and Alison as Proust and Albertine

The middle chapter of *Fun Home*, "In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower," has the same title as the second volume of Proust's novel, which took form during the first two decades of the twentieth century. While the publication of the complete work is not situated in the same time period as that of Oscar Wilde's, it is in the years during the fin-de-siècle that Proust conceived the ideas that would formulate it.¹⁴⁷ Like Wilde's artworks, Proust's novel introduces codes that speak male homosexuality, which reappear in *Fun Home* to construct a sexual reconnection between Alison and Bruce. In this final part of the chapter, I demonstrate how, by conflating the Proustian world and the realm of *Remembrance* with Alison and Bruce's life stories, Bechdel's graphic memoir introduces the climax of the father/daughter dyad as a sexual pair.

¹⁴⁵ Watson, "Autographic Disclosures and Genealogies," 35.

¹⁴⁶ For a discussion on the construction of homosexuality in Marcel Proust's *Remembrance* and the author's association with Oscar Wilde, see Michael Lucey, "Proust's Queer Metalepses," in *Never Say I: Sexuality and the First Person in Colette, Gide and Proust* (London: Duke University Press, 2006), 193-214.

¹⁴⁷ In this chapter I am using Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin's translation of the novel as *Remembrance of Things Past*. For publication details of the novel, see Terence Kilmartin, "Note on the Translation," in *Remembrance of Things Past*, Vol. 1, trans. Scott C. K. Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, 2nd ed. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1981), ix-xii.

In *Fun Home*, the narrator refers to the two different versions of the novel's English translation and explains that

The original title of volume two is *A l'Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs*, literally 'in the shadow of young girls in flower.' The translation to *Within a Budding Grove* shifts emphasis primarily from the erotic to the botanical. But of course as Proust himself so lavishly illustrates, eros and botany are much the same thing.¹⁴⁸

Bechdel's choice of the literal translation therefore preserves both the botanical and the erotic in *Fun Home*. Hence, it suggests that, apart from male homosexuality, the Victorian language of flowers has the potential to construct, in Proust and in Bechdel's texts, female sexual inversion, since the title refers to girls who are in flower. Additionally, the narrator's comment explicitly introduces in the graphic memoir the Proustian use of the language of flowers as invested with sexual meanings and implicitly guides readers to perform a similar interpretation of the same subject in *Fun Home*. Indeed, it is only if we read the flower metaphor and the double possibility it allows for the construction of male homosexuality and female inversion that Bruce and Alison can sexually conflate in this particular chapter. Hence, I proceed to examine how it functions in Proust's text and how it is transformed in *Fun Home* towards repairing the autobiographical avatar's injuries by Oedipally reuniting her with her father.

Proust's use of the flower metaphor as an expression of male homosexuality in the volume entitled *Cities of the Plain* became the most emblematic in modernist gay literature.¹⁴⁹ In this volume, the heterosexual narrator describes the ancient race of inverts, who derive from the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and "link themselves ... to that initial hermaphroditism of which certain rudiments of male organs in the anatomy of women and of female organs in that of men seem still to preserve the trace."¹⁵⁰ After reproducing the fin-de-siècle perception of homosexuality as inversion, Marcel, the narrator, proceeds to relate an incident that he observes from afar and which concerns a scene of sexual

¹⁴⁸ Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 109.

¹⁴⁹ For an analysis of Proust's orchid and bee metaphor, see Syme, *A Touch of Blossom*, 12-13.

¹⁵⁰ Marcel Proust, "Introducing the Men-Women Descendants of those of the Inhabitants of Sodom who Were Spared by the Fire from Heaven," in *Cities of the Plain*, Vol. 2, *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. Scott C. K. Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, 2nd ed. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1981), 653. As Elisabeth Ladenson explains, *Cities of the Plain* refers to the Old Testament cities Sodom and Gomorrah, which have been associated with male and female sexual inversion respectively since the late nineteenth century, hence the characterisation of male inverts as Sodomites. While Gomorrah has not gained a similar validity to Sodom, Proust's *Remembrance*, Ladenson proceeds to note, is one of the rare early twentieth-century literary examples that attempts to describe it, albeit as "the shadow sister of Sodom," based on the author's homosexual experience. See Elisabeth Ladenson, "Gomorrah and Sodom," in *Proust's Lesbianism* (London: Cornell University Press, 1999), 31-36.

intercourse between two male inverts, Mr. de Charlus and Jupien. Marcel describes the sexual act in parallel with the pollination of an orchid by a bee. “M. de Charlus,” he notes in his account, “disappeared through the gate humming like a great bumble-bee ... so long awaited by the orchid,” Jupien.¹⁵¹ As explained, the sexual invert is imagined both as a flower and as a pollinator. By making this comparison and by introducing Jupien as an orchid, a flower which took its name from the Greek word *orchis* (testicle), the narrator uses the flower metaphor in this example to articulate male same-sex desire.¹⁵²

The possibility to construct meanings that are otherwise unspeakable, like that of sexual inversion, exists according to Proust’s narrator in the visual arts and the use of poetic metaphor, like the one mentioned above, that describes male same-sex desire in relation to the orchid and the bumble-bee. Moving from the use of metaphor to the field of visual arts, Marcel explains how painters can recreate the objects they depict through their artistic vision and observes:

A charm in a sort of metamorphosis of the objects represented, analogous to what in poetry we call metaphor ... If God the Father had created things by naming them, it was by taking away their names or giving them other names that Elistir [the painter] created them anew. The names which designate things correspond invariably to an intellectual notion, alien to our true impressions, and compelling us to eliminate from them everything that is not in keeping with that notion.¹⁵³

Almost a century earlier, Marcel’s comment evokes Judith Butler’s descriptions of the restrictions that grammar imposes on what is speakable and “thinkable,” and of the violence that naming processes impose on human subjects in heteronormative hegemonic systems.¹⁵⁴ If we understand Marcel’s comment about the male God’s naming as similar to Butler’s observation, and sexual inversion as one of the meanings stripped off from human beings in their definition as always already heterosexual, then the visual arts and poetic metaphor can be used constructively to articulate such meanings, according to Proust’s narrator. Indeed Butler, too, refers to the potential of the visual arts in the construction of subversive gender and sexuality performances.¹⁵⁵ In his description of male same-sex intercourse as an orchid’s pollination by a bee, itself a visual image constructed in words, Marcel succeeds in speaking the unspeakable in *Cities of the Plain*. Hence, the natural

¹⁵¹ Proust, *Cities of the Plain*, 628.

¹⁵² About the meaning of “orchid,” see Syme, *A Touch of Blossom*, 26.

¹⁵³ Marcel Proust, “Place-Names: The Place,” in *Within A Budding Grove*, Vol. 1, *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (London: Chatto & Widnus, 1981), 893.

¹⁵⁴ See Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xix.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, xvii.

surrounding environment, viewed through an artistic vision that invests it with multiple meanings, becomes essential in such rhetorical constructions.

