Abstract

In this study, I focus on how Alison Bechdel’s graphic novel, *Fun Home*, is a formal critique of our culture. Contributing to the increase in attention to Bechdel's work, I’ll focus on the relationship between word, text, and how the framing of Bechdel’s relationships with her family critiques heteronormativity. Bechdel critiques culture’s heteronormative standards by revealing the struggles and tragedies that arise in complying with and resisting the standard performance of genders through her story growing up as a lesbian with a closeted homosexual father. Through the characterization of her parents and herself, she shows that generational differences and sexual identity affect how one molds to heteronormative standards. The relationship between text and image reflects the differences in each character’s compliance with or resistance to heteronormativity in relation to private and public spheres. Bechdel’s critique of culture reveals how those actions affect each character’s identity and reveals the problems with heteronormativity.
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I would like to thank Dr. Eaton for her encouragement and advice throughout the entire process of writing this thesis. She originally suggested that I look into Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, which turned into the focus of my project. I struggled in finding a focus for my thesis in the beginning and directed most of my attention looking into zines and the way they combine words and images in a creative way. Majoring in Writing and Interactive Media Studies guided me towards the interactions of words and images, so zines were my first choice. My interests in feminism led me to the feminist zines, *Riot Girrl*, and I researched the social and cultural impacts *Riot Girrl* zines have on feminism. However, finding hard copies of zines and narrowing my focus became difficult, so I had to switch my thesis elsewhere.

Due to my interests in feminism and the interaction of words and images, Dr. Eaton suggested that I read Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* and analyze it through a queer perspective. In doing so, I slowly began building my thesis. Dr. Eaton guided me through the difficult and stressful process of organizing my ideas and analysis. She gave me useful and constructive feedback throughout every step of the way.

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The Role of Gender and Society

Alison Bechdel addresses the heteronormative society we live in and its impact on her and her family as she grows into adulthood. She critiques this heteronormative society through the gendered and non-gendered acts of herself and her family. *Fun Home* is a graphic novel memoir that explores Alison Bechdel’s childhood and family. She reflects on her life growing up in a small town with two teachers for parents and a funeral home for a family business. Her main focus is on her relationship with her closeted homosexual father, and she looks back and analyzes what led up to his suicide, and how her own lesbian identity compares to his identity. According to Bechdel’s current website, her father is identified as bisexual. However, most critics describe him as a closeted homosexual. Bechdel explores the different stages in her life and the struggles of being forced to perform her gender in a very gender focused household and society. She reflects back on the moments in her childhood where her father attempted to conform to expectations for the male gender and when his performance isn’t quite genuine. Although his sex is male, Bechdel’s father has a hard time performing his interpretation of male gender.

Alison Bechdel is a cartoonist and feminist. She began her career writing her long running self-syndicated comic strip, *Dykes to Watch Out For*, which features lesbian and gay life through a variety of characters. The comic ran for twenty-five years, from 1983 to 2008 and has since been compiled into books. Her comic strip has also started the Bechdel Test, which began in one of her comics. A work passes the Bechdel test if it features two women who talk about something other than men and has become a phenomenon in testing the depth of female characters in films and literature. *Fun Home* brought her the most success in 2006 reaching a wider audience and receiving considerable acclaim as a finalist for a National Book Critics...
Circle Award and was named the Best Book of 2006 by *Time* magazine. It has since been adapted into a musical and was produced off Broadway and is debuting on Broadway May 2015. After the success of her first book, she wrote another graphic memoir about her relationship with her mother called *Are You My Mother?*. She explores the theories of the British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott and relates them to her and her mother’s lives. Bechdel was awarded the MacArthur Fellowship in 2014, also referred to as the genius award. She is one of the very few comic artists who have won this prestigious award.

In Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, Bechdel travels through her childhood after her father’s suicide by stepping in front of a bread truck. She reflects back on her relationship with her mother and specifically her father and his very controlling and sometimes violent nature. The family lives in a small town and run a funeral home, while both of Bechdel’s parents teach at the local high school. Alison’s father spends his free time restoring the family’s Gothic style home as her mother continues her acting career and works towards her master’s. Bechdel describes small scenes in her life growing up and dealing with her identity and the complicated identity of her parents, while eventually getting to college and realizing she is a lesbian. Here she begins a relationship with her first girlfriend. Upon coming out to her family, her mother reveals that her father has had affairs with young men and boys, and not long after Alison’s coming out, her mother asks for a divorce. The novel comes full circle by reflecting on her father’s suicide at the end and the small moments of happiness between her as a young girl and her father. Bechdel delves into the complications that arise in life by trying to fit into the heteronormative codes of society through the difficulties within her own family and the troubles they have in identifying with their genders, but also embracing their full identities.
Sex and gender are not the same, and Bechdel explores the differences through *Fun Home*. Sex is biological, whereas gender is cultural. One can learn and, in turn, unlearn gender, but one cannot learn or unlearn sex. This is what makes gender so complex and hard to identify. Gender is a performance of preconceived cultural acts constructed by society through history. Bechdel explores the gender dichotomies that are strictly male or female and the difficulties that result in constricting oneself into these binaries. Judith Butler describes how “gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (519). Gender roles are a construction of an historical account of how heterosexual norms should play out. They represent the rules our culture enforces on males and females over time, and the constant reinforcement of these rules is what classifies the gender binaries as normal.

Included in this cultural learning of gender is the learning of sexual orientation. This is why we live in such a heteronormative society. We are taught that to be a woman means to be sexually attracted to men and to be a man means to be sexually attracted to women. Therefore, people of other sexual orientations break from this script of heterosexual normality and become the outsiders. They are the rebels in the heteronormative code of conduct. Bechdel poses in her work that one’s identity is much more complex than the black and white heteronormative script we are all taught. One can have aspects of both taught genders while identifying with any sexual orientation. Jack Halberstam reflects on the complexities of gender categories and states, “Life is complicated, genders are complicated, families are complicated, and yet we have so few words for these new and often quite welcome complications that accompany massive social shifts” (xviii). The man and woman binary of gender is too constructed and narrow for anyone to
completely adhere to, but we all struggle to fit into it and fight against it because it controls most aspects of society.

