

Queer Crossings and Inversions in Alison Bechdel's

Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic

Trabajo de Fin de Grado realizado por

Coral Anaid Díaz Cano

Bajo la supervisión de la profesora

Isabel González Díaz

Grado en Estudios Ingleses

Universidad de La Laguna

Junio de 2015

Abstract

This final degree dissertation provides a comparison and contrast between father and daughter as characters in Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir titled *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. The main focus of my analysis deals with the representation of gender ambiguity in the text.

The dissertation is divided into five sections. After a general introduction to the topic, the second part introduces the novel and its author. In the third section, I deal with the construction of the artifice in *Fun Home*, providing portraits of father and daughter as individual characters, and paying special attention to the house and the relationships of these characters to the physical space that surrounds them. In the fourth section, the notions of queer crossings, (dis)identity and (in)visibility are introduced and applied to the analysis of this graphic novel. The binary games that appear in *Fun Home* are presented, followed by an analysis of several traits that these characters have in common, such as their artistic development and the appreciation of masculinity, which give them a common ground where they can meet. I reflect on how father and daughter work as inverted versions of each other, both in the sense of the meaning of "invert" as "non-heterosexual," and in the sense of how the narratives that are presented are inverted and intertwined. While the daughter rejects femininity, her father seems to desire to perform it and, at the same time, she seems to compensate for his lack of masculinity. The notion of queer crossings discussed by Sam Mcbean will be taken into consideration in this part of the analysis, in the sense that father and daughter are opposites that only meet in those crossings that reveal their queer identity. The role of photographs in *Fun Home* is also discussed in this project; photographs serve as a link for the author to reflect on the (closeted) queer identity of her father. The issue of coming-out in this queer narrative is also discussed, since it offers visibility and the opportunity for the daughter to come out as a lesbian and, eventually, to become an artist.

The final aim of this dissertation is to show how Bechdel presents entwined stories in her reflection on the construction of the gender identities of father and daughter: stories that are opposite but that meet at certain points or crossings. The conclusion reinforces my argument as, by using the snake as a symbol of the ambiguity between the masculine and the feminine, Bechdel emphasizes non-duality. Bechdel goes through her father's past, reworking her own memories and speculating about his identity and what happened to him; her father's end is eventually presented as her beginning in the way she became the artist that he always wanted to be.

Key words

Bechdel, Binaries, Gender, Graphic novel, Queer.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. “A Memoir about Memoirs”: <i>Fun Home</i> and Alison Bechdel	4
3. <i>Fun Home</i> and the Construction of the Artifice	
3.1 Alison Bechdel: Queer Daughter, Documenter and Artist	7
3.2 Bruce Bechdel: “Old Father, Old Artificer”	10
3.3 “His shame inhabited our house”: Father, Daughter and the Family Home	12
4. Queer Narratives in <i>Fun Home</i> : Binaries, Crossings and Inversions	
4.1 “Butch to his Nelly, Utilitarian to his Aesthete”: Binary Games	15
4.2 “We were inversions of one another”: Queer Crossings	20
4.3 The Family Album: Photographs and Queer (Dis)identity	27
4.4 The Process of Coming-out: (In)Visibility	31
4.5 “He was there to catch me when I leapt”: Entwined Narratives	34
5. “My father’s end was my beginning”: A Conclusion and a New Opening	38
6. Works Cited	41

List of Figures

FIGURE	Page
Fig. 1: Alison's first displays of masculinity (Bechdel 73).	8
Fig. 2: Alison and her father argue over a necklace (Bechdel 99).	8
Fig. 3: Alison's diary (Bechdel 149).	9
Fig. 4: Bruce's skills as an artificer (Bechdel 6).	10
Fig. 5: A breaking point in Bruce's perfect external appearance (Bechdel 17).	11
Fig. 6: Behind the façade of the perfect husband and father (Bechdel 1).	12
Fig. 7.1: The perfect family and the perfect home (Bechdel 17).	13
Fig. 7.2: The Bechdel family living in the old house (Bechdel 17).	13
Fig. 8: Father and daughter described in binary oppositions (Bechdel 15)	16
Fig. 9: The gazes of father and daughter <i>meet</i> in the magazine (Bechdel 99).	17
Fig. 10.1: Bruce working in the funeral home (Bechdel 44).	18
Fig. 10.2: Alison having sex with her girlfriend (Bechdel 214).	18
Fig. 11.1: Bruce adds a second stanza to Alison's poem (Bechdel 129).	19
Fig. 11.2: The finished piece, a combination of word and image (Bechdel 130).	19
Fig. 12: Bruce represses Alison's early displays of masculinity (Bechdel 97).	22
Fig. 13: Alison evaluates her father's masculinity (Bechdel 95).	23
Fig. 14.1: Queer crossings between father and daughter (Bechdel 98).	24
Fig. 14.2: "A war of cross-purposes" (Bechdel 98).	24
Fig. 15: Alison recognizes the butch woman (Bechdel 118).	25
Fig. 16: Alison sees the woman in the calendar (Bechdel 112).	26
Fig. 17: Alison and her friend dress up as men (Bechdel 182).	26

