



Monstrosity – Illness – Wound Uncanny Interconnections in Deborah Levy's *Hot Milk*

Abstract: Sofia Papastergiadis – the protagonist of Deborah Levy's *Hot Milk* – seems to be encircled by various monstrosities. First, her overbearing, monstrous mother suffers from an equally monstrous unidentifiable illness, because of which the two women travel to Almería, seeking answers and potential therapy. Second, while in Andalusia, Sofia is often attacked by Medusae/jellyfish, which is a painful, yet uncannily addictive experience. Third, the protagonist is puzzled with her own doubtful motivations, hasty decisions, and dark fascinations, resurfacing, for instance, in a pursuit of toxic, but sensual, affairs. All of these drive Sofia to investigate yet another monster: one residing inside her. In this article, I propose a reading informed by psychoanalysis and feminist criticism which aims at tracing how the discourse of illness interweaves with that of monstrosity in Levy's Booker-shortlisted bildungsroman. Keeping in mind that disease and monstrosity engage in an interplay of secrecy and revelation in the novel, I wish to study the implications of that for the protagonist and her relationships with others.

Keywords: Deborah Levy, monster, disease, jellyfish, Medusa, femininity

*I showered and felt the medusa stings throb under the warm water.
They were inciting me to do something monstrous but I wasn't yet
sure what this might be. Sun-stroked, blistered and bruised, I was
preparing for it.*

– Deborah Levy, *Hot Milk*¹

Sofia Papastergiadis – the protagonist of *Hot Milk* (2016) – joins Deborah Levy's literary pantheon of wounded people.² However, what makes her unique is her complicated relationship with monstrosity. We meet Sofia, aged twenty-five, in

1. Deborah Levy, *Hot Milk* (London: Penguin Books, 2017), 208.

2. In Levy's novels, we can notice a tendency to portray displaced and confused people either in sites of historical significance, such as London and Berlin (see her debut novel, Deborah Levy, *Beautiful Mutants*, in *Early Levy* (London: Penguin Books, 2014); and her latest novel, Deborah Levy, *The Man Who Saw Everything* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2019)), or in seemingly blissful holiday locations (see Deborah Levy, *The Unloved* (London: Penguin Books, 2014); Deborah Levy, *Swimming Home* (High Wycombe: And Other Stories, 2011)).

southern Spain in August; however, she is not there on holiday – she accompanies her mother, Rose, who suffers from a variety of mysterious symptoms and hopes to have this puzzle solved in a clinic near Almería. Sofia’s life revolves around her mother’s unidentifiable (potentially imaginary) illness. Sofia dropped out of her PhD in anthropology when Rose’s condition deteriorated, yet, as she herself admits, she has been “an unwilling detective”³ investigating Rose’s symptoms for the past two decades. In the novel, we witness how the relationship between Sofia and Rose evolves, but we also observe the young woman’s struggle to understand the motivations behind her own aberrant behaviour, and to scrutinise monstrous entities and phenomena surrounding her. The monsters she encounters rarely take conventional forms, but rather manifest themselves through the return of the repressed, violation of personal/bodily boundaries, and intrusion of the traumatic excess.

The goal of this paper is to explore the interplay of the tropes of monstrosity, illness, and wound in Levy’s Booker-shortlisted bildungsroman. By all means are the conjunctions between the elements of the proposed triad complex: both monstrosity and illness rely on a combination of secrecy and disclosure; a wound becomes a tangible sign of monstrous presence and a remnant of transgression; and, finally, illnesses and wounds allow us to unpack physical, psychological, and existential vulnerabilities of the characters. I wish to study the implications of these uncanny interconnections for the protagonist and her relationships with others.⁴ Since my reading is informed by classical and feminist psychoanalysis, I will mostly focus on symbolic, semiotic, and mythical dimensions of monstrosity; in this light, monstrosity as a metaphor stands for the crisis of meaning and