From as early as birth, we are bombarded with the structured dichotomy of gender. When one goes to the store to buy baby clothes, he/she gets a choice of pink or blue, but if he/she decides not to dress his/her baby in one of those two groups, the choice switches to gray and brown. Society says if one doesn’t choose the soft pinks or blues for his/her baby, people are stuck with the bland grays or browns. This is the “punishment” for not adhering to the heterosexual codes set in place. If one doesn’t decide that his/her child is a girl or a boy, then the child gets to wear the bland clothing that is not gendered. The way we dress, act, speak, and look all serve a purpose for this heteronormative continuance. This kind of heterosexual training starts immediately, and Bechdel shows her struggles with it growing up. Her whole childhood is spent resisting the heteronormative actions. While her father, Bruce, molds to the nuclear family structure, Bechdel resists these norms to find her own identity.

Lies Xhonneux, a queer theorist, analyzes and critiques the work of other queer theorists like Judith Butler and Rebecca Brown. While analyzing Brown’s work, she explains:

Although school is important, the societal norms producing gender in Brown’s oeuvre are mainly embodied by the narrators’ parents. The novels most obviously addressing gender performativity are those narrated by a female protagonist who is still young and whose social world is limited to her family. The presence of performativity in those works might be explained by the fact that a child narrator still has to learn to do her gender right. She is not yet fully socialized into the feminine role, a defamiliarization that directs the reader’s attention to something the adult protagonists take for granted: the
establishment of a gender as a natural essence, a procedure concealing its own constructedness while simultaneously promoting universalized heterosexuality. (294-295) although this critique has to do with Brown’s work, it can easily be applied to Bechdel’s *Fun Home.* Xhonneux explains how heteronormativity and gender is learned and is not actually a natural occurrence. She describes it as “a procedure concealing its own constructedness,” which means that the very fact that the roles of gender are continually reproduced means that they are hiding their own beginnings. Since gender performance starts off so young, people assume that these performances are just natural. Xhonneux argues that in Brown’s work these young girls’ resistance to gender norms can be explained by the fact that they haven’t been socialized as much into society’s heteronormative culture. Jack Halberstam also acknowledges this: “While the adult filters his or her responses to sex, love, emotions through the thick haze of training that has installed shame and guilt as appropriate barriers … until a certain age, the child does not yet know what the difference might be between appropriate and inappropriate, legitimate and illegitimate, important and silly” (xxiv). Children tend to become the most knowledgeable and accepting of their own identities and others because of this openness to differences and lack of social training.

This can be seen in *Fun Home* where much of Bechdel’s book follows herself as a young girl with a limited scope on gender. Bechdel is a naïve girl still behaving like how she wants to and not how society tells her. Her gender identity and performance is complicated by how she wants to act and how her parents and socialization as a young girl steer her. Her father has the most influence over her heteronormative socialization through his constant critique of her hair style choices and her clothing choices that are not what he considers to be ladylike or what a heteronormative woman should wear. These instances show that not performing gender
correctly can have its consequences. Butler explains, “Discrete genders are part of what ‘humanizes’ individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished” (522). In Bechdel’s case, the young Alison is chided by her father for how she dresses and behaves. She is regularly punished by her father for not acting ladylike and that punishment demonstrates that to not perform according to the gender binaries means to be alienated or punished in society. Alison resists the feminine portrayal and is punished with alienation by her father. While in this case her societal norms are limited to her family structure, she is still pushed to the outcast position in her family by openly defying her father’s gender rules.

For example, on page 96 of *Fun Home*, Bruce stops Alison from leaving the kitchen and asks where her barrette is. He’s holding a painting of flowers, and presumably decorating. He looks sternly at his daughter as Alison is reaching for the door to the kitchen with a guilty look on her face. In the next frame, Bruce pulls Alison’s hair back and holds the barrette up to fix her hair. He states, “It keeps the hair out of your eyes,” and Alison replies, “So would a crew cut.” It’s obvious that Bruce wants Alison to wear the barrette for reasons other than just the fact that it keeps the hair out of her eyes. The barrette symbolizes the femininity that Bruce wants his daughter to embrace. It’s a very feminine item that women typically wear to pull back the long hair they are expected to have in order to perform their gender. This simple act means so much to the gender performance in the heteronormative show that Bruce conducts. Alison, however, states that she would rather have a crew cut, which implies that she would rather perform a typically male gendered hairstyle. As a child, Alison does not understand the reason for pulling her hair back when she can save the trouble of it in her face by cutting it all off. She would rather resist the gender she is forced to perform. Here, Bruce is the enforcer of these gender
performances within the nuclear family because he has already been coded into thinking heteronormatively. He wants his daughter to look like society’s standard image of a daughter and not of a son.

In the next frame, Alison takes out the barrette again, resisting the gender rules set by her culture and enforced by her father. She is shown hiding behind a bush, watching the older boys play basketball and pulling out the barrette that she hates so much. Her older self reflects back on the situation: “I counted as an indication of my success the nickname bestowed on me by my older cousins.” In the frame over, her older cousins stop playing basketball and throw her the ball. Her hair is a mess and one of the boys calls her “butch,” a word used to describe a girl who acts like a boy and has the qualities of a boy. Alison shows the complexity in her identity and her resistance of norms because she feels comfortable and content with being called butch with the boys, but cannot handle wearing the feminine role by keeping her barrette on. When she returns home in the next page, her father stops her at the door. He immediately notices she took out her barrette and asks where it went, and in the frame below he violently forces another one into her hair. Alison declares that the other barrette fell out, and Bruce states, “I don’t care! Next time I see you without it, I’ll wale you.” Alison is physically punished for not accepting her position as a girl and accepting the gender rules and performances that go with that position. Reflecting back on this matter, older Alison states,

