Chris Ware's *Building Stories:* A Feminist Reading

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Tämän pro gradu -tutkielman tavoitteena on tehdä feministinen analyysi Chris Waren vuonna 2012 ilmestyneestä sarjakuvaromaanista *Building Stories*. Erityisesti pyrin ymmärtämään teoksen nimetöntä naispäähenkilöä ja teoksen rakennetta ranskalaisen feminismin turvin. Käytän tutkimuksessa ranskalaisen feminismin tärkeimpiä konsepteja kuten naisen keho, identiteetti ja minuus.

Teoreettinen kehys muodostuu ennen kaikkea ranskalaisten feministien työn pohjalle: määrittelen tutkimuksen lähestymistavan Kristevan, Beauvoir'n, Cixous'n ja Irigarayn kirjoitusten kautta. Kristevan ja Beauvoir'n eriävä käsitys äitiyden roolista on tutkimuksessa tärkeässä osassa: kärjistetysti Kristevan kanta on positiivinen ja Beauvoir'n taas negatiivinen. Tutkielmassani pyrin määrittelemään ranskalaisten feministien käsityksen naisesta, naisen odotetusta roolista, keinoista, joilla nainen voi vapautua patriarkaatista, ja ennen kaikkea sen, miten feminististä käsitteistöä voisi hyödyntää analyysissä.

Waren sarjakuva on hyvin erilainen amerikkalaiseen valtavirtatarjontaan verrattuna. *Building Stories* on teos, joka koostuu neljästätoista erilaisesta osasta, mukaan lukien julisteista, lautapelilaudoista, lehdistä ja vihoista. Merkittävästi yhdelläkään osalla ei ole nimeä, sivunumeroita tai edes tarkkaa järjestystä, missä osat pitäisi lukea. Argumentoinkin, että teoksen esitystapa uhmaa määrittelemistä ja yksinkertaistamista samalla tavalla kuin kolmannen aallon postmoderni feminismi.

Mielestäni tutkielmani on arvokas lisä Waren teosten analyysissä, ja ensimmäinen feministinen tulkinta *Building Stories*ista. Tutkielmassani yllä olevan lisäksi vertaan teosta aikakauden vastaavanlaisiin sarjakuvateoksiin, tutkin omaelämänkerrallisia elementtejä ja pohdin teoksen hahmojen roolia tarinan kerronnan kannalta.

avainsanat: Chris Ware, Building Stories, comics, French feminism, third wave feminism, mother, motherhood, authorship, author

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1. Introduction

Chris Ware has been an enduring presence in the comics field for more than two decades. His unique brand of work has garnered awards, including, but not limited to, several Eisner and Harvey Awards, a National Cartoonists Society Award and the Guardian First Book Award. An enigmatic figure, Chris Ware is critically acclaimed but remains surprisingly eluded by mainstream awareness. A case in point is the difficulty of obtaining his oeuvre, and the fact that both *Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth* and *Building Stories* require the consumer not only to be willing to endure walls of text and relative lack of action in an American comic book.

Building Stories defies easy classification. While it is a feminist and postmodern work, with a constant focus on the unnamed female protagonist and unconventional employment of nonlinear memories, its temporal structure, meaning, themes and correct method of reading it are up for debate. Due to the unique nature of its presentation – a box which contains 14 booklets, magazines, posters and board games, all without proper titles and page numbering – it is a question in itself how the work itself should be read, let alone understood. To my knowledge, no one prior has attempted to categorize *Building Stories* into referable segments, a process that I will undertake in order to not only be able to cite the work but hopefully gain a solid understanding of it. As with its categorization, no feminist reading of *Building Stories* exists: this is an oversight that my research will rectify.

Before I may begin, three matters must be clarified. Most importantly, it must be made clear that my work focuses on *Building Stories* as a completed work and in the form that it was published in as a "comic-in-a-box" in 2012. Parts of the work have been published previously, most notably in Ware's own magazine, *The Acme Novelty Library* and in *The New Yorker*, but I will ignore these publications. Ware has chosen this form to represent his completed work, and thus I believe it is the form most worthy of analysis – at least during this phase when little research of the completed work exists, and only some segments have been subject to analysis (in the book *The*

Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing is a Way of Thinking). Secondly, all Finnish sources employed in my research have been translated into English by yours truly. Thirdly, in all excerpts from *Building Stories*, the bold and italic text segments are emphasis by Ware, unless otherwise clearly stated.

1.1 Previous Research

Chris Ware's oeuvre has been the target of academic scrutiny, but the majority of the research has explored his previous work, most notably *Jimmy Corrigan – The Smartest Kid on Earth*. While *Building Stories* is, arguably, even more fertile as a ground for academic analysis, its complete form was released in 2012. Thus, the only existing research on the work can be found in *The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing is a Way of Thinking*.

The book collects 15 essays by different authors, and many deal with Chris Ware and his work as a whole – including an essay on his rhetoric of failure (David M. Ball), Ware's place in the comic canon (Jeet Heer), Ware and his relationship with art history (Katherine Roeder) and so on. While three essays focus on Jimmy Corrigan, *Building Stories* is the subject of four. It is necessary to mention that this book was published in 2010, a full two years before the release of the complete graphic novel. This means that unlike my work, all of the essayists of the book have not had access to all of *Building Stories* while conducting their research.

Daniel Worden's "On Modernism's Ruins: The Architecture of 'Building Stories' and *Lost Buildings*" deals with the architectural elements of *Building Stories*, especially those of the eponymous buildings. Worden provides strong evidence for his claim that Ware longs for lost architecture and its art by presenting Ware's work on a video piece dedicated to the late architect Louis Sullivan as proof. Sullivan, whose buildings have largely been torn down and replaced with new designs, has had the misfortunate of having his buildings sharing the same fate as the titular building of *Building Stories*. Ware's longing for old architecture, the livable works of art, parallels his apparent distaste for the disconnection caused by technology, as is most evident in *DM*.

Matt Godbey deals explicitly with gentrification in "Chris Ware's 'Building Stories,' Gentrification, and the Lives of/in Houses". Gentrification, according to Godbey, is directly referred to when "Tom, an African American character, who only appears once in the strip, sarcastically thanks the young white woman from the opening panel for making Humboldt Park 'safe' for North Siders" (p. 125). As with Worden's essay, Godbey argues that Ware is making a plea for the sanctity and value of old buildings and their design as artifacts that are worthy of preservation but yet subject to none.

Margaret Fink Berman's essay is the most relevant one in the context of my research. Dealing with disability, its depiction and effects upon the protagonist, Berman's essay "Imagining an Idiosyncratic Belonging: Representing Disability in Chris Ware's 'Building Stories'" challenges the ostensibly normalized depiction of disability. Or, as Berman puts it: "from the perspective of disability studies, the strange discrepancy between the striking presence of the protagonist's short leg in the visual register of 'Building Stories' and the near absence of any acknowledgement of her disability in the textual register creates a perplexing interpretive situation" (pt. 191). The protagonist cannot forget her disability, yet she virtually never acknowledges it and even the cases where others do so are rare. Once the female neighbor openly pities her to her husband, and the protagonist has a short discussion about her leg with her plumber, but mostly there is no recognition whatsoever.

Finally, Peter R. Sattler writes about the very structure and temporal structure of *Building Stories*, with his essay "Past Imperfect: 'Building Stories' and the Art of Memory". Arguing that the graphic novel is nothing but a collection of memories, thus explaining its unconventional structure and occasionally highly postmodernist passages, Sattler uses an example to make his claims: the paper dolls. The old landlady and owner of the building – unnamed and referred to by her age or by her status as the proprietor – is depicted as a paper doll in some passages, most notably in *MOW* (see section 2.1 for the explanation for this abbreviation). The old

lady is not actually there, in her memories, but she is a doll momentarily pasted upon them, only to be moved elsewhere soon enough. The most powerful corroborating statements come from Ware himself, who has described *Building Stories* as a way to "reproduce false memories on the page, through compositions that approximate, the way I actually *think*" (p. 209). In addition to his works themselves featuring a complex intertwining form of time, Ware, in his career "has constantly evoked cartoonists from the past, particularly the newspaper cartoonists of the early twentieth century and the pioneering superhero artists of the 1930s and 1940s" (Heer 2010, 3). Heer also observantly notes that "Chris Ware represents not just the future of comics but also its past; indeed, the burden of his work is to show that the past and future are tightly bound together" (Heer 2010, 12).

Berman's and Sattler's work are essential when approaching *Building Stories* from a feminist angle. As with feminism, Berman's disability studies approach explores the true nature and depiction of the protagonist, and Sattler is significant by default. I argue that all the possible meanings and themes of *Building Stories* are intricately and inescapably woven into the very fabric of its delivery: its unconventional structure not only serves but allows the work to exist. And thus since Sattler's work approaches this structure from one angle – attempting to understand the very rationalizations behind the form of *Building Stories* – his work is also the work of understanding the graphic novel from any given angle or via any method. Conversely, I do not question the validity of Godbey's and Worden's essays, but they are research that strictly does not directly relate to understanding *Building Stories* with a feminist methodology; and will not feature as prominently in this work.

In addition to the aforementioned four essays, I will also employ the shorter essays written by the book's – *Chris Ware: Drawing is a Way of Thinking* – authors. These were written and published online in 2012, to commemorate the release of the complete *Building Stories* release.

1.2 Ware's Rhetoric of Failure

Chris Ware consistently employs a method that David M. Ball has deemed the "rhetoric of failure". This is best demonstrated by quoting Ware himself; his reaction when he has learned that there will be an academic book with his work as the focus:

> I must say, I'm not sure whether to be pleased or terrified that my stuff would fall under the scrutiny of people who are clearly educated enough to know better. I'd imagine that your roundtable will quickly dissolve into topics of much more pressing interest, or what you'll at least be able to adjourn early for a place in line at lunch, etc.
> (Quoted in Ball 2010, 45)

This rhetoric consists of both belittling one's own achievements and praising those of others, as is evident in the above example. This method is ubiquitous to Ware, "even the very barcodes of Ware's works rarely appear without a self-flagellant quip or reminder to the book's purchasers that their time and money could be better invested elsewhere" (Ball 2010, 45). The effects of this rhetoric are multiple and in addition to creating an air of humility and self-doubt, Ball argues that this rhetoric serves other functions as well.

Ball lists two other possible reasons for the rhetoric. Ware may be morbidly fascinated with futility and human suffering (Ball 2010, 46), or may be engaging in an attempt to situate graphic novels in the literary canon (Ball 2010, 46). Ball argues that Ware is using his rhetoric in order to ameliorate the status of comics from a purely commercial medium to something that can and does encompass high art. Throughout history, many artists have commercially and critically been complete failures in their lifetimes, and it is this "heroic failure" that Ware seeks: "the flip side of this celebration of, and self-identification with, heroic failure is the thoroughgoing disavowal of success" (Ball 2010, 53). Thus Ware is naturally inclined to draw attention away from his own undeniable success, improving his chances to join the cultural elite with his works: "understanding this larger literary historical treatment of celebrated failures, where success is viewed as antithetical to artistic aims, allows us to better understand the counterintuitive thrust of Chris Ware's omnipresent rhetoric of failure" (Ball 2010, 53).

It is difficult to disagree with Ball's analysis of this rhetoric. Ware's success is undeniable: his multiple awards (including multiple Eisners, the Oscars of the cartoonist world, and Harveys) and even the mere fact that he is able to live comfortably solely with his drawing work prove as much. Ware, of course, can be a failure in the manner that he may not reach goals that he has set for himself, and his work, while celebrated, may not reflect his actual vision and inspiration that he has set out to accomplish, a common problem for artists.

And this is what is interesting in the context of *Building Stories:* the protagonist, like Ware, is an artist-writer[1] and constantly employs the rhetoric of failure. These similarities are potent enough to give credence to the idea that *Building Stories* is in some way autobiographical (as contemplated in 3.2.2). Though *Building Stories* makes it apparent that the protagonist laments her lack of success due to her depressive disposition, the biographical connection makes this more complex. If on some level the protagonist is Ware, and Ware employs the rhetoric of failure to further the status of his work, logically then the protagonist similarly attempts to add to the value of *Building Stories*. This is a selflessly sacrificing – but also self-serving – act, laying out bare the most sensitive and painfully personal facets of her life to further her artistic ends. If Ware is the protagonist, then the end of *DM* becomes a painful admission of Ware's own failure: despite undeniable financial successes, his books are not kept in libraries, and he may have not changed the status of comics as he has wanted to do.

2. The Form and Temporal Structure of *Building Stories*

The form in which *Building Stories* is presented as – a box with 14 independent elements – was inspired, in part, by Marcel Duchamp's "Museum in a Box" and a 1920s French set of games (Kaneko et al., 2012). In addition, Joseph Cornell's boxed assemblages are also a source, confirmed

[1] Cartoonists who both write and draw their material are somewhat rare in the US comics market. Most often, the roles of penciller, inker, colorist and writer all have their own specialist, and sometimes a single role is fulfilled by multiple people, such as two people working as colorists. Ware is notable for fulfilling all these roles himself, which is rare: often US teams consist of at least a distinct writer and artist rather than a single creator.

by Ware himself (Gilmore 2012). Accordingly, everything in *Building Stories* serves a purpose: as is traditional with board games, the work is encased in two boxes, a top and bottom half. The front of the upper box is the cover of the comic, while its interior serves as a title page; having the dedications and legal info necessary for a printed work. The bottom box has nothing on its interior, but its exterior serves as the back cover of the work; brandishing both the traditional back cover elements – excerpts of the work and a short synopsis of it – and the table of contents, which, of course, in this particular case is pictures of each of the pieces within. This graphic novel is effectively "a work that intentionally troubles the distinction between 'book' and 'box,' and leaves readers in the same state of flux as its characters, forced to construct a contingent narrative from the jumbled moments of life" (Gilmore 2012).

The 14 pieces of *Building Stories* come in varying shapes and sizes (although all elements are rectangles) and have no titles or page numbers. These 14 pieces are used "in part to reinforce one of the major narrative themes of Building Stories, the fragmented nature of modern urban life" (Heer 2012). Roeder (2012) describes the reading of *Building Stories* thusly: "it becomes a physical experience: unfurling the newspapers, flipping through chapbooks, handling the game board, each of which is carefully crafted and exquisite. The pieces are architectural fragments, building upon each other and accumulating meaning."

Segment 2.1 elaborates upon the form and content of each individual piece, 2.2 categorizes each piece to make citations possible and, finally, 2.3 considers the implications of this structure on the temporal structure of *Building Stories'* narrative.

2.1 Categorization System

As the 14 pieces of *Building Stories* have no titles and there is no established research that refers to the work other than as a cohesive whole, this segment establishes titles and a numbering system for each piece. It is, however, important to always remember that these titles and numbers are

altogether arbitrary, and not meant to influence the reading of the work in any intentional manner. In a fashion, everything and nothing happens at the same time in *Building Stories*, since there is no set linear order to read the work in. Despite this and the fact that there are no clear beginnings, second acts, endings and so on, nothing in the narrative according to my reading contradicts its events or creates anachronisms. All this is testament to the fact that *Building Stories* is a work with and without form for purposes that are quintessential to the entire cohesion of the work itself and instrumental to its understanding.

Despite the arbitrary nature of these given titles, an attempt has been made to render these names logical, easy to remember and above all, connected to their referents on some semantic level. The names of the pieces are – not respectively, for there is no such order in *Building Stories* – *Branford the Best Bee in the World* (henceforth referred to as *BBB*), *Accordion Snow* (*AS*), *Accordion Daughter* (*AD*), *Tijuana Bible* (*TB*), *Golden Book* (*GB*), *The Daily Bee* (*DB*), *Disconnect-Magazine* (*DM*), *Green Blank Book* (*GBB*), *Poster* (*P*), *Magazine Neighbors* (*MN*), *Magazine Old Woman* (*MOW*), *Board Game* (*BG*), *Forest Newspaper* (*FN*) and *Baby Newspaper* (*BN*).

These names are based on both the content and the form of each given piece, so, for example, *AS* has a name based on the fact that the prevailing visual element in the piece is snow, and that it is printed as an accordion that folds out to be read. When the form of a piece is unique, its name is also completely unique, as in the case of *Board Game. BG* is a real board game board, only there is a comic in place of a board – a seemingly self-ironic stab at the fact that *Building Stories* is a comic book that appears to be a board game. When the pieces are not unique in their form, namely with the magazines, accordions and newspapers, an additional signifier is provided, based on the content of the piece. In three cases, the names are based on the text on the first page of the given piece; which may or may not be interpreted as the official name of the piece: *Branford the Best Bee in the World*, *Disconnect-Magazine*, and *The Daily Bee*. Considering these as official titles,

however, may prove problematic as it can also be argued that they are part of the narrative itself and not paratexts. This is particularly apparent with *DM:* though "DISCONNECT" appears separate on the first page in the piece, "REPETITION" and "BROWSING" (on the last page, no less) are presented in the exact same way, only with a dissimilar background color and the protagonist at a different age. It can be argued that rather than being a genuine title for the piece itself, the "title" is just yet another narrative device. However, even if one considers these three pieces to have official titles, the reality is that the 11 other pieces have no discernible titles – there either is no text at all on the first page, or such an abundance of dialogue and monologue that no clear title is apparent.

