

# Excavating Childhood: Fairytales, Monsters and Abuse

## Survival in Lynda Barry's *What It Is*

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### **Abstract:**

This article investigates the excavation of abused childhood in Lynda Barry's *What It Is*. Looking at the centrality of childish play, fairy tales and the Gorgon in the protagonist's effort to cope with maternal abuse, it argues that comics complicate the life narrative and allow the feminist reconfiguration of the monstrous mother of Western psychoanalysis and art.

**Keywords:** Lynda Barry, graphic memoir, Medusa, fairy tale, comics

### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

In its hybrid combination of verbal and visual parts, the graphic memoir has, from the time of its emergence in the 1960s and 70s, negotiated issues concerning traumatic childhoods.<sup>2</sup> Since then, it has undergone a process of maturation in terms of how it performs such memories. In this article, I am focusing on Lynda Barry's *What It Is*, to demonstrate how this maturity foregrounds the significance of the graphic memoir, not only as a narrative of private childhood trauma, but also as a cultural product that can perform subversive feminist statements which revise previous (patriarchal) formations of the female subject, and specifically of the mother figure. *What It Is* conflates fiction and reality, the genre of the fairy tale with that of the memoir, monsters and family members, to recreate the autobiographical subject's relationship with her abusive mother and the former's struggle to cope with abuse. Below, I investigate why in parallel to the problematic mother/daughter bond, the narrator

simultaneously remembers reading old fairy tales and playing alone as a child. Specifically, I examine the centrality of the mythological Medusa in these playing processes, arguing that the monster is ultimately re-invented and transforms into a coping mechanism for the child avatar through her play, and into a muse that unblocks adult Lynda's artistic creativity.<sup>3</sup> I am arguing that Barry's graphic memoir introduces a feminist take on the maternal monster of Western mythology, psychoanalysis and art that could only be performed because of the condensed nature of its visual/verbal hybridity. In so doing, I want to point to the potential offered by comics in relation to the representation of childhood memories, the excavation and reconfiguration of personal and public artistic pasts, and the performance of subversive feminist formations of the female subject.

### **Excavating the Past through the Comics Medium**

Comics scholar Jared Gardner has foregrounded the availability of comics for productive engagement with the media of the past, and suggested 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 between present and past. In his examination of texts by artists like Art Spiegelman, Seth, Daniel Clowes and Chris Ware, Gardner observes that these include "archives of [...] forgotten artefacts and ephemera of American popular culture" (787). These archives aid each protagonist to make sense of his place in the world, via the collection and preservation of items from popular culture (ibid). Gardner's 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 [...] past that is always in the process of becoming" (799). It is this potential

offered by comics that I am also investigating, shifting attention, however, to its feminist uses, arguing that the graphic memoir can become a site 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 can show how “the past is continuously modified and redescribed even as it continues to shape the future” (vii–xi).<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, Charles Hatfield argues that the value of autobiographical comics does not lie on the factuality of the stories they narrate, but on how these stories are mediated and situated in the cultural context, “on the contact surface between cultural environment and individual identity” (*Alternative Comics* 113). 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 development in a strict Catholic environment (132–34). In addition, he demonstrates how Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* visualizes 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 (139–40). Since comics do allow the performance of cartoonists’ critical stance in relation to religion and racism, as Hatfield shows, the medium seems to have the potential to offer space for voicing, or rather, *visualizing*, feminist concerns as well.

Being heavily dependent on visuality, comics offer space for the reconfiguration of the female subject, as the latter has been heavily invested with what Laura Mulvey described as female “to-be-looked-at-ness,” and has been perceived as a passive spectacle under the male gaze in Western culture (19–20). Indeed, in *Autobiographical Comics* Elizabeth El Refaie has noted that women cartoonists “are increasingly challenging traditional cultural inscriptions of the gendered body and claiming the right to represent their own physicality [...] in a way that truthfully

reflects their own experiences” (80). Similarly, in *Graphic Women*, Hillary Chute suggests that due to its visual aspect and its association with underground explicit depictions of issues concerning sexuality, the medium of comics “lends itself to feminist concerns about embodiment and representation” (19). Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Phoebe Gloeckner, Debbie Drechsler Julie Doucet, Sylvie Rancourt and Alison Bechdel are just a few of the artists, in addition to Barry, whose graphic memoirs negotiate the status of the woman as a spectacle and the representation of domestic sexual and other forms of childhood trauma.<sup>5</sup> Through their distinct drawing and writing styles these cartoonists offer their own counter-narratives on the representation of female subjectivities.

*What It Is* was published seven years after Barry’s more well-known *One! Hundred! Demons!*. Despite their similarities, the two graphic memoirs are also different, as Chute points out, in the former’s “intensification of the [latter’s] themes and formal concerns” (127). *What It Is* is a peculiar book composed by fragmented autobiographical sections in Barry’s distinct hand-writing and drawing style on yellow legal paper. These sections are interrupted by collage arrangements that function as separate units subtly associated with the content of the self-referential parts (see Fig. 1 – 3). The reader must pause to investigate the components of each collaged page and try to think of the questions addressing them about play, creativity, monsters and memories. The final part of the book is, similarly to *One! Hundred! Demons!*, an instruction manual for the stimulation of artistic creativity providing readers with creative writing and drawing exercises explained by adult Lynda, the Magic Cephalopod and the Sea-Ma, two sea-creatures that function as creative muses for the adult avatar in the graphic memoir.<sup>6</sup> As such, *What It Is* constitutes a strange text that expands the boundaries of autographics and of what the language of comics

can be because of Barry's distinct style and her use of collage and unconventional every-day materials. Indeed, Chute aptly notes that Barry's collages have similarities with those 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'" (110).<sup>7</sup> Hence, apart from the field of autographics, Barry's work is situated in the tradition of women's craft arts, in its negotiation of childhood trauma.

In terms of content, *What It Is* "is a meditation on the creative process, a memoir about [Barry's] development as an artist, a philosophical enquiry into how memory is embedded in places that are 'spots of time' out of which images emerge, and a genre-bending graphic narrative, in which the relation between text and drawing is integral to the story" (Cvetkovich 203-04). Playing is also central in *What It Is*, both in its structure and its content. In fact, Barry cites Donald Winnicott, whose *Playing and Reality* describes the importance of playing in the development of children as an influence for her work (*What It Is* 210). Like him, she "aims to show [...] that 'playing' is an essential activity [...] that] involves conflict and anxiety," and to also unveil the ways in which playing functions reparatively for the child autobiographical avatar (Chute 127).

In this article, I focus on the effect of fairy-tale reading as a form of creative play. I explain how the excavation of the artistic past through Barry's intertextual reference to and reconfiguration of Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio's *Medusa* (c. 1597) can function positively in relation to the visual embodiment of the monstrous mother figure, while simultaneously informing the *mise-en-scène* life narrative of childhood abuse. On the one hand, I show how Barry incorporates and positively re-

imagines the monster in ways that aid the autobiographical subject to cope with and survive through maternal violence. On the other, I am arguing that Medusa is transformed through Barry's feminist artistic vision into a positive force, thus capturing a distinctly female experience and understanding of the monster.