And despite the tyrannical power with which he held sway, it was clear to me that my father was a big sissy. Proust refers to his explicitly homosexual characters as “inverts.” I’ve always been fond of this antiquated clinical term. It’s imprecise and insufficient, defining the homosexual as a person whose gender expression is at odds with his or her
sex. But in the admittedly limited sample comprising my father and me, perhaps it is sufficient. (97)

While the feminine role does not fit in Alison’s identity or performance, it does fit into the identity that Bruce would like to fulfill, but cannot. Alison describes her father as a “big sissy” here because he doesn’t get rough and dirty like other men. When he first disciplines her for not wearing a barrette, he is hanging a flowery painting in his home. Even though he’s doing the manly “handy work” by hanging a picture, his interest involves an air of décor typical of women. Both characters represent a little bit of the freedom that the other one desires. Bruce desires to do things with flourish and decoration, which Alison is told to do with her hair and clothes. He ends up projecting this desire on Alison through the way he forces his daughter to act.

Bruce has a complicated idea of living with his identity and the outward appearance he puts on to appease his society. He hides his homosexuality behind the ornateness of his home and nuclear family, dressing both up for the show of heteronormativity in their small town life. In the first chapter, Bechdel focuses on her father and his hobby of bringing their Victorian style home back to life. The chapter is titled “Old Father, Old Artificer” and opens with a sketching of a photograph of Bruce outside the front porch of his home. He’s shirtless and posing for the camera with a model-like stance. This sketching of a photograph really shows Bruce’s character. His face looks worn and tired, and his body relaxes to the pose he wants and not what society tells him to. His whole life has been hiding behind the giant Victorian home, which is now behind him in this picture. The picture represents a moment of separation from the façade Bruce puts on and the heteronormative performance he usually adheres to.
Judith Butler says that “to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of ‘woman,’ to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project” (522). When Alison wears the barrette in the scene previously described, she is “inducing her body to become a cultural sign.” This little barrette becomes a tool for her to become her femininity through the history of its primary use by girls and women. Through history, there has been a continual adherence to the obedience of gender rules. Women are expected to act a certain way and look a certain way in order to call themselves a woman. While history has changed details of the rules of being a woman and women have new feminine tools besides barrettes, the basic structure of what it means to be a woman is still central to our culture.

What Alison Bechdel does in *Fun Home* is resist this idea of a woman and the heteronormative standards grounded within American culture. In another instance on page 73, a young Bechdel and her family go on a tour of Europe where Alison begins to break from this cultural idea of woman and break the heteronormative behaviors expected of a girl. In the top left frame, Alison tries to convince her mother to buy her hiking boots. Alison tugs on her mother’s sleeve and says, “See? Girls wear them too,” while a little girl and boy walk by both wearing them. Her mother wears high-waisted pants and a white blouse, while holding her bag. She performs her role as a mother and a woman here without exception. Dressed in a flowery dress, Alison needs to convince her mother that she should be allowed to wear hiking boots because they can fit into the cultural requirements of being a woman in the current setting they’re in. The girl and boy in the scene are both wearing the hiking boots Alison wants to wear, so this becomes Alison’s evidence that one can be a girl and wear the boots and be accepted as normal.
In the next frame over, Alison continues to shift the required cultural acts of a woman by convincing her parents she could wear swim trunks like the boys in Cannes. The frame shows what seems to be Alison and her brother playing in the sand at the beach while a topless older woman walks on the beach behind them. Both Alison and her brother look almost identical in this frame with short dark hair and swim trunks. Bechdel shows how her childhood self does not mold to the cultural idea of a little girl, but is much more complex. Alison’s desire to dress differently confirms that since Bechdel is still young and moldable, her perceptions of gender have not been solidified into these social and gender binaries just yet. Bechdel implies that she convinced her parents into letting her change out of her feminine swimsuit and ditch the flowery dress for a pair of shorts because women walk around topless at the beach as a norm in Cannes. This reflects on Bechdel’s parents’ need to force themselves and their children into whatever the heteronormative standard is at the time.

Bechdel reflects back on her childhood trip: “Such freedom from conventions was intoxicating. But while our travels widened my scope, I suspect my parents felt their own dwindling” (73). Her own views of heteronormativity are widened and her idea of what it means to be a woman is less constrained than that of her parents and the extreme heteronormative constraints of their small town society. Coming from a different time when non-heterosexuality is not as welcome in society, Bechdel’s parents have a heightened pressure to repress their own sexualities and keep up the appearance and performance of their genders and their children’s genders. Bechdel’s parents are already so entrenched in the gender rules they were taught that they become exhausted with not adhering to them on their trip. The trip to Europe shows the different versions of gender rules across cultures. Bechdel’s parents, coming from their little town in the country, have a much more narrow set of rules when it comes to gender performance.
Bruce’s Identity

Bruce becomes the main director of his family’s performances. He develops a strong sense of the heterosexual “nuclear family” and pushes that theme onto his family in everything they do publicly. Tulia Thompson explains, “Fun home and Are you my mother? arguably challenge heterosexism by poising Bechdel’s nuanced social critique at the site of the heterosexual, nuclear family. Both Fun Home and Are you my mother? draw our ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant 2011) to the surface of family life by making it visible, uncomfortable and eerily funny” (3). Thompson notes that both of Bechdel’s books critique this heteronormativity by exemplifying the truth behind her own seemingly normal nuclear family. Thompson brings up this notion of “cruel optimism,” which explores the overly optimistic weight society puts on fantasies of what makes a good life and how this life is not all that it’s cracked up to be. This ideal life that Thompson refers to is the heterosexual nuclear family that Bruce attempts to create in his house and throughout Alison’s life growing up. Bechdel shows that it is “cruel optimism” to continue to believe that this life is the only good one when she reveals all the hidden struggles and truths behind the façade of the nuclear family that Bruce creates. It’s all a fantasy that fogs reality.

