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## ”The Girl and the Monster” in Literature and Comic Strips

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This paper will discuss the mediation of the theme of identity in the work of the Swedish writer and artist, Inger Edelfeldt. More specifically we explore how this thematic, which we call “the girl and the monster”, is presented in the novel *Kamalas bok* (1986) (*Kamala’s book*) as compared to her comic strip albums, *Den feminina mystiken* (*The feminine mystique*) and *Hondjuret* (*The she-animal*), both from the 1980’s. One aim of the paper is to show how media specificity brings out different but also similar aesthetic and discursive presentations. Another aim is to explore how intermedial analysis can deepen the understanding of the identity theme, as well as the respective medium. For example it can deepen your awareness of the element of visuality present in the literary text and the discursive element in visual media. In intermedial studies there is an interest in artists who use different media because of the assumption that the interrelations of their works should be illuminating for this type of study.

## "The Girl and the Monster" in Literature and Comic Strips

In this paper we investigate two works by the Swedish writer and visual artist Inger Edelfeldt, the novel *Kamala's Book* (*Kamalas bok*, 1986) and the comic book, *The Feminine Mystique – A Short Guide* (*Den feminina mystiken – En kort guide*, 1988). The investigation is based on a common theme in these works, which we call "the girl and the monster", and which we consider to be central in her early work from the late 1970s through the 1980s. The paper will consist of two separate parts and a conclusion where we comment on our findings.

### Kamala's Book

In *Kamala's Book* the 'girl' and the 'monster' figures play important parts in the identity problematic which is the main thematic concern of the novel. The protagonist is a young woman, aged 22, who remains nameless throughout the text and interpreted from one perspective the girl and the monster figures make up the polarities of her identity dilemma. The girl represents the feminine facade that the young woman shows the world, a girlishly pretty, pleasing and obedient appearance; whereas the monster stands for what is beneath the surface, all the chaotic feelings that she fears to let loose: aggression, physical and mental hunger (eating disorders), fear of bodily changes and decay. In this sense the girl and the monster are presented as each others' doubles, but this dichotomous structure is partly modified when the girl figure, represented by the protagonist as a child, is shown to possess qualities that could transgress the polarity. This is demonstrated when she reads about Kamala, another little girl, but also a 'monster', a feral child who has been brought up by a female wolf.<sup>1</sup>

In this part of the paper the theme of the girl and the monster will be discussed mainly through the ways in which it is visualized with the aim to discuss how different visual techniques influence the narrative. Before the identity problematic is discussed some general visual qualities in the text will be brought out, however. Visual representations are quite numerous in *Kamala's book*, ranging from graphic arrangements of the text, such as the use of capital letters to give emphasis, imitate speech or personify – "But for the Chins, I think I would like my face"<sup>2</sup> – to vivid descriptions of different locations that are connected to the protagonist, for example her flat with its orange kitchen walls and a "very romantic" poster, showing "the face of a crying woman." Each space presented is the basis for a separate narrative which makes the narrative technique seem more spatial than temporal, a characteristic that has been associated with visual representation. Still, the narrative has a temporal dimension as the protagonist's problems deepen and reach a peak as her boy friend leaves for summer vacations without her; but when he comes back the narrative starts all over again but with the difference that the protagonist's fragmented self now is presented as more definite. The novel thus shows a circular rather than a linear progression.

The narrative is told in the first person and apart from the ending the protagonist acts as narrator, giving both voice and focalisation to the narrative, although the voices of other characters are heard through the narrator's voice occasionally and the focalisation changes

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1 As a character Kamala is based on a feral child with the same name who has apparently existed in India in the 1920s. See *The Diary of the Wolf-Children of Midnapore* (India) by the Rev. JAL Singh. [www.feralchildren.com](http://www.feralchildren.com) In literature on monsters one defining characteristic is the transgression from the human into the animal sphere. See Margrit Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster*, 2002.

2 *Kamala's Book* (*Kamalas bok*) p. 10. "Om det inte vore för Kinderna tror jag att jag skulle tycka om mitt ansikte". All translations of quotations are made by Ingrid Holmquist. References are taken from the pocket edition, 1994 (first published 1986). The Swedish original is given in footnotes as above.

from its usual internal mode to external a few times.<sup>3</sup> At the end of the novel, however, Kamala takes over the role as narrator, now acting as the protagonist's 'shadow' or 'inner monster', while the focalization moves between the protagonist and Kamala.

Although the protagonist's narrative voice and perspective dominates the novel there are certain distancing mechanisms built into the text. Some of them have visual dimensions as for example the main thematic problem of the girlish surface and the inner monster, which is presented through the motif of looking and being looked at. The gaze, especially the 'male gaze',<sup>4</sup> is represented as a kind of God's Eye, ruling over the protagonist's femininity.