When talking about the situation at her house during her childhood, the narrator mentions: "My parents 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" (*What It Is* 26). As the father is practically absent from the narrative, we frequently see the mother yelling at, insulting, belittling and physically abusing Lynda. Despite referring to the problematic mother/daughter bond, existing criticism on Barry's graphic memoirs does not show how their formal characteristics and the incorporation of fairy tales and Medusa can elevate the autobiographical subject beyond this abusive situation. In her two articles on *One! Hundred! Demons!*, which also refers to Lynda's relationship with her mother, Melinda de Jesús focuses on the protagonist's maternal Filipino-American cultural heritage, and argues that the distance between the mother and the daughter is maintained and unresolved ("Of Monsters and Mothers" 1–26; "Liminality and Mestiza Consciousness" 219–52). Chute also briefly refers to Lynda's abusive mother and her intense Tagalog swearing as emblematic of the mother/daughter interaction (119).

Chute, nevertheless, also discusses Barry's work in relation to playing, which she introduces as "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" (127). She further 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” (112). This description could also apply to *What It Is*, which deconstructs the boundaries between the genre of the fairy tale and that of autographics since as we read through its pages, various creatures are looking at us, saluting us and asking us questions. As such, the book evokes in its readers a childish mode of interaction with its words and pictures because it makes us creatively interact with them. This approach is central in how creative play, fairy-tale reading and female monstrosity are used in the narrative of abused childhood. Given the dominance of these processes in the graphic memoir, it is useful to attempt its interpretation through the lens of children’s literature and, specifically, of fairy-tale criticism.

### **Playing, Fairy Tales and the Graphic Memoir**

Regarding the intersections between comics and children’s literature studies, Hatfield has observed that,

largely propelled by the comic book’s putative “coming of age,” [comics scholarship] has yet to find its way to children’s literature and culture studies, that is, has yet to engage the idea of childhood critically, so as to overcome its reflexive embarrassment over the oft-belittled juvenile origins of the medium. (“Introduction” n. pag.)

Elsewhere, Hatfield describes “the range and provocativeness” of children’s literature when applied to the scholarly examination of comics (“Comic Art” 360–82). In agreement with Hatfield, I am arguing that “comics offer, potentially, a powerful form of cross-writing” (“Introduction” n. pag.). “Cross-writing,” a term introduced by Mitzi Myers and Ulrich C. Knoepfelmacher, refers to “a dialogic mix of older and younger voices occur[ing] in texts too often read as univocal [; an] interplay and cross-

fertilization” among adult and child perspectives, “that dissolve the binaries and contraries that our culture has rigidified and fixed” (vii). In *What It Is*, this kind of cross-writing (and cross-drawing) enriches and complicates the meanings of the graphic life narrative and foregrounds playing and fairy-tale reading in the development of the plot, and in the book’s essence.

Indeed, the narrator theorizes about childhood play, adult artistic creativity and their connection with myth and fairy tales. She notes that “playing and fun are not the same thing,” continuing to identify “a kind of amnesia about the seriousness of playing, especially when we played by ourselves [...]. There is something brought alive during play, and this something when played with seems to play back” (*What It Is* 51). On the visual register, we see Lynda preparing a magic potion that would save the residents of a village. In the fictional world she creates, if “she who made the potion drinks it, she will die” (ibid). The autobiographical avatar is drawn serious during her play and notes that she is “not afraid to die” by drinking the potion to save the people (ibid). Later, the narrator mentions that “not being able to play is misery,” and she identifies the inability to play with “writer’s block” (ibid 52). In the visual narrative, we come across two representations of Lynda, one as a child and one as an adult, looking depressed, in the former case unable to play, in the latter staring at a blank page, unable to write.

Linking artistic creativity, and playing and the lack of them with myths and fairy tales, the narrator notes that such narratives “are often about this very thing: they begin with this very situation: a dead kingdom. Its residents all turned into stone. It’s a good way to say it, that something alive is gone” (ibid 53). The visual images show again the adult and child versions of Lynda staring passively, and with a depressed look, at the TV. “The television eased the problem [...] though it couldn’t watch me



back, not that it would see much if it could: a girl made of stone facing flickering light, 45 years later a woman made of stone doing the same thing” (ibid). While the monster of the Medusa is not present at this point in the book, the reference to being turned into stone evokes her story and foregrounds the lack of inspiration and creativity as what turns one into stone. Returning to her analysis of myth and fairy tale, the narrator explains that there,

[o]ne doesn't restore the kingdom by passivity, nor can it be done by force. It can't be done by logic or thought. [...] Monsters and dangerous tasks seem to be part of it. Courage and terror and failure or what seems like failure, and then hopelessness and the approach of death convincingly. The happy ending is hardly important, though we may be glad it's there. The real joy is knowing that if you felt the trouble in the story, your kingdom isn't dead. (54)

On this page, we do not see the mirroring images of the child and adult avatars, but rather, monsters and ghosts, surrounded by flames in bright colours, instructing Lynda to “get the jar” while she is depicted reading at the bottom right corner of the page, taking a tiny space. The page thus visually captures the massive, frightening worlds opening up in her reading of a fairy tale or a myth, while also pointing to the significance of active, creative reading and the willingness to enter the state of uncertainty, fear and anxiety they entail.

Later, the narrator explains how she tried as a child to be friends “with a lot of bugs, but none ever spoke to [her] in the way creatures speak in fairy tales” and how her imaginary friend “didn't come until [she] learnt to read” (25). The visual realm of narration depicts animal figures looking back at us with one of them having the word

“hello” inscribed on its body. That the appearance of Lynda’s imaginary friend is situated at the same temporal point as the start of her ability to read, suggests that reading allows her space to create and interact with creatures that do not appear in her everyday life and which are beneficial for her. Thus, it points to the possibility “to find healing with the help of fairy tales” in children’s positive responses to them (Joosen 129).

Indeed, the narrator draws a line between the real or, as she calls it, “the outside world” and another one, which comes to life when reading fairy tales or drawing:

Paper and ink have conjuring abilities of their own. Arrangements of lines and shapes, of letters and words on a series of pages make a world we can dwell and travel in. I travelled up the mountain as Heidi. I slept on a straw bed in the hayloft and heard the high wind in the streets. I despaired for my future there, not knowing what was to come. I remember it like it happened to me. I suppose you could say that it did. (*What It Is* 38)

The pictures accompanying the text visually illustrate what the narrator describes, and the fusion of Lynda’s reality and the fairy-tale world is enacted on the page. First, we see the child autobiographical avatar sitting in a dark corner of her house reading a fairy tale. Then, we see her climbing up the mountain, surrounded by animals, and lastly, laying on a straw bed and crying in the dark. The collapse of the boundaries between the real and the fantastic is therefore achieved through the hybrid visual/verbal combinations of comics.