The line Bruce draws between fiction and reality is a blurry one, which is how he is constantly acting in his own fantasy. He is the puppet master for his family’s appearance and portrayal, but culture and society as a whole are what’s controlling him. Society forces Bruce to act the way he does in order to mold to the expectations of his neighbors, making him a puppet, too. Bruce creates his own masculine character from the books he reads. Specifically, Bruce emulates his masculinity through one of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s characters, Jimmy Gatz from The Great Gatsby. Bechdel describes “Gatsby’s self-willed metamorphosis from farm boy to prince
is in many ways identical to my father’s” (63). Bruce grew up in a small, farm town and is forced to go back there and take over the family business when his father dies. In a sense, he goes “from farm boy to prince” like Gatsby. Bruce transforms himself, his home, and his family to this elegant nuclear family household. Bruce is the diligent homeowner, dressed to perfection, with a well-stocked and beautiful library in his extravagant home like the character of Gatsby in Fitzgerald’s book. Bruce’s masculinity conforms to the type of masculinity portrayed by a fictional character. In this way, his whole life becomes a performance.

At times, Bruce’s performance gets in the way of his responsibilities as a father and husband. Throughout much of Fun Home, Bechdel paints her father as an abusive tyrant who still had a hint of the loving fatherly character. At one point, Bruce shows off his library to a young man whom it is assumed that Bruce has had an affair with. While portraying this refined man of stature, Bruce forgets to pick up his son from Cub Scouts, which complicates his role as a father. His strong masculine performance that he works so hard to outwardly portray becomes rocky when he tries to impress the neighborhood boy with his books and knowledge. His showing off and affair in this instance directly affect Bruce’s role as father and man. He is not supposed to be attracted to young men and is not supposed to take actions in expressing that attraction, so when he does, his act as the heterosexual responsible father falters a little. He breaks character slightly and receives a dirty look from his wife, who continues her performance as the silent, obedient wife.

Bruce is an interesting character because his identity mirrors that of the Victorian house that he spends nearly twenty years renovating: “The story is also very much about the family's Victorian-Gothic home, which we see develop and change alongside Bechdel and her family… its ‘birth’ in 1860, its eventual rediscovery and remodel by the Bechdel family, and the weather
and human-related damage it sustains over the years” (Goldsmith 3). Just as the house goes through renovations and changes, Bruce and his family do as well. As Bechdel describes her father during her childhood, the house becomes such a dynamic and ever-present presence in the whole family’s lives that it takes on a life of its own. The history of the house, the knicks that occur throughout the family’s time there, and the constant changing of décor and outward appearance make up the identity of the house and mirrors Bruce’s own changing identity. Bruce uses the house as a means of hiding his true self and running from the barriers of gender codes. He creates his identity by hiding behind his home and other outward appearances.

The ornateness of the Victorian home reveals the façade Bruce continually adds to in order to create a sense of outward normalcy within the small town he and his family call home. The house symbolizes the nuclear family and heteronormativity. Bruce uses it as a show piece along with his family. They are a picture of family perfection on the outside to cover up the true bisexual identity that lies underneath this perfect façade. Bechdel describes on page 13 in *Fun Home*, “Sometimes, when things were going well, I think my father actually enjoyed having a family. Or at least, the air of authenticity we lent to his exhibit. A sort of still life with children.” In this frame, Alison and her two brothers sit beneath an ornate Christmas tree, loaded with ornaments and garland. Fancy drapes cover the windows behind them like a scene straight from a classic Christmas movie. The lines that make up the floor all point towards this little scene to draw more attention to the tree. Bruce stands in the front corner, however, in shadow and holding a glass of wine or champagne. His pinky is out and he looks over the scene with the air of a proud artist admiring his work. He is the ultimate director—using his whole family as a medium for display of his art. There’s a distance that is represented in this image that really expresses the distant relationship between Bruce and his family. He is not really a part of the
scene in his own life, but hides behind the décor and picturesque qualities he creates. Bechdel often times describes her childhood home as if it was a museum and their family was the main exhibit. Her father curates all this for the benefit of the public and to hide his desire to be someone other than a father and husband—someone who would be able to resist the societal gender norms and express his identity outwardly.

Bruce, outwardly, ornaments himself just as he disguises the house behind fancy furniture and décor. He dresses in the appropriate way a man should dress in his position as a father, a high school teacher, and as the elegant, high class Gatsby man always in suits and ties with his hair slicked to the side. However, Bechdel reveals some truths behind the scene that complicate Bruce’s identity. As early as the first chapter, Bechdel highlights the inconsistencies in Bruce’s performance that she didn’t pay much attention to as a young girl but looking back has connected it with her father’s homosexual secret. On page 16, a young Alison walks in on her father applying bronzer in the bathroom. Bruce reveals that he wears make-up in order to give his skin a bronzed effect. He steps away from the manly performance and into the role typical of a woman in our culture. However, he still does not make this outwardly known, but hides it in the privacy of his bathroom where only his family has the opportunity to perhaps catch glimpses of Bruce without the façade. Bechdel narrates above the picture, “My father began to seem morally suspect to me long before I knew that he actually had a dark secret” (16). Even as a child, Alison began to notice discrepancies in Bruce’s performance.

On the next page, we find out the dark secret that Alison alludes to. The family attends church and Bechdel narrates, “He appeared to be an ideal husband and father, for example. But would an ideal husband and father have sex with teenage boys?” (17). Bruce’s biggest secret and reason for hiding behind his decorations and nuclear family act becomes known and it’s not
surprising why Bruce keeps it hidden. He would be highly punished in our culture if he were to make that secret known, both in a legal sense and through public shaming. In the image, Bruce stands facing the altar, but his eyes watch the altar boys walk by. Alison and her brothers look bored in their pews and Bechdel’s mother looks blank-faced watching the altar. They all are dressed in typical church clothes: the men and boys in suits, while Alison and her mother wear skirts or dresses.