3. Levy, *Hot Milk*, 11.

4. In this paper I propose to focus on Sofia Papastergiadis and the changes she experiences as a result of her uncanny encounters with illness and monstrosity. My decision is motivated by the fact that the novel itself prioritises her (inherently subjective) narration, while – as Jasmine Bajada rightly notes – Rose Papastergiadis, Sofia’s mother, “does not have narrative agency,” functioning here as “an object rather than a subject.” Jasmine Bajada, “Mothers, Daughters, and Damaged Legs: Mother-Daughter Relationships in Elena Ferrante’s *Neapolitan Novels* and Deborah Levy’s *Hot Milk*,” *antae* 7, no. 1 (2020): 21. Gabriele Griffin proposes an alternative approach to Rose. In her study, which recognises *Hot Milk* as a challenge to the 21st-century model of mother-daughter relation as a partnership, Griffin analyses how both women need to transform in order to have a meaningful relationship and move on individually. See Gabriele Griffin, “Morphing Together: Motherhood, Old Grievances, and Corporeal Materiality in Deborah Levy’s *Hot Milk*,” in *Close Relations: Family, Kinship, and Beyond*, ed. Helena Wahlström Henriksson and Klara Goedecke (Singapore: Springer, 2021), 209–220. In her reading of the mother and the daughter through the prism of vulnerability and potentiality, María Magdalena Flores Quesada also gravitates towards treating Rose as a subject – although an inactive one. See María Magdalena Flores Quesada, “Re-orienting Vulnerability: An Analysis of Deborah Levy’s *Hot Milk*,” *ES Review: Spanish Journal of English Studies* 42 (2021): 113, <https://doi.org/10.24197/ersjes.42.2021.105-125> (08.12.2022).

the *I*'s integrity, thus conjuring up anxiety, desire, guilt, and loss. The categories this paper is going to employ are, among others, Sigmund Freud's *fort/da* and parapraxis, Hélène Cixous's Medusan femininity, and Bracha L. Ettinger's primal mother-phantasies.⁵

A Monstrous Bildungsroman

On the very first page of *Hot Milk*, Sofia Papastergiadis recognises herself as "broken."⁶ She was forced to abandon her PhD studies in order to support her ill mother, and now she has followed her to Andalusia. Sofia's unfinished dissertation haunts her and makes her feel ashamed, and so does her current occupation – she is a waitress in a café in London; she contends: "The dream is over for me."⁷ Having a degree in anthropology, Sofia is trained to be observant; thus, she treats also herself as an object of study, providing us with a critical (although necessarily fragmentary) account of her present situation. Twenty-five years old, unsatisfied, bound by responsibility, she quite inadvertently embarks on a journey of self-discovery, initiated by the stings of jellyfish.⁸

The so-called sea monsters⁹ attack Sofia several times, and each of these encounters leaves a mark exceeding the injuries inflicted on her body. After the first incident, Sofia notes: "It was as if the poison from the medusa sting had in turn released some venom that was lurking inside me,"¹⁰ remembering that in Spanish the name "medusa" is ascribed both to the marine animals and to one of the

5. My reading drifts apart from feminist conceptualisations of monstrosity informed by posthumanism, despite shared emphasis on vulnerability, corporeality, and becoming. For post-humanist reflections on femininity and monstrosity, see, for instance: Rosi Braidotti, "Mothers, Monsters, and Machines," in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, ed. Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 59–79; Rosi Braidotti, "Cyber-teratologies," in *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2002), 172–211; Margrit Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (London, Thousand Oaks, and New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2002).

6. Levy, *Hot Milk*, 1.

7. Levy, *Hot Milk*, 8.

8. It is not merely the stings that encourage her to develop as a person. Actually, Dr Gómez, her mother's unconventional physician, is the one who diagnoses Sofia's need to change and challenges her to pursue this goal on multiple occasions. On one of their first meetings, he argues: "[Y]ou are a little weak for a young healthy woman. Sometimes you limp, as if you have picked up on your mother's emotional weather. You could do with more physical strength. [...] I do not believe you need to do more exercise. It is a matter of having purpose, less apathy. Why not steal a fish from the market to make you bolder?" Levy, *Hot Milk*, 58.