Throughout *What It Is*, we frequently see Lynda with a book of fairy tales in her hands, either by the brothers Grimm or by Hans Christian Andersen (see 27, 40). The narrator notes that “[t]here are certain children who are told they are too sensitive, and there are adults who believe sensitivity is a problem that can be fixed in the way crooked teeth can be fixed and made straight. And when these two come together you get a fairy tale, a kind of story with hopelessness in it” (39). In describing the co-existence of sensitive children with adults who believe that sensitivity can be “mended” as the cause of a fairy tale, the narrator foregrounds the connection between these children’s “real lives” and fairy-tale narratives. In most fairy tales, especially by the brothers Grimm and Andersen, children are forced, primarily by their parents, to leave home and survive through hardships and dangers and, consequently, they grow stronger. As Jack Zipes explains, children in fairy tales and myth are abused, abandoned or devoured by their parents, who are metaphorically structured as monsters, witches and ogres (*Why Fairy Tales Stick* 225). Nevertheless, they are also enabled to survive independently. There is in fairy tales, according to Zipes, a “socialization process and acquisition of values for participation in society where the protagonist has more power of determination” (*Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* 172). In *What It Is*, the fairy tale is not mentioned in relation to its happy ending, but with regard to the feeling of “hopelessness,” the anxiety of the hero during the stage of *peripeteia*, before reaching the *catharsis* of the end. On the visual level of narration on the same page, Lynda is drawn as a Cinderella character, sitting in front of a fire place barefoot and crying, being watched by a small mouse and a big bear, the latter with a wine glass in its hand. A pot is on the fire and a couple of rugs are hanging on a string, thus evoking Cinderella’s story of torture by her evil stepmother and her hopelessness before the happy ending.

The general comment about children who are too sensitive becomes more specific on the following page, by showing the autobiographical avatar crying while reading the Grimms' fairy tales, and a scary mother figure taking the book away from her because it makes her cry. On the one hand, by introducing Lynda as Cinderella, the visual/verbal combinations point to the identification between the abused child and the fairy-tale protagonist. On the other, they introduce Lynda's mother as the source of her sadness. The mother becomes the adult who tries to get rid of the child's sensitivity— in this case, by taking her fairy tale away from her, asking her why she reads it if it makes her cry (*What It Is* 40). Failing to recognize the usefulness of the fairy tale for Lynda, her mother takes it away to stop her from crying; to prevent her from being too sensitive. The narrator, however, clarifies why fairy tales are important: "They can't transform your actual situation, but they can transform your experience of it. We don't create a fantasy world to escape reality, we create it to be able to stay. I believe we have always done this," she continues, "used images to stand and understand what would otherwise be intolerable" (ibid). With this comment, Barry's narrator introduces what Zipes describes as the "liberating potential of the fantastic in literature" (*Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* 176). For Zipes, "tales about bogeymen, monsters, and ogres [...] alert children to what they must do if they don't want to be eaten, and they also warn them what to expect and how they might subvert prescriptive and arbitrary rule" (242). The mother's taking Lynda's book away while she is crying, deprives her of the means that can help her survive by creating and entering another world, and leads readers to make inferences about the girl's inability to tolerate maternal behaviour. Connecting the process of fairy-tale reading to that of playing and foregrounding its necessity to a child's mental health, the narrator further relates that "human beings everywhere understand that a child

who is never allowed to play will eventually go mad” (*What It Is* 40). If we perceive Lynda’s fairy-tale reading as a form of serious play that causes anxiety, then her mother’s interruption of this playing process can become damaging for the autobiographical avatar.

Zipes explains that fairy tales by the brothers Grimm represent a social reality in which parents “are poor and starving and more or less driven to abandon their children,” who are called “not just to survive abandonment but to overcome abuse in the form of a witch,” since the mother is erased from their narratives (*Happily Ever After* 46-48).<sup>8</sup> He also argues that Grimms’ tales “reveal [...] the ambivalent feelings parents have about their children, their desire to abandon them and the shame they feel when they actually abuse them,” noting that “there’s hardly a story that doesn’t raise parental oppression” and that in these stories, “we find more than 100 children who experience some form of mistreatment” (“Children’s Books; Child Abuse and Happy Endings” n. pag.). Elsewhere, Zipes draws parallels between Grimms’ tales and the contemporary situation in Western societies, where

child abuse in the form of battering, abandonment, sexual violation, psychological manipulation, discarding, and killing unfortunately has not abated during the second half of the twentieth century. If anything, in America it seems to have increased, and child abuse does not occur in just one social class. In fact, I would argue [...] that every child encounters some form of abuse and grows up fearing abuse and abandonment. (*Happily Ever After* 57–58).

The fairy-tale heroes that Lynda encounters go through similar troubles as her. Despite all the hardships children suffer within the familial domain however, when reflected in fairy tales, abuse becomes projected on monsters and witches and the

family home, associated with the good, caring mother figure becomes the ultimate goal of the fairy-tale child protagonist's quest in accordance with "the norms and expectations of the bourgeois reading public at [Grimms'] time" (51). The happy ending entails "the joyous overcoming of abandonment and reconciliation with the parents or abusers," which Zipes describes quoting John Boswell as "'the happiest but least convincing outcome of abandonment'" (59). Children, for Zipes, desire this happy ending in the same way that "modern audiences expect love affairs to end happily, not because in life they do, but because they sometimes do, and one wishes they always would" (59 – 60). This happy ending "or recovery [... makes] it appear that parents are not guilty—they are not the problem," leading towards their reconciliation with the abused child (60). In *What It Is*, Lynda is, as mentioned, shown repeatedly reading a book of Andersen and Grimms' fairy tales both during her childhood and as an adult. Moreover, as we read through the graphic memoir, the investment of creatures and objects with life and will, the identification of abusive parents with monsters and the conflation of reality with the fictional realm of the fairy tale are performed by Lynda, who also enacts her own fairy tale in her childhood playing processes in order to project, in a similar way to Grimms, maternal abuse on Medusa.

### **Encountering and Using the Monster**

The narrator explains that she got to know the monster from a 1964 British horror film, *The Gorgon* (Fig. 1).

I didn't know she was mythical and ancient and also called Medusa,  
[...] or that she had a story and relatives and never looked into mirrors.

I only knew her from a monster movie I saw one Saturday afternoon when I was about eight. But it was all I needed. (65)

Later, as an adult, she gets to know the myth surrounding it. On the visual level of narration, at this point readers can see a reproduction of Caravaggio's *Medusa*. Lynda is shown at the cinema looking towards what should have been a still image from the film on the screen. Instead, Barry chooses to incorporate a high-artistic painting in place of a low-art film, thus alluding to how the monster is constructed in two different artistic discourses. Continuing her description of her familiarization with the monster, Lynda explains: "I sat through *The Gorgon* twice because the first time she got her head cut off, I looked away—and I realized it was something I needed to see. Something I needed to know how to do" (65). Sitting through the film twice and learning how to face the gruesome act of Medusa's decapitation allows Lynda to later incorporate her in her games. While myth is different from fairy tales, according to Zipes there is an "extraordinary symbiotic connection" between the two, and "since myth narrates the deeds of supernatural beings, it sets examples for human beings that enable them to codify and order their lives" (*Fairy Tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale* 1). Hence, it becomes possible for Lynda as a child and for Barry as an adult artist to respond to the myth in ways that allow the use of the monster in the ways that Zipes describes.