As Julia Kristeva explains, for Proust, “perception of present reality is a disappointment, and only the imagination can provide lasting enjoyment, in its quest for what is absent.”¹⁵⁶ Proust’s metaphor thus becomes, as she explains, a metamorphosis and it achieves ““the transubstantiation of the irrational qualities of matter and life into human words.””¹⁵⁷ For example, distinct elements like the bee and Mr. de Charlus and the orchid and Jupien, respectively, are conflated together to visualise and thus express homosexual intercourse. Hence, apart from its Wildean aestheticism, the graphic memoir also demonstrates a Proustian transubstantiation in its construction of Bruce in relation to the Gothic Revival house and his grave. By so doing, it succeeds in expressing paternal homosexuality in a context where it is otherwise concealed and silenced and, in so doing, to conflate the father/daughter pair. Nevertheless, the appearance of visual flower metaphors and the set of identifications that I have detected in Bechdel’s Proustian chapter, which I proceed to examine, explicitly present Alison and Bruce as an erotic pair.

Alison begins her narration by identifying Bruce with Proust because of their shared love for gardening and their hidden homosexuality.¹⁵⁸ Additionally, she notes that “if there was ever a bigger pansy than my father, it was Marcel Proust. Proust would have intense emotional friendships with fashionable women . . . But it was young, often straight men with whom he fell in love.”¹⁵⁹ The conflation of distinct realms and the reference to flowers as signifiers of Bruce’s homosexuality become apparent if we pay attention to the visual images that accompany the narrator’s text, which are reproduced on the following

¹⁵⁶ Julia Kristeva, “Apologia for Metaphor,” in *Proust and the Sense of Time*, trans. Stephen Bann (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), 53. For similar discussions on Proust’s artistic vision and his use of metaphor, see also Wallace Fowlie, “A l’Ombre des Jeunes Filles en Fleurs. B. The Problem of Incommunicability,” in *A Reading of Proust*, 2nd ed. (London: Chicago University Press, 1975), 109; and Mieke Bal, “Introduction,” in *The Mottled Screen: Reading Proust Visually*, trans. Anna-Louise Milne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 3.

¹⁵⁷ Kristeva, *Proust and the Sense of Time*, 58.

¹⁵⁸ See Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 92-93. Julia Watson also discusses “In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower.” She also notes the parallelism between Proust and Bruce and the narrator’s use of the word “invert” used by Proust in *Remembrance* to describe herself and her father as inversions of one another in that she has the masculinity her father lacks and *vice versa*. However, she does not explain how Proustian influences recreate what she refers to as the “erotics” of the father/daughter relationship, which she observes in the panel reproduced in the first pages of the graphic memoir (fig. 3-2). See Watson, “Autographic Disclosures and Genealogies,” 38-39. For a similar discussion, see also Julia Watson, “The Pleasures of Reading in Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*,” *Life Writing* 9, no. 3 (2012): 311, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14484528.2012.692652>.

¹⁵⁹ Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 93-94.

page (fig. 3-12).¹⁶⁰ As Alison describes Proust's "emotional friendships with fashionable women," the visual image in the panel depicts the protagonist's mother reading *Vogue*, thus introducing Bruce's relationship with her as a friendship rather than the sexual/erotic one that is supposed to exist between a husband and a wife. Additionally, Alison's father is depicted in the background preoccupied with gardening, which the narrator elsewhere describes as the most "redolent" aspect of his "disturbing bent."¹⁶¹ Similarly, when she refers to Proust's passion for young straight men, the panel below depicts Roy, their babysitter, with whom Bruce had an affair according to Alison's speculations. As she points out, "My father could not afford a chauffeur/secretary [like Proust.] But he did spring for the occasional yardwork assistant/babysitter."¹⁶² To refer to the young men like Roy, who came into the house and possibly had affairs with Bruce, and whose beauty Alison admired, the narrator notes that "we would cultivate these young men like orchids."¹⁶³ By so doing she reproduces Proust's orchid metaphor and introduces both herself and her father as cultivators. Thus, she becomes implicated in the structuring of her father's homoerotic desire on the grounds of their shared love for masculine youth.

Apart from identifying Bruce with Proust, to achieve the sexual connection between Alison and her father, a second set of identifications concerns the protagonist and introduces her as one of Proust's "young girls in flower," Albertine. In *Remembrance*, the narrator becomes infatuated by a group of girls he watches from afar and falls in love with one of them, Albertine. That Proust's girls are similar to Alison in terms of their masculinity is demonstrated by Marcel's comments about them. Initially, he describes Gilberte as a girl with a "somewhat boyish appearance."¹⁶⁴ Additionally, he explains that he first saw Albertine when she was cycling, an activity that at the beginning of the

¹⁶⁰ Gerard Genette describes the conflation of different diegetic realms in a text as "narrative metalepsis" and explains that "any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.), or the inverse ... produces an effect of strangeness that is either comical ... or fantastic." See Gerard Genette, "Voice," in *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin, ed. Jonathan Culler, 2nd ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 234-235. In this chapter, I argue that it also achieves the sexual reunion between Alison and Bruce in their conflation with Proust and one of his fictional girls, respectively.

¹⁶¹ See Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 90.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 94, 95.

¹⁶³ Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 95.

¹⁶⁴ Marcel Proust, "Combray," in *Swann's Way*, Vol. 1, *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. Scott C.K. Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, 2nd ed. (London: Chatto & Widnus, 1981), 122.

twentieth century was not considered appropriate for girls.¹⁶⁵ Randolph Splitter describes the group of Proust's girls and points out that they are

Adolescent girls on the verge of sexual maturity [whose] frank uninhibited manners [are] less sexual than tomboyish. In fact these athletic, tomboyish girls – the cyclist Albertine who plays golf and ‘ferret’ and wears a polo cap, the girl who plays leapfrog with the old gentleman, as well as Gilberte ... – may remind Marcel of his own boyish adolescent self.¹⁶⁶