9. Levy, *Hot Milk*, 73.

10. Levy, *Hot Milk*, 9.

mythological Gorgons, whose gaze could turn men to stone. Her description is replete with negative connotations – the “poison,” or “venom,” is “lurking inside” her, which suggests consequences reaching beyond physical discomfort. Indeed, the protagonist constantly feels the presence of the jellyfish, but she comes to accept the pain; she even recognises it as “a relief.”¹¹ Furthermore, throughout the novel, Sofia finds herself unable to refrain from returning to the sea – and these multiple returns result in new injuries. Thus, physical trauma, whose tangible rem(a)inders are jellyfish welts, merges with psychological trauma, famously problematised by Sigmund Freud. This appears to trigger the mechanism of repetition; Sofia engages in a game of *fort/da* with the medusae, opening herself up for new wounds over and over again. This compulsion to repeat may be recognised as “a homeopathic procedure,” or a “poison that cures,”¹² as Eric L. Santner has it. At the same time, Freud admits that repetition is inextricably linked to “the instinct to return to the inanimate state,”¹³ which defies the reign of the pleasure principle. What confirms a masochistic overtone of Sofia’s actions is her description of the sensations after one of the following incidents as enjoyable; she seems to develop an affinity for these wounds.¹⁴ Thus, by choosing to return to the sea, Sofia might be claimed to simultaneously anaesthetise herself and make herself more susceptible to – potentially disruptive – stimulations.

Sofia begins to associate wounds and pain with sexuality and desire. In the course of the novel, the protagonist becomes involved in two relationships: with Juan, who works in an injury hut, and with Ingrid Bauer, a rather unpredictable seamstress. Sofia meets Juan right after her first encounter with the medusae, since the hut is mostly visited by tourists who disregard the yellow danger flag. Juan and Sofia’s relationship becomes purely physical; one of their dates is depicted as follows: “[W]e swam naked in the warm night and he kissed every medusa sting on my body, the welts and blisters, until I was disappointed there were not more of them. I had been stung into desire. He was my lover and I was his conqueror.”¹⁵ Sofia’s stings are cherished here – the act of giving pleasure is directed at them, which awakens her desire to be even more wounded. Not only are her welts loci of satisfaction, but they are also identified as sources of the protagonist’s confidence; Sofia ceases to be passive – she now sees herself as a “conqueror,” bold,

11. Levy, *Hot Milk*, 23.

12. Eric L. Santner, “History Beyond the Pleasure Principle: Some Thoughts on the Representation of Trauma,” in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution*, ed. Saul Friedländer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 146.

13. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (Seattle: Pacific Publishing Studio, 2010), 64.

14. Levy, *Hot Milk*, 89.

15. Levy, *Hot Milk*, 87.

even predatory, and victorious. Her relationship with Ingrid is more complicated, especially in terms of both women's expectations and other commitments. However, when it comes to its physical aspect, again, inflicting pain seems to be its integral part, as we can deduce from Sofia's portrayal of their intimate moments: "[W]e kept on kissing and she was holding on to my shoulder with the medusa sting, squeezing the purple welts. It hurt but I didn't care."¹⁶ It is difficult to find her account reliable; her acceptance of suffering goes beyond mere indifference. Taking into consideration her relationship with Juan, we may assume that she agrees on it because via the experience of physical discomfort her sexual desire resurfaces and strengthens.

The relation between Sofia and Ingrid reveals both women's monstrosity. It is based on not only physical, but also psychological discomfort. Ingrid acts towards Sofia in an imposing manner, often overwhelming the protagonist with her fervour, but simultaneously she is the one who sets boundaries. For instance, despite being involved physically and emotionally with Sofia, Ingrid does not terminate her relationship with Matty. Furthermore, Sofia's narration in the novel interweaves with a fragmentary narration of her anonymous observer; at some point, it becomes clear that Ingrid is the voyeur, constantly violating Sofia's privacy. Each of the women identifies the other as a monstrous entity. On a basic level, both feel that they are treated unfairly in their relationship and seem to have incompatible expectations about it. What is more, Ingrid directly addresses Sofia as a "monster"¹⁷ numerous times. Later in the novel, Sofia interprets it as a form of displacement, having learnt about an accident that Ingrid caused when she was five years old, which resulted in her younger sister suffering irreversible brain damage.¹⁸ Sofia suspects that Ingrid, unable to deal with her sense of guilt, treats the protagonist like a mirror, reflecting her own monstrosity. Grounded upon a shared sense of monstrosity, the women's relationship is thus extremely vulnerable and, at times, threatening.