Thus, *What It Is* performs what Donald Haase describes as "responsible reading of fairy tales" in that both the child autobiographical avatar and the author herself respond to the myth in an active, critical way ("Response and Responsibility in Reading Grimms' Fairy Tales" 237). For Haase responses to fairy tales "reflect a recipient's experience, perspective, or predisposition" (235). Haase introduces Karen Rowe's view that there are two narrative lines in fairy tales; the dominant, patriarchal,

repressive one with misogynist elements and “an overall message of rebirth, coming of age, or liberation” (236-37). This hidden message is addressed to “a sisterhood of readers” and suggests “a double potential in responding to fairy tales,” one being to read the patriarchal message and the other being the ability to decipher the secret “code of liberation [...] the ‘secret revelations of the tale’” (237). Reader response and responsibility is performed in how both Barry and her autobiographical avatar revision the maternal mythical monster in ways that foreground its emancipation from its patriarchal formations.

The narrator explains that even though she knew the monster was not real, she was terrified of her as a child. “I hated the thought of her,” she explains, “but she was often on my mind. 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” (*What It Is* 63). Her memories inform readers about how the monster entered her everyday reality, while also providing details about Medusa’s myth: “She paralyzes you. You have to cut off her head without looking at her face. Sometimes I managed—and other times she got me. I’d practice being paralyzed and turning into stone” (ibid). Evoking Medusa’s lethal gaze, which turns men into stone, Lynda sees herself as the hopeless fairy-tale hero, trying to escape the monster. The visual illustrations show Lynda drawing Medusa with her head turned towards her mother, who holds another drawing of the monster as she tells her daughter that she “draw[s] ugly faces” and she “just waste[s] paper,” rejecting Lynda’s creative work (ibid). That we are informed about Medusa’s lethal gaze while Lynda is looking both at her mother and at the monster’s drawing causes an ambiguity in relation to whose gaze is frightening and lethal in this case. Later, the narrator explains how she would pretend turning into stone after failing to escape Medusa’s gaze: “Sometimes I did this in



front of my mother to see if she would notice. Sometimes I turned to stone in the front yard. Once I made myself fall off my bike as if I had seen her while coasting down my street, trying to freeze myself exactly as I fell” (64).

This playing process foregrounds the idea that monsters in children’s worlds are both fictional and real and the mother is recreated at this stage in parallel to the Gorgon. Instead of choosing to play with an imaginary friend, Lynda recreates Medusa and, rather, plays with a monster. “I believe,” Barry writes, that “a lot of kids play with monsters in this way. That most of us had a certain something that really scared us and seemed to have it in for us. A ‘something’ we had to defend ourselves against in secret ways” (ibid). The reason why playing with monsters and protecting the self from them was, according to the narrator, common both for her and for other children appears a couple of pages into the narrative, when Lynda explains that the Gorgon helped her love her mother (66). “We never need certain monsters more than when we are children. And a furious woman with terrifying eyes and snakes for hair was perfect for me” (ibid). If we assume that Lynda projects traits of her mother on the Gorgon, then she can gain the potential to lift the responsibility of abuse from her and place it on the monster. Lynda’s *peripeteia* with the Gorgon then, can allow her to eventually love her mother.

In *One! Hundred! Demons!* there is a similar identification between the mother and a monster from Filipino myth, the Aswang. There, the narrator explains that she was “terrified of her mother [because] she was unpredictable and quite violent” (91). Describing the Aswang she also notes that monsters “usually had a reason for being the way they were. [They] hardly ever started out as monsters. Something always transformed them [...]. The histories of vampires and people are not so different, really” (92). With this parallelism, a mirroring is created between the

mother and the Aswang and an attempt to explain monstrosity surfaces. Later in the graphic memoir, we get to know of the mother's trauma, associated with the death of her father, her survival through the war, and the poverty and starvation she suffered as a child (187). The narrator also explains that she loved her a lot and "it broke [her] heart that she didn't seem to like [her] much" (93). In addition, she recounts: "Mom used to scream that she couldn't wait until I had children so I would know what hell was like [...]. I never did have children. There must be a better way to fight vampires but I just couldn't think of it in time" (95-96). On the visual level of narration, Barry's adult autobiographical avatar is drawn sitting on her desk writing, suggesting that being an artist can be an alternative way to fight vampires, and work through childhood trauma. Reading *What It Is* after *One! Hundred! Demons!*, then, allows an informed interpretation of its mother/monster correlation. The identification between the abusive mother and the monster that is present in both graphic memoirs, escalates just after the description of Lynda's playing with Medusa, on two consecutive pages (Fig. 1 and Fig 2).