He is like God, He can always see me. Or rather, He could catch sight of me. Somewhere in the future he is waiting for me, maybe the next minute. Even when I am alone I am responsible to him. If I get a pimple he is critical. If I buy a slit skirt he will be appeased.<sup>5</sup>

The male gaze is here personified as a severe Master who subjects the protagonist to a kind of sadist-masochist relationship, which makes her turn herself into an image or an object to be shaped according to His pleasure. This is also clearly illustrated when she looks at herself in the mirror, projecting the male gaze to her own image: "Then I always feel like taking a knife, cutting off part of my chins as a sculptor would do to a head of clay."<sup>6</sup> The self-violence inherent in this passage is also demonstrated by her feelings for her high-heeled shoes: "Every morning I bring a pair of flat shoes /to work/ but only as an emergency. I'd rather take a pain killer. I can't stand myself in flat shoes."<sup>7</sup> On another occasion the shoes are said to be "red" and "hard as glass", which establishes intertextual connections with fairy tales, denoting feminine oppression and punishment.<sup>8</sup> The red shoes also functions as a visual sign symbolising this kind of femininity.

The male God's Eye does not only symbolize sexist patriarchal power but also romantic love; He is not only the severe Master but also the "interesting stranger" that will suddenly 'see' her and rescue her from all the trivialities of her life. To 'see' here implies an understanding of what is unique in a person, as in the concept romantic love where you look for the person who is uniquely "right", and this combination of patriarchal domination and romantic saviour turns the male god figure into an extremely potent construct, which is shown by his ability to occupy both the protagonist's sense of self and her judgments of other people. Her relationship with her 'best friend' Gabriella has consequently turned into a competition about which is the happiest, i.e. the most loved, and the best looking:

Her nose is almost six centimetres' long and mine is only 4.5, we have measured them. My bust measure is bigger than hers but her waist is thinner and her neck longer and her nipples are just in the middle of her breasts (...)

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3 Concepts such as voice and focalisation are standard in modern narratology. A basic reference is Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse – An Essay in Method*, 1980.

4 This concept is frequently used in feminist studies on visual culture, the original reference is Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", in *Screen* 1975, vol.16(3): 6-18.

5 Kamala's Book, p. 9. "Han är som Gud, Han ser mig ständigt. Eller snarare, Han skulle kunna få syn på mig. Någonstans i framtiden väntar han, kanske I nästa sekund. Till och med när jag är ensam är jag ansvarig inför Honom. Om jag får en finne I ansiktet blir Han kritisk. Om jag köper en slitsad kjol blir Han blickad."

6 Ibid. "Då får jag alltid lust att ta en kniv och skära bort lite av kinderna, som en skulptör skulle göra med ett lerhuvud." P. 10.

7 Ibid. "Varje morgon tar jag med mig ett par lågklackade I en påse, men dem sätter jag bara på mig I nödfall. Hellre tar jag en värktablet. Jag tål inte mig själv I platta skor." P. 9.

8 *Cinderella*, where Cinderella's sisters are ready to cut off their heels in order to fit the shoes and get the prince; *The Red Shoes* by HC Andersen (1845) where the little girl Karen must cut off her feet in order to repent her infatuation with the beauty of her red shoes.

Finally I turned all stiff and hardly dared to look into her eyes cause I was so afraid that she would notice how much I hated her.<sup>9</sup>

The same type of hate is manifested when she sees other pretty girls in the streets: “And I know that I do not see them with my own eyes. I see them with His eyes – I have no eyes of my own”.<sup>10</sup> Thus the sadist-masochist quality of the protagonist’s experience of the God’s Eye results in self-hate (as shown by the violence she directs against herself) that is projected on to her relationship with other people. This is shown to be one of the complications of the surface existence that the protagonist submits to; forbidden feelings like hate are repressed and thus become more chaotic and difficult to handle and the life on the surface in its turn becomes unreal and unauthentic, a life of pretending. On several occasions the protagonist tries to see her life as a film to “make it feel more interesting” and “meaningful”, but at the end of the novel the visual perspective changes and the narrator describes her from the outside as “the girl in the film”<sup>11</sup> – on her way to see her boy-friend again, dressed in her usual attributes, the painful red shoes, and as usual looking into the mirror before knocking on his door. As this description is a repetition of earlier events and elements in the text and furthermore is placed at the end, the phrase “the girl in the film” acquires more meaning and appears like a definition of her surface identity.

The discussion above has shown how feminine gender is constructed through looking and being looked at and how this process is visualized through the “male gaze” and its consequences such as objectification or turning oneself and other people into images to be looked at. The great abundance of mirrors, and also shop-windows are visual devices, which underline this motif.<sup>12</sup> The motif of looking will be further investigated through two photographs, which are described in the narrative; one concerns the surface life and the other one the life of the “monster”. The verbal descriptions of the photos are so-called ekphrastic narratives, a term used in intermedial analysis to refer to “verbal representations of visual representations”.<sup>13</sup> This broad definition of ekphrasis covers a great variety of images – for example works of art, posters, logotypes – whereas in earlier research the term was only used for poems or narratives on works of art.<sup>14</sup> The term goes back to classical rhetoric where it meant lucid or graphic speech that could be mentally “seen”. In a similar fashion, the photos used in *Kamala’s Book* serve as messages from the outside world that the protagonist has to decode.