One of the symbols of Sofia's mental condition and the state of her relationship with Ingrid is a silk top with a word embroidered on it. The protagonist receives it as a gift and identifies the word Ingrid has sewn as "Beloved."¹⁹ However, later in the novel Sofia comes to understand that it was an act of misreading; actually, the word is "Beheaded,"²⁰ which, according to Hélène Cixous, is a specifically

16. Levy, *Hot Milk*, 38.

17. Levy, *Hot Milk*, 71, *passim*.

18. See Levy, *Hot Milk*, 168–169.

19. Levy, *Hot Milk*, 83.

20. Levy, *Hot Milk*, 151.

feminine threat.²¹ This suits one of the categories of a parapraxis Freud describes in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*:

It contains something which rouses the reader's defences – some information or imputation distressing to him – and which is therefore corrected by being misread so as to fit in with a repudiation or with the fulfilment of a wish. In such cases we are of course obliged to assume that the text was first correctly understood and judged by the reader before it underwent correction, although his consciousness learnt nothing of this first reading.²²

Sofia is in urgent need to feel beloved – she desires a more intimate relationship than the one Ingrid can offer. Through the act of misreading, Sofia fulfils her wish, even if temporarily. When she detects her self-deception, she keeps on spending time with the woman, nevertheless. She learns to accept Ingrid's feelings; after all, as she observes, "It is not for me to censor how she thinks with her sewing needle, even if her thoughts hurt me."²³ Finally, the word "Beheaded" might be read as a sign of Ingrid's sadistic tendencies, fuelled by her guilt, which Sofia summarises as follows: "She had beheaded her sister and she was going to get me too."²⁴ The Beloved/Beheaded parapraxis points to the incompatibility of the two women and the toxic nature of their involvement²⁵; simultaneously, the gesture of beheading brings us back to the mentioned mythical monstrous woman.

21. "If man operates under the threat of castration, if masculinity is culturally ordered by the castration complex, it might be said that the backlash, the return, on women of this castration anxiety is its displacement as decapitation, execution, of woman, as loss of her head." Hélène Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?", trans. Annette Kuhn, *Signs* 7, no. 1 (1981): 43, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3173505> (17.04.2023).

22. Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Volume VI (1901): The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, trans. Alan Tyson (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1981), 114.

23. Levy, *Hot Milk*, 166.

24. Levy, *Hot Milk*, 200.

25. Madeleine Gray provides an alternative interpretation of Sofia and Ingrid's relationship. In this thought-provoking study of feminist reimaginings of temporality, it is proposed that Ingrid – identified as "a fellow Medusa" – challenges Sofia to change her detached, anthropological mode of observation that does not allow anyone to return the gaze into a more reciprocal one. Gray concludes: "In complex, mutual perception, Sofia and Ingrid resist self-protectively absencing themselves from normative, cruelly optimistic forward-time. Instead, they become ingrained in all the many directions in which worldly temporality can flow between people, forward and backward, attuning and reattuning within each connected moment." Madeleine Gray, "Making Her Time (and Time Again): Feminist Phenomenology and Form in Recent British and Irish Fiction Written by Women," *Contemporary Women's Writing* 14, no. 1 (2020): 11, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cww/vpaa014> (06.12.2022).

Sofia is intrigued by Medusa to the point of identifying with her. In one of her autobiographical essays, Deborah Levy summarises this monster as follows:

The Medusa was a woman who was both very powerful and very upset. It was a peculiar myth about a woman who returns the male gaze instead of looking away, and it ends with her cruel beheading, the separating of the head of a woman (the mind, subjectivity) from her body – as if its potency is too threatening.²⁶

In a gesture of affirmation, Sofia reflects on Medusa's monstrosity as potentially beneficial to the mythological woman, hoping that it gave her strength and influence.²⁷ Sofia's affirmative reinterpretation may be regarded as an example of wishful thinking, as she starts perceiving herself as a monster and phantasing about possessing monstrous powers. Among others, she wishes to master a skill of turning people – or, more exactly, her mother – to stone.²⁸ The desire to petrify her mother provides an interesting detour from the original myth, in which Medusa is infamous for killing only men. Madeleine Gray elucidates the matter further:

Sofia often thinks in Medusian terms about watching and being watched and about the stony power of a gaze filled with intent. However, while in classical mythology, Medusa's victims are turned to stone if they happen to gaze upon Medusa's face, in Sofia's vision of Medusian power, the agency lies with women who actively seek subjects to gaze upon [...]. This kind of petrifying sight reflects Sofia's anthropological "visualist bias." If someone is turned to stone, then they cannot look back, nor break your image of them and of yourself.²⁹

As Gray emphasises, this is a misidentification of the Gorgon's power; arguably, Medusa's full potency is revealed at the point when Medusan figures are able to return each other's gazes and acknowledge their varying perspectives,³⁰ which would correspond to Cixous's postulate that this monstrous woman need not be associated with death.³¹ Nevertheless, whether Sofia's desire for power and

26. Deborah Levy, *The Cost of Living* (London: Penguin Books, 2019), 110.

27. Levy, *Hot Milk*, 66.

28. Levy, *Hot Milk*, 55.

29. Gray, "Making Her Time (and Time Again)," 10.

30. See Gray, "Making Her Time (and Time Again)," 10–11. In Gray's reading, this is the case of Sofia and Ingrid; however, in the next section of my article the relation between Sofia and her mother will be studied through this prism as well.

31. Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976): 885, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3173239> (08.12.2022). Interestingly, the epigraph of *Hot Milk* is taken from Cixous: "[I]t's up to you to break the old circuits." Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 890. This emphasises Levy's indebtedness to Cixous's rethinking of the feminine

agency is misplaced or not, she decides to embrace the role of the monster instead of fighting it.

In Sofia's case, womanhood is inextricably linked to monstrosity. As she discovers her sensuality and her needs, she becomes more confident, sharp-tongued, and daring. Her behaviours are increasingly erratic; she steals a fish, releases an aggressive and mistreated dog, and destroys Ingrid's phone, to name a few examples. Some characters (such as her mother, her father, whom she briefly visits in Greece, or Ingrid) fail to understand her motivations, while others (for instance, Dr Gómez, her mother's physician) encourage her to embrace change. In this dark bildungsroman, Sofia embodies Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's understanding of the monster: she is "transgressive, too sexual, perversely erotic, a lawbreaker [...]."³² Her monstrosity – defined through pursuit of power, egocentrism, liberation of passions, sexual activity, vulnerability, and eccentricities – ought not to be battled. Rather, it needs to be affirmed in order for the protagonist to develop and gain independence, including – it seems – independence from her mother.

A Mother-Monster

We see Rose Papastergiadis through the eyes of her daughter Sofia, the story's main narrator.³³ What needs to be stressed here are the inherent unreliability, prejudice, and limitations of this perspective; nonetheless, it is the only one available to us since the story is supposed to function as, first and foremost, "a window into Sofia's interior life."³⁴ Rose is presented as a woman difficult to handle. She constantly criticises and diminishes Sofia, also in front of strangers. On one occasion, she announces: "My daughter is wasting her life [...]. Sofia is plump and idle and she is living off her mother at quite an advanced age."³⁵ Undoubtedly, this passage conveys an inappropriate amount of criticism. However, it might also be read through the prism of care; Rose might be interpreted as a worried mother, who lacks the proper language to express her concern about her daughter's sacrifice.

potential. Yet, as Gray rightly notes, the original addressee of Cixous's statement is a man, which would give such a choice of a motto "a sardonic tenor"; after all, men in the novel are unable and unwilling to participate in any kind of change. Gray, "Making Her Time (and Time Again)," 8.

32. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 16.

33. While Sofia is the main narrator of the novel, Levy introduces fragmentary narrations of an anonymous observer/stalker of Sofia, who can later be identified as Ingrid Bauer.

34. Katie Lewis, "The Footprints of the Past Walk through the Novel: A Conversation with Deborah Levy," *British Journal of Psychotherapy* 35, no. 1 (2019): 132, <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjp.12425>.

35. Levy, *Hot Milk*, 65.

Most importantly, Rose exhibits a number of enigmatic symptoms. As Sofia bluntly puts it, “Sometimes Rose can walk, sometimes she can’t.”³⁶ Throughout the novel we witness numerous instances when Rose walks or drives a car as if there were nothing wrong with her legs; it seems to be more of a matter of will than that of physical capabilities. She takes dozens of pills for a variety of symptoms – her body fails her, but doctors have been unable to pinpoint the direct cause of her malfunctions so far. It was for this reason she decided to visit the Gómez Clinic. Her daughter is her only companion; Sofia’s father, Christos Papastergiadis, abandoned them when the girl was little.³⁷ Another symptom that reappears – although it is not regarded as such in the first place – reveals itself through Rose’s constant dissatisfaction with water Sofia brings her. All of these easily lead to a conclusion that Rose suffers from hypochondria – Christos, with whom the protagonist meets in Athens, favours this interpretation.³⁸ Rose’s uncanny affliction and her extrovert way of handling it contribute to Sofia’s belief that her “mother tongue” is that of illness.³⁹ For Cixous, the mother tongue, a source of inspiration, is based on the female body, its intensities and affects.⁴⁰ Sofia’s mother’s body is in constant pain for no medically justifiable reason; its intensities resurface in a multitude of symptoms, and its affects are overwhelmingly negative. It comes as no surprise that Sofia wishes to “kill this language” based on her mother’s ailing body “stone dead.”⁴¹ It can be argued that the nature of Rose’s condition unmasks the interplay of monstrosity and illness. Illness, which points to our finitude and vulnerability, is presented here as the unimaginable – the hidden, inaccessible knowledge; monstrosity, as its very name assumes, is exactly that which “tell[s],” “warn[s],” or “show[s],”⁴² and so are Rose’s symptoms. They function as revelations and admonitions, whose meaning remains obscure.