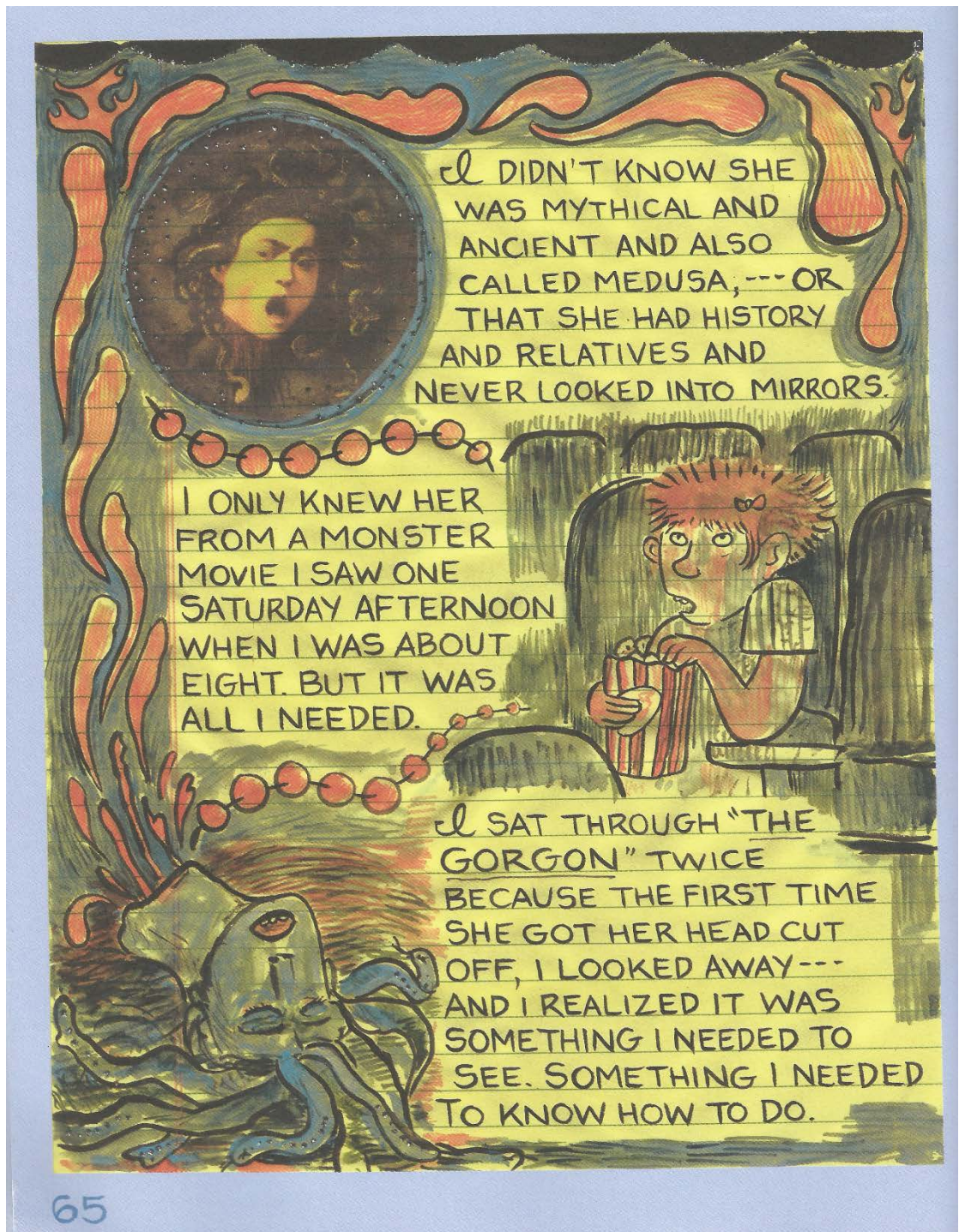


Fig. 1: Lynda Barry, p. 65, What It Is (Drawn and Quarterly, 2009). Copyright © 2009 by Lynda Barry. Used with permission by Drawn and Quarterly.



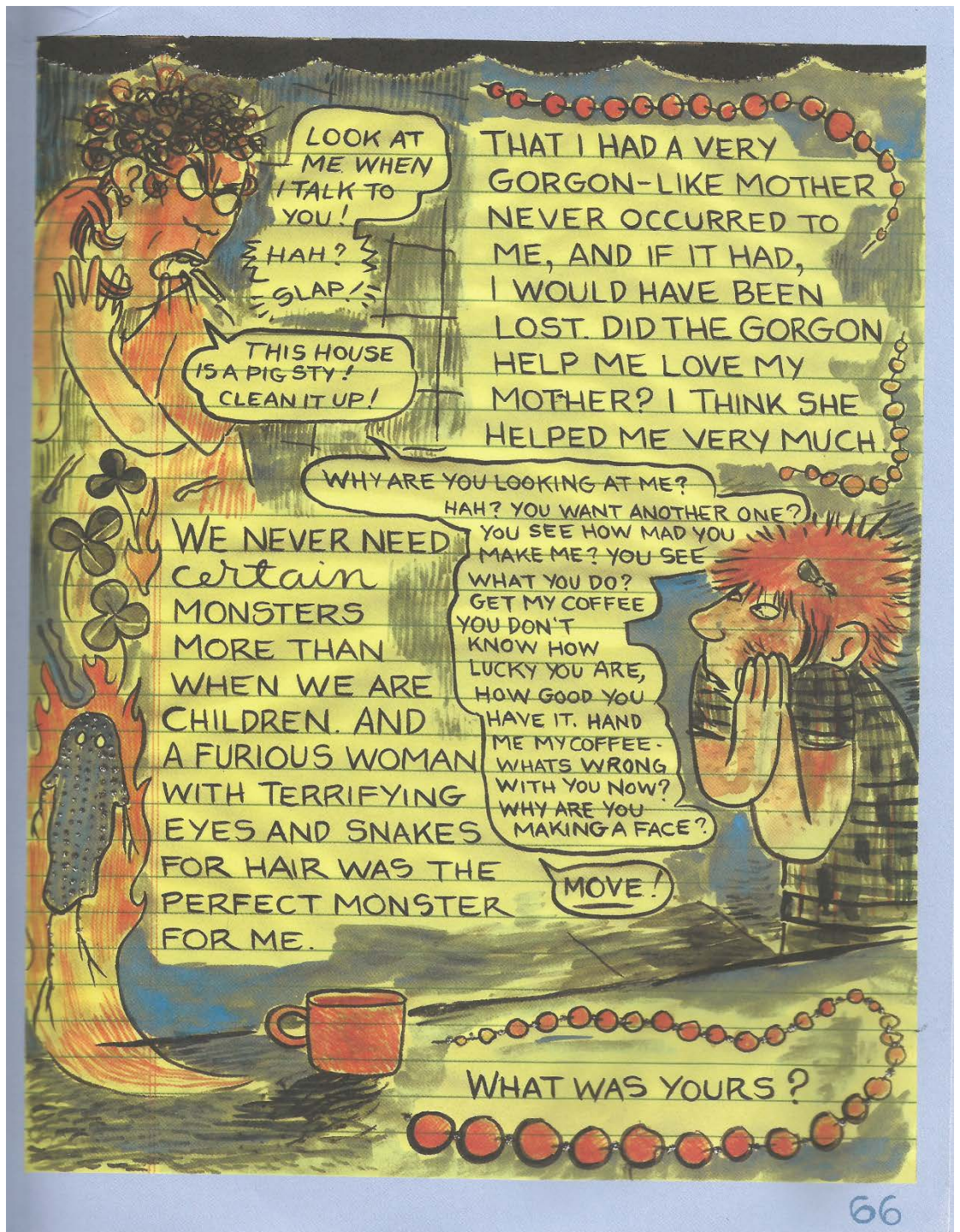


Fig. 2: Lynda Barry, p. 66, *What It Is* (Drawn and Quarterly, 2009).  
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Fig. 3: Lynda Barry, p. 60, *What It Is* (Drawn and Quarterly, 2009).  
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On the first page, Lynda is in the movie theatre looking at Caravaggio's *Medusa*; on the second one, the distribution of characters is similar, with the mother taking the place of the monster. Her mother's curlers, her eyeglasses, which introduce her gaze as frightening together with her facial expression and her open mouth, render her very similar to the Gorgon. The speech balloons stemming from the mother's avatar show that Lynda is being ordered to clean the house, and that she is also physically abused. "Look at me when I talk to you! Hah? Slap! This house is a pig sty. Clean it up! Why are you looking at me? You want another one? You see how mad you make me? [...] What's wrong with you? Why are you making a face? MOVE!" (ibid). The word "slap" and Lynda holding her red cheek indicate that the latter is physically abused as the mother also threatens to slap Lynda again because the house is dirty. That she tells Lynda to look at her when she talks suggests that the latter averts her gaze, similarly to those who avoid looking at Medusa so as to escape being turned into stone. After yelling at and hitting Lynda, her mother also tells her to move, implying that the child protagonist—or fairy-tale hero—remains still and frozen at the sight of this maternal monster, in the same way that she did during her play with the Gorgon. "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," the narrator explains (ibid). Monsters, then, become necessary for children because as Barry shows, in agreement with Zipes, they allow children to survive abuse in its different forms and love abusive parents.