Bechdel places the family in a church for multiple reasons. They are all performing the acts of a typical small town nuclear family by attending church, but they are also all deceiving. None of them are paying attention to the sermon or fully participating. They all only appear to look prepared for church with their clothes. Bruce is looking over at a teenage boy, which would suggest that he’d prefer to be doing something else. Also, there is an irony in the setting that refers to the problems in some Catholic churches with inappropriate relationships between the priest and teenage boys, which mirrors her father’s own explicit relationships. Overall, there is a lot happening in this scene that reveals the hidden truth in Bruce’s identity. He is not the father in a typical nuclear family that he’d like everyone in his town to believe.

Bruce’s second profession also lends itself to Bruce’s identity. He runs a funeral home and must prepare the bodies for viewing. In this way, Bruce must put on an act in order for the families to see their loved ones in a happier or life-like state while they lay dead in a casket. In a letter to Alison he writes, “Some highlights of my work her yellow lace bikini rose-embroidered panties. Her dyed red hair after three months of hospitalization. Her hairdresser and her hairpieces. Her bitter green velvet jumpsuit with gold sequined trim and plunging neckline. Well I did my best with red lips, green eye shadow, lots of rouge and eyebrow pencil and low and behold there lay Fay” (49). Bruce describes it as an art. He dresses this old woman in lively
womanly clothing and fixes her hair and make-up to display her for society. This explains exactly what Bruce does. He dresses himself and his family to display them for their heteronormative society. Even the way he dresses Fay up is in a way that encompasses her gender. The sequins, the lace, the low-cut top, the red lipstick all are very feminine items and are used to perform the womanly gender. Bruce is a connoisseur of gender performance and dresses everyone up for the part, even the dead.

When his children are still young, the funeral home receives a call about a car crash where three people are killed, one of them a young boy who happens to be a distant cousin. Bruce must prepare all their bodies, and in doing so, he calls his children in to see the body of the young boy. The frame shows Bruce revealing the boy on a table by lifting the white sheet off his body. The contrast between the reaction of Bruce and the reaction of the children is powerful. Bruce’s face looks worn and unimpressed while the children look wide-eyed at the boy with fear and shock. Their innocence in seeing a dead body and realizing that death can happen to such a young person rattles them and they stand with slumped shoulders, with looks of defeat on their bodies. Bruce, on the other hand, seems utterly unaffected looking down at the body. Bechdel later reflects on her father and states, “I suppose a lifetime spent hiding one’s erotic truth could have a cumulative renunciatory effect. Sexual shame is in itself a kind of death” (228). It’s as though Bruce has a connection with the dead that he prepares for burial. His children connect to the dead on a surface level as though that young boy could be them, but Bruce connects with the dead as though that young boy on the table is him. He’s become so comfortable with death and sees himself in the eyes of those he buries. He lives his life in shame, hiding from his sexuality and Bechdel describes that as living like the dead. In a way, he kills himself long before he is hit by the truck.
Helen’s Identity

Bechdel’s mother, Helen, also has to conform to the strict gender codes of her culture. While she is not the main focus in *Fun Home*, she still plays a major role in this demonstration of gender performance and influences her daughter’s performance and identity. Bechdel’s other book, *Are You My Mother?*, goes further into her relationship with Helen and the tensions between the two of them after Alison comes out and the social discomforts Helen feels.

In *Fun Home*, Helen’s performance of a wife, woman, and mother adds to Bruce’s picture of the typical nuclear family. She is an actor in both her professional life and in her everyday life by performing in plays and acting according to the rules of a woman in her position. Helen reveals one of the more unsettling qualities attached to the role of woman in our culture, which is the role of a silent woman. She proves throughout Alison’s childhood that she can be as voiceless and powerless as society wishes her to be, and in this way, she acts out her gender. For example, on page 13 in *Fun Home*, Bruce asks Helen for her opinion on a chandelier to add to their Victorian home. She tells him it’s “bordello,” comparing it to a whorehouse and implying that she doesn’t like the chandelier. However, in the frame next to it, we see Bruce holding the new chandelier and ignoring his wife’s opinion as if he didn’t ask her in the first place. Bechdel narrates these two frames, “In theory, his arrangement with my mother was more cooperative. In practice, it was not” (Bechdel 13). Bechdel explains the overbearing and controlling relationship Bruce has with the rest of his family as his role as the manly head of the household. His wife, although asked her opinion, is still in the silenced position of a dutiful wife by going along with whatever her husband says. She performs her position as wife and mother here by not arguing with her husband and being a passive participant in their home.
She also encourages her children to act in accordance with the rules of a patriarchal nuclear family. When Bechdel’s brother comments on his father’s tie at breakfast, Bruce immediately goes to change it, concerned that his performance as this manly Gatsby character is imperfect. Later, Bechdel’s mother tells her children, “No comments on his appearance. Is that understood? Good, bad, it doesn’t matter” (19). They all seem almost afraid of upsetting Bruce or putting him in a position where he is not the respected father. Their family is obviously very patriarchal and molded to the nuclear heteronormative and traditional family. Bechdel’s mother even trains her children to fit into this mold by tip-toeing around their father and keeping silent.

Helen’s ultimate performance is keeping her husband’s identity and extra-curricular activities a secret. She silences his secrets and continues to live dutifully in her marriage however unhappy it makes her. We find out that she has known about her husband’s exploits for some time when Alison comes out to her parents: “The news was not received as well as I had hoped. There was an exchange of difficult letters with my mother. Then a phone call in which she dealt a staggering blow” (58). Helen finally reveals not only her husband’s secret of homosexuality, but also his affairs with teenage boys. The heteronormative act begins to crack for Helen after she finds out about her daughter’s homosexuality. Helen states, “Your father has had affairs with other men. He…he was molested by a farm hand when he was young” (Bechdel 58). Helen still wants to hide behind some sort of heteronormativity by suggesting that the reason for Bruce’s homosexuality is because he is a victim of child molestation. Whether that be true or not, Helen shows that she is still not entirely comfortable with being open about her husband’s failure to perform his heterosexual lifestyle.