Fig. 18.1: Alison Bechdel posing as her Bruce. Extracted from Watson (201).	27
Fig. 18.2: The final product (Bechdel 197).	27
Fig. 19: <i>Fun Home</i> 's centerfold (Bechdel 100-101).	29
Fig. 20.1: Bruce wearing a women's bathing suit (Bechdel 120).	30
Fig. 20.2: Photographs of father and daughter (Bechdel 120).	30
Fig. 21: Bruce recognizes a butch woman (Bechdel 108).	32
Fig. 22.1: Bruce reveals his queer experiences (Bechdel 220).	33
Fig. 22.2: Alison replies with her own (Bechdel 221).	33
Fig. 23: Alison and Bruce swim together (Bechdel 230).	35
Fig. 24: "Icarian games" at the beginning of <i>Fun Home</i> (Bechdel 3).	35
Fig. 25: Alison jumps into her father's arms (Bechdel 232).	36
Fig. 26: The serpent as "an ambiguous archetype" (Bechdel 116).	38
Fig. 27: The road: endings and beginnings (Bechdel 117).	39

1. Introduction

Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic, the graphic memoir published by Alison Bechdel in 2006, can be considered to be at the level of the acclaimed *Maus* (1993) by Art Spiegelman and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2003). These three graphic novels deal with family relations, but *Fun Home* goes further than those texts in emphasizing the gender identities and sexual practices of some of its characters.

It is precisely because of the focus of this text on gender issues that I felt attracted to it when my tutor suggested topics for my final degree dissertation. At the beginning I felt uncertain about analysing a graphic novel, since I have not done any research on comics throughout my degree. However, after some conversations with my tutor, she encouraged me and I had the opportunity to initiate myself in something that I had not studied before. Comics were normally considered as a genre inferior to the novel, but in the last decades that has begun to change. Nowadays they are considered to be part of the academic world, precisely thanks to the work of authors such as Spiegelman and Satrapi.¹

Another aspect that I found interesting about *Fun Home* is its autobiographical nature, since the story that Bechdel tells is based on her personal life. *Fun Home* is not political in an international way as *Maus* or *Persepolis* are, dealing with the Holocaust and with Iranian history and politics. As Ann Cvetkovich points out, there are not many historical or social references in the background of *Fun Home*, the most notorious being the Stonewall riots and the Watergate scandal (121). What Bechdel does instead is to focus on the personal story that is framed within the historical moments that her characters live. Cvetkovich claims that this text presents an effort to redefine the “connections between memory and history, private experience and public life [...]” (111). History, in *Fun Home*, becomes personal history and it is seen through the lenses of memory.

Yet, *Fun Home* is a text that can be analysed from many different approaches. There are many instances of intertextuality throughout the book. Bechdel plays with the myth of Icarus and Daedalus in the beginning and end of her text, and she makes explicit reference to the works of authors such as Henry James, James Joyce, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Marcel Proust and Oscar Wilde.² Even though I am aware that an analysis from the point of view of the relation

¹ For more information about the increasing importance of comics in the academic world, see Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1993) and Douglass Wolk's *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean* (2007).

² For an analysis on the role of intertextuality and Modernism in *Fun Home*, see Ariela Freedman's article titled “Drawing on Modernism in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*.”

of this book to Modernism, and that the mentioned intertextuality would offer an interesting development, it was more appealing to me to look at the representation of gender and identity in this graphic novel. Since my third year in the degree I have been interested in gender and its different representations. Unfortunately, I have not had the opportunity in this degree to study gender issues in depth. I wanted to take the opportunity that this final degree dissertation offers me to work on something new, something that would present a new challenge during my last academic year.