### **Revisiting Psychoanalytical Formations of the Monstrous Mother and the Uncanny**

The mother/monster identification is not evident only in Barry's graphic memoir but also in Western psychoanalysis. Sigmund Freud has identified the female monster

with the terrifying maternal vagina that has the power to castrate in his short essay “Medusa’s Head” (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 273–74). Otto Rank refers to the existence of the vaginal castrating monster’s existence in children’s fairy tales such as the “The Little Red-Cap” and “Hansel and Gretel,” (109). Jacques Lacan also describes the primal mother of infantile fantasy as a devouring monster that threatens to consume the child and “resembles the petrifying Gorgon” (Barzilai 214-18).<sup>9</sup> This perception of the maternal vagina has shaped both the understanding and the artistic interpretations of the monster in Western culture. The evil mother/monster is depicted in Caravaggio’s high artistic painting, in the mass-produced horror film that Lynda watches as an eight-year-old girl, and in Barry’s graphic memoir. Apart from the autobiographical narrative, a different version of the monster exists in the collages preceding it.

These collages include questions addressing readers regarding the existence and purpose of monstrosity. In the first one, readers are called to think about what monsters are, where they come from and why they leave us (60). In a sense, this prelude foreshadows the content of the life narrative that concerns Lynda’s familiarization with the Gorgon. The next one (Fig. 3) 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?” (61). At the bottom we see a piece of paper with “once upon a time” written on it, a phrase which according to Maria Tatar, “introduces the specific family situation that drives the hero from home to the arena of the marvellous [because] [o]ne member of the family disturbs the initial tranquillity and renders life at home intolerable” (72).

Apart from “once upon a time,” the dark colours, the skulls and the ghostlike figures have the potential to evoke fear and uncanniness in readers. According to

Freud, the “subject of the uncanny is [...] undoubtedly related to what is frightening—to what arouses dread and horror” (“The Uncanny” 193). Freud associates 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” (220). For the aforementioned effect to emerge, the boundaries between imagination and reality collapse because of the “infantile element in this [...], the over-accentuation of psychical reality in comparison with material reality” (221). If the uncanny can be associated with the return to the maternal uterus—the *unheimlich* place that was the “former *Heim* [home] of all human beings”—then it has the potential to denote the continuity between the mother and the infant, the former’s existence within the maternal uterus, before the exit from the *vagina dentata*. Freud describes this process, as well as the sight of female genitals, as “terrifying” (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 273–74). Elsewhere, he describes female sexuality as “a dark continent for psychology” (*An Autobiographical Study*, 212).

In her critique of such misogynist, patriarchal formations of the female subject in her powerful essay, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Hélène Cixous explains that “as soon as they begin to speak, at the same time as they are taught their name, [women] can be taught that their territory is black: because [they] are Africa, [they] are black” (877). “You can’t see anything in the dark, you’re afraid,” she continues, “[d]on’t move, you might fall. Most of all don’t go into the forest. And so we have internalized this horror of the dark” (878).<sup>10</sup> I want to focus on the inability to *see* in the feminine darkness of Western psychoanalysis and the impossibility to explore and represent the “dark continent,” the “abyss” and the Medusa that has been attributed to and internalized by women according to Cixous (885). In *What It Is*, the child autobiographical avatar is not afraid to *see* and interact with the Gorgon and Barry



performs her own seeing of the monster drawing from its different discursive formations in mythology, art and psychoanalysis, evoking in the specific collage the mother's association with fear and the uncanny.

Zipes connects the Freudian uncanny with readers' experiencing of fairy tales, noting that "once we begin listening to or reading a fairy tale we experience estrangement or separation from a familiar world, including an uncanny feeling that can be both frightening and comforting" (*Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* 172). Reading, he explains, involves identification with "the dislocated protagonist so that the quest for the *Heimliche* or real home can begin. The fairy tale ignites a double quest for home," one in the reader's mind and one within the actual tale (ibid). "In both quests the notion of home or *Heimat* which is closely related etymologically to *heimlich* and *unheimlich* retains a powerful progressive attraction for readers of fairy tales" (173). In Barry's collage, the reader/spectator is forced face the monstrous and the uncanny. For Zipes, "the uncanny setting and motifs of the fairy tale already open us up to the occurrence of primal experiences, [but] we can move forward at the same time [...] [into] 'unfulfilled but possible futures to which we still like to cling in fantasy'" (ibid). These futures include a return to a reconfigured home that has "been repressed [...]. The pattern in most fairy tales involves the reconstitution of home on a new plane. (173 – 74).

This reconstituted home can be associated with the happy ending involving a return to abusive parents who are forgiven and re-imagined. Reading through *What It Is* we come across different representations of maternal monstrosity: Firstly, we see Lynda's familiarization with the Gorgon and her playing with the monster; secondly, we become familiar with the monstrous abusive mother/Gorgon; and, thirdly, we are presented with the collage arrangement that depicts the uncanny dark continent of the

maternal uterus. In its cross-generic nature which oscillates between autographics and the fairy tale, *What It Is* also proceeds to present a repetition that is at the same time a positive reconfiguration of the maternal *heim*. If we read Lynda's becoming an artist as her way of fighting vampires, as is suggested in *One! Hundred! Demons!*, then it could be argued that through her art she wins the battle against maternal monstrosity and re-imagines, in a positive light, the maternal home. In its repetitions and differentiations, maternal monstrosity gradually develops into a positive force.

Apart from introducing the uncanny and maternal darkness, the collage also includes a large octopus, or rather a cephalopod, in central position, with smaller but similarly shaped creatures around it.<sup>11</sup> Within the large cephalopod a smaller one is reproduced, 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, 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 vagina is seen in psychoanalysis as the entrance to a dark uncanny space and is also compared to devouring monsters with sharp teeth, who suck in and eat up infants, then the cephalopod and the other creatures can be seen as embodying 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 can be read as visual embodiments of the terrifying *vagina dentata* of the primal mother and the infantile fantasy of intrauterine return as described by Freud, Rank and Lacan.