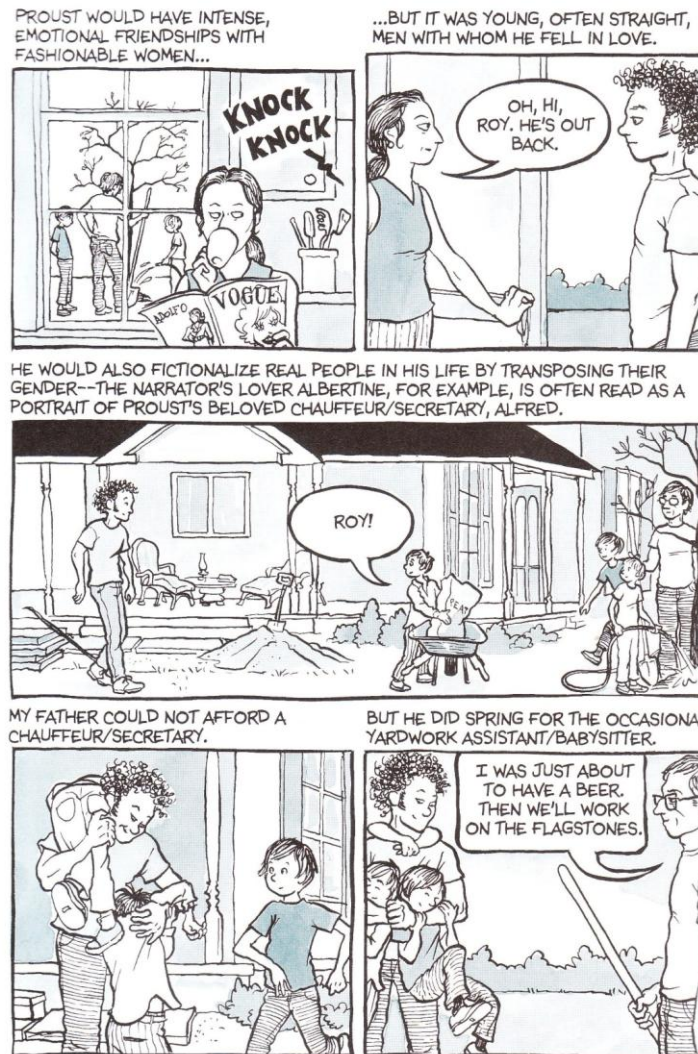


Fig. 3-12: Alison Bechdel, “In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower,” p.94, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (Jonathan Cape, 2006). Copyright © 2006 by Alison Bechdel. All Rights Reserved. Used with permission.

¹⁶⁵ Proust, *Within a Budding Grove*, 851.

¹⁶⁶ Randolph Splitter, “Proust, Joyce and the Theory of Metaphor,” (March 1978) <http://authors.library.caltech.edu/13687/1/HumsWP-0003.pdf>.

If we perceive Proust's girls as masculine or sexual inverts, a term Alison uses to describe herself as well, then for their masculinity to be explicitly constructed, they also need to be introduced in relation to the flower metaphor. Indeed, the narrator explains that his desire for them is preserved only when he is situated far from them and observes them from a distance that allows him to perceive them as conflated with the background space, with the flowers that surround them. Bechdel's narrator refers to the conflation between Proust's girls and the flowers and notes that "the young narrator [Marcel], failing to distinguish [Gilberte] ... from the general floral fecundity, instantly fell in love with her."¹⁶⁷

Therefore, distance becomes essential in the construction and maintenance of desire. As Marcel explains,

The mistresses whom I have loved most passionately have never coincided with my love for them. That love was genuine, since I subordinated everything else to seeing them, keeping them for myself alone ... My sole joy lay in seeing them, my sole anxiety in waiting for them to come.¹⁶⁸

Marcel's joys in seeing the girls stem precisely from his distant artistic vision that allows him to invest both the girls and the surrounding nature with new meanings, thus constructing them as sexual inverts. As Lisa Guenther observes, his desire for Albertine "collapses upon [his] attaining [of] the desired object."¹⁶⁹ While the narrator idealises her when enabled to perceive her as a rose and before being able to physically touch her, his comments after kissing her demonstrate precisely the collapse of his desire.

But alas – for in this matter of kissing our nostrils and eyes are as ill-placed as our lips are ill-made – suddenly my eyes ceased to see, then my nose, crushed by the collision, no longer perceived any odor, and, without thereby gaining any clearer idea of the taste of the rose of my desire, I learned, from these obnoxious signs, that at least I was in the act of kissing Albertine's cheek.¹⁷⁰

Marcel's sexual desire exists only insofar as he can perceive Albertine as a rose, which demarcates her hermaphroditism, her female masculinity. When the narrator finally touches her, her seductive ability is destroyed because their proximity does not allow her identification with the floral surroundings.

¹⁶⁷ Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 93.

¹⁶⁸ Proust, *Cities of the Plain*, 1164.

¹⁶⁹ Lisa Guenther, "Other Fecundities: Proust and Irigaray on Sexual Difference," *A Journal of Feminist Studies* 21, no. 2 (2010): 35, <http://differences.dukejournals.org/content/21/2/24.full.pdf+html>.

¹⁷⁰ Marcel Proust, "A Visit from Albertine," in *The Guermantes Way*, Vol. 1, *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. Scott C. K. Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (London: Chatto & Widnus, 1981), 379.

Apart from explaining the flower/girl conflation in Proust's novel, in *Fun Home*, Alison also explains that Proust "would also fictionalize real people in his life by transforming their gender – the narrator's lover Albertine, for example, is often read as a portrait of Proust's beloved chauffeur/ secretary, Alfred."¹⁷¹ What she describes is introduced in Proustian criticism as the transposition theory. Justin O' Brien wrote in 1949 of Proust's affair with Alfred Agostinelli, a man who seemed "a real 'key' to the character of Albertine," associating "the novelist's homosexuality" to the creation of "the transposed ... sex of Albertine."¹⁷² O'Brien notes that in order for the novelist to mask his homosexual desire for Agostinelli in his text, he had to create a form of a sexual inversion between the real Alfred and the fictional Albertine, to transpose his lover's male soul into a female body. Having provided readers with descriptions of the Proustian flower metaphor and consequent transubstantiation and the transposition theory, *Fun Home* also puts them to use in order to construct the autobiographical avatar as Albertine, the masculine girl who is identified with Bruce/Proust's object of desire.

To do so, the narrator describes an event that took place when she was ten years old and went on a camping trip with her father, a male friend and her brothers. On their way to the mountains, she discovered a calendar with the picture of a naked female model in the car and remembers: "I felt as if I'd been stripped naked myself, inexplicably ashamed, like Adam and Eve."¹⁷³ In seeing the naked model, Alison as a child feels a discomfort that contradicts the pleasure she describes in her identification with the male basketball player during her first masturbation incident at the age of thirteen. The two panels reproduced below (fig. 3-13), demonstrate the contradiction between the naked body of the model and Alison's visual embodiment as a masculine girl, facilitated also by the use of Proustian metaphor and transubstantiation. Alison is clothed and sitting on a wooden pole that functions as a phallic symbol. Her depiction performs a different gender construction than the one allowed by the nakedness of model.

¹⁷¹ Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 93-94.

¹⁷² Justin O' Brien, "Albertine the Ambiguous: Notes on Proust's Transposition of Sexes," *Modern Language Association* 64, no. 5 (1949): 935, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/459544>. For an argument against the transposition theory, see Ladenson, *Proust's Lesbianism*, 5-7.

¹⁷³ Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 112.



Fig. 3-13: Alison Bechdel, “In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower,” panels 1 and 3, p.112, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (Jonathan Cape, 2006). Copyright © 2006 by Alison Bechdel. All Rights Reserved. Used with permission.

In the second panel, we come across a manipulation of the protagonist’s surrounding environment in the mountains that introduces the wooden pole as a continuation of her body, a phallic prosthesis, which visually articulates her masculinity. Hence, similarly to Bruce’s conflation with the family home and the obelisk, Alison’s conflation with the surrounding environment, a transubstantiation of sorts, allows her representation as a masculine phallic girl and her identification with her father’s ideal objects of desire, adolescent boys. Bechdel’s manipulation of the visual element of comics demonstrates Proust and Butler’s views on the potential of visual arts and poetic metaphor to construct unspeakable meanings and repairs Alison’s wound of female castration. Proustian metaphor and transubstantiation are described by the narrator and then translated in the visual register to release both Alison and her father from the restrictions of heteronormatively sexed and gendered bodies. Hence, the canonical father’s influences are used reparatively, because it is precisely through their freedom, allowed by the visual/verbal, bitextual medium of comics, that Bruce and his daughter are reunited.