Helen met Bruce in a performance of The Taming of the Shrew, which mirrors the life she would soon have with her husband. Helen played the strong-willed Katherine who is “tamed” by
the domineering Petruchio. She is similarly tamed into womanhood and wifedom after she marries Bruce and puts her life of actress and artist on the backburner in order to be the passive wife. Bechdel reflects back on her parents’ marriage and states, “Even in those prefeminist days, my parents must have found this relationship model to be problematic. They would probably have been appalled at the suggestion that their own marriage would play out in a similar way” (Bechdel 70). Helen lives in denial, continually performing the act of passive woman and wife in order to make her husband and society happy and to appear normal in her small town setting.

She escapes her role of mother and wife only through the brief moments she performs as someone else through her acting career: “Understanding Helen's migratory move from the home, a realm in which Helen struggles to relax and find pleasure, to patio, where she is free to rehearse her lines, foregrounds these spaces in the narrative, and suggests their material significance as sites of meaning and complex interaction” (Goldsmith 4). Helen finds solace outside of the world that Bruce has created for her and her family. The home, which becomes a place for Bruce to hide his identity, is also a place where Helen is forced to conform to gender norms. She must play the dutiful wife and mother within the home, but Jenna Goldsmith explains that as Helen heads to the patio, she is able to be herself. Helen is often shown practicing her lines out here on the wicker chairs that Bruce has decorated it with. While he still tries to control the look of the patio, he cannot control Helen’s outside aspirations there. The structure that Bruce has created for the family does not bleed into the patio and Helen can escape to her other fictional worlds of performance through her passion in acting.

While reading her lines out on the freedom of the patio allows Helen to be another version of herself, it also conflicts with her role of mother. Alison reads another character for Helen as she practices for the upcoming play, *The Importance of Being Ernest* and states, “I have
lost both my parents.” Helen responds with her lines, “Both? That seems like carelessness” (Bechdel 158). This reflects Alison’s feelings towards her mother’s distractedness in parenting. Bechdel deliberately pulls these lines from the play and uses them in this scene because they show how she feels as though herself and her parents have become careless in their relationship roles. The way the frames are split also reflects this attitude. Alison is sitting in a patio chair in the frame on the left, and Helen is sitting in a patio chair in the frame on the right. They’re both facing each other, but there is a division between them since they are in different frames. There’s also a small text box in between the frames where Bechdel notes, “She was very busy, with her master’s thesis as well as the play” (158). The layout visually represents the way Helen’s other roles are coming between her and her daughter or her and her role as mother. In the frame below, Bechdel also states that Helen would use her sewing room as a study in order to reinforce the fact that Helen’s identity is complicated by her many roles as she begins to embrace them all. By taking the room designated for her motherly duties and turning it into a room designated for her own learning advancement, Helen breaks character from the world Bruce makes for them.

As her children get older, Helen starts regaining the part of her identity she had wanted all along by working for her master’s degree and doing more acting. Bechdel shows that when Alison is a teenager, both of her parents started going off and doing their own things, leaving the children at home to fend for themselves. Helen goes to see her thesis director and tells her kids on her way out the door, “After you dust and vacuum, you can go swimming” (Bechdel 163). Helen focuses on her own work and passes the motherly work off to her children. Bruce, at this time, goes to a psychiatrist to deal with his own identity issues involving his over-attentiveness to underage boys. Both of Alison’s parents struggle to continue their performances as mother
and father as their children grow up and it becomes more apparent of what they’d rather be doing.

There are moments where Helen’s roles become too much and conflict with each other. Her acting and piano practice takes center stage, and her role as a mother is secondary. On page 132 and 133 of *Fun Home*, Alison is a little girl and leans against the piano as her mother plays. She asks her mom “Did chop-in write chopsticks?” like a young child would, and Helen replies, “Sho-Pahn. No. Don’t bother me now.” On the next page, Alison again comes to Helen while she’s playing her piano and tells her mother she is hungry. The image shows Helen completely immersed in her work, not even looking up as Alison whines. Helen continues to play her piano and tells Alison she’ll make something in fifteen minutes and Alison storms away angry and annoyed. Helen’s dismissal of her child, at both these moments, reflects her dismissal of the mothering role she’s expected to play. She disconnects from the life she made with Bruce, and reconnects with the life she has wanted to live since a young woman, before she married and had kids.

Embracing all these roles does begin to show the toll it takes on Helen. Bechdel shows two photographs of Helen, one where she’s at home, again on the patio, and another where she’s dressed in her costume for the play. The photograph where Helen is on the patio shows her huddled beneath a blanket looking tired and worn. Her eyes are droopy and her cheeks look sunken in a little giving her a sickly quality. Bechdel notes, “In a photo taken a week before the play opened, she’s literally holding herself together” (164). In comparison, the photograph of her in her costume and ready to perform, Helen has all the elegance and posture of a strong, proud woman. She puts on her face as an actress even though a week before the many roles are crushing her. Helen’s ability to become a character and transform herself into a new role despite
pressure reflects on her ability to perform well in society despite her other desires. She can become both the mother and wife that Bruce and her culture want her to be, while performing in other areas as well.