What I have done in my research is to make a comparison between the two main characters (father and daughter) regarding their gender, their sexuality and their interactions with each other. In order to do this, *Fun Home* has been analysed using some of the ideas developed by Queer Theory. The scope of this project does not allow me to devote a large section to the very philosophical and intricate field of Queer Theory. I believe that it is better to explain in this introduction why I think this approach is appropriate to analyze this graphic novel. According to Mimi Marinucci, Queer Theory avoids any kind of binary contrasts, such as female and male, feminine and masculine, and homosexual and heterosexual (34). However, it is still “compatible with the existence of female and male identities, butch and femme identities, homosexual and heterosexual identities, transgender identities, and various other identities that exist, be it comfortably or uncomfortably, within the binary system” (Marinucci 34). Apart from this, Queer Theory does not stand for the destruction of the categories of gender, sex and sexuality (Marinucci 34). Its aim as a deconstructive strategy, as Sullivan points out, is “to denaturalise heteronormative understanding of sex, gender, sexuality, sociality, and the relations between them” (81). That is why I find that it is suitable to analyse *Fun Home* following the approach of Queer Theory, since what Bechdel does is to disrupt a conventional, heteronormative reading of her text when presenting characters that do not fit in conventional gender roles.

This dissertation revolves around two main notions: crossings and inversions. Inversion in this analysis does not only refer to sexual inversion, but also to the inversion present in the narratives of father and daughter. Along with this concept I look at the many (queer) crossings that this graphic memoir offers at several levels. Sam McBean introduces the question of queer crossings in her article “Seeing in Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*,” which is useful for me to develop my argument. These ideas will be explained in detail in the fourth and fifth sections of this project, with the help of some concepts developed by Nikki Sullivan, Maggie Humm and Mimi Marinucci. Judith Butler’s notion of the construction of gender is also applied in the analysis, as well as Judith Halberstam’s reflections on female masculinity.

Additionally, I consider the role of photographs within the text and their relation to queer (dis)identity, and, finally, I deal with the notion of coming-out in queer narratives. For this part of the analysis I will be using Berthold Schoene's 2006 article on Queer Theory.

Moreover, throughout the discussion I take into consideration the formal aspects of the graphic novel, such as panel distribution, size, placement, etc. I have included some pictures from this graphic novel along with my own interpretations and commentaries, because this allows me to focus both on the text and on the visual elements. The main sources that I will be using to analyse the graphic novel are the articles written by Hillary Chute, Julia Watson, Ann Cvetkovich, Robyn Warhol and Sam McBean.

What I have attempted to demonstrate with my analysis is that Bechdel has managed to represent father and daughter as inverted versions of each other, and that they present life narratives that develop in opposites but that meet at several points or "crossings."

2. “A Memoir about Memoirs”: *Fun Home* and Alison Bechdel

Before proceeding to analyze the text, it is necessary to dedicate a small section to briefly introduce this graphic novel and its author. Alison Bechdel is an American lesbian cartoonist that reached international fame with her long-running comic strips titled *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1983-2008). Following her autobiographical text, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, Bechdel released *Are You My Mother?* in 2012. Whereas *Fun Home* deals with the figure of her father, in this work she explores the figure of her mother.³

The title of the graphic novel that occupies this dissertation presents an interesting play of words. As Chute points out, *Fun Home* refers, on the one hand, to the Gothic revival home in Beech Creek, Pennsylvania, where the Bechdel family lives. On the other hand, *Fun Home* invokes the funeral home where Bruce Bechdel, Alison’s father, works as a mortician (176). But the book has a subtitle: *A Family Tragicomic*. The word *Tragicomic* functions as a manifestation of the nature of the book. *Fun Home* is not a tragicomedy in the most traditional sense of the word, but a *tragicomic*. With that play of words, Bechdel emphasizes the visual nature of her book. Moreover, she plays with the expectation of the reader that confronts a comic book: there is not only humor through these pages, but also moments in which sadness and tragedy take place, negating thus the common belief that comics are a light-hearted genre.