As Judith Butler notes,

Always already a cultural sign, the body sets limits to the imaginary meanings that it occasions, but is never free of an imaginary construction. The fantasized body can never be understood in relation to another culturally instituted fantasy, one which claims the place of the 'literal' and the 'real.' The limits of the 'real' are produced within the naturalized heterosexualization of bodies in which physical facts serve as causes and desires reflect the inexorable effects of physicality.¹⁷⁴

Butler's description of the fantasised body that moves beyond the boundaries of heteronormativity applies to Bechdel's denaturalised bodily performances, which are conflated with the spatial background to allow Alison's reparation and the father/daughter erotic reunion. Like Proust's Albertine who is introduced as a hermaphroditic rose, Alison too is conflated with the natural background for her masculinity to be expressed.

To make the identification between Albertine and Alison more explicit, the narrator proceeds to relate another incident from the camping trip, which she remembers and re-interprets as an adult reader, aware of Proust's transposition model. During their visit to the strip mine, Alison and her brothers were allowed entry by the operator of one of the cabs.¹⁷⁵ After coming across another calendar with a naked female model, Alison explains that she felt "it seemed imperative that [the operator] not know [she] was a girl."¹⁷⁶ Having reached her decision, she asked her brother to "call [her] Albert instead of Alison," but he ignored her wish.¹⁷⁷ "My brother ignored me," she notes, but "looking back, my stratagem strikes me as a precocious feat of Proustian transposition – not to mention a tidy melding of Proust's real Alfred and his fictional Albertine."¹⁷⁸ Bechdel's narrative therefore re-transposes the gender of Proust's Albertine. If we are to see the Proustian girl as a fictional disguise of Proust's lover Alfred Agostinelli, then for the purposes of *Fun Home*, Albertine is transformed back into a boy with Alison's passing and her wish to be called Albert. If Bruce is identified with Proust and Alison with Albertine, then these identifications and Bechdel's transubstantiation allow the construction of the father/daughter pair as an erotic one. Thus, the autobiographical subject is embodied beyond her trauma because she is presented as sexually connected with her father.

By adopting the tools provided by Proust, *Fun Home* recreates Alison's childhood experiences and crafts the literary father's text in a way that suits the needs of expressing

¹⁷⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 96.

¹⁷⁵ Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 111.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

Alison's desire for Bruce. The distance the wiser adult narrator and artist gain from the events and the incorporation of Wildean aestheticism and Proustian transposition, metaphor, and transubstantiation function towards the reunion of Bruce and Alison. Simultaneously, they introduce what William Carter describes as Proust's "topological representation of *eros* ... the idea ... of capturing the beloved's essence through a framing device or a visual image."¹⁷⁹ If the "essence" that is captured through the artist's distant vision is sexual inversion, then *Fun Home* too allows such constructions only insofar as the reader is aware and distant enough to detect Bechdel's Proustian take on her childhood.

The importance of distance preservation in the construction of the family narrative in *Fun Home* is introduced by the narrator herself. As she explains, "perhaps my cool aesthetic distance itself does more to convey the arctic climate of our family than any particular literary comparison."¹⁸⁰ Bechdel's aesthetic distance, like that of Proust's narrator, does much more than describe "the arctic climate" in the Bechdel family home. It provides a denaturalised expression of Bruce's homosexuality embedded with Alison's female masculinity, which allows a sexual bond between the two to be performed in the graphic memoir. The pastiche arrangements of Wildean aestheticism and Proustian metaphor, transubstantiation, and transposition redistribute gender and sexuality performances across human bodies and spatial backgrounds so as to deconstruct the violence and restrictions imposed by heteronormative discourses and sexed bodies. Additionally, they facilitate the reconfiguration of the Bechdel family kinship bonds in a way that allows the reunion between the otherwise distant and abusive Bruce and Alison. By reinterpreting Alison's childhood labyrinth-like house, and Bruce's inexplicable, painful (for the children) obsession with it, *Fun Home* rebuilds it as a mediating tool that connects the father/daughter pair. Similarly, by putting into productive use paternal homosexuality in relation to the daughter's female masculinity, previously described as a distancing factor between the two, it positively reconfigures the Oedipal bond between Alison and Bruce. In this chapter I argue for the centrality of Wilde and Proust's works in Bechdel's graphic memoir precisely because they allow the positive transformation of the problematic father/daughter relationship.

¹⁷⁹ William C. Carter, "Women as Landscapes," in *The Proustian Quest* (London: New York University Press, 1992), 25.

¹⁸⁰ Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 65.

In the final pages of *Fun Home* the narrator refers to the history behind the publication of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, her father’s favourite book. She explains that “Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap were prosecuted for running episodes in their magazine, *The Little Review*,” and notes that “Sylvia Beach took in publishing a manuscript no one else would touch.”¹⁸¹ Furthermore, Alison notes that “perhaps it was just a coincidence that these women – along with Sylvia’s lover Adrienne Monnier, who published the French edition of *Ulysses* – were all Lesbians. But I like to think they went to the mat for this book *because* they were lesbians, because they knew a thing or two about erotic truth.”¹⁸² In the same page the fourth panel shows Bruce’s hand when he gives Alison Colette’s *Earthly Paradise*.¹⁸³ Bechdel’s decision to refer to the aforementioned collaborations and to visually depict her father’s contribution in Alison’s coming out as a lesbian by giving her Colette’s book, points to the positive outcomes of the interaction between homosexual men and lesbian women with regards to the (literary) expression of what she describes as “erotic truth.”¹⁸⁴ Continuing in their path, Bechdel, the lesbian contemporary artist, chooses to re-appropriate the meanings created in the male homosexual canon to perform her autobiographical alter ego’s erotic, Oedipal reclaiming of her father.



Fig. 3-14: Alison Bechdel, “The Antihero’s Journey,” panels 2, p. 232, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (Jonathan Cape, 2006). Copyright © 2006 by Alison Bechdel. All Rights Reserved. Used with permission.

¹⁸¹ Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 229.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ With regards to Colette’s influence in Alison’s coming out, see Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 207.

The last panel of *Fun Home*, shown above (fig. 3-14), captures precisely this connection between Alison and Bruce. Bechdel ends her narrative in the same way that she embarked on it, with the myth of Dedalus and Icarus.¹⁸⁵ She is depicted as a child, with a bathing suit, about to fall in her father's arms as he stands in a swimming pool. Like Icarus she is just about to fall, to physically touch her father. Nevertheless, the panel freezes at the moment before Alison's fall, maintaining the distance between the father/daughter pair that renders their relationship erotic. The autobiographical avatar's position in the panel above Bruce, in addition to the narrator's reference to the Icarian myth, alludes back to the beginning of the narrative and Alison's Icarian games with her father (fig. 3-2). While their bond was initially disturbed, in the last panel it is maintained before the destruction their touch/collision will bring.