36. Levy, *Hot Milk*, 6.

37. An interesting interpretation of Rose’s condition is provided by Jasmine Bajada, who reads *Hot Milk* through the prism of the *stabat mater dolorosa* figure, Julia Kristeva’s formulation of the abject, and Luce Irigaray’s reflections on maternal paralysis. As Bajada argues, “Rose’s paralysis is symptomatic of a larger social malady – the male mistreatment of women – and, to a certain extent, it is not important whether Rose is actually disabled as long as she literalises her suffering through physical illness.” Bajada, “Mothers, Daughters, and Damaged Legs,” 20.

38. Levy, *Hot Milk*, 146.

39. Levy, *Hot Milk*, 135.

40. See Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 880–886.

41. Levy, *Hot Milk*, 55.

42. I am referring here to two Latin roots of the word *monster*: *monere* – “to remind, bring to (one’s) recollection, tell (of); admonish, advise, warn, instruct, teach” and *monstrare* – “to point out, show.” “Monster,” in *Online Etymology Dictionary*, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/monster> (05.12.2022).

While their meaning remains hidden, Rose's symptoms are repeated by Sofia. Sofia identifies herself as an investigator of her mother's struggle,⁴³ and Rose's physician, Dr Gómez, becomes her "research assistant."⁴⁴ However, she steps beyond the role of a passive and impartial observer. She tends to limp. Sometimes it is so because she helps her mother walk ("I am twenty-five and I am limping with my mother to keep in step with her. My legs are her legs."⁴⁵), but sometimes she does it when she walks alone. She interprets it as a kind of bodily memory of their shared walks.⁴⁶ Able to imagine her mother's pain due to her intense descriptions of it, Sofia often experiences similar sensations; in one of such situations, we read: "I found myself wincing as if I were feeling this small pain on her behalf. Empathy is more painful than medusa stings."⁴⁷ Thus, she deems empathy responsible for her mechanism of mirroring her mother's symptoms.

Undoubtedly, Sofia is an empathetic person; however, what also seems to be at stake here is extreme closeness between her and her mother. Rose accuses Sofia of being distant on several occasions. She wants Sofia to be more attentive to her problems; she does not approve of her daughter spending time with her peers in Spain, and she seems offended even when Sofia informs her she has not done anything special all day ("How wonderful to do nothing. Nothing is such a privilege."⁴⁸). Rose has a narcissistic habit of redirecting all conversations to her suffering, because of which Sofia develops a defence mechanism – she belittles her own experiences to avoid upsetting her mother.⁴⁹ We cannot say that their relationship is based on openness or dialogue; instead, Sofia feels the need to maintain a safe distance from her mother. From her perspective, she still remains "too close. To her grievances."⁵⁰ In her review of the novel, Giulia Miller summarises their relation as follows: "Rose stays wilfully sick because she can't face life, and Sofia uses this as an excuse to avoid responsibility. The result is a chilling and sickly symbiosis."⁵¹ Indeed, the women seem to maintain a quasi-symbiotic relation based on co-dependence, connoting Julia Kristeva's notion of the *semiotic chora*.⁵²

43. Levy, *Hot Milk*, 11.

44. Levy, *Hot Milk*, 46.

45. Levy, *Hot Milk*, 14.

46. Levy, *Hot Milk*, 26.

47. Levy, *Hot Milk*, 95.

48. Levy, *Hot Milk*, 125.

49. Levy, *Hot Milk*, 27.

50. Levy, *Hot Milk*, 89.

51. Giulia Miller, Review of *Hot Milk* by Deborah Levy, *Jewish Quarterly* 63, no. 2 (2016): 68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0449010X.2016.1202525>.

52. See Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 25–27. See also: Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions. Three French Feminists* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989), 42–44.