The first ekphrasis refers to some nude pictures of the protagonist, taken by her boyfriend Stefan. As such they can be related to the Western aesthetic tradition of the “female nude”, which feminist art historians have criticized for turning women’s bodies into objects with considerable aesthetic market value both as art objects and as commercial images with ample

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9 Ibid. Hennes näsa är nästan sex centimeter lång och min bara 4,5, vi har mätt dem. Mitt bystmått är större än hennes men hennes midja är smalare och hennes hals längre och hennes bröstvårtor sitter precis mitt på bröstet (...)

Till slut satt jag där alldeles stel och vågade knappt se henne i ögonen för jag var så rädd att hon skulle märka hur mycket jag hatade henne.” P. 127

10 Ibid. “Och jag vet att jag inte ser med mina egna ögon. Det är Hans ögon jag ser med.” P. 39.

11 Ibid. “Flickan i filmen”, p. 132.

12 For example there are dreams and fantasies about being displayed in shop-windows.

13 This definition of ekphrasis was coined by James A.W. Heffernan in 1993. The quotation is taken from Hans Lund, “Litterär ekfras” /Literary Ekphrasis/ in *Intermedialitet /Intermediality/*, red. Hans Lund, 2002, p. 184.

14 Ibid. p. 183-184. Observant readers may have noticed that we have mentioned a poster in the description of the protagonist’s flat – that is also an instance of ekphrasis then, but not an instance worth analysing on its own. However, it is interesting as one of many examples of popular culture in *Kamala’s Book*, an element that links *Kamala’s Book* with Edelfeldt’s comic strips.

use in advertising. In this process the woman's naked body has been constructed as the culturally staged nude.<sup>15</sup> In the protagonist's description of the photos such qualities are underlined:

He /Stefan/ has taken a series of very flattering nude pictures of me in a light that makes my breasts look bigger. He gave me two ice-cubes to press at the nipples to turn them stiff. The pictures are so successful that you can hardly tell it is me.<sup>16</sup>

Here the protagonist gives a lucid description of how the photos were made and reveals techniques of turning a woman's body into an aesthetic object. Thereby she unmasks the photograph as an "authentic" genre<sup>17</sup> and also punctures the male gaze. The spectator position turns from that of the desiring male to the critical woman. The reader is likewise enlightened, the only one who still seems to be in the dark is the protagonist. The protagonist certainly unmasks the photo but it seems to be done unconsciously. You may of course assume that the protagonist's voice is ironic in the quotation above, especially in the last sentence, but read in the context of the whole novel it appears not to be. The tone of voice used here is quite common in the narrative, compare for example her comment on Stefan's capacity as a lover:

Presumably, Stefan is an excellent lover. He is quite desperate if I don't come. He can caress you in ways I had thought were not possible. I have read everywhere about women who are never caressed. I should be grateful but I am not.<sup>18</sup>

Rather than being ironic the voice can tentatively be described as naively open or serious but also matter of factual. This type of voice is kept up regardless of the content, which often gives the narrative a particular absurd humour and also creates a distance to the protagonist and her perspective.

Viewed in relation to the identity thematics, especially the surface identity and the issue of looking, the message inherent in the protagonist's description of the photo seems to be that she has been closely looked at but not really seen, i.e. understood: "The pictures are so successful that you can hardly see it is me". This interpretation is also in line with the general image the protagonist gives of her boyfriend as instrumental (as in the love-making above) and unwilling to go beyond the surface of life.

In the second ekphrasis we enter Kamala's world and thus the "monstrous" sphere metaphorically located beneath the surface of existence. The protagonist "meets" Kamala in a weekly magazine which she happens to read as a child; as a narrator she recalls this event, sometimes with the distance of memory and sometimes more closely to her perspective as a child. The protagonist underlines her immediate fascination with the article that was strong enough to make wake up from the "boredom" that characterized her childhood. The fascination seems to be based on Kamala's being both her "other" and her equal, both a little girl like herself and a girl who has been brought up by a wolf. The article tells the story about how Kamala was found in a wolf's den and was adopted by a priest who tried to civilize her

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15 See for example Eriksson/Göthlund, *Möte med bilder*, (Meeting Images), 116-122.

16 Kamala's Book, p 24. "Han har tagit en serie mycket fördelaktiga nakenfoton på mig, i ett sånt ljus att bröstet ser större ut. Han gav mig två iskuber att trycka mot bröstvårtorna så de skulle bli styva. Han har lyckats så bra med bilderna att det knappt syns att det är mig de föreställer."