Unlike Alison's masculine appearance throughout *Fun Home*, in this panel the protagonist's bathing suit brings her closer to a heteronormative female gender stylization. However, her masculine identification and the recreation of her desire for Bruce are signified by a different almost unnoticeable aspect of the panel. If we pay close attention, we can observe two dots at the bottom. The dots allude back to Bechdel's Proustian chapter, "In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower," where we observe the escalation of Alison and Bruce's representation as an erotic pair through their identifications with Albertine and Proust respectively. In the same chapter, the narrator explains how she felt when she discovered a photograph of Roy after her father's death. In the photograph Roy is lying on a bed, wearing just his underwear. In seeing it, Alison identifies, as she explains, with "her father's illicit awe."¹⁸⁶ Roy's picture becomes, therefore, a trace that captures Bruce's homoerotic desire by visually embodying his lover and Alison's gaze implicates her in her father's homoerotic desire. Commenting upon the picture, the narrator notes that her father had "carefully blotted out" the year the picture was taken "and two small bullets on either side with a blue magic marker."¹⁸⁷ Nevertheless, she proceeds to explain that her father's "ineffectual attempt at censorship" leaves evidence with regards to his homosexuality that is "simultaneously hidden and revealed."¹⁸⁸ Even though Alison fails to understand Bruce's reasoning behind the erasure of the two bullets, Bechdel uses them productively to recreate and preserve in the very final panel of the book the erotic

¹⁸⁵ See Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 231-232.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 100-101.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

connection between the father and the daughter by alluding to the meanings and the implications behind Roy's picture. By so doing, and by underscoring Alison's Oedipal desire towards Bruce in her pastiche arrangements, Bechdel rejects the divisions that emerge in the Freudian model of the Oedipus complex.

Adrielle Mitchell observes that Bechdel "locates both her father and herself outside the heteronormative, procreative structure of the family" because of their common homosexuality.¹⁸⁹ She further suggests that the artist "does not have to renounce the family of origin to be queer: she can queer the family."¹⁹⁰ Forgetting the heterosexual family as a source of origins is a method queer people should take up, according to Judith Halberstam, to deconstruct the power of heteronormative kinship bonds. Halberstam proposes that as queer people,

We may want to forget family and forget lineage and forget tradition in order to start from a new place, not the place where the old engenders the new, where the old makes a place for the new, but where the new begins afresh, unfettered by memory, tradition, and usable pasts ... It may be the case that we must forget family in our theorizations of gender, sexuality, community, and politics and adopt forgetting as a strategy for the disruption of Oedipal transmission.¹⁹¹

If forgetting the family can disrupt Oedipal dynamics and create a queer alternative, *Fun Home* shows that remembering, repeating and reconfiguring it does so too. It demonstrates that remembering canonical male homosexual literary fathers and the family unit through the wiser adult artist's *a posteriori* knowledge of her father's homosexuality in relation to the autobiographical subject's masculinity can also queer the Oedipal complex.

Commenting upon Proust's *Remembrance*, Bechdel's narrator notes:

After dad died, an updated translation of Proust came out, *Remembrance of Things Past* was re-titled *In Search of Lost Time*. The new title is a more literal translation of *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, but it still doesn't

¹⁸⁹ Adrielle Mitchell, "Spectral Memory, Sexuality and Inversion: An Arthrological Study of Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*," *ImageText: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies* 4, no. 3 (2009), http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v4_3/mitchell/.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid. Mitchell describes an Oedipal dynamic between Alison and her father but introduces Bruce's homosexuality as castration and feminisation, reading him as the "weak mother" whom Alison repudiates in favour of the father. Nevertheless, to reduce Bruce to a mother is to remain restricted within the binary restrictions that shape the Freudian Oedipal theory and fail to explain the process that takes place in *Fun Home*.

¹⁹¹ Judith Halberstam, "Dude where is my Phallus?," in *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 70-71.

capture the full resonance of *perdu*. It means not just lost but ruined, undone, wasted, wrecked, and spoiled.¹⁹²

Fun Home is a graphic memoir that demonstrates Alison's effort to make sense of her distant father, to reconcile with his death and recover from his loss. If we perceive her years in the family home as lost time, "wasted and ruined" because of Bruce's closeted homosexuality and preoccupation with the house that hindered his relationship with her, then by reinterpreting and recreating them, Bechdel's graphic memoir demonstrates how both the lost time and the lost father are ultimately regained.

In *Fun Home*, Alison Oedipally coexists with Bruce through the pastiche arrangements of Wilde and Proust's influences. Thus, the text demonstrates the potential of comics to complicate the reading process with the manipulation and reconfiguration of canonical influences towards subversive gender and sexuality performances that allow the reunion of the homosexual father with his masculine daughter. A medium that has until recently been rejected by academic circles due to its associations with the juvenile and the countercultural emerges therefore out of Bechdel's hands as a productive tool for feminist re-appropriations and revisions of the male canon. Like Gloeckner and Barry's graphic memoirs, but at the same time in a different way, *Fun Home* enters the paternal canonical past and claims acknowledgement of its cultural value as the artistic daughter's work. In so doing, it functions reparatively within the cultural domain that has until recently rejected the medium of comics and the work of women artists.

¹⁹² Bechdel, *Fun Home*, 119.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have examined the role of pastiche in contemporary American women's graphic memoirs. Taking as representative examples of the genre Phoebe Gloeckner, Lynda Barry and Alison Bechdel's works, I have demonstrated that the different versions of insidious trauma narrated in each artist's works demand different uses of pastiche, which function as parodic critical transformations of previous dominant texts, and lead towards reparation and the feminist reconfiguration of the female subject. I have also explained that in the woman and the girl's reconfiguration, contemporary graphic memoirs also challenge, and point to the restrictions and the insufficiencies that some of Freud's most significant theories have. Thus, I have pointed out how Gloeckner, Barry and Bechdel direct their subversive feminist struggles beyond the male literary and artistic canon, to that of psychoanalysis as well. They do so by undermining Freud's rejection of the seduction theory and his views on female castration and passivity as shown in Chapter One, by transforming the monstrous maternal vagina as indicated in Chapter Two, and by rejecting the gender and sexuality binary divisions that Freud's Oedipal complex entails, as demonstrated in Chapter Three.

While Gloeckner, Barry and Bechdel are aware of the cultural heritage of women's art, in which their own graphic memoirs are also situated, it is precisely by choosing to turn their critical stance towards male dominant texts that they succeed in re-inventing the female subject. Their pastiche arrangements introduce each autobiographical subject in ways that reject heteronormative formations of gender and sexuality and that function reparatively in relation to the distinct forms of daughter/parent problematic relationships narrated in each work. In Gloeckner's narratives Minnie's sexual trauma demands the feminist transformation of the passive, silenced, sexual girl who is in the service of adult male heterosexuality. Barry's version of insidious trauma derives from maternal violence and estrangement, and the reparation it demands concerns the re-signification of the mother/infant bond and of maternal monstrosity. Lastly, in *Fun Home*, Alison's trauma stems from closeted paternal homosexuality that leads to Bruce's distancing and abusive behaviour towards her. Hence, Bechdel repeats and reconfigures influences from of the male homosexual canon in a way that allows the reunion of the father/daughter pair.