Film critic Gerard Cohen-Vrignaud explains that the cephalopod can also be used as an artistic symbol for maternal genitalia. He 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. Cohen-Vrignaud describes the "cephalopodian visualization of female anatomy," and notes that the cephalopod is a metaphorical construction of the *vagina dentata* (33–34). He points out that "the bewildering combination of tentacles, suction cups and orifice subtly triggers the immemorial confusion of men faced with a female anatomy" (41). Similarly, in their reading of the evil octopus, the sea witch Ursula in Walt Disney's adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's *Little Mermaid* (1989), feminist critics have identified her with the *vagina dentata* or the Medusa (see Sells 184; Trites 149-50; Dundes 64–68). Similarly, the cephalopod in *What It Is* can also be read as an artistic metaphorical equivalent of the monstrous maternal vagina.

The association between the cephalopod and Medusa does not lie only in their embodiment of different versions of the maternal genitals. Critics have also noted that Medusa's terrifying appearance derives from cephalopodian looks. In Barry's *What It Is*, the association between the two monsters is foreshadowed via the existence of multiple eyes looking at readers on the cephalopod's body, thereby evoking Medusa's terrifying lethal gaze. Frederick Elworthy also explains that the myth appeared mostly at locations near the sea and with abundant cephalopods nearby; hence, he suggests, Medusa's head is an artistic, terrifying version of the creature (213–15). 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 Wilk 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” (103). 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 to escape. Likewise, Barry’s artistic gaze at the female monster, as performed in her graphic memoirs through her use of the cephalopodian weapon, ink, allows for the depiction of the autobiographical avatar surviving maternal abuse and ultimately co-existing with a reconfigured monster/mother figure. 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. *What It Is* therefore embodies an example of Cixous’s feminine writing, which becomes a form of birthing and mothering. Writing in 1976, Cixous notes that “[e]verything will be changed once woman gives woman to the other woman. There is hidden and always ready in woman the source; the locus for the other. The mother too is a metaphor” (“The Laugh of the Medusa” 881). This is precisely what Barry does. She becomes a creative mother, writing in “white ink,” bringing to life a new mother, who is no longer monstrous or castrating, thus becoming emancipated from her patriarchal formations (ibid).

### **Barry’s Feminist Gaze at the Gorgon**

This transformation of the Gorgon and its centrality in Barry’s work is shown by the repetitive occurrence of her emblematic, cartoony cephalopod on practically every page of *What It Is*, either in central position or in a more marginal place. Apart from aiding her as a child to recover from maternal abuse, the Gorgon/cephalopod emerges as a creative muse for the autobiographical avatar too. Its presence escalates in the final pages of the book, where the narrator describes her creative block. Earlier, when

she refers to her inability to play as a child, Lynda explains: “There were times when I wasn’t able to, though I wanted to—there were times when nothing played back. Writers call it ‘writer’s block.’ For kids there are other names for that feeling, though kids don’t usually know them” (*What It Is* 52). Artistic creativity is introduced as the ability to play with things that are willing to play back, with creatures that are willing to respond to a child. In the process of artistic production, the negative thoughts that hinder Lynda’s creativity are questions about the quality and the worthiness of her work, which repeat her mother’s comments about the uselessness of her art (130). 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 (132). The answer to the question about what is missing from her creative process is connected with her reading of fairy tales. In her struggle to find out what causes her creative block, Lynda is shown 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 the Grimms’ tales.

The narrator explains that 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” (*ibid*). By reading a fairy tale, Lynda starts remembering what allows creative play and artistic production. The process of un-thinking and returning to a childish approach to art is precisely what allows the stimulation of imagination and creativity, and is the solution to writer’s block. It is also the process that allows the survival through the uncanny, the imaginative victory over the evil monsters and the positive reinvention of the *heim*. Here, the Gorgonic monster, the artistic embodiment of the *vagina dentata*, is transformed into a non-threatening motherly figure. This is implied by the

cephalopod's depiction at the top right side of the page. It is no longer frightening, it fits into a square box, and holds safely in its tentacles a baby monkey, peacefully sleeping in an embryonic position, thus visually embodying Barry's vision of the intra-uterine experience. Further into the narrative, the answer to the riddle about the cause of Lynda's creative block is explicitly stated in the graphic memoir's visual/verbal combinations. The narrator explains that one needs to "be able to stand not knowing long enough to let something alive take shape!" (135). At this point, like the sleeping monkey, Lynda as an adult is also drawn hugged and protected by the cephalopod. Being held securely in its 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 a positively reconfigured Gorgon (ibid).

In the final section of *What It Is*, readers are offered a set of creativity exercises. There, we come across a picture of "Lynda Barry" the instructor, accompanied by a short biographical note. Next to it, we see a picture of "the magic cephalopod," introduced as the "pathfinder," which readers are invited to follow (ibid 138). Below, a caption explains that the creature is born "when looked upon," thus offering a counter-narrative to that of the lethal gaze of the Medusa, which needs to be avoided at all costs. Later, the Sea-Ma, another monstrous creature, is introduced as the "class-monitor" that also provides readers with advice on how to stimulate and articulate their artistic creativity. *What It Is*, therefore, allows space for playing and for an interactive relationship with its readers, who can respond to the instructions of the three tutors.

The Sea-Ma, like the cephalopod, appears frequently in the graphic memoir. She 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 are nevertheless transformed in Barry's texts into non-threatening and cartoony. What is also noteworthy about the Sea-Ma is that, like the cephalopod—which holds the monkey and Lynda in its tentacles—it is also occasionally painted either with a small monkey head or with Lynda as an adult on its body, specifically on the stomach area (see 138, 150, 154). The monkey appears on the cover of *What It Is* and inside it (see 8, 16, 132-38). Towards the final pages of the book, instead of Lynda Barry being the instructor who provides guidelines to readers together with the Sea-Ma, we also see the visual representation of “the Near-Sighted Monkey” in pyjamas. A caption informs us that the monkey “likes cutting pictures from old magazines at night with the TV on” in an exercise asking readers to make a picture bag (184). The cover of Barry's *Picture This: The Near-Sighted Monkey Book* (2010) consists of an invitation for readers to “learn how to art with the Near-Sighted Monkey,” accompanied by its picture. In addition, it is Barry's visual representation on her twitter and tumblr profiles. As such, the Near-Sighted Monkey functions as yet another visual embodiment of the cartoonist, one that is further removed from Barry's physical appearance. In *What It Is*, the cephalopod and the Sea-Ma holding the monkey and Lynda as an adult, hold two different visual representations of the autobiographical avatar. The self becomes fictionalized and its plasticity is underscored not only in how the cartoonist becomes a cartoon as Hatfield points out, but also in that this cartoon, like some of the mother/monster's representations, is not human (*Alternative Comics* 114).