Below is a table that lists the vital details of each piece: its given name, page width, page height, the presence of text (or whether the piece consists of pictures only) and folding in the box (if any). Dimensions are given for the instance when any given piece has been unfolded (for example when *BG* is fully opened). Common attributes of all pieces are their shape – all are some manner of rectangles, all lack page numbers and all are in color. Since there are no page numbers in the comic itself, they will be defined in the next segment (2.2). Thus, the number of pages can be found in the table in that respective segment. The dimensions of the box itself are approximately as follows: width 29 cm, height 42 cm and depth 4,5 cm. In addition, all the elements within the box are paper, except the covers of *Green Blank Book, The Golden Book* and the *Board Game.* All folds are horizontal folds, sans for the folds of the accordions and the *BG* which are vertical folds.

All values are measured estimates.

Name	Page Width	Page Height	Text	Folding
BBB	13,5 cm	19,7 cm	Yes	None
AS	72 cm	9 cm	Yes	Accordion (3 folds)
AD	72 cm	9 cm	Yes	Accordion (3 folds)
TB	7,5 cm	25 cm	No	None
GB	21,5 cm	24 cm	Yes	None
DB	31,3 cm	47 cm	Yes	None
DM	22,9 cm	30,4 cm	Yes	None
GBB	23,5 cm	31 cm	Yes	None
P	33 cm	25,6 cm	Yes	Folded once
MN	21 cm	28 cm	Yes	None
MOW	21 cm	28 cm	Yes	None
BG	106 cm	40,5 cm	No	Accordion (3 folds)
FN	41 cm	56 cm	Yes	Folded once
BN	40,5 cm	56 cm	Yes	Folded once

2.2 Page Numbers

With the titles of each individual piece established, the remaining necessity is to assign page numbers. In many cases, determining these values are straightforward enough, but some pieces – namely the accordions, *P* and *BG* require their own distinct rules due to their unique presentation. In all cases, the very first page – the title page – is page number 1. Thus, the number of the back cover in each piece is also the number of pages in the given piece; this system is used for simplicity. Some academic publications choose to refer to specific panels in cited comics with the system "page number: panel number", but this is unintuitive in *Building Stories* due to the fact that some compositions make it difficult to determine which panel is meant to be the first one. Instead, I only refer to specific pages, and elaborate if I am referring to a specific section on a given page.

The accordions, *BG* and *P*, when folded out, only have two sides, and each of them have a designated side "A" and "B", where the order is arbitrary: both sides progress chronologically but it is impossible to know which side is the first one – especially with the

accordions, which effectively form thematic loops. For *AS*, side A is the one where the third panel's bubble reads "**God**… I can't bear it… I can't… I **can't**…". For *AD*, side A is the one which begins with the protagonist's narration: "her laugh is like a flock of tiny birds, taking off…". For *BG*, when it is completely unfolded, the "front" is the side with the comic, while "back" is the side with the blue & white blueprints (or, to be exact, not blueprints but depictions of a house with the color scheme of conventional blueprints).Unlike the rest of these special cases, *BG* has an obvious front and back, and thus is not categorized as sides "A and B". For *P*, side A is the one that begins "AS A KID".

For convenience, below is a table that records the names of the pieces and the total number of pages in each piece. It is important to note that the ordering of these names is arbitrary; as is with the graphic novel itself. The number of pages in *Building Stories*, according to the back cover, is 260, but with this categorization the overall page count is 264. This is most likely due to the fact that by assigning a page number to each and every page, including blank pages and book covers (the blank covers of the *GBB*, especially) are counted among the total. For the convenience of being able to employ a universal page number system, this categorization will regard *Building Stories* as having 264 pages despite the contradiction.

Name	Number of Pages	Name	Number of Pages
BBB	32	*GBB*	56
AS	2 (sides A & B)	*P*	2 (sides A & B)
AD	2 (sides A & B)	*MN*	16
TB	52	*MOW*	16
GB	36	*BG*	2 (sides front & back)
DB	4	*FN*	20
DM	20	*BN*	4

2.3 Temporal Structure

Time is a challenging concept in *Building Stories*. Though nothing hints that the work would have anything but a linear concept of time – for example, there are no anachronistic elements in the work. If a character dies, he or she remains dead, and so on, but there are other complexities. The main complication arises from the fact that the presentation alternates between stark realism and outright postmodern methods, as in *MOW*, where the old woman is depicted, several times, as progressing through her life (and to both directions, no less), all the while as she narrates the story as an old woman. Predominantly, she is depicted as being of a singular age, either in memory or in the present as an old woman, but the postmodern segments occur and end without warning.

In my view, *Building Stories* is explicitly a postmodern work. Banta (2012) notes that one of the most interesting elements in the work is "the alienating interaction of its protagonists with various kinds of electronic devices and gadgets." And indeed, tablet devices, computers and smartphones are commonplace once the protagonist is depicted as a middle-aged woman; especially in *FN*, which, in addition to all the other gadgets throughout the piece, even features an apparent depiction of Facebook on page 15. The postmodern time is confirmed by *GB*: the vast majority of

this piece occurs on September 23rd 2000. In addition, its page 34 takes place on April 20th 2005 where the baby is a toddler, confirming that the protagonist and Phil have married in the interim of 2000–2005 and that the baby has been conceived sometime during 2003–2004. *GB* is unique in the context of *Building Stories* for being the only piece that defines an absolute date; possibly due to the powerful memory of the protagonist and Phil beginning their relationship on this date. Thus, the majority of *Building Stories* takes place in the late 90s to the early 00s (while the protagonist is still renting the apartment) and in all the years of the 2010s decade. The only reason why it is clearly apparent that the decade progresses in the narrative is the fact that the protagonist's daughter Lucy keeps growing up.

Some events can be traced and determined by using the few dates that are available. For example, the unnamed neighbors of the protagonist (when she lives in the apartment) were presumably born some time during the 1970s, as when they first meet they are depicted as young, and the year is explicitly stated to be 1991 (*MN* 6). In contrast, some dates are almost impossible to determine, including the age of the old woman – though her surroundings in *MOW* during the time of her birth and childhood suggest that she was born in the 1930s or 40s.

Though the vast majority of events in *Building Stories* occur in the 2000–2020 period without clear dates, some of the pieces coincide. These include *BG*, *BBB* and *DB*. Considering the short life-span of bees – and the fact that despite their anthropomorphized nature, they are still predominantly depicted having the intelligence, behavior and physical attributes of bees – it is likely that *BBB* and *DB* take place within a short space of time, weeks or days. This is due to the fact that both feature Branford and his family as the primary protagonists. *BG* explicitly links itself to *BBB* by featuring the death of Branford; a death that is also featured on the final page of *BBB*. It, unlike *BG*, reveals that Branford is reborn, comically now as a bacterium ("Branford the Benevolent Bacterium") who must compost the flowers. The fact that this occasion is marked as "Chapter One:

Birth", despite never being continued in *Building Stories*, appears to be an implicit hint that Branford's story is an endless one, as is the circle of life.

What then is the effect of temporal structure of *Building Stories*? For if the majority of the work has no explicit dates, does time serve a function whatsoever? It can be argued that the reasoning for these sporadic dates is to set a background, but not distract from the work itself. Indeed, exact dates would be problematic, for *Building Stories* constantly shifts between several levels of consciousness and memory; present events are depicted while past events are narrated, past events are narrated while thoughts and different memories are depicted, and so on. Sometimes time runs on, and sometimes life is ordinary and mundane: "Ware's version of 'the ordinary' is a living moment-by-moment, dwelling on the micro-gestures that narratives usually elide; it is the bored killing of time, the waiting to finish peeing, the placing of feet on a coffee table with a plate balanced on one's lap" (Berman 2010, 195). If the protagonist herself is the author and narrator (see segment 3.2.3 for elaboration), then all of this makes sense: she has no need for specific dates and if she requires them, she can easily determine them. The only exact dates are when (ostensibly) lifelong couples have formed: the protagonist and Phil, and the neighbors. It may very well be the case that these men changed the lives of these women, though not always for the better – especially in the case of the neighbors – but it is nevertheless a date that is to be remembered as a positive memory, though it may ultimately lead to downfall.

3. Feminism(s): Understanding *Building Stories*

Building Stories is a prime candidate for feminist research. Its primary protagonist is female, almost everything in the work is portrayed from the protagonist's perspective and many themes in the work are either universal regardless of gender and sex (fulfilling one's dreams, finding a mate, financial troubles), or those that are traditionally associated with the female sex (pregnancy, rearing children, frustration with lack of respect from spouse). Despite this, no established research on feminist

themes in *Building Stories* exists: previous work has focused primarily on the architectural, gentrification and racial themes, with emphasis on the narrative structure of the work.

The following segments seek to rectify this oversight: 3.1 defines the feminist approach that is going to be employed. Feminism is a vast field, and the term "feminisms" is more appropriate (Dolan 1991, 3); as not only is feminist research an endless resource but also one that harbors deeply contradicting elements. Despite the fact that this work will primarily employ French feminists, even within that specific strait of feminism academics disagree on fundamental topics (in this context, especially Kristeva and Beauvoir). 3.2 employs this now-defined method to gain a feminist overall reading of *Building Stories*, while the hyponymous segments 3.2.1 to 3.2.5 each focus on a single approach to the work or its elements: contrast with contemporary peers, the biographical elements, temporality and authorship, the protagonist and the form of *Building Stories*.

3.1 Definitions

Feminism is a collection of ideologies, academic disciplines and movements. Albeit an exhaustive definition is beyond the scope of this work, I will explore the French feminist tradition, the primary concepts and their relevance with understanding *Building Stories* in the following sub-segments. More specifically, the segments will attempt to define feminism (3.1.1), explore the feminist problem of defining "woman" (3.1.2), the role of the feminist critic (3.1.3), the traditional and conservative role of the "woman" and her otherness (3.1.4), contemporary feminism and especially its relation to comics (3.1.5), the role "I" and phenomenology in feminism (3.1.6) and finally, feminist criticism that explores comics (3.1.7).

3.1.1 Defining Feminism(s)

One way to define feminism is to see it as a political project, a "series of discussions, which concern the contradictory nature of the definition of a woman in Western thought" (Koivunen et al.1996, 10). Another is to define feminism by sexuality. For to feminism, sexuality is what work is to Marxism:

"that which is most one's own, yet most taken away" (A. MacKinnon 1981–1982, 1), and female sexuality "has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters" (Irigaray 1985, 23). Sexuality is a social process which "creates, organizes, expresses and directs desire, creating the social beings we know as women and men, as their relations create society" (A. MacKinnon 1981–1982, 2). The primary process that allows the subjection of women is sexual objectification: women are reduced to objects, and men are the only agents, subjects: "Man fucks woman; subject verb object." (A. MacKinnon 1981–1982, 27). Butler (1990) echoes a similar sentiment of sexuality and gender being something constructed: "gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceede [sic]; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (270).

Why is feminism necessary? Feminism was, and is, needed to ensure not only the obvious – equal rights for all sexes – but, as with post-colonialism, to catalogue and understand the world via the voice of those that once (and regrettably sometimes continue to be) repressed. Women have secondary social status, as "the second sex", as Beauvoir puts it, relegated to this status by patriarchy (Reineke 2011, 22). Beauvoir successfully argues that gender inequality is built upon biological difference: women are inferior, thus regardless of volition or action, both women and men are forced to experience their body in different ways (Reineke 2011, 25). Beauvoir goes on to show that women's bodies are "the raw material that men interpret" (Reineke 2011, 26), with, for example, "cultural icons of the maternal and virginal body" (Reineke 2011, 26.). Arguably, Beauvoir's greatest contribution to the field of feminism is the realization that not only are women and especially their bodies used as "an important locus in patriarchal power in Western culture" (Reineke 2011, 34) and her term "bad faith", the concept of women's own complicity in their own repression and relegation to their status as secondary citizens under male domination (Reineke 2011, 30).

Special attention here must be paid to the role of feminism within the field of comics – after all, this thesis concerns a graphic novel. Though by no means an independent form of art exempt from the rest of society, comics is, interestingly and importantly, a genre that is both young and one that is at the same time constantly evolving and stagnant. What I mean by this is that while some genres remain essentially the same for even decades, the proliferation of the underground comics scene in the mid-20th century and the evolution of Internet comics at the end of the same century have served to create a fertile environment for expression where absolute freedom from the patriarchy is possible, as comics are both inexpensive to create and easy to spread online.

Despite this, comics, of course, have not been immune to the prevalent objectification and conventional gender roles imposed on women. In reviewing Mike Madrid's *The supergirls: fashion, feminism, fantasy, and the history of comic book heroines*, Carr (2011) mentions that even superheroines are subject to the same conservative expectations: "the author also spends a chapter discussing a little-covered aspect of the superheroine: the balance that *many characters* must walk between crime fighting and *child rearing*" (107, emphasis mine). Conversely, very few American comics – especially superhero comics – deal with fatherhood. Batman has a son with Talia al Ghul (at least prior to the New 52[2], which I am unfamiliar with), but this son remains unknown to him until he has reared through his adolescence, arriving to Batman only as a teenager – a character in itself and not a burden to hinder his adventures, as is often the case with the depiction of superheroines in their struggles with motherhood. Heer (2012) notes "historically comics have been among the most sexist of all art forms, but with Building Stories, Chris Ware becomes one of the handful of male cartoonists who has created an authentically convincing female character (an achievement that is also rare in male-written prose fiction)." I agree with his statement, drawing upon knowledge of comics ranging from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 21st century. In the seventies, sexist depictions of women in comics are still not only commonplace but

[2] A relaunch of the DC multiverse in 2011, where all ongoing monthly superhero books were cancelled and replaced with 52 new ones.

often the norm. This situation has only truly been rectified in the 20th century, when comics by women and/or comics targeted either for women or all genders have become popularized and commonplace.

3.1.2 Defining Woman

But what then is a woman, and what must a woman do to remain one, if anything? Our gender is built upon the biological sex, which itself can only be accessed via the social (Liljeström 1996, 120): the duality between sex and gender is seen as that of a complementary relationship, where the restricting nature of gender is not realized to be equally discriminating toward not only the woman but the man (Liljeström 1996, 117). Some do not even attempt this monumental task, as Kristeva (1980B) notes that "in 'woman' I see something that cannot be represented, something that is not said, something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies" (137). Cixous (1980), in her seminal work *The Laugh of the Medusa* writes that "woman must write her self [sic]: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies" (245). Cixous would be opposed in entirety to the process and product that is *Building Stories*, for she adds that "I write woman: woman must write woman. And man, man." (Cixous 1980, 247). Or, equally possibly, Cixous would not object, for the work fully embodies her message: "it is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded – which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist." (Cixous 1980, 253). *Building Stories* can be read as a product of the protagonist's stream of consciousness, as an impossible-to-define episodic narrative of one woman's thoughts (see segment 3.2.3 for elaboration), thus implicitly echoing Cixous's statement deep within its own narrative.

What is the significance of the physical with femininity? For the philosopher Merleau-Ponty, the body and its relationship to the world form the core of his existential phenomenology

(Petäjäniemi 1997, 250). The body is a given, as such that it is the necessity of being in the world (Petäjäniemi 1997, 250). Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty writes that "there is no inner human, human is in the world, and only in the world he/she knows him/herself"[3] (Petäjäniemi 1997, 251). Commenting upon Merleau-Ponty, Butler writes that "language and materiality envelop one another perfectly. They are intertwined and thus dependent upon one another. They never return to each other, but neither do they surpass one another either" (Petäjäniemi 1997, 259). Butler is keen to distinguish that she does not deny the physical, nor language, or, it is implied, any other such conventionally perceived (and described) dichotomy-relationship, but what she means is that, as these pairs exist, our perception of them is flawed – such as with the signifier "woman" or "man". Though the signifier and the signified touch one another, they never completely cross their paths and truly mean and become the same (Petäjäniemi 1997, 260). This, taken to its logical extreme, means that we can never understand what truly is a "woman"; definition by sex is easy enough but Butler, among others, have demonstrated the inherent difficulty of other signifiers.

3.1.3 The Feminist Critic

What is the feminist critic? "The feminist critic can be seen as a 'resistant reader,' who analyzes a performance's meaning by reading against the grain of stereotypes and resisting the manipulation of both the performance text and the cultural text that it helps to shape" (Dolan 1991, 2). The feminist critic resists the objectification, resists classifications. This resistance can take force as rational speech: "an eyes-open, truth-telling passion against 'the powers that be' and 'the censors within,' can be one emancipatory window into the future" (Elshtain 1981–1982, 129). Even this is complicated, as throughout history people have identified the combinations "masculinity + objectivity" and "masculinity + scientific" (Fox Keller 1988, 81). Fox Keller also adds to the sentiment of Butler and A. MacKinnon (and countless others) by stating that "sex hormones may

[3] This quote has been translated from a Finnish source, and the Finnish language does not distinguish between the sexes with personal pronouns. Thus, I have chosen to portray the inherent ambiguity of the Finnish source here.

have all manner of effects on one's intelligence or personality, but it is undeniable that our notions on the differences of the sexes cannot be completely accounted for with just biology." (Fox Keller 1988, 86) The woman's relationship to her body and to the body, likewise, is not simple: "as has sexuality and corporality been seen as a fundamental method of oppression, so too have they been viewed as fundamental to emancipation" (Koivunen et. al. 1996, 31). This, for example, is evident with Kristeva's and Beauvoir's differing attitudes toward pregnancy.