As the reparation of each autobiographical subject's trauma is achieved via pastiche, this thesis argues for the centrality of pastiche as a reparative mechanism in contemporary women's graphic memoirs. It demonstrates that it is through Gloeckner, Barry and Bechdel's different uses of pastiche that each autobiographical subject is constructed – primarily through the visual register – beyond the familial trauma that the verbal text narrates. In addition, it shows how the Western literary and artistic male canon can be re-imagined and reconfigured, through a feminist perspective, to challenge previous discursive formations of the female subject and to react to the marginalization of women's art, a phenomenon that Ann Cvetkovich describes as women's cultural depression. As Gloeckner, Barry and Bechdel's graphic memoirs focus on the protagonists' childhood and adolescence, the family sphere and the relationship between each child and the respective parental figure become focal points in each text. Thus, remembering takes place in the domains of literary and artistic canonical traditions and private family life. The amalgamation of the private narrative of problematic and abused childhood on the one hand, and of canonical male traditions on the other, functions constructively both in the familial and in the cultural domain by introducing subversive feminist subjects.

The potential offered by the medium of comics and its richly flexible boundaries is put into productive use by Gloeckner, Barry and Bechdel in their narration of each protagonist's family strife, of each girl's effort to deal with parental abuse, neglect and violence. Comics' bitextuality infused with pastiche arrangements succeeds, as it has been shown, in tackling matters of childhood suffering. In *The Mind of the Child*, Sally Shuttleworth refers to the idea that a child should be seen and not heard.¹ More so, this is the case for female children, since women and girls are burdened with what Laura Mulvey described as "to-be-looked-at-ness."² If being silenced, observed and constructed by patriarchal discourses has led to the production of children and women as silent spectacles and objects under the male gaze, in their use of the medium of comics to tell the stories of growing up, women artists like the three included in this thesis take up this position to undermine it.³ What Siebers describes as the "excessive expressivity of images" speaks for the autobiographical avatars and narrates their experiences in ways that move them beyond

¹ See Sally Shuttleworth, "Introduction," in *The Mind of the Child: Child Development in Literature, Science and Medicine, 1840-1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1.

² See Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 19.

³ Thomas Mitchell refers to the "contexts of object discourse" or ekphrasis," which he describes as the cases "when mute objects seem to speak" and provides as one such example the narratives of women and children. He notes that such groups often suffer "forms of subjection and abject powerlessness that compel public acts of autobiography." See Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 197.

subordination and suffering, both in terms of the family domain and of their position within male-dominated canonical literary and artistic formations.⁴

In the first chapter, I discussed Phoebe Gloeckner's parodic engagement with male artistic predecessors in *A Child's Life* and *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* and the narrative of the protagonist's sexualisation and sexual suffering in the domain of the family. I demonstrated how pastiche is used to construct the daughter's familiarisation with adult male sexuality and with her status as a sexual being during childhood. By highlighting Robert Crumb, Marcel Duchamp, Edgar Allan Poe and Vladimir Nabokov's influences in her first graphic memoir, I situate Gloeckner's work in male-dominated literary and artistic traditions that span back to the nineteenth century and introduce the female body – both adult and underage – as a sexual object that exists for the satisfaction of male adult sexual desire. In so doing, I have argued that, Gloeckner's graphic memoir offers a de-romanticised version of the Lolita figure embodied in Minnie as it also mediates the horrors and the trauma that come along with the sexualisation of underage girls by father figures. Gloeckner's second graphic memoir, *The Diary*, continued to draw from the traditions of canonical male art and the negotiation of the adolescent female spectacle therein. In reproducing the form of Victorian black-and-white illustration, and Aubrey Beardsley and Oscar Wilde's influences therein, *The Diary* mediates the girl protagonist's gradual transformation from a victim to a survivor. In its implicit allusion to Salome, the late-Victorian Lolita, and its more explicit re-appropriation of the painting *Gabrielle d'Estrées and her Sister, the Duchess of Villars*, which introduces a Renaissance predecessor of the underage girl who is sexualised by the adult male patriarch, the graphic memoir is once again situated in the aforementioned traditions while at the same time subverting them. In Gloeckner's feminist revision, which underscores the potential of comics for a critical engagement with previous texts, Minnie emerges as a phallic Lolita who violates and visually castrates her stepfather and abuser. Her transgression is allowed and performed through the visual aspect of the graphic memoirs, where she comes to own a parodic, carnivalesque version of the Freudian phallus and the self-sufficiency, power and wholeness that come with it.

In the second chapter, I investigated Lynda Barry's graphic memoirs *One! Hundred! Demons!* and *What It Is* and how they are influenced by William Blake's

⁴ Siebers, "Words Stare like a Glass Eye," 1326.

illuminated manuscripts, Michelangelo da Caravaggio's painting of the Medusa, and fairy tales by the brothers Grimm. In Barry's texts, I identified a playful adaptation and incorporation of influences that function towards constructing the protagonist's imaginary intrauterine return. Barry's autobiographical alter ego struggles to survive her mother's distant, neglectful and often abusive – both verbally and physically – behaviour. However, by introducing new versions of Blake's gender-ambiguous characters, his calligraphy and his verbal/visual narratives, her texts repeatedly reproduce the continuity between the self and the mother, and the wholeness of the mother/child unity. The reconnection with the mother figure escalates in *What It Is* and the incorporation of Caravaggio's painting of the Medusa, together with the re-imagination and recreation of the monster. Apart from Blake's tradition, by constructing her second graphic memoir with influences from the brothers Grimm's fairy tales, Barry introduces a feminist reconfiguration of the Medusa that transforms her into Lynda's protector and into the artistic visual embodiment of the secure and pleasurable maternal womb. Thus, she also undermines the Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic formation of maternal monstrosity. Barry's texts reproduce the meanings formulated in the forefathers' works though a parodic childish perspective to construct Lynda beyond the primary narcissistic wound and its repetition in her mother's hostility towards her during her childhood. Simultaneously, even though they are situated in the aforementioned traditions, they also undo them in Barry's creation of the books as domestic products of female amateur creativity and in their conflation between the original and the fraudulent copy.

In the third chapter, I examined Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* and the creation of an Oedipal connection between the distant closeted homosexual father and the masculine daughter protagonist. Bechdel's artistic decision to borrow elements from the homosexual male literary canon and the transformation of those influences from the verbal to the visual register resolve in the context of the graphic memoir the protagonist's problematic relationship with her father. Bruce's attention to the Gothic Revival house and his obsession with maintaining heteronormative appearances created a distance between him and his daughter. However, by focusing on these two elements, and by reinventing them through Wildean and Proustian perspectives, *Fun Home* achieves the denaturalisation of gender and sexuality representations that lead to the Oedipal reunion of the father/daughter pair. Introducing Bruce as a nineteenth-century aesthete and the house as his work of art, which performs his homosexuality, embedded with Alison's masculine representations,

allows, as I have explained, the reconnection between the two. Simultaneously, Proustian transubstantiation and transposition also contribute to Alison's identification with her father's adolescent male objects of desire. Ultimately, in her identification of Bruce with Marcel Proust and of the protagonist with Albertine, Bechdel constructs the father/daughter pair as an erotic one. Thus, her graphic memoir demonstrates how the medium of comics can achieve a complicated translation of canonical literary work in the visual realm, and how productive the daughter artist's interaction with the homosexual fathers' traditions is.