Still, in the book we witness how Sofia is decreasingly comfortable with such an arrangement. “My love for my mother is like an axe. It cuts very deep”⁵³ is an emblematic statement in this respect; it points to the interweaving of affection and pain, but it also suggests a growing need for the “cut” – a separation from the mother. Sofia has grown tired of their mutual dependence, while her mother does not cease to try to envelop the protagonist. These disparate needs and expectations can by no means be reconciled, and if there is a solution to this impasse, we will not find it in the novel.

Rose Papastergiadis is undoubtedly portrayed as a monstrous figure. Bracha L. Ettinger, famous for her matrixial theory in psychoanalysis, observes that in the clinical situation the psychoanalyst tends to employ the so-called *ready-made mother-monster* figure, which puts the blame for the patient’s suffering on his or her mother. What Ettinger postulates is the recognition of three primal mother-phantasies: of *devouring*, *not-enoughness*, and *abandonment*. These phantasies, when accepted as primordial, prevent “systematically rechannel[ling] hate toward the mother and destroy[ing] the daughter’s desire for identification with the parent of her own sex.”⁵⁴ Rose, seen through Sofia’s eyes, functions as the epitome of these monstrous phantasies. To start with the *devouring mother*, Rose seems to wish that Sofia constantly accompanied and took care of her. If the phantasy of *not-enoughness* is taken into consideration, indeed, for Sofia her mother is never a sufficient source of support. Due to Rose’s deteriorating condition, the women, arguably, have swapped places: Sofia acts like a caring mother, and Rose – like a child needing special attention. The one crime Rose is *not* guilty of is *abandoning* her daughter. Certainly, Sofia occasionally feels betrayed, for instance when her mother decides to amputate her legs; still, the protagonist admits that her mother has always been there for her, in contrast to her father. Actually, Sofia feels overwhelmed by the implications of Rose single-handedly carrying the burden of raising her; she admits, “I am chained to her sacrifice, *mortified* by it,”⁵⁵ and the idea of mortification etymologically⁵⁶ brings us back to Medusa. By the end of the novel, Rose declares that she is aware of the power she yields – she has

53. Levy, *Hot Milk*, 99.

54. Bracha L. Ettinger, “From Proto-ethical Compassion to Responsibility: Besideness and the Three *Primal Mother*-phantasies of Not-enoughness, Devouring and Abandonment,” *Athena* 1 (2006): 107. For more on the *ready-made mother-monster* figure, see also: Bracha L. Ettinger, “Demeter–Persephone Complex, Entangled Aerials of the Psyche, and Sylvia Plath,” *English Studies in Canada* 40, no. 1 (2014): 123–154.

55. Levy, *Hot Milk*, 143. Emphasis mine.

56. Although more contemporarily *being mortified* stands for humiliation, the Late Latin and Old French roots of the word convey the original deadly meaning of the expression. See “Mortified,” in *Online Etymology Dictionary*, www.etymonline.com/word/Mortified (05.12.2022).

been observing Sofia all her life because “[i]t’s what mothers do. [...] We know our gaze is powerful so we pretend not to look.”⁵⁷ In this context, we can argue that Sofia comes to affirm her mother’s Medusan monstrosity. To specify, rather than rejecting her as a failing parent, Sofia chooses – consciously or not – to identify with her in her act of becoming a monster.

Even though Sofia’s narration may suggest otherwise, the fact that Rose has never abandoned her daughter is by no means her only positive trait. Sofia tends to be prejudiced against her mother, but in some of her accounts Rose’s attentiveness to her daughter’s needs resurfaces. Although sometimes in a crude manner, Rose does encourage Sofia to be more independent. The most telling example of her care is the scene in which she teaches her daughter to drive a car (Sofia repeatedly failed her driving test in the past). When Sofia starts to drive, Rose gives her advice and calmly tries to make her feel comfortable; only then does she inform her daughter – with no sign of anger or distress – that driving on the left side of the road is not a fortunate choice in Spain.⁵⁸ Upon closer observation, one might note a peculiar combination of caring and carrying in the women’s relation. “It is such hard work carrying my mother,”⁵⁹ Sofia admits, and in her case carrying becomes synonymous with caring, which conjures up Ettinger’s notion of *carriance*: carrying and caring as well as being carried and taken care of; as Ettinger elucidates, such a position leads to “witnessing and responsibility to the vulnerable other.”⁶⁰ Despite the personal hardships and her fragile health, Rose has been carrying and caring for her daughter as well. Levy herself provides us with an insight into how children perceive the role of their mother:

[W]e blame her for everything because she is near by. [...] [W]e need her to feel anxiety on our behalf [...]. If we do not disclose our feelings to her, we mysteriously expect her to understand them anyway. And if she moves beyond us, comes close to being a self that is not at our service, she has transgressed from the mythic, primal task of being our protector and nurturer. Yet, if she comes too close, she suffocates us [...].⁶¹

This set of conditions is impossible to satisfy. Sofia is able to acknowledge that Rose has been at a disadvantage, not receiving any support from her ex-husband and struggling with health issues. Still, although their relationship is based on a sense

57. Levy, *Hot Milk*, 218.

58. See Levy, *Hot Milk*, 98–99.

59. Levy, *Hot Milk*, 92.

60. Bracha L. Ettinger, “Carriance, Copoiesis and the Subreal,” in Bracha L. Ettinger, *And My Heart Wound-space* (Leeds: The Wild Pansy Press, 2015), 344.

61. Levy, *The Cost of Living*, 119–120.

of mutual responsibility, from the daughter's perspective, it remains insufficient and overbearing, simultaneously.

Hot Milk provides us with a symbolic cut of the umbilical cord. Sofia finds herself ready to embrace her monstrousness after an argument with her mother about the planned amputation; we read: "I showered and felt the medusa stings throb under the warm water. They were inciting me to do something monstrous but I wasn't yet sure what this might be. Sun-stroked, blistered and bruised, I was preparing for it."⁶² The venom of the jellyfish, thus, initiates in the ultimate stage of the transformation. Shortly after, the protagonist proceeds to a failed attempt at matricide – she leaves her mother on a wheelchair in the middle of the road. As they meet again in their rented apartment, Rose announces "the good news"⁶³ – she has been diagnosed with oesophageal cancer. Both the attempted matricide and the identification of the illness become the turning points for Sofia: they lead to the highly anticipated separation from the mother. This experience is vividly described: "The tide was coming in with all the medusas floating in its turbulence. The tendrils of the jellyfish in limbo, like something cut loose, a placenta, a parachute, a refugee severed from its place of origin."⁶⁴ As we learn from this passage, the split does not turn out to be beneficial for the protagonist – detached from her mother, she is overpowered by the sense of emptiness, insecurity, and rootlessness.

Conclusion

Who, surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives (for she was made to believe that a well-adjusted normal woman has a ... divine composure), hasn't accused herself of being a monster? Who, feeling a funny desire stirring inside her (to sing, to write, to dare to speak, in short, to bring out something new), hasn't thought she was sick? Well, her shameful sickness is that she resists death, that she makes trouble.⁶⁵

Monstrosity, illness, femininity, and death tend to be perceived as a natural combination, not just in Cixous's famous essay, but also in Levy's literary reflection on daughterhood and change. In the spirit of the above citation, Sofia learns to abide by her desires, struggles to have a meaningful life, engages in risky relationships, mirrors her mother's uncanny sickness, and proclaims herself a monster. When Sofia's relationship with monstrousness is concerned, it appears to be her enemy,

62. Levy, *Hot Milk*, 208.

63. Levy, *Hot Milk*, 216.

64. Levy, *Hot Milk*, 218.

65. Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," 876.

object of study, source of inspiration, and goal. In this sense, the novel engages in a dialogue with the bildungsroman genre since, instead of overcoming the monstrosities of childhood, Sofia becomes independent and self-aware by means of becoming a monster; monstrosity is then accepted by her, but by no means does it protect her from suffering. Simultaneously, affirmation of monstrousness seems to lead to recognition of the disease. In this “thriller of symptoms,”⁶⁶ to use Levy’s expression, Rose also comes to accept the monster in her life: she is relieved to learn about her cancer because now she can face her fear as it actually is, and not as it appears; what is more, she can no longer be identified as a hypochondriac. Finally, the jellyfish and their stings, constantly accompanying the protagonist, serve as a metaphor for an interconnection of disease and monstrousness. The hidden, almost invisible creatures of the sea, jellyfish reveal themselves in an exact moment of contamination, thus embodying the interplay of secrecy and revelation. The poison, pulsating in Sofia’s body, becomes an uncannily active agent in her monstrous metamorphosis.

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