To Kristeva, motherhood is both physical – "cells fuse, split, and proliferate; volumes grow tissues stretch, and body fluids change rhythm, speeding up or slowing down" (1980A, 236) and an almost-supernatural process which redefines the woman and her body: there is an other. And no one is present, within that simultaneously dual and alien space, to signify what is going on. 'It happens, but I'm not there.' 'I cannot realize it, but it goes on.'" (Kristeva 1980A, 236). Kristeva draws an interesting parallel within the generations of women, observing that:

> By giving birth, the woman enters into contact with her mother; she becomes, *she is her own mother; they are the same continuity differentiating itself*. She thus actualizes the homosexual facet of motherhood, through which a woman is simultaneously closer to her instinctual memory, more open to her own psychosis, and consequently more nugatory of the social, symbolic bond. (Kristeva 1980A, 239, emphasis mine.)

To Kristeva, motherhood is a truly universal process, occupying both the transcendental and the physical space. In a fashion, a woman only becomes a woman through her motherhood, connecting to her mother and thus to countless previous and next generations with this act. Regarding the definition of the woman and the mother, Kristeva notes that "even though *woman* cannot be described (without endangering her difference), perhaps *mother* can be. After all, motherhood is the only function of the 'second sex' that which existence can be affirmed in all certainty (1993, 137, emphasis in the original). It must be noted at this point that this quote also almost certainly serves as an apparent stab towards Kristeva's contemporary and, in some ways, ideological rival Simone de Beauvoir who defined the concept of "second sex" in her landmark work *Second Sex* (1949). Beauvoir's negative outlook on and outright rejection of pregnancy is subtly mocked, as Kristeva

describes motherhood as something that is essentially feminine – a grand insult in the world of feminism, where the conventional values of biological essentialism are, in many ways, the ultimate enemy of any manner of feminist ideology. On children, Kristeva notes that for the mother the arrival of the child "leads the mother into the labyrinths of an experience that, without the child, she would only rarely encounter: love for an other. Not for herself, nor for an identical being, and still less for another person with whom "I" fuse (love or sexual passion)" (1981–1982, 49).

Kristeva and Beauvoir share the view that "that the maternal body is the site of a radical splitting of the female subject" (Zerilli 1992, 113). Despite Beauvoir's reservations towards pregnancy and children, she fails to explain why feminists continue to bear children if child-bearing is nothing but "drudgery and oppression" (Zerilli 1992, 115). However, Zerilli also claims, comparing the two that "the sense of connectedness that binds a woman to their mother is almost always seen by Kristeva as an immense problem, if not as the source of 'psychosis' – for example, lesbianism" (Zerilli 1992, 127). This can be considered false, as though Kristeva undeniably problematizes pregnancy she does not do so "almost always". Pregnancy grants woman the unique love of motherhood, and, as Kristeva as a mother puts it herself: "motherhood is a passion in the sense that the emotions (of attachment and aggression toward the fetus, baby and child) turn into love (idealization, planning for the child's future, dedication) with its hate correlative more or less reduced" (Kristeva 2005). Despite the mentioning of hatred in this quote, the message is a positive one: a pregnancy, troubled it may be, evolves into love. Why Beauvoir apparently cannot see pregnancy in a positive light is difficult to ascertain. If Kristeva and Beauvoir are reduced to a personal level for the sake of this consideration, the two have lived according to their principles. Kristeva has personally studied the effect of pregnancy on the female body and psyche, and Beauvoir has never surrendered to render her womb an incubator for something that can essentially be seen as a parasite. Why Beauvoir chose not to procreate – if it indeed was a choice – is not apparent, but her life suggests that it was to preserve her independence. She never married, never

lived together with her lifelong partner Sartre and the two never restricted themselves to a conventional monogamous relationship. It is possible that that Beauvoir chose to retain all the volition possible in her life at all costs.

Furthermore on the issue of pregnancy, Zerilli suggests that "man's dread of the female body is fear of his own corporeal limits, of immanence, of becoming woman – dread, that is to say, of the (m)other" (Zerilli 1992, 126). That is to say, man fears woman for if woman is not woman, then how can man be man as the original, if the other cannot be defined? Worse still, this ambiguity may lead the man unwittingly to partially or fully assume the position of being the woman, the other.

3.1.4 The Role of the "Woman"

Cixous and Irigaray speak of Western cultural systems as being "phallogocentric"; based on "the primacy of certain terms in an array of binary oppositions" (Klages 2001). Thus it is logical that being the woman, or even woman-like, woman-ish, the woman-esque is to be avoided at all costs. Klages provides a list of good/bad polar opposites that includes, among other things, male/female, order/chaos, language/silence, presence/absence, speech/writing, light/dark, and even good/evil (Klages 2001). If language, then, is phallogocentric, evolved to be so throughout thousands of years of patriarchy, what can one do to escape polar opposition? One way to combat this is to deconstruct language itself, using wholly unconventional writing and jargon, as is the case with Butler, who has defended her difficult style as allowing to circumnavigate what is traditionally regarded as "common sense", thus unlocking the potential to genuinely express radical thought and achieve progress – and this is a feature of not only her own work but also, for instance, Spivak's.[4] Or, one may simply appreciate the nature of "woman" and its versatility and difficulty: "when Cixous says that woman is more slippery, more fluid, less fixed than man, she means both the literal woman, the

[4] http://www.lrb.co.uk/v21/n13/letters

person, and the signifier 'woman'" (Klages 2001). Klages also adds, explicitly stating that women are not defined by men, period, by declaring that "If women could show men their true sexual pleasures, their real bodies – by writing them in non-representational form – Cixous says, men would understand that female bodies, female sexuality, is not about penises (too few or too many) at all" (Klages 2001).

Not only are women traditionally seen as reduced to objects, mothers and potential conquests, but never as human. Indeed, "the problem for feminists is not mother as subject but women as nonsubjects, as maternal ideal, mother as mute subject" (Zerilli 1992, 131). Feminist criticism has shown that "women, in the tradition of Western thought, do not actually fit within the abstract models of 'human' or 'individual'" (Koivunen et. al. 1996, 10–11). The complexity of feminism is not only the aforementioned fact that feminism simultaneously exists in different waves, approaches and even conflicting methods and goals, but indeed the reality that "feminist research is, at the same time, *both* defined by historical and cultural power relations and ideological constructs, *but also* outside them or research focusing on the margin between the two" (Koivunen et. al. 1996, 10–11, emphasis in the original). Modern feminism recognizes the needs of women, while simultaneously affirming there is no universal "woman", just as there is no quintessential "man", and in the quest for equality, the true question has emerged as a question of power: "the equal disbursement of power and agency between not only the two sexes, but also between races, classes, and nationalities – feminists have learned to analyze media in terms of power relationships and to assess who has agency and how they derived it" (Kornfield 2009, 60). And, in relation to *Building Stories*, Kornfield also states that "American entertainment often presents heroines who still conform to the confining stereotypes of passivity, docility, sexual objectification, and ultimate dependence on the hero, offering patriarchal narratives in popular culture" (Kornfield 2009, iii).

3.1.5 Contemporary Feminism

The third wave of feminism is not always quite as stark and intentionally shocking as the work of Brownmiller, A. MacKinnon and Beauvoir. Harris (2001) suggests there are three key features of uncategorized young feminism: 1) it is diverse, multiple, and open to a range of viewpoints; 2) it uses technology, popular culture and the media in savvy ways; 3) it is 'do-it-yourself' (DIY) rather than leader-focused (p. 28). It can be argued that *Building Stories* fits in this fresh tradition perfectly with its postmodern form of expression and ways of reading it,[5] and as it uses contemporary technology in a savvy way to express the disconnection that the main couple has in their marriage, and the entire work alludes that the protagonist may very well have created the entire story herself (more in segment 3.2.3).

One attribute of third-wave feminism is that its reach has extended to comics, making it not only a considerable but a crucial tool that cannot be ignored in feminist comic analysis. Comics themselves have evolved, even as the majority of comics have perpetuated and featured rather stereotypical and limited views of women – they have, in recent years, begun to challenge these images (Klein 1993, 60). Within the comics tradition – and even that of painting – "the spectator is always assumed to be male, and the ideal woman is always assumed to be there to flatter him" (Klein 1993, 61). These notions have been challenged, not only by some individuals and works in the mainstream comics genre, but all the more prominently by feminist comics. Describing feminist comic humor, Klein notes that it "recognizes that the personal is political by confronting sexism, gender and economic issues" (Klein 1993, 63). Both comics and feminism are inescapable and ubiquitous presences: comics "will continue to play an important role in our culture because of their mass appeal and world-wide circulation" (Klein 1993, 65). Now, more than ever, with services such as Comixology, the digital libraries of Marvel and DC Comics, comics are more affordable and accessible than they have ever been.

[5] If one reads each of the 14 pieces from the beginning to the end by finishing each piece and then moving on, and reads them only once, there are 14! (87178291200) ways to read *Building Stories* in the correct order, which, of course, is any order at all.

Building Stories is a graphic novel, and a feminist work. In addition, it is a postmodern effort. The relationship between feminism and the postmodern has not been an easy one; still in the 1980s there were few who were willing to combine the two (Rossi 1999, 17). Perhaps one may, instead of speaking of the third wave, instead speak of post-feminism, or consider post-feminism the fourth. Rossi writes that "dividing feminism into waves and grades easily goes too far with the categorization and boundaries" (Rossi 1999, 19). Post-feminism is still feminism – more specifically, feminism interested in the sociocultural position of women – but not so much in what exactly is woman, how to define woman – but the gender system or order as a continuously renewing structure, with its own positions on gender and sexuality (Rossi 1999, 18). To further add to the confusion, post-structuralism and postmodernism are occasionally used virtually as interchangeable synonyms. However, the postmodern is more strongly affiliated with sociality, intricately connected to the multi-layered sociocultural structure and thus both greater and more inclusive than post-structuralism (Rossi 1999, 25). This claim, however, is a bold and problematic one, for although post-structuralism does not share this social facet, it is by its nature a universal approach that encompasses everything and anything and is thus greater still, and can be seen as the central goal of at least traditional feminism. Earlier feminists claim that women cannot be defined – there is no center, there is no other – while contemporary feminists are either not concerned with labels and definitions or just want to choose and design their own labels and wear them proudly.

I, myself, in the context of using feminism as a tool of analysis, do not submit to the division of feminism into waves and ostensible grades and shades; the postmodern feminist's sociocultural concerns can exist mutually with the monumental task of defining womanhood. This, of course, does not mean that because the two may coexist that they should exist simultaneously in any given research or approach. However, in some contexts – as in this case with *Building Stories* – when both concerns are intricately linked in the work, mutual inclusion is the best course of action. *Building Stories* encompasses the postmodern sociocultural concerns and the nature of womanhood

through its fundamental core structures: *Building Stories* practically equals its main protagonist, whose struggles to define herself and problems with her self-esteem, looks, relationships, money and various other issues all touch upon both her sociocultural role and place and the very nature of womanhood.

It must also be stated that I do not outright reject classifications and grading: I merely object to the concept of strictly confining any given feminist effort to an arbitrarily defined group. Likewise, I do not object to analysis made within the context of strict groups – such as French feminist analysis – but I argue that this selection is best done based on the subject of the research rather than loyalty to any established category. Individual works within categories often warrant an individual approach: since works have countless minute differences, does it not only logically follow that the selection of theory to approach any given work is then a significant and important choice best not constrained by a strict boundary? *Building Stories* is a work that by its subject matter happens to concern both French feminism and contemporary feminist ideas and approaches, and there is no reason to mutually exclude these approaches. It is a logical fallacy to refrain from doing so due to fear of conflicting ideologies, because then all feminist approaches become impossible, as feminists even within the same group strongly conflict with one another, most notably Kristeva and Beauvoir. Furthermore, it is important to recognize that even established categories can be arbitrary, and are occasionally defined only in hindsight. All of this, of course, does not warrant that categories would be meaningless or without merit; but that their nature is not necessary quintessential and all-encompassing.

Perhaps the abandonment of womanhood as the subject stems not from irrelevance or obsolete status, but from desperation. Indeed, Irigaray expresses the impossibility of language and the madness of the attempt of understanding as she claims that "as soon as I recognize the otherness of the other as irreducible… the world itself becomes irreducible to a single world: there are always at least two worlds" (quoted in van Leeuwen 2012, 479). Though combining elements from

different feminists, different so-called waves and, especially, radically differing opinions – Beauvoir and virtually any of the modern feminists, for example – may seem counterintuitive, even impossible, there is a simple method to solve this conundrum. As the ultimate goal of feminism is then to free woman both from history, society, patriarchy and herself – or whatever else may hold her back – then the greatest feminist is the feminist who best serves this purpose. Though this idea is simple and overtly so, its application is infinitely problematic. There is no scale or method to determine the "efficiency" or "potency" of any given feminism. Thus this argument is moot, but then lends credence to the argument that all the feminisms can, and must, be employed side by side, and that any limiting choice is both arbitrary and only necessary due to space and time constraints. Though I personally employ Butler due to her significance and relevance, and feminist comic critique due to their relevance, I freely admit that choosing to primarily employ French feminists – or, to be more exact, those labeled under the arbitrary categorization "French feminism" purely by their geographic location – is a personal choice and one that cannot be justified as it is by definition arbitrary. It is arbitrary, but it is a necessitated choice, and a choice made by "I".

3.1.6 The "I" in Feminism

What is the significance or "I" in feminism? If there can be no woman, or if woman cannot be defined, what does it matter who "I" is? Does it matter that these words are written by a physical male, who identifies as a man? Warhol and Herndl (1991) write that beginning their book with a personal anecdote is justified: "there are good reasons for this: feminism holds that 'the personal *is* political', and as feminists we believe that the traditional academic boundaries between professional and personal experienced ought to be undermined" (ix). Indeed, even from a purely logical perspective, one cannot be completely objective with all matters feminist: though not all people are women, each and every human being has a relationship with the woman. Men are born from women; they define themselves by not being women, and so on. The question, whether or not men are

allowed to be feminists, or whether this is a task reserved solely for "the other" sex, is a valid one. For can the oppressor truly sympathize with its victim? A similar, but, of course, not exact concern is raised by Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", which, among other matters, criticizes Western approaches to understand post-colonial cultures. Indeed the crucial difference between feminism and post-colonialism is not the goal – which is that of right to govern oneself and have power over one's destiny – but the identity. Post-structuralist feminists maintain there is no "man", no "woman", whilst post-colonialists maintain the equality *and* difference these different cultures. To the post-structuralist feminist, there literally cannot be any difference between a man and woman feminist: there is no center, there is no other, there effectively is no man, no woman.

3.1.7 Feminist Criticism and Comics

The final remaining question is then that how can one analyze comics with a feminist viewpoint? Some ways are obvious: analyzing the depiction of women, the role of women, the relationship between women and men, the narrative significance and agency of women within the comic, and so on. Where this becomes complex is the very nature of comics. With comics, the combination of words and images has a number of implications and they are occasionally ambiguous. Or, as McCloud puts it in his renowned comics study *Understanding Comics – The Invisible Art*: "whatever the mysteries ***within*** each panel, it's the power of closure ***between*** panels that I find the most ***interesting***" (1993, 88, boldface emphases in the original). Thus not only are the gutters – the common name for the space between panels – comparable to what is *not* written in a book: the events, objects and – in the case of writing – visuals that are not described – a significant element, but one of the most significant ambiguous elements of comics. And with *Building Stories*, ambiguity is pervasive and universal: virtually all characters lack names, sans very few occasions, there are no clear dates, or addresses, and there is not even a clear way to read the work. This complexity and ambiguousness serves to render *Building Stories* – and comics in general – a fertile

proverbial oasis of analysis and academic scrutiny. The unique mesh of printed words and pictures create a medium that is complex and "allows for much flexibility in the manipulation of meaning" (McAllister et al. 2001, 3). In addition, though comics may occasionally be dismissed as nothing more than "funnies", they are a medium that in practice, not just in theory, often portrays social issues and representations of particular groups, an act that has significant ideological implications (McAllister et al. 2001, 4–5).

This is not to say that comics are nothing but images and the interplay of image and text: depending on the given example, text may play the most significant role in comics, or no role at all. Good examples of this are Frank Miller's oeuvre (particularly *Sin City* and *300* which are both dominated by walls of text and would be quite legible even without pictures) and *Gon*, respectively, as *Gon* features no text whatsoever and is wordless. In *Building Stories*, the text adds another dimension with its stream-of-consciousness delivery: as in spoken language, awkward pauses, repetitions and exclamations color the narration. On the development of comics and particularly that of Ware's work as literature, Ball (2010B, 103) writes and explores his view that

> The development of comics can be seen as an inverted history of an admittedly caricatural but nonetheless widely held trajectory of twentieth-century literary history, one that moves from the formal experimentation and putative disdain for mass culture in modernist texts to the playful self-referentiality and celebration of consumption in postmodern fiction.

In addition to text, the interplay of text and images, and images themselves, there are at least two more significant factors any critic of comics must acknowledge: perspective and transitions. Comic transitions – meaning how much the space and/or time change between adjacent panels in any given comic – were famously categorized by Scott McCloud in his landmark work *Understanding Comics*. McCloud divides transitions into six different categories: moment-to-moment, action-to-action, subject-to-subject, scene-to-scene, aspect-to-aspect and the special category non-sequitur where there is no relation whatsoever between two adjacent panels (1993, 70–72). Perspective is essentially "a system of depicting three-dimensional space on a two-

dimensional plane" (Smith 2002, 110). In this context, however, what I mean by "perspective" is the same concept what perspective means in the context of film: the angle used in any given scene, the distance of the "camera" from the elements pictured and, uniquely to comics, the size of the panel.