Gloeckner's protagonist was recreated as a masqueraded phallic girl who rejects the abusive father figure altogether and Barry's autobiographical alter-ego is conflated with the artist's version of the *vagina dentata*, not with the actual mother of the protagonist. However, in Bechdel's graphic memoir, the way Bruce himself is reconfigured in relation to the house and later to his grave Oedipally reconnect him with his masculine daughter because they function as Wildean aesthetic artworks. Hence, each protagonist is introduced beyond her insidious trauma and the problematic relationship with her parent. Simultaneously, the verbal/visual element of the graphic memoirs emerges as a feminist tool, whose boundaries can be stretched to evoke and differentiate a variety of male-dominated traditions so as to make them speak the experiences of each underage female subject.

The interaction of women artists with the male canon has been rejected within feminist circles since Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, first published in 1928. "Have you any notion," Woolf asked, "how many books are written about women in the course of one year? Have you any notion how many are written by men? Are you aware that you are, perhaps the most discussed animal in the universe?"⁵ Proceeding to describe the "mental, moral and physical inferiority" attributed to women in men's texts, the narrator becomes angered by the male-dominated traditions and the way they produce and reproduce women.⁶ "It is useless for a woman writer to turn to the great men writers for help," she concludes, the "man's mind [is] too unlike her own for her to lift anything substantial from him successfully."⁷ Urging women to look back to their mothers' traditions, Woolf rejects any form of interaction with the male canon.

⁵ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Penguin, 2004), 30.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

Similarly, feminist poet and philosopher Adrienne Rich, who writes during the 1960s and 1970s, refers to the unrepresentability of women in Western art and literature and, after associating her work with that of Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*, she notes,

A lot is being said today about the influence that the myths and images of women have on all of us who are products of culture. I think it has been a peculiar confusion to the girl or woman who tries to write because she is peculiarly susceptible to language. She goes to poetry or fiction looking for her way of being in the world [and] comes up against something that negates everything she is about: she meets the image of Woman in books written by men. She finds a terror and a dream, she finds a beautiful pale face, she finds La Belle Dame Sans Merci, she finds Juliet or Tess or Salome, but precisely what she does not find is that absorbed, drudging, puzzled, sometimes inspired creature, herself.⁸

Women artists and writers, as this thesis has also demonstrated, come across a female subject which has nothing to do with them as it has been created by men. In the same paper, Rich observes the damage done to women's creativity and the expression of female experience because of the dominant discursive formations of the woman as a *femme fatale*, a seductress, or a vulnerable beautiful object. As she notes,

The specter of this kind of male judgment, along with the active discouragement and thwarting of her needs by a culture controlled by males, has created problems for the woman writer: problems of contact with herself, problems of language and style, problems of energy and survival ... So what does she do? What did I do? I read the older women poets with their peculiar keenness and ambivalence.⁹

The urgency for revision and recreation of the literary and artistic mothers' work is unquestionable for Rich. Contemporary artist and writer Mira Schor also situates herself in the same tradition. She writes that for women artists to reference canonical fathers is to seek legitimation and argues that "relying [too] heavily on a male system to validate a feminist practice" leads to their constant subordination by "her mega-father."¹⁰ Nevertheless, as this thesis has shown, to engage with the artistic and literary mega-fathers is not necessarily to be subsumed by them. To the contrary, the productive cross-pollination between the fathers and the daughters' works demonstrated in Gloeckner, Barry and Bechdel's graphic memoirs can achieve much more than the reproduction of daughters' subordination. As explained in Chapter One, Gloeckner's engagement with the

⁸ Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken," 21.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

¹⁰ Mira Schor, "Patrilineage," in *Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (London: Routledge, 2003), 253.

canon undoes what Christine Froula describes as the “hysterical cultural script,” which reproduces the dominance of the father and the silencing of the daughter. Her graphic memoirs succeed in doing so by introducing the trauma effect of Minnie’s sexualisation and her transformation into a powerful phallic girl. Similarly, Barry and Bechdel’s pastiche arrangements demonstrate how influences from fathers’ works can be reiterated to enrich and complicate the expression of the female autobiographical subject’s experience and to facilitate its construction beyond domestic suffering and trauma on the one hand, and cultural subordination and silence on the other. Thus, these texts undermine women’s inferiority and silence by working with discursive formations that create and reproduce them.

Janet Wolff explores feminine writing and painting within such contexts and notes:

It seems reasonable to suppose that new forms of cultural expression, by virtue of the fact that their very existence challenges and dislocates dominant narratives and discourses, provide the space for different voices to speak and for hitherto silenced subjects to articulate their experience.¹¹

The new forms of women’s cultural expression are described by Wolff as “feminine sentences.”¹² After clarifying that the term does not only refer to women’s writing about their own experience, Wolff proceeds to point out that the phrase “feminine sentences” also entails “the secondary meaning of the word ‘sentence,’ indicating an exploration of the constraints and restrictions experienced by women in a patriarchal culture. Women in this sense,” she explains, “are sentenced to containment and silence.”¹³ According to Wolff, feminist criticism on women’s artistic and literary production “is intended as a contribution to the overthrow of that ‘sentence,’ and to the process whereby women find ways to intervene in an excluding culture, and to articulate their own experience.”¹⁴ It is in the same context that this thesis situates contemporary American women’s graphic memoirs by taking as case studies Gloeckner, Barry and Bechdel’s works. By so doing, it has introduced the potential of pastiche arrangements in the verbal/visual medium of comics to facilitate the feminist reconfiguration of the paternal literary and artistic canon in the service of the female autobiographical subject. Hence, it has shown that engagement with mega-fathers does not merely subsume women artists but produces radical feminist “sentences,” in Wolff’s words. Indeed, it is in this undoing and reimagining of male-

¹¹ Wolff, *Feminine Sentences*, 9.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

dominated cultural formations of the woman and the girl that the significance of contemporary women's graphic memoirs lies.

Therefore, paying attention to pastiche further complicates and enriches the formations of life narratives in the verbal/visual medium of comics. In his discussion on intertextuality, the broader category under which pastiche falls, Jonathan Culler explains that

It becomes less a name for a work's relation to particular prior texts than a designation of its participation in the discursive space of a culture: the relationship between a text and the various languages or signifying practices of a culture and its relation to those texts which articulate for it the possibilities of that culture.¹⁵

If contemporary American women's graphic memoirs critically engage with the Western male literary and artistic canon and the possibilities it offers with regards to the formation of the female subject, then by reworking these possibilities, they reconfigure the woman and the girl's status as they simultaneously offer new prospects for their discursive formations. The medium of comics, embedded with pastiche arrangements, allows the creation of a female subject that is decolonised by the canonical father's gaze. Even though the girl and the woman are created by Gloeckner, Barry and Bechdel's interactions with canonical fathers' works, they question and mock and subvert their previous male-dominated configurations.