As her children grow older, Helen finally breaks and embraces all the other qualities of her identity that do not coincide with the societal norm, but it is too late because she already has accepted the role of mother and must continue it. She attempts to take them all on, but her struggles reveal that she is stretched too thin and her role as mother gets pushed to the sidelines. While inside the house, Helen must play the role of mother; outside on the patio she begins to open up and regain the life she used to have as an actress. This division in Helen’s life represents the complications that evolve when one tries to simultaneously adhere to society’s expectations while also accepting and embracing one’s own identity.
**Alison’s Identity**

While Bruce and Helen attempt to conform to their gender roles in the best way they can, Alison represents the resistance to these gender norms. Throughout her childhood, Alison pushes against the notion of heteronormativity. She goes against her parent’s teachings and societal norms to develop her identity the way she wants it. Tulia Thompson argues that this is highly unusual for a child to stray from his/her parent’s norms because our society trains us to feel indebted to our parents for creating us and caring for us; therefore, we take up the norms that resemble our parents. Heterosexuality is one of these norms that Bruce and Helen propose to their children, but Alison does not follow in their footsteps. “Bechdel’s narrator suggests a rupture, where the ‘straight line’ of the parents is not taken up via the resemblance of the child to her heterosexual parents. Instead, Bechdel’s narrator’s refusal of heterosexuality creates the conditions of possibility for seeing her father’s life as queer, the odd life of a closeted gay man (Thompson 4). Thompson suggests that Bechdel breaks this line of heteronormativity passed down by parents. Bechdel strays from this social indebtedness to be like her parents and is able to come out and publicly be homosexual unlike her father. This represents a shift in the generational gap, allowing for Alison to be herself and not the pre-fit mold planned for her by her parents and society.

*Fun Home* shows the ways in which a gendered culture has made Bechdel construct her own identity. Alison is confronted with social standards as she grows and learns, and she resists and conforms to those standards in an effort to find a place where she fits in. At one point in the book, Alison goes on a camping trip with her father, his male friend, and her two brothers while her mother stays at home. Surrounded by men, Alison feels out of place and anxious to fit in and be considered part of the guys. On their way to the camp, they stop by a friend of Bruce’s who
gives Bruce a pin-up girl calendar to take with him. The man says, “Oh, and Bruce, can you take this with you? If Elsie finds it she’ll have my hide” (Bechdel 111). The man here performs the typical manly joking over a dirty calendar that he hides from his wife. Alison is then confronted with another pin-up girl calendar when they visit a mine during their trip. It hangs in plain sight on a wall next to a clipboard with a burly looking miner walking away from it. The young Alison stares up at it with shock and worry on her face, contrasting with the gruff dead-pan look on the miner’s face. Surrounded by men and their gendered performance, Alison attempts to disconnect from the over-sexualized women in the calendars and instead align herself with the men she is with. Bechdel reflects about the miner in the image: “As the man showed us around, it seemed imperative that he not know I was a girl” (113). Alison seems both embarrassed and afraid to be placed in the same category as the naked women in the calendars. She does not want to be the outsider amongst the group of men. She pulls her brother aside and says “Call me Albert instead of Alison” while the naked woman in the calendar hangs on the wall right above Alison’s head as if it’s haunting her (113).

Laura Mulvey explains the idea of the male gaze where women in the media are meant to be looked at as objects for men’s desires. She states, “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact” (837). The pin-up girl on the calendar is a product of the male gaze. The woman pictured is the passive object while the miners that look at her are the active subjects looking at her as an object of their own sexual desire. This reflects on the patriarchal society and shows the passive, sexualized, objectified role of women in this
society. Understandably, this makes Alison uncomfortable. She does not wish to become the woman in the calendar and the object of the male gaze. Therefore, she attempts to pass for a boy in an effort to disassociate herself from that image.

Throughout their trip, Alison conforms to the male gendered activities in camping. She tries to shoot a gun, but fails to have the physical strength to pull the trigger. Bill, Bruce’s friend, states, “That’s weird, I could do it fine when I was your age” (Bechdel 114). Shooting guns and hunting have generally been considered a manly thing to do, so when Bill states that he could and Alison can’t, she falls short of the expectations she wishes. In order to become one of the guys, she feels as though she should have been able to pull the trigger and fire a gun like a man. Alison continues to try and become a member of this male group when she sees a snake and calls Bill over to do something about it. Bill brings his gun, but cannot find the snake and Bechdel reflects, “I was shocked when Bill grabbed the gun. Then relieved and somewhat embarrassed that the snake was gone” (115). She doesn’t quite fit in emotionally with society’s expectations of a man being tough and unaffected towards killing a wild animal and is embarrassed that she feels for the snake. Bechdel states, “On the drive home, a postlapsarian melancholy crept over me. I had failed some unspoken initiation rite, and life’s possibilities were no longer infinite” (115). Alison tries to find her identity within these very polarized gender categories and becomes depressed because she cannot fit into either. Bechdel’s reflection here shows a major problem with society. We are told as children that the possibilities are endless if we work hard enough, but Alison cannot truly fit in with the men like she wants. She loses her innocence on this trip when she realizes that there are restrictions on her identity.

When she gets back to the house and takes a bath, her mother does her hair, pushing it back. Helen states, “See? This is how you’d look if you had long hair and pulled it back in a
ponytail” (Bechdel 116). We see their backs as they look into the mirror and Alison’s reflection looks annoyed and miserable while her mother forces her hair into the feminine style she expects Alison to wear. Alison proves that she has no desire to adhere to the feminine qualities that are expected of her, so when she fails to fit in with the men, she feels lost and without a clear path to identity. She struggles to fit in with the roles that she really desires. Her desire to be grouped in with men becomes complicated because she is still seen as a girl and is expected to embrace the qualities of a girl, but Alison wants nothing to do with those feminine qualities.

As Alison grows up, she reveals her uncertainty and lack of confidence in her identity. Throughout her youth and into adulthood, Alison writes a daily journal. When Alison is young, she writes the small phrase, “I think,” between most of her statements in her journal. This soon becomes so often that the “I thinks” become a small carrot-shaped squiggle, and she writes them over her journaling. Bechdel states, “When I was ten, I was obsessed with making sure my diaries bore no false witness” (169). She unconsciously is unable to fully commit to her own thoughts even when they are to herself, as though she does not trust herself. Simple activities of the day and her reflections on them prove to be uncertain when she hedges all of it with an “I think.” After some time, Helen notices how poor Alison’s handwriting has become and begins writing Alison’s journals as she dictates until her penmanship improves. Helen takes control of Alison’s journaling and becomes another puppet master like her father. Even though Alison dictates her thoughts, they are filtered by what she thinks her mother would want to hear, not what she truly wants to say. Her journals are constantly being looked over by a culturally conscious heteronormative view.