Perspective in comics, as in film, is a crucial tool: the mood, intensity and duration of any given scene are all elements that are created with the choice of perspective. Will Eisner describes that the primary function of perspective should be "to manipulate the reader's orientation for a purpose in accord with the author's narrative plan" (2008, 92). This is evident in *Building Stories* on several occasions; where the employment of several close-up small panels, which focus on a mundane, uneventful task (such as removing plastic covering from apple pieces in *MOW*) creates a slow sub-narrative of its own: McCloud's famous categorization of panel-to-panel transitions in *Understanding Comics* would classify this ponderous sequence as moment-to-moment, a rare transition in comics. Its presence in comics is so rare, in fact that an entire essay in *The Comics of Chris Ware: Drawing is a Way of Thinking* is devoted to passages such as the apple unwrapping and similar instances of slowness in Ware's work (Banita's *Chris Ware and the Pursuit of Slowness*). Though Ware greatly varies his transitions – ranging from the slow moments to massive temporal leaps of several years – his perspective almost always remains isometric: "frequently depicting the building as a cross section, rendering interior space as a series of isometric schematics, Ware highlights how, on a daily basis, the characters in the strips play out their lives in spaces that order and provide structure, in direct opposition to the messiness outside" (Godbey 2012).

This means that everything is represented with a system that utilizes three coordinate axes that are equally apart from another, thus the axes forming three 120-degree angles. Typically, *Building Stories* uses two versions of this setup where either one of the axes is fully horizontal or fully vertical. Usually, the graphic novel more commonly uses the vertical variant, but both are

extensively featured. Notably, the characters often seemingly do not conform to this perspective, making them instantly recognizable elements not related to the background. This is all the more important when one considers that Building Stories often – but not always – portrays pages in the ligne claire fashion (popularized by *The Adventures of Tintin*), where each line is given similar importance (in other words, width). The function of perspective in comics are numerous, and another of its uses is "to manipulate and produce various emotional states in the reader" (Eisner 2008, 92). This creates a curious effect with *Building Stories,* as the virtually omnipresent stillness, sad tranquility and everlasting perspective effectively depict a world where nothing seems to change no matter how many things do change.

Despite the aforementioned attributes unique to comics, I do not claim that graphic novels should be analyzed in a radically different way from any other manner of literary text. While comics employ the visual medium uniquely with text, they share countless features with conventional literature: they use the same language, they are read in the same way, and they share the same genres and so on. There is no reason why conventional literary criticism cannot be employed with comics; the only caveat is that one must *also* be aware of the ramifications of the visual elements.

Thus then the feminist comics critic is both a feminist critic and a critic of comics who seeks the same elements in comics that he or she would look for in texts, but always with a watchful eye fixated upon the gutters, the panels, the compositions and the union of text and image, and the potential significance of all these factors in relation to the meaning and purpose of the relevant feminist discourse that takes place in the source work.

3.2 Application

Building Stories is a feminist work. It is "about women and representations of sex and gender" (Davis-McElligatt 2012). It is both in graphic novel form and a cartoon. The reality is, however,

that there is no clear true division between the two as contemporary marketing has begun calling any manner of cartoons "graphic novels". Ware himself describes that "a cartoon is not an image taken from life. A cartoon is taken from memory. You're trying to distill the memory of an experience, not the experience itself" (quoted in Sattler 2010, 206). The purpose of this section is to analyze and understand the significance of Ware's box of cartoons.

Much of *Building Stories* revolves around its core character, the unnamed protagonist. Thus the majority of this section will focus on her and her relationships with the various characters of the work, in 3.2.4 and its subsections. The other sections concern themselves with other elements of the work, contrasting it with relevant contemporary comics (3.2.1), exploring the possible biographical elements and their implications (3.2.2), dealing with the potential authorship and temporal structure (3.2.3), and considering a feminist approach to the form of the graphic novel itself (3.2.5).

3.2.1 Contrast with Contemporary Peers

One way to attempt to understand *Building Stories* is to compare it to its peers and luminaries. Released in 2012 but a work-in-progress for roughly a decade, *Building Stories* is a work that is only natural to compare to its famous contemporaries, the bestsellers *Persepolis* (Satrapi 2000), *Fun Home* (Bechdel 2006) and *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo, and Me: A Graphic Memoir* (Forney 2012). These four works have much in common: they are graphic novels, feature female protagonists, have dark subject matter, occasional comedic elements and are autobiographical. The only exception seems to be that Ware happens to be a man, and his work seemingly non-autobiographical. This begs the question, is this problematic from a feminist viewpoint? After all, as I am claiming, *Building Stories* is a feminist work. "Branford, a bee whose hive is outside the apartment building, is the only male point of view we inhabit" (Leith 2012) and even Branford one day finds himself to more closely resemble a female bee with his hairy legs. Leith also observes that

"this is ostensibly a book about buildings but it´s more quietly, too, a book about women´s lives" (Leith 2012).

If one consults Butler, the reality of Ware's gender and sex is no problem whatsoever. To her, gender is constructed with acts, and she compares them to "performative acts within theatrical contexts" (Butler 1990, 272). Similarly, Butler points out that in addition to her own views, "feminist theory has often been critical of naturalistic explanations of sex and sexuality that assume that the meaning of women's social existence can be derived from some fact of their physiology" (Butler 1990, 271). In addition, Butler is skeptical that one can even trace the process of one's gender, as it is "a construction that regularly conceals its genesis" (Butler 1990, 273). There are, of course, differing opinions. Brownmiller (1975) explicitly states "in short the nation's entire lawful power structure (and I mean power in the physical sense) must be stripped of male dominance and control – if women are to cease being a colonized protectorate of men" (388). Though Brownmiller's book overtly has nothing to do with comics – *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* – one can apply the implicit notion of male hegemony defeating the possibility of female expression within the context of comics. Indeed, Ware ironically both supports and oppresses Brownmiller's view. He is fighting against the whitewashing of feminist issues by acknowledging them but, as a man, he is at the same time giving a voice to a female narrator through his own masculine tool of power in the comic world, the pencil.

A differing view is offered by the protagonist herself in *GBB* (26): "nothing was as bad as that short story the teacher read out loud, though, about the couple dealing with mutual infidelity, which the author (a guy) had written from both a male **and** a female point of view… **god,** I thought I was gonna throw up…" (brackets by Ware). This adds a rather comical and even absurd layer to the significance of Ware's sex in relation to the authorship: the protagonist, based on the above quotation, would be disgusted to find out her writer and creator was a man. However, within the work, there is the implication that the protagonist is the writer of *Building Stories*, but even

above this, Ware is the de-facto creator of this hypothetical creator. In a fashion, the protagonist's quip is an extreme expression of Ware's rhetoric of failure, since even his own main character derides and effectively dismisses the authenticity of his agency. This may in fact be nothing but a complex meta-constructed joke, but it is both possible and likely that Ware is using this to acknowledge the inherent risks of writing and drawing as "the other sex"; potentially an act of hostile appropriation.

One does need to look far for the reasons of Brownmiller's reservations against male colonization and oppression, and this is a reality present in the world of comics as well: comics have long been perceived as a medium made by men, for men. For proof, one need only read virtually any superhero comic imaginable made prior the 21th century, for example the issue where Superman and Batman Jr. defeat an alien that is brainwashing the women of a village to become feminists[6]. Ironically, *Building Stories* is indistinguishable from its peers that have been made by women. These are women who, interestingly, all identify as women, were biologically born as women but have different sexualities: Forney is openly bisexual, Satrapi heterosexual and Bechdel gay, facts that are very apparent and, especially with Bechdel, directly stated and instrumental in their respective works. Unlike the others, Satrapi does not overtly state her preference but only shows interest towards men in the autobiographical *Persepolis*. Though Ware's sexuality has never been questioned or stated, he is known to be married with a single child, just as the protagonist.

The possibilities of employing graphic novels as a powerful medium for autobiographical female narrative have been noted before: Chute (2010) agrees that women's graphic narrative is often traumatic and that the comic medium is "apt for expressing that difficult register" (2). In addition, "the growth of the underground comix movement was connected to second-wave feminism, which enabled a body of work that was explicitly political to sprout" (Chute 2010, 20). Comics have always possessed a subversive and political presence, and, even

[6] *World's Finest Comics,* No. 233

more importantly, a unique form of expression. With the nature of comics as a medium that has its own formal elements, "there is room to make a productive connection between gender studies and comics studies" (Vincent 2011, 32).

Building Stories and *Fun Home – A Family Tragicomic* share one core theme: the difficulty of relationships. In *Building Stories*, the protagonist remains troubled by her past relationships, particularly by Lance, and has difficulties with her husband: "my husband has no respect for my intelligence some times" (*FN* 4). Interestingly, this particular instance, where the protagonist is chastised by her husband for flushing tampons, is a repeated offense that also occurs in *GB* (26) and necessitates a plumber. In addition, Phil and the protagonist lack sexual passion in their relationship, as evidenced on page 5 of *FN*. Similarly, a difficult relationship is the core theme in Bechdel's *Fun Home*: her oft tumultuous relationship with her own father. As with *Building Stories*, there is no singular reason that would explain the strained nature of the given relationship: Bechdel's father was distant, a closeted homosexual, and apparently killed himself (whether or not he did is one of the great unanswered questions of *Fun Home*). Bechdel describes the relationship thus: "it was unusual, and we were close. But not close enough." (p. 225). And, as with *Building Stories*, *Fun Home* does not offer solutions, only mysteries and tragic tales. Bechdel suspects that maybe she could have saved her father, if she had only kept her own sexuality secret: "If I had not felt compelled to share my little sexual discovery, perhaps the semi would have passed without incident four months later" (Bechdel 2006, 59). Narratively, *Fun Home* and *Building Stories* have much in common. They are both memories which are constructed via semantic order – a revelation leads to the logical next event, regardless of when it occurred – and only rarely linearly. Unlike *Building Stories*, Bechdel's work has a concrete beginning and ending, page numbers and as such forms a cohesive whole.

Unlike *Fun Home*, *Marbles* and *Persepolis* seem to only have superficial common elements, most of which have already been mentioned above. While *Marbles* and *Persepolis* are

effectively coming-of-age narratives parallel with an overarching grand theme, coping with bipolar disorder and the political struggles in Iran, respectively. *Building Stories* has no such obvious undertone. This position, however, is easy to challenge: it is a fallacy to assume that *Marbles* and *Persepolis* can be reduced to a single uniting theme, and despite the many themes of *Building Stories* – architecture, the life of the protagonist, gentrification, to name a few – one can define *Building Stories* by its very name: it is the story of two buildings, and the people who live in them. Thus more apt would be to describe the greatest difference between Ware's work and these three works – including Bechdel – to acknowledge that these comics have an overarching narrative, with beginnings and endings.

All four works predominantly concern a single woman, her world, the world according to her and her journey, but in some ways, *Building Stories* is different. This difference is best expressed on the level of approach: whereas Ware enters the realm of the post-modern and the meta, Bechdel, Satrapi and Forney remain firmly grounded in traditional narrative strategies.

3.2.2 Biographical Elements

It can be argued that the unnamed protagonist may be an alternate version of Ware, as both employ the rhetoric of failure, though likely to differing ends: whereas Ware's omnipresent rhetoric of failure may serve his innate agenda of furthering the artistic recognition of comics (Ball 2010A, 53), there is no clear reason given for the protagonist's similar rhetoric of failure – the easy interpretation is to simply label the character depressed, and this is possible. In particular, the events of *AS* seem to confirm this. As the protagonist walks out in the snow, alone and echoing thoughts such as "was I ever happy? It seems impossible now… Unthinkable…" (*AS* A), she also inadvertently re-enacts the misery of her one-time neighbor, who too wonders about the seeming futility of life in *MN* (7–8).

The fact remains that it is extremely difficult to ascertain whether or not the protagonist is in any shape or form a representation of Ware. This, at its core, is due to the fact that almost nothing of Ware is publically known. These few details include: his profession, the fact that he is married, has a child, and some of his interests purely through the virtue of his work, such as classic comics and architecture. Therefore any parallels drawn between Ware and his works are tenuous at best. Regardless, there is enough to argue that one element of *Building Stories* is its autobiographic nature: both Ware and the unnamed protagonist frequently employ the rhetoric of failure, both aspired to become artists, and have similar families. This, however, is where the common things end: Ware *is* a successful artist, the two do not share a sex and Ware is not (to my knowledge) disabled in any way. It is possible to read *Building Stories* as a thought experiment, as Ware reimaging himself as a woman. This hypothetical assertion, however, is problematic to a great degree. In this vein, for no apparent reason the protagonist is disabled, so, even if she represents an alternate version of Ware, what then is the implication of her failure? Is Ware implying that he would have failed as an artist, had he been born as a woman? This can be seen both as incredibly condescending and amiable: alternatively suggesting that women are incapable of drawing proper comics or that society does not grant the opportunities necessary for women to thrive as cartoonists, respectively. But all of this is tenuous indeed. The protagonist and Ware share qualities, but Ware's inherent mystique and lack of overt hints leave a biographic reading possible, but difficult, and by no means furtive when attempting to understand *Building Stories* exhaustively. Despite this, it is important to consider whether or not such a reading can be beneficial.

Another manner of biographical reading may be more productive: *Building Stories* can be seen as a sort of template for the reader: the reader becomes the protagonist. The most compelling case for this notion comes from the very fact that the protagonist remains unnamed: despite all that we learn of her, only other characters have the luxury of names. This, by itself, is ironic, since the protagonist's role as the main focalizer and narrator and perhaps even author of the

story guides the reader to perceive the other characters in relation to the protagonist. The old lady is a spinster version of her, the neighbors portray a possible unhappy relationship in her future, Branford is her sardonic, witty and contemplating sense of humor in the flesh. If the protagonist is a template for the reader, her struggles help identification: every artist knows the kind of struggle she faces, her troubles with finding a mate, rearing a child, coming to terms with past relationships and accepting herself are all themes that are more or less universal.

3.2.3 Temporality and Authorship

Before discussing the authorship of *Building Stories*, three terms must be defined: author, narrator and focalizer. All three are related but distinct concepts, and require further explanation. The subjectivity of a character in a graphic novel can be presented in various ways, such as with perspective techniques, different narrative voices (balloons vs. narrative boxes and so on), the presentation of speech and thought with balloons, following characters (as sentiments and thoughts are revealed through action in a sequence of images), character facial expressions, gesture, body language, gaze and even the character's position in relation to other visible objects in the panel (Mikkonen 2013, 101). If any passage in a graphic novel is subjective for a character, that character is automatically a focalizer and conversely, any character that narrates (in the context of comics, uses text boxes) is a narrator. Narrators that are not characters at all are also possible, but there are apparently no such narrators in *Building Stories*. There has been some controversy concerning the notion whether or not focalizers can simultaneously be narrators, but Phelan argues that even when narrators remain clearly in the discourse space (in other words, independent of the actual events of the narrative), they "perform acts of *perception* that ought to be called 'focalization'" (2001, 52). After defining what I mean with these established concepts within the context of this thesis, I will argue below that the protagonist is not only a focalizer, but also a narrator and possibly even the author.

By "author", I mean the writer and/or draughtsman of *Building Stories* as a graphic novel. This seemingly simple idea – after all, Chris Ware is the confirmed author of the work – is not quite as simple as one would assume, as there are hints that the main protagonist may be the in-universe author of some, or all pieces in the comic. In other words, Ware has made *Building Stories*, but what we witness as readers may be a story written by the comic's main protagonist. By "narrator", I mean any given character that narrates any segment in the comic; most often this is the protagonist, but occasionally also the titular building, one of the neighbors or the old woman and so on. It is apparent that there are no purely omniscient narrators in the comic – this will be further considered below. By "focalizer", I mean whichever character's viewpoint is taken at any given time. Often, but not always, the focalizer and narrator are seemingly the same in *Building Stories*: exceptions include *BBB*, where an apparently objective narrator (which is actually implied to be the protagonist in a separate piece) narrates while Branford remains the focalizer. It is also important to note that in comics, as in video games, a focalizer need not necessitate the literal viewpoint (first-person camera in video games) of a character for him or her to be a focalizer. For example, in the video game *Batman: Arkham City*, the player controls Batman and the character acts as the focalizer, despite being on the screen at almost all times (third-person camera). The same is true for *Building Stories:* the vast majority of the pieces feature the protagonist as the focalizer and as a visible character on nearly every screen. The camera often remains detached, objective and distant: occasionally, smaller and more intense close-ups are employed, but rarely, if ever, the view is through the eyes of any specific character.

The authorship of *Building Stories* is connected to the structure of the work: one possible explanation for the lack of titles, page numbers and cohesive structure is that *Building Stories* may have been authored by the protagonist herself. This notion is supported indirectly by Chris Ware himself, who suggests that comics itself is "a possible metaphor for memory and recollection" (quoted in Chute 2010, 4). Ball (2012) writes:

> Our protagonist may not simply be the subject of Building Stories, but its author as well. Branford the Bee is a fantastic creation she narrates to her daughter, and lines from the speaking building narrative of the New York Times Magazine as well as the narrative of her elderly landlady are both shown to be workshopped in a fiction writing class she takes in the course of the novel's telling.