17 The photographic claim for authenticity is discussed by Roland Barthes in "The photographic message" in *Image-Music-Text*, 1977.

18 P. 47. "Stefan är förmodligen en utmärkt älskare. Han blir alldeles förtvivlad om det inte går för mig. Han kan smeka på ett sätt som jag inte hade trott var möjligt. Jag har läst överallt om kvinnor som aldrig blir smekta. Jag borde vara tacksam men jag är det inte."

and turn into her an ordinary child. The photos of Kamala in the article seem to be especially intriguing to the protagonist both as proofs of her existence and her remarkable habits:

She had really existed. There were some photos of her, fuzzy but amazing. (...) On one of the photos she ran around on all fours with something in her mouth (...) it said underneath that it was a dead chicken. She was naked except for a white rag around her loins. Her hair was cut very short and her skin was dark. (...) There was another picture where she was standing up unsteadily, wearing a light dress but looking uncomfortable. Her face was sullen and her nose broad. She could not laugh and if nobody stopped her she would roll around in animal faeces.<sup>19</sup>

In the first picture she is presented as the protagonist's "other": the wild girl transgressing the borders between the human and the animal world. In the next we see her as barely domesticated, a "nice" little girl only because of the 'civilizer's' seemingly futile efforts.

The protagonist responds to Kamala's story with complete identification: she attempts to walk on all four, eats from a bowl on the floor and looking in the mirror she pulls up her upper lip as she has seen dogs do. Eventually she tries to merge with Kamala. "I lay down under the blanket and felt her traits break through my face, the words left me and instead there was a warm humid darkness."<sup>20</sup> In this narrative there are no distancing mechanisms or questionings of the truth of the photographs as in the first one. Instead there is the girl child's total acceptance and fearless attempt to enter into another dimension of existence, using her own body to do so. Viewed in relation to the identity thematic the girl's behaviour here strongly contrasts with the grown-up woman's inability to face her inner "other" or "monster" and in this respect the girl seems to represent a positive alternative to the woman.

This interpretation suggests that there is a tendency towards the exotic in the way Kamala's story is used as a wild element, but other aspects of the narrative undercut this. Kamala is not romanticised as a character as the limitations of her life as an animal creature are clearly stressed, for example her lack of language and laughter. In her 'civilized' state, on the other hand, she is presented as a victim of a code of behaviour outside of her control. In this sense Kamala provides an example, although extreme, of the social construction of girlhood by means of proper clothes, cleanliness, eating habits etc. Looked at in this context Kamala represents the rebellious girl child who never learnt to "curtsey or sow or behave properly in church"<sup>21</sup> In this capacity she is not only the "other" but also the "same" as the protagonist who is constantly bored by the "niceness" of her childhood. The protagonist's wish to be Kamala can be interpreted as a child's game where she pretends to be half girl, half animal and at the same time tests certain social conventions like eating habits or proper looks. The instance when she checks her face in the mirror, trying to look like a dog is quite interesting considering her grown-up persona's obsession with her looks.

The child's imaginative powers as demonstrated in play and fantasies are shown to be creative, potentially transgressing powers in the text. These qualities connect the protagonist with her childhood self as will be demonstrated in the last visual technique to be discussed here. It can be characterized as a performance, where the reader can follow how the adult

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19 Ibid. p. 111. "Hon hade funnits i verkligheten. Det var några foton på henne, suddiga men häpnadsväckande. (...) På ett av fotona sprang hon omkring på alla fyra med någonting i munnen (...) det stod under att det var en död kyckling. Hon var naken sånär som på en vit trasa kring höfterna. Hennes hår var snaggat och huden mörk. (...) Det fanns en annan bild där hon stod vingligt upprätt i en ljus klänning men hon såg inte ut att trivas. Ansiktet var buttert och näsan bred. Hon kunde inte skratta och om ingen hindrade henne rullade hon sig i djurspillning."

20 Ibid. p. 112. "Jag la mig under täcket och kände hennes drag bryta fram i ansiktet, orden lämnade mig och ett varmt fuktigt mörker kom istället."

21 Ibid. "niga eller sy eller bete sig som hon skulle i kyrkan."

protagonist changes her surface from its usual girlishly pretty look into a kind of gothic Pippi Long Stocking character. As often we find her in front of the mirror, just putting on her green eye-shadow, but this time she does not only cover the lids but powders her whole face with light-green eye-shadow. Then she carefully describes how she draws big, black circles around her eyes and with the help of a lip contour pen adds a streak of blood in the corner of her mouth. Instead of washing her hair (which she often does several times a day otherwise) she simply cuts it very short, “getting rid of the hair gave me an intoxicating sense of freedom.”<sup>22</sup> She completes her make over with a dress printed with big flowers and gym shoes and then happily strolls around the city, doing forbidden things like talking to strangers and eating ice-cream. The protagonist describes herself as a new creature: “Her paws tread steadily on the ground, she had no gender, no race and no age.”<sup>23</sup> The reference to paws clearly pinpoints her as another impersonation of Kamala, and indicates a link with her childhood experience of her. But the transgressions of gender, race and age, gives this passage a more clearly liberating implication both with regard to the protagonist and Kamala.