Literary critic Harold Bloom describes intertextuality in literary tradition as an Oedipal struggle between fathers and sons. He perceives sons' poems as "defensive processes in constant change [and as] acts of reading."¹⁶ In being written, a poem is always already an interpretation of a previous text, "a fierce, proleptic debate with itself, as well as with precursor poems."¹⁷ As Jonathan Culler points out, the antagonism that rises between a poet and his predecessor in Bloom's criticism stems from the "Freudian analogies which structure it [and] keep everything in the family. Intertextuality is the family archive; when one explores it one stays wholly within the traditional canon of major poets."¹⁸ In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom explains that "most poets – like most men – suffer some version of the family romance as they struggle to define their most advantageous relation

¹⁵ Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs*, 103.

¹⁶ Harold Bloom, "Poetry, Revisionism, Repression," *Critical Inquiry* 2, no. 2 (1975): 250, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1342901>.

¹⁷ Ibid. See also Harold Bloom, "Introduction," in *Poetry and Repression* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), 2-3.

¹⁸ Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs*, 108.

to their precursor and their Muse.”¹⁹ The sons who struggle to overcome their fathers produce poems that demonstrate a “complex act of misreading” of previous texts, which Bloom names “poetic misprision.”²⁰ In their strife to claim the Muse, the Freudian mother in that matter, the sons are engaged in a competition with the fathers and strive to produce work that is different and better. Bloom’s interpretation of literary intertextuality formulates the “conception of poetic history as a tale of parricidal battles between the Titans of the past and their ... poetic descendants,” as David Fite notes.²¹ Where does this discussion leave the woman artist, however? While the mother is located in the position of the object that stimulates male creativity, the daughter, the woman artist, is non-existent in the aforementioned accounts.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar refer to Bloom’s “anxiety of influence” in *The Madwoman in the Attic* and note that

For an ‘anxiety of influence’ the woman writer substitutes what we have called an ‘anxiety of authorship,’ an anxiety built from complex and often only barely conscious fears of that authority, which seems to the female artist to be by definition inappropriate to her sex ... Indeed, to the extent that it forms one of the unique bonds that link women to what we might call the secret sisterhood of their literary subculture, such anxiety in itself constitutes a crucial mark of that subculture.²²

Dividing the culture of mega-fathers and the countercultural sisterhood of women writers, Gilbert and Gubar reproduce Woolf and Rich’s separatist view of male and female traditions in Western literature and art. However, this thesis has shown what happens when we discuss the artistic and literary daughters’ interaction with the fathers. The discussions included in the three previous chapters demonstrate not so much a process of antagonism between the forefathers and the female offspring, but rather a productive amalgamation of the two groups. Contemporary women cartoonists’ Oedipal interaction with the canonical fathers produces texts that achieve the female autobiographical subjects’ formation beyond trauma and problematic childhoods and beyond heteronormative pre-assigned notions of gender and sexuality that restrict them in positions of inferiority and subordination both within artistic and literary traditions and in the family domain. Gloeckner, Barry and

¹⁹ Harold Bloom, “*Tessera* or Completion and Antithesis,” in *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 62.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, xxiii.

²¹ David Fite, “Vision’s Revision: *The Anxiety of Influence*,” in *Harold Bloom: The Rhetoric of Romantic Vision* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1985), 55.

²² Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, “Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship,” in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 2nd ed. (London: Yale University Press, 2000), 51.

Bechdel's graphic memoirs demonstrate how engagement with the fathers can produce the underage female subject as a phallic girl, as returning into the maternal womb, and as Oedipally reconnected with the father figure, respectively. Hence, pastiche in contemporary American women's graphic memoirs emerges as a significant reparative mechanism that simultaneously introduces subversive female autobiographical subjects as it also deconstructs divisions between high and low art.

In the preceding chapters, I have touched upon what calls for future work in relation to the use of intertextuality in contemporary graphic memoirs. Another example that demonstrates its recurrence in the genre is Alison Bechdel's second graphic memoir, *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama*, which recreates the protagonist's relationship with her mother and her erotic relationships by referencing literary mothers like Virginia Woolf and Adrienne Rich, among others. Hence, Bechdel turns to the matrilineage to construct women's relationships amongst themselves.²³ Moving from her re-appropriation of influences by literary homosexual fathers to construct Alison's Oedipal attachment to Bruce, Bechdel revisits maternal traditions to describe her autobiographical alter ego's interaction with women in her life. Thus, her second graphic memoir opens up new directions for contemporary women's graphic memoirs in its engagement with the mothers. In addition, it becomes part of what Rich describes, borrowing from Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, as the "literature that ... [reveals] 'that vast chamber where nobody has been' – the realm of relationships between women."²⁴ By describing Alison's relationships with women, both erotic and familial, and by introducing her as an adult subject in the process of writing *Are You My Mother?*, Bechdel, as William Bradley explains, creates a "graphic essay ... about writing nonfiction."²⁵ Hence, the graphic memoir continuously evolves and reconfigures works by literary and artistic mothers, as well as male-dominated traditions,

²³ See for example her intertextual references in Bechdel, *Are You My Mother?*, 161-204. The graphic memoir is also infused with psychoanalytical material and mostly Donald Winnicott's views on the role of the mother in a child's development. For a discussion on the psychoanalytical references included in the graphic memoir and how it attempts to explain Alison's relationship with her mother, see Genie Giaimo, "Psychological Diffusions: The Cognitive Turn in Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama*," *European Journal of Life Writing* 2 (2013), <http://ejlw.eu/article/view/57/78>.

²⁴ Adrienne Rich, "It is the Lesbian in Us..." in *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978*, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton & Company, 1995), 199.

²⁵ Bradley, "Graphic Memoirs Come of Age," 163.

for the formation of autobiographical narratives, and this process in its turn underscores the transformation of the genre.²⁶

In this thesis I have argued for the use of pastiche as a reparative mechanism in each autobiographical subject's family strife in Gloeckner, Barry and Bechdel's texts. In addition, I have demonstrated how their graphic memoirs function reparatively in the cultural domain, where the daughter artists interact with the canonical fathers towards the expression of feminist statements and the formulation of "authentic," in El Refaie's terms, female autobiographical subjects. Further exploration of intertextuality in contemporary graphic memoirs can introduce new ways in which literary and artistic traditions are used, reimagined and recreated in the medium of comics to formulate the life narratives of marginalised and silenced subjects. Additionally, it can underscore the cultural significance of the graphic memoir in its association with and reconfiguration of older traditions.

²⁶ An example that demonstrates the use of intertextuality in contemporary women's graphic memoirs beyond the American domain is Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*. For discussions on transculturation in Satrapi's adaptation of Western cultural elements in *Persepolis* like popular music (references to Kim Wilde and Michael Jackson) and high art (Michelangelo's *La Pietà*) to construct the experience of the revolution in Iran, see Nima Naghibi and Andrew o' Malley, "Estranging the Familiar: 'East' and 'West' in Satrapi's *Persepolis*," *English Studies in Canada* 31, no. 2-3 (2005): 223, <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/esc/v031/31.2naghibi.html>; Whitlock, "Autographics," 965-979; and Whitlock, *Soft Weapons*, 187- 202.

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