Sattler (2012) echoes a similar sentiment (emphasis mine):

> It seems clear that the "Third-Floor Girl" is the source of this imaginative world. In her writing class, for instance, our protagonist gives substance to snippets from her landlord's life, reciting passages from elsewhere in the novel, even as she despairs of her ability to imagine what a "real old lady" has actually experienced. ... *It seems just as clear that the one-legged woman (with her painful prosthetic memories) is not "really" the author at all, but is a bit more like the imagined author of a book she did not or could not create.*

This, however, may not be the universal and final truth: Davis-McElligatt (2012) observes that even though the protagonist largely narrates her own story, an occasional anonymous "editor" overwrites her,[7] who "clarifies her false memories or provides correctives for her frequent hyperboles." Sattler's ideas are, of course, more reserved, as is evident in the emphasized segment above. The strongest support for the protagonist being "an imagined author" comes from *DM,* the piece which ends with the protagonist recounting a dream to her daughter where her book had been published, implying no such book exists in the world of *Building Stories.*

It is, however, yet possible that all of the above – Ball, Sattler and Davis-McElligatt – are correct. For the truth is that narration, however intended to be fully realist and/or an accurate depiction of real past events, may still fail, even if the depictions are clear, personal memories. Strawson (2004) states in *Against Narrativity:* "the from-the-inside character of a memory can detach completely from any sense that one is the subject of the remembered experience" (434). It is apparent that this phenomenon occurs repeatedly in *Building Stories:* an example is Branford the Bee, who is seemingly a creation of the protagonist. In *DM,* her daughter Lucy confirms that

[7] Sattler does not distinguish between word and image here – as is often impossible to completely do with comics – but it is implied he strictly means only the words of the comic when he speaks of this "anonymous editor".

Branford is a bedtime story told by the protagonist: "Oh **boy!** Branford Bee?" (16). This makes Branford's existence complicated, since he simultaneously exists in the "real world" of the narrative of *Building Stories*, being killed in the *BG*. Likewise, *DB* is sealed within this endless labyrinth of meta-narrative, as the newspaper both appears in *BBB* as an in-world newspaper and serves as a companion volume to it via its own narrative. One theory to explain all this is that Branford indeed is both fictional and factual within the context of *Building Stories*. He is a real bee killed during the events of *BG* but one whose death inspired the bedtime stories told by the protagonist, and surreally presented as the real Branford himself.

Some elements cast doubt upon the role of the protagonist as the author, or at least some pieces are unlikely to be authored by her, unless if they are fictional or dramatized. These instances include both *MN* and *MOW*: both are presented from the viewpoints of the starring characters, not the main protagonist. This, however, is not as simple a matter as it may appear: one may argue that these magazines are dramatized from the conversations of the protagonist with her neighbors, and fully fictional. They are, effectively, a form of projection: the protagonist's own feelings influence her perception of these people who then become her characters. As the protagonist is self-admittedly lonely, she has projected her loneliness upon the neighbors and the landlady. This projection functions as a psychological defense mechanism, where "unwanted feelings are displaced onto another person, where they then appear as a threat from the external world" (Encyclop ædia Britannica). The definition of projection in this context must take into account the fact that the term has come to mean a broad range of concepts, many of them differing from the definition of "projective identification" by Melanie Klein (Buckingham 2012, 3–4). What I mean by "projection" in this context is what Klein intended, the "purposeful, usually unconscious depositing of parts of the self, or the whole self, into the object in order to produce an effect, e.g. to control someone, or take over their personality, or even invest another with our strengths and goodness" (Buckingham 2012, 5). The protagonist projects her own problems upon her neighbors,

taking over their personalities and thus justifying her own problems as being universal and unavoidable. To be completely exact, the original term "projection" was first used by Freud in 1895, describing the purpose of paranoia in a female patient as something to "fend off an idea that was intolerable to her ego by projecting it into the external world" (Garland 2001, 177). Projection is defined by Garland as being a "defence mechanism involving the expulsion of unwanted or unbearable parts of the personality, which are then located in others and thereby disowned" (2001, 177). This is exactly what the protagonist has done with her accounts of the neighbors' lives if they are indeed fictionalized.

Effectively, in this instance the depressing neighbors justify the protagonist's depression: if everyone else is suffering similarly in their life, what can the protagonist possibly do to ameliorate her situation? Credence to this theory lends the fact that the loneliness and dysfunctionality of the neighbors never becomes apparent with direct contact to the protagonist – contacts that are likely real events – but only when we observe them from their own point of view, which may or may not thus be a hyperbolic fictional dramatization that the protagonist is known to wont to attempt as evidenced, in part, by *AS*.

The most striking hint about the possible authorship of the protagonist occurs in *DM*, on its final page (20, titled "BROWSING"). The page, where the protagonist, as an old woman – the oldest she ever is in *Building Stories* – relates a dream to her now-adult daughter, where a book by her had been published: "and it had ***everything*** in it… my diaries, the stories from my writing classes, even stuff I didn't know I'd written… everything I'd forgotten, abandoned or thrown out was there… everything…". Even her description of the hypothetical drawings in this dream-book are telling: "all of the illustrations (and there were a lot of them- there seemed to be more and more the more I looked) were so precise and clean it was like an architect had drawn them… They were so colorful and intricate… That's **weird**… I can't draw like this…" Simultaneously, the protagonist describes the graphics of her book as possessing the exact same general style as *Building Stories*

itself, and echoes Ware's rhetoric of failure, the belittling of one's achievements and praising those of others.

Despite these obvious hints, the ending of *DM* – and, thus, the ending of *Building Stories*, at least temporally speaking as the protagonist never appears as an older character – is fully open. Her daughter wants to go to art school, implying that the circle begins anew, while they are having coffee, they are not joined by Phil – who is possibly divorced from the protagonist, dead or at work, no hint is given – and the daughter casually mentions that the protagonist now "has a business". The nature of this business is never elaborated upon, and neither is even the idea of the protagonist ever having any manner of proclivity or thought of founding one. Her desperate final panel – "- I just never thought I had it **in** me, that's all, you know? <snf>… I never thought I actually had it **in** me…" – reaffirms that the protagonist considers herself a failure, despite her acknowledged success as a businesswoman and mother few panels prior.

It is impossible to absolutely determine when and where *Building Stories* truly takes place. It can very well be argued that it is completely a jumble of memories without a clear beginning or ending, or it can be a series of events laid out in stream-of-consciousness fashion, where the narration follows the process of thought of the characters themselves in real time, without the characters directly working for the benefit of the narrative. Another possibility is that the comic is a combination of these, a complex mixture of both approaches where stream-of-consciousness seamlessly blends into the memories and vice versa. The reality of the events and their depiction is called into question by the presence of Branford and the building as narrators (*BBB & DB* and *GB*, respectively). Although, admittedly, the building itself as a narrator is unreliable at best. Its strong assumption that the protagonist would not see Phil again – "you don't have to be a hundred years old to know that boy's never going to call her back" – turns out to be false, as the two later marry. It is more than possible – as Ball postulates – that all of this is explained by the protagonist being the author throughout the work. In this case, the building is a narrative tool used as a narrator by the

protagonist, presumably to offer a humorous perspective (for example, its account of the specific number of orgasms and dreams about dismemberment that have taken place within its walls; *GB* 7). The building, as a character, has few other functions in the comic save its narration: though it is obviously sentient, it (/he/she?) cannot move and all the other characters seem oblivious to his ability to think. This means that the building is merely a narrator, and since the above example proves that this narration may not be reliable, the reader is left merely with the comedic value of the building as a character.

I am not the only one who finds the building's role as a narrator strange: "Ware's rather idiosyncratic decision to focus on the life of a building seems curious at best" (Godbey 2010, 123). There, of course, is some function to as the building as a narrator, for when it is destroyed (the very last page of *GB*) its sympathetic portrayal causes the demolition to be a mournful experience, rather than a neutral one. This sympathy comes from the building's own endearing attitude toward its denizens, particularly and notably toward its female occupants, and its witticisms, arguably the funniest ones in all of *Building Stories*. In addition, there are segments proving that the building is as relatable as the human denizens of the graphic novel with its own personality quirks and challenges, as Godbey describes them: "despite being fully occupied, the building is wistful for earlier times, worried that its low rent and old-fashioned façade is out of touch with changes in the neighborhood" (Godbey 2010, 127). The building's role in the narrative is debatable, but (s)he is more than a mere curious interest.

3.2.4 The Protagonist; Artist, Mother, Housewife

One cannot speak of *Building Stories* without mentioning the protagonist. Virtually everything in the graphic novel is either from her perspective, about her, in relation to her or made by her, as claimed in the previous section, 3.2.3. Even elements that are not overtly connected to her, such as *BBB* and *MOW* are hinted to be her creations, with Branford being one of her bedtime stories told to

her daughter, and the old landlady's narrative hinted to be the protagonist's fictionalized account made for the writing class.

But who is the protagonist? What is she? What is her significance? Some things forever remain clouded, to the point of irritation. The reader learns much of the protagonist, but some of the most important details are never revealed: her name, where she was born, how exactly she lost her leg (in a boating accident as a child, but exactly how?). Even time is a hazy, loose concept, with only two specific dates given in the entire work: September 23rd 2000 and April 20th 2005. Factuality is a problem: if we assume that the protagonist is the author of *Building Stories*, we cannot readily accept anything as fact. This is due to the reason that her human error comes into play: this is explicitly demonstrated in *FN*, page 9, where she remembers her husband Phil saying something that in fact she said herself. It is, however, also possible to question Phil's veracity, and/or assume that otherwise the protagonist is reliable: there are no explicit examples of *Building Stories* creating paradoxes through its narrative.

Interestingly, from a feminist point of view, the protagonist has difficulty defining, accepting and finding herself, but she seemingly always blames herself, and not traditional feminist culprits, such as the patriarchy, social wrongs and poor opportunities. She does, however, complain about her husband: "my husband has no respect for my intelligence some times" (*FN* 4). The weight of this complaint, however, is immediately lessened by two significant details. This transgression by her husband is due to her clogging the toilet with feminine products – an issue that persists from younger days, as the habit forced the protagonist to call a plumber when there yet was not a husband (*GB* 26). As with many things in *Building Stories*, this has wide-reaching implications: the protagonist does not even *attempt* to fix her self-caused problem on either occasions, and in the first occurrence, is satisfied to stop the overflowing of the toilet and call the male plumber. In addition to the implicit admission of guilt and cause for the husband's derision, there is also the fact that on page 8 of the *FN*, she admits "now I love my husband, really…" and goes on to say that she does

not believe in the "war of the sexes", ostensibly declaring that she is not a feminist – or, perhaps to be more exact, she does not identify as a militant overbearing feminist – a silent majority that she may perceive as the de facto form of any given self-admitted feminist.

One possible reason for the unhappiness of the protagonist is the fact that she cannot be happy: she does not believe it is possible, and creates a self-fulfilling prophecy: "was I ever happy? It seems impossible now… Unthinkable…" (*AS* A). She is also resistant to being happy, when she ostensibly is: "and the awful part is I really am happy… I finally am happy." (*BN* 3). It is also a fact that happiness in a Chris Ware work is rare, moments of it are spare and fleeting, as in all his oeuvre (Weldon 2012). Furthermore, she contemplates her own death during times of extreme unhappiness, once awake in *AS* without any clear given single reason, and once in her sleep in *GBB* (2–3), due to her loneliness. With both of these sequences, the interjection "God!" is present. The word's use is notable for its seeming meaninglessness: though the protagonist attends funerals and thus churches in *Building Stories*, spirituality is virtually never a subject of her thoughts. There are, however, some significant examples of spirituality: Branford the Bee views flowers as "the eye of God" (*BBB* 2) and *FN* opens with an enormous picture of the suburbs; dominated by two elements: the lush greenery and trees and the bold three letters on the top of the composition: "God". The implications of these interjections can be numerous. Ware, as has been noted, has nostalgic tendencies. Thus, the sequential juxtaposition of modern technology in a single segment – Facebook (*FN* 15), iPods (*FN* 13) and iPhones (*FN* 18) – with the lack of sexual passion in the protagonist's marriage (*FN* 5) serves as a darkly comical and melancholy remembrance of the past. Likewise, God, and everything associated with God, including church, tradition, its inherent social relations, can be seen as a nod that harkens to Ware's sought-after idyllic past. Other readings of the "God!" interjections are equally possible. As with many elements of *Building Stories*, very little about the interjections is explicit, but their use seems archaic and obsolete in the advanced, material world that the protagonist inhabits.

Below, the subsections are divided into several categories, each focusing on a specific aspect of the protagonist. These aspects include her relationship with men (3.2.4.1), with her motherhood and her mother (3.2.4.2), feminism (3.2.4.3), her disability (3.2.4.4), her dreams and failures (3.2.4.5), her neighbors and the old woman (3.2.4.6), and Branford the Bee (3.2.4.7).

3.2.4.1 The Protagonist and Men

The protagonist's relationship with the men in her life is complex. While living at the titular building, the male neighbor lusts after her (*BG* Front and *GB* 28), in present day, she still thinks of her previous boyfriends, including, but not limited to her high school boyfriend (*P*) and Lance (*DM* 17–19). The protagonist's apparent longing for Lance is a curious affair. Though she is disappointed to learn that her high school boyfriend has defriended her on Facebook (*P*), she takes no action. With Lance, instead, she first looks him up: "his site answered pretty much every question I had… He was still acting, appeared to be successful (minor awards, lots of parts) and offered numerous head shots and stage photos…" (brackets by Ware, *DM* 17). Then, they exchange messages, and she goes to see one of Lance's shows, even briefly meeting him afterwards (*DM* 18–19). Though this reunion is uneventful (and thus unfulfilling), the protagonist's husband's – Phil's – reaction is odd in its nonchalance. Phil not only approves of the protagonist's desire to meet with Lance, but supports her: "I already knew I had the best husband in the world, but this all had just confirmed it… no one else would be so understanding, so generous, so supportive…" (*DM* 19). This oddly emotionless reaction may be explained with the final page of *DM*, directly following the Lance sequence: the protagonist is meeting the now-adult Lucy (the only adult appearance of Lucy in the entire work) and Phil is not present. Though there is nothing explicit to suggest so, Phil's disinterest and lack of emotion strongly hint that the relationship was on the verge of ending, or if not on the verge, approaching it. Despite this convincing sequential juxtaposition, even this cannot be seen as fact: it is all equally possible that Phil is away or dead; albeit these instances are not hinted at.

While this hypothetical divorce is likely, one must acknowledge that it, too, as with so much in process of reading *Building Stories*, is conjecture.

The relationship between Phil and the protagonist also relates to her father. Phil, apparently due to working exhaustively, has been much away from home. So extensively, in fact, that he misses Halloween with the family, which the protagonist comments upon: "I was so mad I could hardly type [a text message on her smartphone]… how many Halloweens did he suppose he'd have with his four-year-old?" (brackets mine, *DM* 8). The connection of this to her father manifests as her mother comes to visit: the mother inquires about Phil and is skeptical to learn that he is working: "whatever you say." (*DM* 9) The reason for her skepticism is revealed to be the fact the protagonist's father actually had an affair (*DM* 10). The protagonist realizes that her mother is alluding that Phil may also be having an affair (*DM* 11).

Ware himself describes the relationship between the protagonist and Phil, even comparing it to his own marriage:

> I tried to portray a fairly well-adjusted relationship between the main character and her husband, but it's true – I lingered on those moments when they're staring down into their little glowing pits and not really experiencing the moment (which is simply a technological highjacking of what adults are apt to do anyway). Lately, I'm flabbergasted at the number of times I'll find myself in the exact same circumstance with my wife. Maybe there's an "app" for this.
> (Quoted in Mautner 2012)

Though one must always be careful with authors describing their own work – they may not be truthful and may not realize all the implications of the finished public work – Ware seems to be correct in this assessment. When the protagonist and the husband fight they do it maturely and without the kind of verbal violence that the neighbors degrade each other with in *MN*. Likewise, the "technological highjacking" is present: there are several instances, but the most striking one of these occurs on page 15 of *DM:* The protagonist stands in the nude as a middle-aged woman, while her nude – and clearly flaccid – husband lies on the bed, using his tablet device. The two are having an

apparent agreed-upon sex day, without passion and with an inescapable air of mechanical necessity and routine.

Though Phil becomes the protagonist's husband and the father of her child, he is never presented as romanticized a character as Lance. A good comparison is the first sexual experience with these men. With Phil, there is awkward kissing – complete with a long kiss that ends in an "un-kiss" (*GB* 32) and premature ejaculation prior to even truly attempting coitus (*GB* 32). The evening is so awkward that even the building itself is certain that Phil is never coming back: "you don't have to be a hundred years old to know that boy's never going to call her back" (*GB* 33). Conversely, the protagonist and Lance meet when Lance models in the nude for an art class that the protagonist is attending as a student: "hey that's really good … I'm not really that handsome though, am I?" (*GBB* 43). On the same page the protagonist provides a description of their first sexual experiences, her first experiences: "the first times were a bit painful, but our third night together things started to go… really well… I'd had hundreds of orgasms myself… But I'd never felt this… filled up… whole… before… from my toes, up through my head…" (*GBB* 43).