This visualization has been described as a performance in order to convey the special quality of the narrative where the reader follows every step in the protagonist’s change. Thereby it is made very concrete and you are drawn into its development, not quite knowing whether what you read is meant to be true or a fantasy. Finally you are told that it was just “trickery”, which is of course disappointing, but on the other hand then you have already experienced the power of fantasy.

The problem of identity is never solved in *Kamala’s Book*. At the end of the novel Kamala is personified as the protagonist’s double, whose task it is to force the protagonist to keep on “longing”. Longing, is still another creative force in the text together with imagination, fantasy and the child’s plastic openness towards the world. What they all have in common is a potentiality for change. The visualizations pertaining to the identity theme, which has been discussed here, show different sides of the protagonist’s fragmented identity. The visual quality makes them almost emblematic, that is, very clear signs of oppression as well as rebelliousness. Thus the visual element performs an important function in order to underline not just the psychological meaning but also the social, feminist message of the text. The life on the surface discussed above is related to a late modern society characterized by male dominance, commercialization and medialization. Although the psychology of the identity problematic indicates personal wholeness to be a solution to the protagonist’s problem, on the social level she is represented as doomed to fragmentation because of social forces that invade her mind as well as her emotions and thus deprive her of agency.

### Visual Analysis of a Comic Narrative: Inger Edelfeldt’s “Little Evelyn”, Femininity and Development

This part of the paper addresses visual and textual representations of “the girl” discussing the media specific possibilities of visual techniques in the comic narrative in relation to notions of the child’s development. I shall concentrate on a single comic book narrative called “Little Evelyn”.<sup>24</sup> Special focus will lie, as the comic media is intermedial in itself, on the relation between the visual representation of the protagonist Evelyn and the narrating voice represented in the text. The narrative does not contain very much dialogue or direct speech, however when this occurs I merely treat it as parts of the visual representations of direct

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22 Ibid. p. 118. “Att håret var borta gav mig en kittlande känsla av frihet.”

23 Ibid. p. 119. “Hennes trampdynor fick stadigt fäste på stenen, hon hade inget kön och ingen ras och ingen ålder.”

24 Edelfeldt, Inger, *Den kvinnliga mystiken – en kortfattad guide*. Alfabetta Förlag, Stockholm 1988.

speech that underlines the visual representations and sometimes adds to or spices up the comical effects of the images.<sup>25</sup>

The themes of this comic narrative are quite easy to grasp only after one read-through of it: a short description would go something like this: A little girl called Evelyn starts to eat and grows larger and larger; first to be fat but still a girl and then to be of monstrous size and soon dangerous to her environment and other people. With her growing also comes a change of attitude and personality.

The title of the whole comic book is *The Feminine Mystique – A Short Guide* and of course it refers to Betty Friedan's famous work on the housewife's situation in the American 1950s.<sup>26</sup> But in the subtitle, "A Short Guide" Edelfeldt instantly makes a remark that makes the title a parody: the mystique can be illuminated and understood with the help of a handbook, a guide, even a short guide. However, it should not be understood as a parody of Friedan's book but of the cultural imaginary making femininity mysterious, which in short is Friedan's account of femininity during this time period. In much, the comic book focuses the process of cultural development from girl to feminine woman, where femininity is not presented as a natural trajectory but a somehow mysterious project for individual women to achieve. It is quite important here to note that this often happens to girls in Edelfeldt's work, but also that femininity as it is perceived in culture seems to always run a risk of failure; idealized femininity is something that one achieves with hard, beautifying work. As a part of this construction of femininity Edelfeldt uses for example the instructive voice of the weekly magazines addressing women, which always makes ideal femininity something that can be failed but also successfully pulled through.

Femininity and eating, as by the time of the comic book's release in 1988 were highly addressed issues, although during the 1980s perhaps anorexia nervosa was more debated and acknowledged as a problem than bulimia which was more acknowledged as a woman's disease by the beginning of the 1990s. However, even if this is the most obvious contextual theme of the narrative I want to point to the significance of the protagonist's position as a small, pre-pubertal girl, as the starting point of the analysis. Small, pre-pubertal girls have seldom been at the centre of discussions about eating disorders, instead girls', and in general children's, eating habits are connected to their developmental changes of being; their natural growth. The notion of this development of children is what Claudia Castaneda calls children's mutability.<sup>27</sup> Children, says Castaneda, are in our culture foremost defined as not-yet adults, and their culturally most valuable characteristic is their potentiality to develop bodily, intellectually and cognitively. So children, both girls and boys are defined by their mutability. However, as Castaneda points out, development, as it is identifiable as a cultural notion connected to children's growth, always runs a risk to fail. This gives you two different imperative social instances, which run risk of failure; development from child to grown-up, and girls' and women's failure to be feminine.