Once Alison does begin writing her journals again, she uses other ways to hedge her thoughts and ideas with qualifiers and punctuation. She still cannot commit to her thoughts and
claim her identity. In a journal entry on page 172, Alison writes, “I think I started Ning or something. (HAHA)? How Horrid!!! I made fudge. Uncle Joe came. Uh…they’re gonna make Nixon hand over the tapes. Good, eh?” She uses the word “Ning” as a code for menstruating in order to hide the part of her that makes her a woman. She is embarrassed to write it in her diary even for herself to see it. Her small qualifiers like “or something,” “Uh,” and “eh” all take the edge off of everything she’s saying as though she’s protecting herself from any disagreement with her words. She even questions her own “HAHA” as though she’s not quite willing to say she actually thought her statement was funny or not. One of her few political statements in her journals, so far, is qualified with “Good, eh?” as though she’s not willing to be certain about her own opinion. All of this serves to show her own uncertainty in her identity. She is complicated by the identity she leans towards and the identity she is forced into as a young child, which makes her unsure of everything else in life, even the most basic daily activities.

It is not until young adulthood that Alison begins to have a better grasp on her identity. She knows what she wants out of life, but her childhood in a strongly imposed heteronormative home and society pushes her towards a forced stereotypical femininity. When Alison is a teenager, she begins to disassociate herself from the activities of her female friends. On page 182 of *Fun Home*, Alison sits on the porch with her friend from school waiting to go to the school’s football game. Alison says that she doesn’t want to go, but her friend tells her they should go to see people and socialize. However, they miss their ride, so Alison suggests another plan for the night. Her and her friend try on Bruce’s old clothes and act as though they’re gentlemen selling life insurance. Bechdel states, “Putting on the formal shirt with its studs and cufflinks was a nearly mystical pleasure, like finding myself fluent in a language I’d never been taught” (182). Alison is finally starting to find herself as a teenage girl by trying on men’s suits.
She has been taught her whole life thus far on how to act and be like a girl; however, her actions here feel much more comfortable to her.

Alison’s identity is coming to the surface here and when her friend gets bored and wants to end their little game, Alison begrudgingly agrees. She journals about missing the game and showing her regret over it, but Bechdel reflects back as an adult, “My profession of disappointment at missing the game and the dance was an utter falsehood, of course” (183). Again, Alison still hides the aspects of her true self and her opinion from even herself. Bechdel as an adult is finally able to understand and come out about her true feelings as a child. Over the years, she continues to express her interest in men’s clothing by going with Bruce to shop for suits and giving him advice. It is not until she gets to college where Alison gains more of a self-awareness of her identity and expresses it.

The way Alison does this is through books. Just like Bruce finding his own ways of expression through literature and identifying with the character of Gatsby, Alison discovers her identity by reading. When she gets to college, Alison is confronted with a much more diverse set of people and ideas. The gender binaries do not seem quite as strict as they do in her small town back home. She explores different authors who discuss sexuality and she states, “I realized, in the campus bookstore, that I was a lesbian” (Bechdel 203). In a frame a little later on, Bechdel shows a variety of contemporary and historical lesbian authors with their books stacked up on Alison’s desk. Her discovery through reading “reflects the fact that books can play an important role in lesbian and queer life both in the formulation of a sense of self and in terms of shaping a collective identity, however, tenuous and amorphous this may be” (Bauer 273). Bechdel comes full circle in writing this book. Writers point out the obscurities and hidden qualities of life that people are too afraid to share or less attuned to when surrounded by cultural norms and stigmas.
Alison’s own identity is discovered through reading others’ confessions and incites, so she writes one of her own to add to the growing literature on these subjects.
Conclusion

A book like *Fun Home* displays the contemporary themes that are emerging within bodies of literature. Alison Bechdel combines multiple genres and creates her own graphic novel memoir-like story that is multi-layered and can be analyzed in a myriad of ways. For the purposes of this paper, I have analyzed *Fun Home* from a queer perspective. Bechdel uses this book as a way to go back and find exactly how her parents’ identities were hidden and brought to the surface in many ways and how her identity emerged through her youth.

Throughout the novel, Bechdel uses the combination of word and image to show the problems with cultural standards of gender binaries for the unique individual. Her father, mother, and herself cannot quite fit into these binaries perfectly and all of them choose to perform their gender in their own way. For Bruce, it was his ability to find a fictional male character to relate to and direct his and his family’s life in their home in accordance with that theme. In this way, he wouldn’t have to confront his homosexuality. For Helen, acting out her gender meant being a dutiful wife and a mother, but she proves that the role mother and wife is not as fulfilling for her as her other roles in plays and as a student. The cultural constructions of gender produce a difficult set of narrow guidelines for anyone to fit into. Acting out our gender begins as a mere performance until it becomes our entire lives.

For people like Alison, who do not fit into society’s heteronormative gender roles, the performance becomes much more difficult to manage. Throughout *Fun Home*, Alison tries to connect to groups of people as a way to fit into some sort of category. However, Bechdel proves that the narrow idea of identity is much more complex than the simple ways we look at it. In other words, “It *Fun Home* provokes thought around the uncertainty of identity, particularly the marginalizing and flattening identity categories that are available for queer youth. Bechdel’s
confrontation of the awkward and unknown wanderings of identification and identity reads like an invitation for youth to approach sexuality as a question instead of a container for identity” (Stebbins 267). Looking at identity as a question rather than a concrete category opens up a world with more diversity and even perhaps less bigotry towards those who are different. Through Bechdel’s story, we can see the struggles a person has in fitting into the narrowness of identity structures. For some, like Bruce, it becomes too much. For others, like Helen, it is just the mode they live by even if it leaves little fulfillment. Alison represents someone who is constantly searching and questioning her identity.
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