The Sea-Ma also lives in water. As such, it evokes Cixous' Sea Mother not only in its existence in the sea, but also in its function as a source of inspiration and a creative muse. For Cixous, as Deborah Jenson explains, "maternity does not involve a narcissistic mother/child genealogy, but rather, an elated mimesis of the *souffle* ['breath'/ 'inspiration'] of others. It is a global maternity in which the 'body' is [...] a sea of related alterity" (197). Cixous explains that "the movement of women to life [...] will be a text, a body decoding and naming itself in one long, slow push; the song of women being brought into the world, of the infinite patience of a woman expecting Woman. All it requires is one woman who stays beyond the bounds of prohibition" ("Going to the Sea" 548). When this happens, according to Cixous, "women will be able to go there and feel themselves loving and being loved, listening and being heard, happy as when they go to the sea, the mother's womb" (ibid). Distinguishing between French and English in relation to the name of the mother, Cixous points out: "*Dans ma langue nous avons le chance de pouvoir dire que la mère est la mer, cela fait partie de notre imaginaire, cela nous dicte quelque chose. A la langue anglaise la mère dit m'other—mon autre*" ("Chemins d'une Ecriture" 19). Cixous' comment foregrounds the othering of the mother within the very essence of the English language, counter-posing that with the French language where the mother is (homophonous to) the sea.<sup>12</sup>

What the medium of comics allows when the visual accompanies the verbal text, is the possibility of changing the meaning of the mother's name in the English language. The Sea-Ma here is transformed into a creature that is no longer the uncanny other, presenting an alternative perspective on the maternal monster, either in the form of the Gorgon or in that of the cephalopod as in the case of Disney's Ursula. The Sea-Ma in *What It Is* simultaneously visually embodies the return in the womb



and the conflation of the autobiographical avatar with Barry's reconfigured mother figure. As such, it embodies a childish revisioning and a feminist repetition and reconfiguration of the terrifying Medusa in the same way that the Magic Cephalopod does. 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" (885). It is this gaze at the maternal monster that Barry's text performs, as it also revises patriarchal discursive formations of the terrifying *vagina dentata* and intervenes in the artistic history of the female monster, both high and low, to introduce a feminist take on it. *What It Is* functions as a descendant to Cixous's powerful "The Laugh of the Medusa" and Barry, or the Near-Sighted Monkey, has accepted the invitation of her feminist mother and has managed to *see* Medusa. In her creative fight against the vampire of maternal monstrosity, she produces through her "cross-writing" and drawing an alternative version of the maternal monster and returns to "the body that has been confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display" (880).

### **Reconfiguring the Gorgon, Performing the Impossible**

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 threatened with disintegration" ("Horror and the Monstrous Feminine" 65). 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" (*Monstrous Feminine* 155). She proceeds to explain that because female monstrosity has been created by

male discourses, a female spectator's potential identification with it in the context of the horror movie cannot provide adequate information that could demonstrate a feminist approach to it (ibid). Nevertheless, Lynda's interaction with the Gorgon in the *mise-en-scène* narrative, as well as Barry's revisioning of the monster, introduce 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 behavior and a creative muse that stimulates the adult avatar's artistic creativity, allowing her to fight her vampires in a way radically different to that her mother is shown to have chosen in *One! Hundred! Demons!*. In *What It Is*, the original home ultimately becomes a space of security again. In contrast, the only monstrous aspect of the mother figure is her abusive hostile behaviour towards her daughter, which is survived with the Gorgon's help.

Barry's work in *What It Is* shows that "autographics" can perform a complex and enriched excavation of, and engagement with, the past (Whitlock 965). Her blurring of the distinction between the genres of autographics and the fairy tale, between play and artistic creativity, monsters and mothers, childhood and adulthood, functions positively by capturing how the child autobiographical avatar coped with and survived maternal abuse in the domestic domain. Simultaneously, her feminist take on Medusa intervenes in artistic history to introduce a new version of the monstrous mother of Western psychoanalysis and art. Barry's "cross-writing" and cross-drawing expands both the genre of the graphic memoir and its potential as a feminist cultural script that allows space for the revision and reconfiguration of dominant (patriarchal) formations of the female subject.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the editors of the special issue as well as the blind reviewers for their insightful comments. I would also like to thank Monica Pearl for reading and providing feedback on earlier versions of this article.

<sup>2</sup> Women artists' first autobiographical comics emerged as part of the underground scene and the Women's Liberation Movement in the United States. Aline Kominsky-Crumb was the initiator of the genre. Her work demonstrates a preoccupation with problematic parental figures, adolescent sexual experimentation and abusive sexual contact. *Love that Bunch* includes a collection of her early work as it first appeared in underground magazines such as *Wimmen's Comics* and *Twisted Sisters*. For discussions on underground women's comics see Robins; Sabin; Kominsky-Crumb; and Merino.

<sup>3</sup> I use "adult Lynda" to refer to the visual embodiments of the adult autobiographical avatar, "Barry" to refer to the historical person, the author of the book and "Lynda" and "the narrator" to refer to the narrating voice of the graphic memoir.

<sup>4</sup> In their introduction to *Canadian Graphic*, a collection of essays on contemporary Canadian graphic memoirs, Candida Rifkind and Linda Warley also note "the desire to make self-referential claims that frequently ironize, unpack and sabotage the nexus of settler colonial mythologies about gender and race that have shaped dominant Canadian culture (4).

<sup>5</sup> See for example, Kominsky-Crumb, *Love that Bunch*, Phoebe Gloeckner, *A Child's Life and Other Stories* and *The Diary of a Teenage Girl: An account in Words and Pictures*, Debbie Drechsler, *Daddy's Girl*, Lynda Barry, *One! Hundred! Demons!*, Julie Doucet, *Dirty Plotte*, Sylvie Rancourt, *Melodie*.

<sup>6</sup> I use the term "autobiographical avatar" to refer to the "I" that is visually embodied in the graphic memoirs, following Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, who distinguish between "the hand or aesthetic autograph of the author/artist that draws; the narrator/architect whose narrating voice runs above the frame [and] the autobiographical avatar, an 'I' both imaged and voiced" (169). El Refaie explains that the term is "used more commonly [...] in computer games, virtual worlds, and Internet forums," where creators "are not bound to any stable physical cues such as race or gender at all," finding its use in the context of autographics problematic (229). However, with my use the term here I want to foreground the protean nature of visual representation of the autobiographical subject.

<sup>7</sup> Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard analyze Miriam Schapiro's art practice of "femmage" and the Pattern and Decoration movement (see Broude and Garrard 315-29; Broude, 208- 25).

<sup>8</sup> Melanie Klein and Maria Tatar also discuss children's identification of parental traits with fairy-tale monsters (See Klein 249; Tatar xviii).

<sup>9</sup> I am including Barzilai's English translations of Lacan's account of the monstrous mother, originally found in French in *Seminar IV* and *Seminar XVII*.

<sup>10</sup> Taking up Freud's notion of spatial darkness, feminist critics have noted the formulation of the maternal vagina as the entrance to a dark grotesque cave (see Russo 2-3; Munford 265-68).

<sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>12</sup> Within French feminist tradition, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva also point to the need for feminine language, the semiotic that is associated with the maternal body outside of the symbolic order and breaking free from the patriarchal naming of the female subject (see Irigaray "When Our Lips Speak Together" 74; Kristeva 29).

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