The comic narrative I will concentrate on here is called "Little Evelyn – A Bildungsroman". The use of the concept "bildungsroman" should be read ironically and in the context of the whole comic book that plays with several different genres, which have been used to represent women throughout history (for example pornographic narrative, re-makes of fairytales and legends like "Tristans and Iseult" etc). The "bildungsroman" describes a narrative in which an individual through difficulties and struggle gain self-awareness and/or

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25 Lund, Hans, (ed), *Intermedialitet – ord, bild och ton i samspel*, Studentlitteratur, Lund 2002.

26 Friedan, Betty, *The Feminine Mystique*, cop. New York 1963.

27 Claudia Castaneda, *Figurations. Child, Bodies, Worlds*, Duke UP, Durham 2003.

enlightenment.<sup>28</sup> The personal trajectory and development are at the centre of this kind of novel. Usually the bodily growth is not focused in this kind of narrative, but seen as a natural change, a background against which the personal, intellectual and emotional development is sketched out.

Each image in the comic narrative will be described and analysed in the order in which they occur in the narrative. Quotations at the beginning of each paragraph mark the text which accompanies each image, called the narrating text.<sup>29</sup>

## Little Evelyn – A Bildungsroman

### ***“Little Evelyn was a delightful child”***

In this square Evelyn’s relation to the world is established. She has got an anxious look on her face and an old lady is making a move in her direction, which makes it look like she is talking to a less knowing, maybe a dog or a baby. The personal integrity seems to be invaded. The balance between being cared for and the notion of personal integrity is, when it comes to children, collapsing, underlining that the definition of a “person” is modelled after an ideal about the autonomous and self-contained subject. The text points out Evelyn’s identity as a matter of what other thinks of her, using a vocabulary (“delightful”) that is not associated with a child’s way to express herself, but more like the old lady in the image and her language.

### ***“Everybody said she ate like a bird”***

Still the text expresses the surrounding world’s way of looking at Evelyn. Here Evelyn’s eating habits are not only a concern for “everybody”, she is also being displayed for an audience that comment on her eating. The image shows Evelyn eating “like a bird” not just as an analogy saying that she eats “little” but Evelyn is actually eating not only like, but as and with the birds, using no hands and eating from the ground. The metaphorical use of an analogy as a textual practice is thus highlighted visually as something that gives real effects in this girl’s life. Language is performative and instructive for Little Evelyn’s identity. This should be seen in relation to the fundamental mutability of the child as such. Words and the “language in use” as “eating like a bird” is (at least in Sweden) a common expression, almost a cliché. The expression “eating like a bird” carries double meanings both in relation to imperatives of “eating to be able to grow”, but when one talks about girls and their eating habits, it can also say something about ideals that girls ought to be small and neat. In the narrative, the two statements about Evelyn are connected so that she becomes delightful because of her smallness, which in turn is the effect of her eating very little.

### ***“But one night she shovelled everything that was in the larder...”***

From the perspective of the third image, in which the story or the Bildungsroman suddenly takes a turn and Evelyn starts her disastrous eating of everything, the two previous images can be interpreted as showing a situation that Evelyn now starts to resist: The treatment of Evelyn as an animal or a pretty object of delightfulness, with the only characteristic that she eats very little and is very tiny, seems to be the background against which she starts her eating. In this image an interesting mutability occurs in that Evelyn does not any longer look like a little girl, but more like a teenage girl. The way she is pictured sitting in profile one can interpret her body as shaped as a young woman’s. Her precious and girlish features are changed altogether

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28 Sandra M. Gilbert/Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: the woman writer and the nineteenth century literary imagination*, 2000.

29 All translations from Swedish are made by Kajsa Widegren.

showing somebody with a violent hunger. The image thus refers to a discourse on eating disorders, notably bulimia, among teenage girls, a phenomenon that is associated with excessive behaviour but also isolation, something the image brings up as the eating takes place during night time. At this point in the narrative Evelyn has changed from a precious little girl to a teenage girl with a typical teenage girl-problem, i.e. the story is still working on a level of “natural development”, as puberty sometimes is described as something that happens “over night”.