While Phil is present and more or less the everyday object and "other" for the protagonist in the context of the narrative of *Building Stories*, Lance is a commanding and dominating presence whenever he is featured, both in terms of narrative and in the relationship. Seemingly afraid of losing his own independence, Lance insists to keep their possessions separate when they move together, and hates it when their dishes get mixed up or when the protagonist does his laundry (*GBB* 32). In this fashion, Lance greatly resembles Beauvoir's ideal of a union; one that is a committed union but which also retains individuality and personal freedom. The great difference between the two couples is, of course, that Beauvoir and Sartre never lived together.

Almost every facet of Lance and Phil seem to support each other as foils. Phil is mundane, secure, boring and the relationship highly traditional. Phil is steady, whereas the relationship between the protagonist and Lance ends quickly, when Lance leaves for a foreign

backpacking trip: “I suppose it doesn’t take a genius to figure out that any boyfriend who sends everything he owns to his parents and leaves on a ‘foreign backpacking trip’ doesn’t really have any intention of coming back…” (*GBB* 33). The protagonist is devastated, partially because the two reunite after Lance returns, going for a Thanksgiving dinner to the protagonist’s parents; causing the protagonist to observe that “at one point I remember looking over and noticing how much he and my dad looked alike… It was weird I’d never thought of it before… Suddenly, I could see us together, ten, twenty, thirty years in the future, married, children… …I was in heaven…” (*GBB* 36). Her dreams are quickly devastated, however: Lance breaks off the relationship for good and the protagonist is upset that he never truly says goodbye, cannot forget him and cannot overcome her obsession over “finding **something** out about him, no matter what…” (*GBB* 37–40). The relationship between the two is also marred by an unwanted pregnancy, one that leads to an abortion (*GBB* 50–51). The fragmented nature of the concept of time in *Building Stories* makes it difficult to ascertain how great a role this abortion plays in the unavoidable downfall of the relationship. For example, *GBB* first features the two as a couple, then their first meeting and toward the end the abortion, making it impossible to be certain. There, of course, is a moment on page 37 – with a depiction of swimming semen – that suggests the protagonist was impregnated when the couple had first reunited at the Thanksgiving dinner; perhaps suggesting that Lance had left her after becoming pregnant, but before learning of it.

Lance and Phil are polar opposites. Lance is an artist, Phil is an interior designer. Lucy is planned, the aborted child not. Lance is nearly twice as old when the protagonist is 18 (*GBB* 46), whereas Phil appears to be roughly the same age as the protagonist. The protagonist is driven wild by Lance, even by his mere absence, and remains a point of contention well into her middle age: Phil is a steady partner; rarely sparking any truly powerful feelings in the protagonist during the course of *Building Stories*; neither positive nor negative. But what is the significance of Lance? Does the artistic side of the protagonist die with him? Lance is a type of an artist – an actor – and

the protagonist apparently halts her own artistry – writing and painting – even prior to meeting Phil. Maybe Lance is not necessary for her art on any level, but coincides with her art. With the relationship, not only dies her artistry, but the cat as well (*GBB* 33).

In addition to Phil and Lance, there is another man – or, more specifically, two men – that prominently feature in relation to the protagonist. The protagonist, as a teenager and prior to her first boyfriend Lance, becomes a house-sitter for a wealthy family and is soon promoted to be the nanny for the son of the family, Jeffrey (*GBB* 12). Based on virtually no knowledge whatsoever, the protagonist speculates upon the nature of the owners of the house: both the father: "I imagined them, the dad always busy, disinterested in both his wife and his child… a sports fan who probably slept around on business trips…" and the mother: "she was probably at heart a very nice person who just got scared in college, saw an opportunity in her law student boyfriend, and jumped. Who could blame her? What girl, deep down, wouldn't want to live like a princess for the rest of her life?" (*GBB* 13). This assertion proves to be completely false, when the protagonist catches the mother of the family seeing another man (*GBB* 15). This, of course, does not prove that the husband is faithful himself, but it convinces the protagonist that he must be.

The protagonist has a curious relationship with the husband of the family. When the two share a potentially flirtatious moment, staring each other in the eyes for some time (*GBB* 15), the protagonist, pondering the implications, considers the two having sex: "the idea mildly disgusted me." (*GBB* 16). This ostensible attraction is revealed to be imaginary, when the husband asks the protagonist to sit down with him some time later. He reveals that she is fired, because Jeffrey has become "too attached" to her, just like to prior au pairs (*GBB* 20). He alludes that she was hired solely for her perceived lack of attractiveness: "well, we just hoped that in your case, you know, he might not… get so, uh… **attached…**" (*GBB* 20). This talking to occurs after the protagonist and Jeffrey have a tickling match, and Jeffrey experiences an erection: there is an action figure "smushed" between them, but it turns out that there is no action figure (*GBB* 17). Soon

afterwards, despite their sibling-esque relationship, the protagonist discovers drawings made by Jeffrey that depict her in the nude (*GBB* 19). This sexual tension with Jeffrey is never resolved. As the protagonist is still in her teens, their age difference is not that significant, likely only five years or so. This is apparent when the two meet by chance a few years later in a bookstore. When the protagonist gives Jeffrey a final hug, her description of him is clearly sexualized: "we said our stilted goodbyes, lied about getting together, and I gave him one more hug… His strong hands… his wide chest…" (*GBB* 20). The irony, of course, is the innuendo that the protagonist is now attracted to the no-longer-adolescent Jeffrey, while Jeffrey no longer appears to harbor such interests though this is difficult to know from the brief instance.

Is the protagonist defined by men? I argue that rather the men are defined by her within the context of *Building Stories.* Everything in the graphic novel directly or indirectly relates to her, and irrevocably becomes another means of understanding her. The neighbors and old woman are alternate versions of her. Lance and Phil both serve as extensions of her personality, Lance's lingering presence is the residue of her haunting artistry which will not release its grasp, whereas Phil embodies the sedentary nature that the protagonist has unwittingly adopted. Branford is her sense of humor, rarely depicted elsewhere in *Building Stories* but something that dominates both *BBB* and *DB* where we indirectly learn that the protagonist has a dark, absurd and silly sense of humor.

When the protagonist fails, she admits full responsibility. When her husband does not take responsibility for their daughter, she is not so much irritated by her workload but by the fact that the husband is not doing his part. Though she may shy from confrontation with Phil: "I love my husband so much. He's one of the most talented people I've ever met. Sometimes, though, I've found it's better to avoid areas of potential conflict between us rather than dwell on them…" (*DM* 3), she never defines herself based on men around her.

3.2.4.2 Motherhood & Mother

One inescapable feminist interest in *Building Stories* is motherhood. When still single in her twenties, and simultaneously lamenting her weight gain, the protagonist wonders if other people have experienced a similar yearning to have kids at her age; "it was like a **thirst**" (*GBB* 18). Later, when her desire for children is fulfilled, her motherhood is important a theme enough to warrant being the core subject of three pieces: *TB, AD* and *BN*. While *BN* also deals with other motifs – most notably the death of the protagonist's father – the two others seemingly concern nothing but the daughter. *TB* is completely wordless, rendering a powerful, intimate look into the life of the protagonist during her pregnancy and the adolescence of Lucy. Though this piece is quiet, still and mundane to the core, there are some elements that stand out. One of them is its circular narrative: as with, for example, *AS* and *Magazine Forest*, the beginning is the same as the end. Granted, with *Magazine Forest* the view is the same (the suburban street and its greenery), but the time of day is different. Though *TB* begins and ends with sleep, there are inescapable differences. In the beginning, the protagonist is pregnant, sleeping with Phil, and in the end, not only is she no longer pregnant, but Phil leaves, leaving the protagonist alone at the end of *TB*. The implications of this are interesting: is the protagonist now alone due to the new baby as Phil leaves to tend to Lucy? Or is he going to the bathroom, or for a midnight snack? Any definite conclusion is impossible; only the fact that the protagonist's life and body have now changed is for certain. As Lucy grows throughout *TB*, her inevitable maturation causes a melancholy moment: as the protagonist is cleaning the house (29) she finds Lucy's old toy she played with earlier on (4). Though the memory persists, Lucy grows and only the memory of her young self persists.

The short segment *AD*, as with *TB*, finds its subject in the mundane. Here, the young daughter is the center of attention, as the protagonist is transfixed with her Lucy. The two share a bonding moment, as both fear boats: the protagonist due to her severe childhood boating accident, the daughter seemingly only due to her adolescence. More interestingly, in another scene the

daughter tells her mother of Kelsie – a friend from school that is not mentioned prior or since – and how "her mom thinks you make unhealthy lunches that are bad for you" (*AD*). Though the protagonist is prone to question her ability and happiness at every turn, this is a notable exception to her relationship with her daughter: if she has reservations as her ability as a mother, they are not overtly expressed in *Building Stories*; save for a few moments such as the instance above. This instance clearly impacts the protagonist: she responds "wait **what?** She **did?**" to the recounted accusation. *AD* is notable for its focus on Lucy: her everyday aphorisms are filtered through the protagonist, but they take center stage:

> She: Mommy, I'm **scared** to have children!
> Me: Why, honey?
> She: Because I'm afraid I won't be able to **control** them!

A similar instance occurs on the other side of the accordion (each has its own panel):

> Lucy: Mom, teenagers shouldn't think so much about **love…**
> Protagonist: Ha ha – Oh yeah? What **should** they think about, then?
> (panel that focuses upon Lucy without dialogue)
> Lucy: **Life!**

These aphorisms gain immense dramatic weight due to the fact that they are not commented upon in any way: they appear as fact. These are facts from an adolescent that, in her naiveté, is more in touch with reality than the adults that surround her. The former aphorism receives one manner of response: as the protagonist and Lucy are drying up with towels, facing a mirror, the worried face of the protagonist hints that she knows all too well the fear of not having control over her child. This is a fear that is confirmed to be justified at the end of *DM*, when the daughter refuses to seek a vocation that her mother desires for her.

Though the protagonist openly expresses nothing but love and care toward her daughter; the relationship still causes stress: "is it really too much to ask for just one hour of not being a mom every once in a while? She's his daughter too, for chrissakes…" (*DM* 1). This is the

only overt reference to the protagonist being stressed by her motherhood: when she is stressed, this is commonly due to monetary woes, her relationship with her husband Phil, her unfulfilled dreams and old boyfriends.

Arguably the most important interaction with the protagonist and her daughter occurs in *BN*. On page 4 – the final section of the final page of the segment which thus possesses dramatic weight as one inevitably lingers on the final image before moving on to the next segment – Lucy asks her mother "will I be the most important thing you ever do?". The implications are staggering: the protagonist does not answer, and the fact that she does not answer is spread over two panels. As with virtually all of the most important interactions of the protagonist; we are left without a clear meaning. The protagonist is clearly moved, but we cannot know what exactly she is thinking and, considering the reality of *Building Stories*, this is ironic because it is a reality where almost everything (and perhaps indeed everything) is filtered through the protagonist. We know what happens to her, what she does, what surrounds her, but we may never truly know *her*.

But what then is the significance of the protagonist's motherhood? Kristeva's concepts of the physical attributes of pregnancy dominate *TB:* we witness how the cells proliferate and the tissues stretch: the lack of dialogue and constantly intimately close perspective only serve to highlight these physical changes. This by itself is an apparent subtle joke, and I gave the piece the name *Tijuana Bible* due to its similarity to Tijuana bibles which are crude, photocopied (or hand-copied) little comic books which often dealt (and deal) with lewd subject matter, typically of a ribald nature. This form and what it represents, and combining it with the subtle and nuanced artistic matter of *TB* creates an absurd connection that can simultaneously be seen as comical.

Motherhood is central to the protagonist's life: "… I love you [Lucy] more than life itself… ….and I always will… …today, tomorrow, and the next day, and the next day…" (brackets mine, *DM* 13). This can be deduced from the sheer existence of three pieces in *Building Stories* that deal with motherhood – more than a fifth of the entire work – *TB, AD* and *DM*. The two former

focus almost exclusively on Lucy, her birth and her personality, respectively. In *DM*, Lucy drives her mother to tears which is apparent proof of their close bond: no one else is given so much weight in the protagonist's life. I do not go as far as to claim that Lucy would be the only character of *Building Stories* to drive the protagonist to tears, but she seems to be the only one capable of inadvertently reducing her to outright sobbing, and, importantly, to a highly critical self-reflection: "I just never thought I had it in me, that's all, you know? -snf-… I never thought I actually had it in me…" (*DM* 20). Motherhood is indeed so central to the protagonist that she effectively finds herself becoming the "(m)other", as the beginning of *DM* subtly illustrates. Her frustrated desire that Phil would acknowledge that Lucy "is his daughter too" (1) by also looking after her is effectively an indirect cry for liberation, for choice. Her dreams of being an artist, a creative occupation, are in direct contrast with her reality as a housewife, as "instead of a productive role, the housewife acts as the main consumer in the family" (Oakley 1990, 78). The role of being a housewife also becomes blurred with the roles of being a mother and a wife in the social image (Oakley 1990, 82).

There is, however, something curious about the protagonist's apparent happiness with motherhood and the occasional stressful segments (including the aforementioned beginning of *DM*): she appears completely devoid of hope and willing to die in *AS:* "**let** it snow… Let it **bury** me for all I care…". Such crippling depression never occurs elsewhere within *Building Stories*, and there is a good reason for this: *AS* may be fictional. The protagonist, still living at her old apartment as a middle-aged woman, thinks to herself that "I almost had everything… Almost had… A family of my own… But then… **God!**" This may indicate that this piece is fictional and either occurs as a fictional narrative-within-narrative or in a parallel universe where the protagonist never had a family. But this, of course, is problematic: are all the pieces from different realities? How does Branford relate to all of this if any manner of inconsistency implies unreliability? On the other hand, we may assume that all the pieces are factual and that *AS* relates to the final page of *DM*. It is not that she never had a family; it is that this family has been lost – she now has an ex-husband and

daughter but no family. This theory is supported by several instances, including, but not limited to, Phil's absence when the protagonist meets the adult Lucy (*DM* 20), Phil's disinterested attitude toward the protagonist's wish to meet her first real boyfriend Lance (*DM* 19) the protagonist's inability to express all of her concerns to her husband: "I love my husband so much. He's one of the most talented people I've ever met. Sometimes, though, I've found it's better to avoid areas of potential conflict between us rather than dwell on them…" (*DM* 3) and the lack of sexual passion in their relationship (*DM* 15 and *FN* 5). As with many significant events of the protagonist's life in *Building Stories*, this divorce is not portrayed nor openly ever admitted. If *Building Stories* is authored by the protagonist and consists of her memories, it would make sense to eschew the details of this painful end of her marriage, and only briefly depict the ensuing depression. Despite all the talk of her failures, the protagonist does not wish to dwell on matters that are the most painful, matters that cannot be changed.

The protagonist's relationship with her mother is never a true focus or significant theme in *Building Stories*: in *BN*, the protagonist's father has died and the mother is now alone, but the focus is on the protagonist and her new daughter. The only truly significant passage with the mother occurs in *DM,* when she visits the protagonist (9). She is the one to suggest that when Phil is working late, he may not be working at all (*DM* 9). The true reason for her skepticism is revealed on page 10, as she admits that her husband – the protagonist's father – had an affair. The protagonist is too shocked by the revelation and empathetic toward her mother to immediately realize the implication: on the next page (11), she understands the implicit idea. Prior to this, the protagonist has had full faith in her husband, but now she is disturbed by the idea.

Though Phil's unfaithfulness is never confirmed or denied, it would serve another recurring theme of *Building Stories*: that of circles that cannot be broken and keep on repeating. These include, but may not be limited to, Branford's continued obsession to fulfill his function even after dying and being reborn as "the Benevolent Bacterium" (*BBB* 32), the old woman's apparently

fully monotone existence and the fact that Lucy grows up to attend art school herself despite her mother's (the protagonist's) wishes. Despite their best efforts and seeming individuality and power of choice, they beat on against the current, forever though the generations and personae may change.

3.2.4.3 The Protagonist and Feminism

"Feminism" is never mentioned in *Building Stories* by name. This, of course, does not imply that its concepts are never contemplated by the protagonist. Indeed, the protagonist's dream is to write, to draw, to express herself: one of the core goals of liberating *woman*. Cixous wrote that woman must write woman: does the protagonist fail because, by definition, it is not a woman who writes her writing, but a man? Perhaps, but perhaps not: the protagonist blames herself; explicitly for her failure as a writer on the final page of *DM*, and multiple times for, what in her eyes, are failures. These instances are numerous, including, but not limited to, concerns about herself as a wife, mother, artist, friend and so on.

The most overt reference to feminism in *Building Stories* is on page 8 of *FN*. As the protagonist declares that she "does not believe in the war of the sexes", this single comment insinuates that she possesses but a cursory understanding of feminism. She is painting it as an extremist doctrine, something that she does not wish to be affiliated with – even if feminism is not mentioned by name. Despite this, her actions and thoughts betray feminist thinking, including her dreams and stories, Branford is explicitly her creation, and his depiction explores the central motif of Butler's *Gender Trouble:* gender becomes arbitrary as Branford effectively becomes a transbee due to the feminine hairy legs he one day wakes up with, "the very subject of women is no longer understood in stable or abiding terms" (Butler 2002, 4). The juxtaposition of human and bee physiology and gender serve to render gender arbitrary; an insight that the protagonist thus then shares because she is the author.