***“...and so it continued”***

The text establishes a connection between the image where Evelyn turns into a teenage girl and this image where a different turn of event takes place. This image takes the eating excess one step further as Evelyn now is competing with, and acting as an animal. In this image, however, Evelyn is hardly a teenager. Her face has no precious features left and she makes a threatening face. It is quite a dark picture pointing to the “shady” character of Evelyn’s actions. Here nothing of her preciousness is left in her face, she is totally transformed, and in a way beyond age categories and in a stage of another form of transformation. In this image there is no real connection between text and the motif of the image, more than the fact that the development and transformation of the little girl continues and once again she behaves like an animal. Associations between the wildness in animals and femininity has a long history and in this image the intertextual relation to the previous image with the bird-eating takes the interpretation to the dichotomy of the domestic and the wild. The image can also be connected to the scene in Kamala’s Book, where the protagonist turns to a childhood memory in which she tries on the role of Kamala, the girl raised by a female wolf, who could not stand up but only walk on her hands and knees. This intertextual relation gives the image a character of childhood fantasy, a playful game – but this interpretation is contested by the look on the girl’s face: she does not play, this is serious. While the bird-eating image plays with the language in use and the expression “eating like bird”, this image only uses the visual to point to the expression of wildness in Evelyn’s face. Language is thus out of the picture, no longer relevant, since Evelyn has entered an undomesticated and animal-like level of hunger.

***“They did not want her in the ballet school anymore”***

Here is yet another Evelyn at the ballet school with a body that has changed because of her excessive eating; her now chubby, ball shaped body is forced into the ballet costume and the little skirt called tyty, pointing at the ideals of a girl’s body which she now exceeds. Evelyn, however, does not seem to mind being out off the ideal and she no longer takes orders from the teacher who desperately tries to make Evelyn do the right ballet movements. Evelyn’s teacher looks nervous and maybe a bit scared. Evelyn replies with an untranslatable expression of dismiss. Maybe it is not her new body shape that forces her out of ballet school but the fact that she is now no longer submissive to the teacher and the disciplining of the female body that this particular form of dance performs. An ironic touch is added in this picture, contrasting against the dark and violent mode of the previous one. But here Evelyn is still in human size, she is shorter than the adult dancing teacher although much more voluminous. From this point the story reaches a completely grotesque stage. This changes the relation between text and image so that the text seems naïve and falling short of describing the development. Next image is once again described with a common expression:

***“She could barely be in furnished rooms”***

This expression; that someone could barely be in furnished rooms, is quite typical of an adult view on a very disturbing and unruly child, one that can not sit still or obey rules that regulates the “furnished” home, a home that contains a lot of objects that are not for children

to play with. This bourgeois domestic environment requires a regulated way of moving in space. The image shows or actually points out a valuable object, a vase, a “valuable inherited object,”<sup>30</sup> broken by the fact that Evelyn’s buttons are flipping out of her blouse as she is now growing, literally, out of proportion. At this point in the narrative, Evelyn looks like a laughing Buda or a Japanese Sumo wrestler. Although her blouse is bursting her girlie signs, the skirt and the bow in her hair are growing with her, they are getting larger as her body is too, signifying her status as a girl, now a monstrous one. She has a happy smile on her face but her teeth are sharp. In the background one sees a woman, probably her mother with a devastated look on her face, calling the monstrous girl by name: “Evelyn, dear...” as to call the little girl back from her new shape and character. Both the mother and the dancing teacher are notably skinny and fragile women who desperately try to perform disciplining with their spoken words, and both clearly fail. But maybe one could see it as if they are also trying to discipline Evelyn with their idealized womanly shaped bodies. As adults are suppose to act as role models for children, this narrative dismisses and undermines the naturalized narrative of girls growing up to become women. Evelyn grows, but she becomes something completely different, she grows out of proportion.

***“Little Evelyn had to sleep outside”***

As a consequence of her giant size, little Evelyn now has to sleep outside. In the next image she is even bigger and she responds to people talking to her with a dissatisfied look on her face. Her blanket is made of four circus tents sewed together but it is still not enough to cover her whole body. The parents standing by her foot tell her: “Evelyn? The magazine ‘Cosy Home’ has advertised a competition: Who can knit the cutest blanket for you? That’s nice, isn’t it?” Once again a crowd of people is looking at Evelyn; her parents, a mother and her little girl, people standing in the enlightened windows all around her, everybody is watching her. Media covers her story with a sympathy angle: the poor girl is so big she has to sleep outdoors. The weekly magazine begs their readers to sympathise and help her. The magazine turns to women who in their daily lives use handcraft to nurture and care for people, a practice that is now mobilized for the poor “little” Evelyn. Evelyn’s face now looks completely unaware, her response to this caring act is zero. In the narrative the cause of her growth and grotesque size has now been left out for two images: her eating, her competing with animals and animal-like appearance. Instead her interaction, or lack of interaction with the surrounding social environment has been focused. However, now this aspect of Evelyn’s transformation and mutation has re-appeared:

***“She ate everything she saw”***

This is the only image in the comic narrative without a full representation of Evelyn and her body. Instead she is indexed as a godlike hand coming down from heaven swapping an elephant. By the size of her hand this animal seems to be the size of a snack for Evelyn. The reference to the divine hand of god gives the narrative yet another level, as it is a representation of a girl-child: The fantasy of the omnipotent child who conquers the world, who can reach the far-away countries of exotic animals like elephants, and eat and destroy them without second thoughts.

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30 The quoted text is written on a small sign pointing at the vase in question. This is a comic technique of commenting texts that Edelfedt uses quite a lot.

***“One does not know how this will end”***

The last image in this narrative shows the ultimate transformation of Evelyn, the image is dominated by the open mouth of a gigantic predator, a shark-like head but with grasping hands (only one is visible in the image), hunting for people that are so small that the volume of the animal becomes supernatural. The text states this unbelievable turn of events with a laconic tone: the narrator does not know how this will end, a denial of the possibility to foresee the future. Evelyn’s bodily excess; her growing, her development into a hunting monster-animal has made anything possible.

Still there are a few things that signify the relation between “little Evelyn” at the beginning of the story and this predator: The bow in her hair, and the hair itself. Evelyn’s bow has grown proportionally with Evelyn herself, so she still has some kind of coherent identity; that of a girl. As a sign of neatness and preciousness it is destroyed, but as a sign of her girl identity it still remains valid. It is Evelyn as a girl who exceeds her bird-like eating and becomes this monster that eats everything.

In Edelfeldt’s comic narratives, femininity is represented through multiple visual signs. In my example this is also the case. Evelyn’s girl identity is visually made clear and is also the absolutely last thing to remain of her, when she has turned into the bodily and behaviourally changed monster-figure at the end. The use of stereotyping in visual techniques and especially in comic books is very common; girl identity is in several visual representations throughout the whole comic book, marked with a (pink) bow in the hair. Dresses of quite traditional types are also common in Edelfeldt’s girl representations as well as white socks and neat and shiny shoes, pointing at the 1950’s ideals about girlhood. This use of a traditional stereotype is commonly used in comic media, in which the understanding of a situation should be established for the viewer/reader in a quick manner. Stereotypical representations of girls are also used ironically in several of the images in this particular comic book, for example at the front cover, where a girl who is not shaped in an idealized manner is forced into the outfit of the traditional precious girl. In this image a conflict is displayed between the outfit (pink bow, pink dress with what might be lace, a bouquet of flowers) and the girl’s body, which is “too big”, “ungracious”, “not cute”. This girl also lacks the stereotypical personal qualities associated with girls: innocence, perky-ness, untroubled-ness. The title of the book; *The Feminine Mystique – A Short Guide* underlines the irony as there is actually nothing mysterious about the girl expressing her discontent with her outfit, an outfit that is strongly linked to idealized femininity and the characteristics mentioned.

The girl on the cover as well as “Little Evelyn” in different ways resist idealized femininity and the visual media is the means used to express this particular transgression of bodily shapes (ideals ?). All “Little Evelyn’s” behavioural and personality changes are connected to her un-natural development from little girl to teenage girl and back to girl again, to beast and finally a supernaturally sized monster, a monster that still becomes treated as a girl who would appreciate the concern of a weekly magazine and its knitting readers. Femininity can thus be described as an interpellation that fails in the case of Evelyn. It is possible for her to resist this form of instructive socialization because of the powers that have suspended natural growth from subjected child to adult, pointing at the impossibility to resist femininity once one has become a grown-up woman. (or: suggesting the impossibility to resist femininity once you follow its “natural” course).

By different contrasting techniques Edelfeldt’s drawings make identity as a girl continuous yet changed and transgressed, while the narrating text focuses on the disastrous changes and the dialogue focuses on the environment continuously treating Evelyn as if she still was herself. The visual media can thus be seen as a powerful tool for representing imaginative, transgressive changes, which at the same time can be readily interpreted as involving a single identifiable individual.

## Concluding Remarks

Here we will bring up a few similarities between the aesthetics of *Kamala's Book* and "Little Evelyn". Both in the novel and the comic narrative the girl and the monster theme involves construction of femininity through disciplining of the female body. The representation of femininity in *Kamala's Book* demonstrates a sadist-masochist quality where the protagonist's subordinated feminine position is displayed through objects such as the slit skirt and the high-heeled red shoes. The nude study, where the protagonist's body has been carefully arranged and framed, has similar connotations. These representations typifies the protagonist and in this process certain visual representations in the narrative such as the red shoes and the female nude play an important part; in this context Edelfeldt uses a signifying technique similar to the use of the bow to indicate girlhood in "Little Evelyn". Resisting and rebelling womanhood also involves the body in *Kamala's Book*, for example the protagonist's liberating physical make over and the girl Kamala, rebelling against both clothes and food habits in the "civilized" world. The rebellious instances are likewise visualized in the narrative; they have an imaginative, creative quality, which aesthetically links them with the bodily visual changes in the comic strip, but at the same time nothing of their grotesque-ness. Such "otherness" does not work in a novel with certain realistic claims, the girl child Kamala "really exists", she is presented to us on a documentary photograph.

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