But is the protagonist a feminist or not, secretly then if clearly not openly? She never acknowledges this, and appears to be indifferent toward the issue, or at least indifferent toward the issue as an abstract concept. She is explicitly worried about money (*DM* 6), homeless people at her door (*DM* 7), her weight gain (*GBB* 18) and so on, but she never directly addresses feminist concerns other than as an individual. She faces frustrations with her husband, but these frustrations are often followed with an immediate response of reconciliation, often from both parties. She explicitly states that she does not believe in the war of the sexes; thus her problems stem from individuals, not gender or sex. When Phil does not join his wife and daughter for Halloween, there is no hint of the protagonist blaming Phil's decision to work late on his sex or gender: he works late because he chooses to work late, rather than due to any inherent perceived essentialist attribute. It could then be argued that the protagonist is a post-feminist; hers is a life where equality is so ubiquitous that it deserves no mention. When she wishes for a break from her motherly duties, it is implied that both husband and wife are overworked in their respective vocations, interior designer (*BN* 4) and housewife. She is stressed by her omnipresent motherly duties at the beginning of *DM*, and a contrite phone call from her husband alludes that the husband agrees with the protagonist's charge of him spending too little time with the daughter: "hey… Hey, I'm really sorry… It's just… <sigh>" (1) and "…I guess I just got testy, that's all.. No one knows you need a break better than me… But I **miss** you, that's all, y'know? I just miss you…" (*DM* 1). Whether or not fights such as this one escalate or are peacefully resolved remains unclear due to the disjointed nature of *Building Stories*' narrative: the reader does not know.

In a fashion the protagonist's apparent "taken-for-granted feminism" as outlined above proves to be her greatest downfall: despite succeeding as a mother and as a business owner (*DM* 20) she never reaches – or at least never reaches in the context of *Building Stories* – her goal of becoming an artist, visual or writer. With the failure to make her dreams a reality she has no one else but herself to blame: "when you're young and you don't know what to do with–I just never had

any confidence in-- --I just never thought I had it in me, that's all, you know? -snf-… I never thought I actually had it in me…" (*DM* 20). The protagonist fails, not because she is a feminist – but fails nonetheless. And, due to her apparent secretive manner of feminism, she must blame herself for her failures, and she does so. To the protagonist feminism is purely personal in her everyday life, but her work – such as Branford – explores feminist concepts and ideas. The protagonist is as afraid to openly express her feminism as she is afraid to pursue her dream of being an artist.

3.2.4.4 Disability and the Protagonist

The protagonist is disabled, with a missing leg: "the reader cannot help but notice the leg as absence, and the absence registers, itself, as a presence, a marker of individuality. What is lost, remains." (Worden 2012). Despite the common phenomenon of "ghost limbs", the protagonist is never hinted to suffer from it – she is apparently always aware on conscious and subconscious levels that her leg is gone – but this is difficult to ascertain, as at least within an empirical psychological framework, theory does not help to understand how ghost limbs exactly function (Rautaparta 1997, 131). This disability is almost never acknowledged, creating a discrepancy from the perspective of disability studies as "the striking presence of the protagonist's short leg in the visual register of "Building Stories" and the near absence of any acknowledgment of her disability in the textual register creates a perplexing interpretive situation" (Berman 2010, 191). In addition, Berman correctly observes that "images of bodies are integral to the ways in which human beings imagine, know, and act toward one another, and thus Ware's disability representation is hardly 'merely' there" (Berman 2010, 192). Berman also notes that the only occasion in the comic when her disability is verbally articulated is when Mr. Bell – the repairman who comes to fix the toilet in *GB* (26) – notices this (Berman 2010, 198). This statement is, in the context of the complete *Building Stories*, blatantly false. An entire page in *GBB* (34) deals explicitly with the protagonist's impairment, complete with the title "HER

LEG" in capitals. Berman's incorrect statement is most likely due to the fact that her text was published in 2010, and the collected form of *Building Stories* was released in 2012. This also explains her baffling statement (p. 202) that the graphic novel has a "happy ending and some happy moments", which is completely incorrect by default, as *Building Stories* has 14 different acceptable endings[8] and while some of them end positively, most do not.

But what is the significance of this disability? In the context of comics, and especially superheroes – "the spectacle of witnessing a character's origin or primal scene is strong in the superhero narrative due to it being a primarily visual medium. A character's origin is seen and read at the same time, thus becoming known to the reader/viewer" (Murray 2011, 56). This is true, but what then is the effect of us never truly knowing how the protagonist lost her leg? Did she do something rash, or was the boating accident sudden and a complete surprise? These questions are never answered. Are we meant to ignore her disability, or expected to? Ware himself states that

> It's the artist's or the writer's duty to try and tangle with what seems unnavigable about life as one experiences it. Though one might not produce any answers, frequently simply showing something can be useful. *Human beings generally don't notice things unless there's a name for them.*
> (quoted in Mautner 2012, emphasis mine)

This becomes even more interesting when we consider that the protagonist is never given a name, yet she is impossible to miss. She indeed is *Building Stories* embodied; as Ware admits that memories are what the graphic novel is, and that the main character "still regrets abandoning her creative dreams – which is, as I mentioned above, where everything ends up residing, including the book itself" (Mautner 2012). Ware goes on to describe the structure of the pieces rather not a book at all but "more like a gem or a flower or a three-dimensional something that we can turn and turn inside out and get into and out of" (Mautner 2012). Ware is not the only one to note the significance of this structure: "in Building Stories, the game and the book-as-object are the frameworks through

[8] This is based on the assumption that the correct way to read *Building Stories* is to select piece x and then finish it and then choose the next piece, with the next piece never been any prior one. Thus there are 14 possible endings.

which a multilayered, intricate web of stories and relationships emerge" (Kuhlman 2012). By "game" Kuhlman means that for Ware comics are "a kind of game in which one can manipulate and test the limits of the medium" (Kuhlman 2012).

There is no great focus on disability on a verbal level, because the protagonist no longer constantly herself thinks of herself as disabled and the nature of being so. Fink (2012) writes that

> Oppressive, and unfortunately still normative, interpretations of disability see it as a life-wrecking condition, a subhuman existence; if a way of seeing or representing starts from these assumptions, disability as a characteristic of a human being metastasizes, becoming the only salient feature.

This is not the case with the protagonist: her everyday life is depicted realistically; and her leg is acknowledged in *GBB*. She thinks of the attention she has gotten due to it when people realize it is "fake", and also notes that "I've had **six** legs now total…" (34). The protagonist is not in denial, but is heavily implied to be at ease with her disability. When she looks in the mirror and laments her appearance, the panel focuses on her body and figure, and the missing leg is merely one part of the body among others in that context.

Despite Berman's and Fink's stances, I personally do not find great meaning attributed to the disability of the protagonist. She casually mentions that in her childhood "the doctors just said that I had a 'weak heart' and that I shouldn't engage in any 'strenuous activity'… That was fine with me…" (*GBB* 41). Is this similarly significant? Or similarly insignificant? I hypothesize that to a degree, her disability does not weigh upon the meaning of *Building Stories*. She is disabled, yes, but this does not fully define her, and though it is a defining visual characteristic of her – the graphic novel implies that her life would not have been all that different even without the accident. Her relationships, dreams and other important life events are never decided by her disability or lack thereof. It is more than possible to argue that the protagonist would not have lived a different life even with her leg. On a strictly physical level, nothing in her life is impeded. She lives on the third floor of a building without an elevator, she bears a child, she jogs

and she paints and draws – all despite her disability. When considering the protagonist's emotions and her mind, it is mere speculation to attempt to attest the effects of her disability. Though the protagonist herself never blames her disability for any of her problems, it is still possible that in some way, her life would have been different had she always had her leg – if nothing else, she would not be afraid of boats in her adult life.

Despite Berman's rejections of labelling the missing leg "merely being there", the everyday nature of this absence may indeed be the entire point of the character's disability. In a fashion, yes, the disability is there: working as visual marker but having little impact on the protagonist's actual life. She is capable of jogging in her middle age despite the disability – and this serves as a statement in itself. Feminist disability studies "questions that disability is a flaw, lack, or excess" (Garland-Thomson 2005, 1557), and this is exactly the sentiment encompassed by Ware's depiction. The protagonist is flawed, but her flaws do not stem from her disability. The absence is significant, but she is not lacking. Even though the protagonist is affected by her disability – she occasionally needs canes, sometimes people stare at her – the effects are by no means excessive, and her life is not dominated by the lack of her leg. Tersely put, the protagonist is disabled but her disability does not define her. Though she would not be the same character if she possessed both legs, she would likely lead a similar existence as her leg does not seem to impede her life in any truly significant way.

3.2.4.5 The Protagonist's Dreams and Failures

The protagonist consistently and repeatedly fails to reach her dreams. Cates (2012) states that he feels, as do I, that "[the thing he] personally can't get over is the way maternal commitments crowd her daily time and diminish her imagination of who she might become". The protagonist does fit within the context of Ware's work, as "Chris Ware's works are often populated with melancholic,

despondent, shamed figures, unhappy and ill at ease with contemporary life" (Worden 2010, 108); and the protagonist is certainly both.

Building Stories features both common meanings of the word "dream": the kind experienced during the night, and personal goals. The former are featured on *GBB* 2–3, as the protagonist in her twenties (or early thirties) dreams a complex sequence, where there is no apparent beginning or ending. An intricate multilayered depiction; this double page spread includes the protagonist contemplating her own suicide, its inevitable repercussions, her aging, and the possible direction her life could take, and its current condition: "my life seems utterly unbearable and repulsive to me…" (*GBB* 2). This marks one of the two instances that the protagonist explicitly ponders suicide; the other occasion being *AS*, when she is an approximate twenty years older. While being awake, the protagonist's disposition does not change: "my life is stupid. I'm stupid." (*GBB* 11) and "everything is always the same… Nothing ever changes. I'm never going to change." (*GBB* 11). There is a feeling of negative tranquility as the protagonist has apparently given up on her dream of becoming an artist of any kind, though she seems to still contemplate it, as her phone conversation with a customer at the flower shop seems to imply: "a **writer**? Haha… **hardly**… Thanks, though…" (*GBB* 24). This implied still-living dream is confirmed on the final page of *DM*, as both meanings of "dream" coincide: the protagonist's lifelong dream of being an artist has materialized in a dream. She tells her daughter of this dream, which features her book, published and available for purchase.

It is never revealed why the protagonist has given up working towards her artistic goals, even if she secretly still yearns to achieve them. On page 49 of *GBB* she reminisces – while still attending art class in her early twenties – that "it took years for me to figure out that I wasn't really an artist, but back then, I was still fooling myself…" There does not seem to be any single dramatic instance of the protagonist relinquishing her dream of becoming an artist: maybe there is no single moment, maybe this change was gradual. One may theorize that the ending of her relationship with Lance – a man who continued to be a successful actor (*DM* 17), effectively ended

her artistic aspirations. It is not that she cannot be an artist without Lance; it is that she becomes preoccupied with her loneliness when Lance leaves her. This loneliness manifests after the breakup, most notably as the protagonist is at an airport, and encounters a hysterically crying woman who is crying as her boyfriend/husband is leaving on a plane, apparently for an extended period of time. The protagonist observes her and declares in her mind that "we [other people in the vicinity at the airport] were all so deeply envious of her." (*GBB* 31, quotes by me).

There is nothing in the protagonist's life that would actually stop her from pursuing her dreams: she is not blinded, rendering her unable to see her drawings, she does not lose control of her limbs or anything else equally dramatic and drastic. She loses her volition, and her lack of free time does not help: the beginning of *DM* has her being frustrated due to constantly having to look after Lucy, and on other pages we learn that as a middle-aged woman, the protagonist is concerned about the oil crisis (p. 2) and the monetary situation of their family (p. 5). When she is worried in her middle age, she is almost never worried about her artistic goals or they are not depicted.

The obvious reading is, of course, to blame the protagonist for her failures, and this is what she herself seems to do: speaking to her daughter, she outright admits that "I just never thought I had it in me, you know?" (*DM* 20), even repeating the line almost verbatim. What is clear, however, that the protagonist seemingly only fails in the context of her artistic dreams. Her now adult daughter, on the very same page, acknowledges that she was a great mother and that the protagonist now runs a successful business. More apt would be to blame both the protagonist and external factors for her self-defined failure: the lack of support from both Lance and Phil play an undeniable role, though she may have been defeated by her very own doubt and lack of resolution. One problem with assigning blame is the fact that as the protagonist is potentially the author, the depiction of her failures is likely to be a subjective account. For example, there are hints that Phil's apparently constant working would not leave the protagonist any time to pursue art, should she want

to. A damning argument in this vein is the fact that after their implied divorce, she then and only then owns her successful business. But outright condemning Phil and Lance for her lack of success is an oversimplification: they are but one reason why the protagonist fails to fulfill her artistic goals.

3.2.4.6 The Neighbors, Old Woman and the Protagonist

The neighbors, as does the old woman, serve a unique role in *Building Stories*. Unlike with all other pieces of the graphic novel, the pieces reserved for these three characters contain virtually no role for the protagonist: *MN* and *MOW* are dominated by their respective characters, and depicted entirely from their point of view. This raises questions: if *Building Stories* is a collection of the protagonist's memories rendered real – the inner cover of the upper box includes Picasso's quote "everything you can imagine is real" – are they any less real in the context of *Building Stories* if they are imagined by the protagonist? And even if not, what is the role of the neighbors in the narrative?

There are minor hints that *MN* may in fact be fictional within the fictional world of *Building Stories*. Its occurrences have no bearing upon the protagonist, and virtually all of the fights take place when the protagonist is not present. Furthermore, the similar piece *MOW* is alluded to have been written by the protagonist: in a workshop class, she ends her story with the same words as the piece itself ends with: "oh mama, what happened? What happened to me?" (*GBB* 26 and *MOW* 3). What are the implications of this possible – and even probable – fictional nature of *MN*? If it indeed is fictional, then their story must be read as the protagonist's artistic expression: not necessarily autobiographical, but always related to her. If she is the creator, she is not completely removed from her work, even if that work is fully fictional.

The most defining attribute of the male neighbor (hereafter referred to as "man" and the female neighbor referred to as "woman") is his quick temper. Though never physically violent, he is prone to sudden bursts of anger; as when he rages alone in the apartment, throwing and

kicking things around, all the while shouting "I can't – mother – **fucking** – **STAND** her anymore!" (*MN* 2). The sadness of the portrayal of the marital woes of the couple comes from their fights' realistic nature: both share the blame and neither is ever singled out as the sole cause of their problems. While the man is aggressive and verbally abusive, he is quick to be ashamed of his actions. After he spends the day alone, watching TV and picking up the items he threw around, he asks the woman as she enters: "hey where **were** you?" pause – "**I was getting worried**" (*MN* 3). And, though the woman does not hurtfully snap at the man, she too overreacts. Her response to a mean-spirited and immediately withdrawn comment – "you're not gonna wear **that**, are you?" "**hey** – Hey I was just kidding" (*MN* 11) is to storm out without resolving the issue. There is no communication, and at least within the scope of *MN*, no fights nor issues are ever truly resolved.

The contrast between the early stages or the relationship and its current status could not be clearer. While the man is speaking on the phone with a friend – in Chicago, 1991 – he goes on to say this about his first meeting with his future wife: "the greatest chick…". "Man, you don't even know the half of it, **perfect** tits… **legs** up to here… nice round **ass**…" "This time it's different…" and "I really feel like I've got a **friend…** Y'know?" (*MN* 6). Likewise, the woman's first impression of the man is a positive one, comically juxtaposed with that of the man's as she is not nearly as coarse in her description: "**cute?** Oh my God… he's, like, **gorgeous…** It sounds a cliché, but he's actually tall, dark and handsome… to the **max*[9]…**" (*MN* 4). Though the man's version of this enthusiasm is admittedly coarse, it still appears to be as genuine as the woman's.

Time seems to reverse the luck of the man and woman. Initially, they are both fortunate to find one another, and this is exemplified when the woman and her friend see the man's band for the first time. Though the friend is attracted to the musicians – particularly the man – the woman ends up with the man, the charismatic vocalist/guitarist (*MN* 5). The woman's infatuation is so significant that she leaves her current boyfriend – Frank – for the guitarist – as Frank begs on his

[9] The comic provides a footnote for "to the max": late 1990s term meaning "to the fullest extent".

knees for her not to go (*MN* 5). This occurs despite the fact that the woman initially attempts to help her friend pursue the guitarist: the friend acknowledges that the way she looks denies her the opportunity to woo the man: "I know I'm too **fat** for guys like that, though…" (*MN* 5). This is a highly important detail for two reasons. The friend greatly resembles the protagonist in her twenties by her build and appearance, thus implicitly suggesting that this may also be the reason why she has trouble finding a mate of her own. Secondly, the neighbor woman eventually becomes just as (if not more so) "fat" later in life. The obvious (and probably incorrect) conjecture to be made from this is that the relationship fails because both become old and fat. Perhaps, instead, the correct reading is that with all their changes, including their bodies, vocations and behavior, something critical was lost: the woman ponders in the present that when was it: "when his words started to hurt" (*MN* 11). And: "every weekend I hope that it's going to be different, that he'll start being nice to me again, but he never is… He just gets nasty and then one of us leaves, and it's usually me…" (*MN* 9).

As the woman, in the present (present time in the context of *MN*), and alone, gazes into the mirror and considers that she may indeed be repulsive, she unwittingly describes the entire nature of *Building Stories* – the entire nature of everyone's existence on its pages: "it's funny… when I think back to the early days of our relationship, it's all jumbled up in my mind, like one of those corny movie montages… Except no one moves…" (*MN* 10). As with these jumbled relationship memories, much is equally confusing with *Building Stories*: many details are never mentioned or even alluded to, and we are bereft of the regular comfort of linear narrative strategies.

How does all this relate to the protagonist? A possible reading is to see the man and the woman and their relationship as a potential scenario for the protagonist: if the Old Woman's fate featured in *MOW* is the protagonist's potential fate as a future spinster, then *MN* may indeed be a potential failed relationship for her. Though the woman seemingly only shares but few common sources of stress with the protagonist – appearance and relationships – they must be compared to one another as the protagonist's central role necessitates this. Though, it must be acknowledged that

especially the post-structuralist feminist would vehemently oppose this comparison, as it would effectively render all other female characters as "the other". This would be a capital offense to post-structuralist feminists, as it would inevitably rob the neighbors of their own unique nature, with each attribute either a foil to the protagonist's own personality, or a common and shared trait that furthers the comparison. Regardless, it is difficult to read the neighbor independently of the protagonist as they have in common their shared existence in the building, suffering problems in their relationships in their middle-age and both probably ultimately facing the end of their respective relationships.

There is an implication that the woman may be moving on from the relationship. This is apparent as she is riding a train: she runs into a coworker whom she admits (to the reader) she has a crush on (*MN* 12), who then in turn greets her by admitting that "I was **just**, like, thinking about you!" (*MN* 13). During this exchange, the husband calls her, but the woman cannot decide whether or not she will answer (*MN* 13). The narrative is then interrupted by a bizarre and unique passage where the time changes and the space remains the same: a young woman is using a device of some sort that appears to be a bubble on her head, connecting to some manner of super-Internet, and gazing at the events unfolding at the same location with the woman and the coworker (*MN* 14). The sequence ends as the train begins to move, the doors close, and the woman does not respond to the phone (*MN* 15). Earlier, the woman laments that "he never tries to get me to come back… He never follows me" (*MN* 8). Now, in contrast, the husband *does* follow her on page 15, holding his still-calling phone and exclaiming – as the train speeds up – "wait!" and "I'm such an idiot…", symbolically and literally leaving the man behind as the woman likely begins a new liaison.

The man, alone, retreats back to home to doze on the couch – as he works during the night as a guard – and calls her once more, with no result: "just trying you again, that's all…" "Gimme a call, okay?" "Love you" (*MN* 16). The relationship does not necessarily end here – and in fact the reader never encounters the couple again in *Building Stories* – but the implications are

convincing. The relationship fails because both the man and woman fail: they both fail to be present, they are unable to talk and even when they genuinely do attempt to solve their differences, fate conspires against them. It is possible the neighbors are in some ways the mirror image of Phil and the protagonist. Both relationships seem to fail – though these failures remain unconfirmed – but here it is the woman that is the cheating party, whereas Phil is heavily implied to have cheated on the protagonist.

The old lady – a character that I additionally interchangeably refer to as the old woman – is a core character in *Building Stories*. Though she may be nothing but a fictional depiction within the context of the narrative in a similar fashion as with the neighbors, we are given quite a few insights into her. Unsurprisingly, the majority of these occur in *MOW*, but *GB* and *GBB* also play a role in her characterization. Despite the fact that the old lady lives in the same apartment as the neighbors do, there is virtually no direct contact whatsoever between the characters. The neighbor man occasionally casually mocks the old lady behind her back, but that is all.

The old woman's life, when she is old, seems lonely. She admits that "I've lived my whole life afraid of people…" (*GB* 22). A link between the old woman and the protagonist is established by the protagonist, when she openly fears that she may end up becoming like her, old and alone: "God I did not want to end up like her… alone, my life over…" (*GB* 25). The two meet earlier on in *GB*, and it becomes apparent that the old woman studied art in her youth, which makes comparison inevitable (*GB* 17). They are both spinsters at this moment in *GB*; the protagonist is merely younger. The house itself goes on to compare the protagonist, the neighbor lady and the old woman: "they're my three little birds, bathing, breakfasting, sitting their broad behinds where they please…" (*GB* 20).

The old woman eventually becomes trapped due to both her own desires and especially her circumstances. As an old woman, she thinks that "no… No, I never wanted to have children…" (*MOW* 2) but still admits on the same page that "what we really could've used around

here was a boy… A gentle, kind boy… like dad was…" (*MOW* 2). The old woman forever remains infatuated with her father, or at least the idea of her father: she idolizes him: "never once was he mean to me" (*MOW* 5), and even ostensibly unwittingly desires the same physical qualities from her potential husbands as those that her father possessed: "I like Ernie [a boyfriend in her young adult life never elaborated upon and seen only once] fine, but I suppose I'd like a strong, dark man (with blue eyes!) better, but in my situation, a girl can't afford to be choosy… I suppose he'll ask me to marry him one of these days… I wonder what I'll say…" (*MOW* 15). All three women of the apartment are once again linked as the old woman takes an aimless stroll near the building (*MOW* 8), as does the protagonist (*AS*) and the neighbor (*MN*).

The old woman seemingly embodies the Electra complex proposed by Jung, the complex being a stage in a girl's development when she "develops a specific liking for the father, with a correspondingly jealous attitude toward the mother" (Kilmartin et al. 1997, 269). She loves her father, but apparently despises her mother. In her teenage, she has nothing but contempt for her mother: "why did she have to bob her hair like mine, anyway? Trying to look young" (*MOW* 4) and "mother, running the electric carpet sweeper just to annoy me." (*MOW* 4). This antagonism continues to the very end. When she is middle-aged and the mother finally dies, she immediately renovates the apartment, buys an electric blanket, hires a maid and installs a handrail; all things that were not allowed or were not possible in her mother's lifetime. The woman has no desire to retain the apartment in the form it existed when her mother lived; with her dies the old ways of the apartment. Arguably the most incriminating evidence of the woman's dislike of her mother comes from the admission that "I would have moved her into a home, but we couldn't have afforded it. – No, we couldn't have afforded it." (*MOW* 13). Interestingly, despite her dislike of her mother, she claims that "we" could not afford it; not that "I" could not afford it.

Though the old woman is overloaded with debt and caring for her mother; she is implied to be a tool in her own proverbial downfall: as an old woman, she has long thought about

going through the things in the attic, but: "not today, though… Not today…" (*MOW* 11) suggesting she has been putting on many a thing in her life. This may also suggest that she wishes to put her past in the past; the difficult years of caring of her mother and being alone.

Virtually everything about the depiction of the woman casts her as a lonely failure, who never even truly attempted to find happiness. This, however, is in stark contrast to a single quotation from the apartment itself that can be found in *GBB* (53):

> It is unlikely that this nauseated girl [the protagonist] who, for most of her life, has been much too eager to be loved (and, so has lived it for the greater part alone) could stomach the possibility that the romantic memories which play out behind the shuttered eyes of this sleeping woman [the old woman] are more shocking than what current network broadcast permits and that they also rival those of the girl's, both in count and frequency.

What purpose does this serve? There is little, if any, suggestion elsewhere that the woman has such romantic memories of her own. The only implied man of her life is Ernie, a relationship that did not last. If the woman is an older spinster version of the protagonist, is this an allusion that the protagonist may yet find someone, but yet will ultimately be alone? This is possible, considering the apparent ending of the protagonist's marriage alluded to at the end of *DM.* Perhaps, however, the most fruitful method of comparing the protagonist and the old woman is to consider the reasons for their failures; though the protagonist apparently fails as an artist because she has no faith in herself, the old woman seems to fail both due to circumstance and her own complicity. She has to take care of her mother; but does this necessitate that she need be alone? Likewise, why could the protagonist not realize her dream? This is an idyllic dream of perfection, with her painting, husband working and the child independently playing, all in the same room as is featured in *FN* (2). *Building Stories* never answers these questions. The woman fails, the protagonist fails, and while the woman blames her mother, the protagonist blames herself.

It may be that the neighbor woman is the odd one among these three women: the old woman's mother is not part of this group, as she is never a focalizer. The implication is that she will

find new love and a way out of her doomed marriage; whereas the protagonist and the old woman appear to have no choice but to age alone. The three women are somewhat of an amalgam of the early and contemporary feminist conceptions of women: respectively, they share common attributes and woes, but they are still unique individuals that defy classification (as the quote describing the old woman's history of sexual debauchery attests to). Perhaps they all function as dramatic foils to one another, without being reduced to becoming "the other". If we accept the theory that the protagonist is the author of both *MOW* and *MN*, the old woman and the neighbor woman help the reader understand the protagonist better through her authorship, as the characters' depictions are deliberate choices by the protagonist. Despite this, they still exist as individuals, as relevant characters even without the protagonist.

3.2.4.7 Branford the Bee

Branford the Bee is the comic relief of *Building Stories*: his story does not directly relate to the protagonist, though there are undeniable links. He is confirmed to be a fictional creation within the narrative – or the fact that this particular depiction of him is fictional – by the fact that Lucy wants the protagonist to again tell her stories about him (*DM* 16). In addition, Branford's death is featured both on the final page of *BBB* and *BG*, linking the seemingly former fictional piece to the realistic context of *BG*. *BBB* is linked to *DB* via the latter appearing in the former (page 10).

Much of Branford's journey is seemingly purely comical and irrelevant in the context of a feminist reading, but there are a few important details. Branford is mocked relentlessly by the other bees due to his beta male status, yet he fantasizes about fertilizing the Queen (*BBB* 8). He falls in love with another bee and marries her and they start a family: their compatibility as a couple is alluded to on the first page of *DB*, as they appear as the only colored individuals in two lines of discolored bees. Branford, though loving his wife and children and deriding the simplicity of his cruel bee brethren – "don't they know there is more to life than fertilizing Queens?" (*DB* 2) –

appears also to be similarly envious. In both the pieces centered on him he dreams of fertilizing the Queen (*DB* 2). Though Branford is anthropomorphized, he still retains realistic bee behavior: after finding himself inside a flower shop after been lured by painted flowers (apparently the flower shop where the protagonist works at in her youth) he cannot escape, repeatedly slamming himself against the window rather than exiting the same way he entered.

Branford's beta male status proves to be only the second most challenging hurdle of his life: one morning he wakes up only to find that he now has hair on his legs (*BBB* 15). This is a reversal of bee sex norms, as in fact females are the only ones that have hair, to collect pollen – a detail that is provided by the graphic novel itself (*BBB* 15). Branford is confused and disillusioned, as he no longer embodies the norm. The confusion is so extensive that he attempts to hide the phenomenon from his family and, under threat of starvation, use it to gather food for them as if he were a female (*BBB* 15–16). The significance of Branford effectively being a "trans-bee" is not readily apparent and its cause never explained. He (or she?) seems simultaneously both to resist and agree upon Butler's ideas of gender as performative: he is a he because he continues performing as a male bee despite his physical change. But conversely, if gender is performative, why is he then demoralized by his physical change? If gender is truly purely a performance, there need not be any cause for concern. This may be countered by the notion that the not all of the world's denizens assume gender *is* performative even if it is, thus explaining why Branford could face significantly more ridicule from the roving gangs of alpha males due to his new feminine hairy condition.

Branford's trouble with his gender never causes him to question his sexuality, only his gender. But what is the significance of this confusion? Can this struggle be seen in relation to the protagonist? The only clear link appears to be the protagonist's missing leg and the possible struggles with self-identifying as a woman it may bring. This link, however, is dubious at best: if the missing organ would be something considered traditionally feminine, such as hair on the head or breasts, this could be argued. But as it is, it seems that the significance of Branford's gender

confusion functions both as comedic and endearing on a dramatic level within the narrative, and as a demonstration that the protagonist – who most likely has created this particular Branford of *BBB* and *DB* – is indeed aware of these feminist concerns. This helps to establish that the protagonist is not only aware, but sympathetic to these concerns as well – Branford's plight is in a sympathetic light and so are the concerns.

The sympathy towards this plight comes from the sheer fact that Branford himself is a sympathetic character. Branford's most significant positive qualities include his dedication to his family and his humbleness: though he shares the universal male bee desire to fertilize the queen, he is the sole bee who questions his right to do so and even ponders that there is more to life than bedding the queen. Likewise, even Branford's negative qualities are endearing, as his lack of physical strength and stupidity are either comical or pitiable, or both. Thus, it is only logical that this sympathetic character's struggles also come to be viewed with empathy by the reader. If the main protagonist is the author of the adventures of Branford, this clearly sympathetic portrayal of Branford's problems only serves to indirectly show the protagonist understands transsexual struggles – or, at the very least, is interested in them.

3.2.5 Bestowing form on *Building Stories*

The form of *Building Stories* is, to my knowledge, unique in mainstream comics. Its inherently fragmented nature defies easy classification, as is evident by the necessity of an entire segment to allow citations: how often does any literary work so powerfully defy any manner of classification? Prior work on *Building Stories* never speaks of page numbers, titles or assigns genuine names to the segments; instead it only refers to the work in general or simply not strictly specifying which segments are alluded to.

Perhaps these earlier commentators are right not to relegate any arbitrary numbers and titles to *Building Stories*. The graphic novel is a feminist work, and since one of the core beliefs of

feminists is that women are individuals and not something to be defined ("strictly speaking, 'women' cannot be said to exist." – Julia Kristeva, "woman does not have a sex." – Luce Irigaray) one can also argue that then thus assigning labels to *Building Stories* is by definition a crime against feminism by itself.

But if this is so, what is the alternative? Work prior to this thesis done on the graphic novel has focused on the work focused on the comic before it was complete. In its complete form, the work consists of more than 200 pages, a volume that would render general citation – references without any reference to a specific page – extremely cumbersome and time-consuming, and even occasionally impossible to track. Furthermore, if definitions made by anyone else but Ware – such as my categorization system (2.1) – fight against the principles of feminism, one may still employ them while simultaneously admitting their arbitrary nature. With this in mind, the categorization system undeniably does cause some problems: though I myself had the luxury of reading the work before any classification existed, anyone who first encounters my analysis and then reads the work cannot help but think of the segments with the names I have bestowed, despite the fact that these names are self-admittedly arbitrary and not sanctioned by Ware.

Can the form itself of *Building Stories* be read with a feminist method? Of course, but this approach may not be furtive. There are many things to consider about the form: it defies classification, it is unique and by sheer virtue of existing, defies modern media. In recent years, digital comics have become the main distribution system of comics: the inherent accessibility, cheaper prices and both economic and ecological sustainability have helped to greatly popularize digital comics, similarly how video games, films and television shows are now primarily distributed online. With this in mind, *Building Stories* is paradoxically both conservative and revolutionary: though it is only available as a paper version (due to Ware's wishes, despite the fact that almost all modern graphic novel releases are released in digital or simultaneously digital & print formats), its lack of organization, separate segments and even subject matter are nothing but revolutionary.

Furthermore, in my analysis *Building Stories* is a work so fundamentally feminist that its protagonist is not only a woman but that everything and everyone else in the work is relegated to the role of "the other", and as such it is necessary to recognize that *Building Stories* is not to be legitimately categorized or defined even when it is impossible to avoid such attempts altogether.

4. Conclusion

Building Stories is a postmodern graphic novel designed to be read in several ways. With the aid of feminist thematic – particularly French feminists Irigaray, Kristeva, Beauvoir and Cixous and several post-modern third wave feminists – I have provided a feminist reading of the graphic novel. Adding to a currently small pool of academic knowledge on *Building Stories*, this thesis is most likely the first feminist undertaking on the work, one that has strived to catalogue all current research on the graphic novel.

Building Stories comes in a box with 14 separate booklets, magazines and newspapers, all without titles and numbering. To enable academic citations to *Building Stories*, I have created a categorization system. This system serves to give each of the 14 separate pieces in *Building Stories* unique names, and a system of pagination. These titles and page numbers were defined for sake of clarity and clear, concise referencing.

To analyze the work, I defined key terms with the help of French feminist sources, including "feminism" and "woman". I also explored the nature of existing feminist analysis of comics, which has focused on a diverse selection of topics, such as superhero comics and graphic novels. Notably, there was no pre-existing feminist analysis available of *Building Stories*, likely due to it being a contemporary release (2012).

Virtually all aspects of *Building Stories* relate to the protagonist in some manner or another. Even segments that do not feature her at all – most notably the two pieces *BBB* and *DB* – are connected to her in some way. In the case of these two examples, they are connected via the

revelation that their core character Branford Bee is an imaginary fiction-within-fiction created by the protagonist herself. Other characters, that are not fictional within the work, namely the protagonist's neighbors and landlady, likely feature fictional stories created by the protagonist in their pieces – *MN* and *MOW* respectively. Their fictional nature is hinted toward in other segments of the work, where the protagonist workshops a tale that concerns the fate of the old lady.

In addition to analyzing the protagonist through many different perspectives – such as through her role as a daughter, mother, wife, girlfriend, artist, disabled individual and friend – this thesis has also contemplated the nature of the form of the graphic novel, possible biographical elements that link the protagonist with Ware himself, and *Building Stories'* place among contemporary feminist graphic novel peers.

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