Fun Home is written in the form of a graphic memoir: there are drawings and text, which makes it very different from written narrative. Warhol explains that academics tend to talk about comics “as a dual form [...] composed of the ‘verbal’ and the ‘visual’” (2). Chute defines comics as “a hybrid word-and-image form in which two narrative tracks, one verbal and one visual, register temporality spatially” (qtd. in Warhol 2). *Fun Home* is a good example for Chute’s definition, since it provides the reader with a story where these two narrative tracks combine perfectly and complement each other. When getting to this point, it is important to mention the art style of the book. According to Chute, *Fun Home* presents “two different visual representational styles: one that is heavily crosshatched, which is used for drawing photographs, and one that has crisper black line art” (179). The panels are coloured with a greenish shade of watercolours. In an interview with Chute, Bechdel described this shade of green as a “grieving colour” (179). The colour green in this graphic novel, as Chute writes, is like a washed version of the green wallpaper that decorates the

³ For more information on Alison Bechdel, see the “About” section in her personal webpage *Dykes to Watch Out For*: <http://dykestowatchoutfor.com/about> and the biography provided by The Pennsylvania Center for the Book, available in the following link: http://pabook.libraries.psu.edu/palitmap/bios/Bechdel_Alison.html

interior of several rooms in Bechdel's childhood home (179). It is remarkable then that the house impregnates the pages of her novel even in the most physical sense.

Regarding time, *Fun Home* presents a non-chronological and non-linear narrative. Bechdel approaches the story of her family from different perspectives, going back and forward in time. This obliges the reader to receive and read the story in the manner that Bechdel wants to tell it. A child is the main character, and an older voice outside the panels narrates the story. In Watson's words, the narrative presents a case of splitting of the self (124).⁴ Watson also remarks that Bechdel reviews her memories while depicting herself as a main character that is not only an observer of what happens in that house, but who also takes part actively in the story (126). Alison, as a child, becomes a witness of her own personal history and, interestingly, Bechdel does not offer a limited closure to her book. The reader is given the opportunity to go back and forward through the events that the author has portrayed in her work to think about a possible conclusion.

Fun Home is a text difficult to classify from the perspective of traditional genre definitions: it plays with the confessional and the artificial, it combines words and images, and it deals with the life of the father and the life of the daughter. However, even though *Fun Home* can be described in these binary terms, the author does not stick to any of them. The difficulty to classify this text points to its queer texture, as if Bechdel refuses to include her text in a definite category. From my point of view, *Fun Home* deals mainly with three aspects: the exploration of a sexuality that does not rely on heteronormative models, the construction of the artist, and the reconstruction of family history in the exploration of the shadowy figure of her father. According to Watson, *Fun Home* can be considered a "memoir about memoirs" (123). The way in which Bechdel explores that family history and her own memories is through the reproduction of archival documents such as maps, novels, letters, newspapers, photographs, etc.

Taking into account formal aspects, Robyn Warhol points out that there are "at least three operative layers in [Bechdel's] comics, two of them verbal, the third pictorial" (5). The first verbal layer is the "extradiegetic voice-over narration," the voice of the narrator in and out of the panels. The second verbal level is the "intradiegetic dialogue," the words spoken inside the panels and the "narrative world." The third level, the pictorial one, is the level of the drawings and cartoons that sometimes go hand in hand with the voice-over narration and

⁴ For the purpose of my analysis, I will be using the name "Alison" when referring to the character in the novel, and the surname "Bechdel" when referring to the author or real person behind the graphic memoir. A similar strategy has been adopted by Cvetkovich in her article "Drawing the Archive in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*."

other times depict a completely different thing. Warhol also adds that the pictorial level is the one that includes the reproduction of text and pictures (5). My suggestion is that there is a fourth layer directly related to the pictorial one that includes and addresses the reader. This is seen in scenes such as the centrefold of the book where Bechdel draws her hands holding photographs (Bechdel 100-101; see fig. 20). Bechdel shows her personal archive to a reader that is given the opportunity to interpret what she is seeing. Finally, Cvetkovich remarks Bechdel's ability to move "between lesbian culture and high culture" (122), because she makes direct reference not only to mainstream male authors such as Marcel Proust or James Joyce, but also to many lesbian and feminist authors (Cvetkovich 122).

3. *Fun Home* and the Construction of the Artifice

So far the previous section has provided an introduction to Bechdel and to the formal aspects of the text under analysis. What follows now is a section that serves as a bridge to the central point of my dissertation. I will provide a closer look to father and daughter, considering also their relationship with the physical space that surrounds them. At this point I will not yet be providing a contrast between them, since I believe that it is important to present first individual portraits of the characters, especially in a narrative where they are so *intertwined* that sometimes it is difficult to see when one ends and the other begins. Besides, during this section I will draw attention to the concept of the artifice understood as a trick or device, and to how this notion varies (or not) from father to daughter.

Oxford Dictionaries defines “artifice” as “clever or cunning devices or expedients, especially as used to trick or deceive others,” and the definition of “artificer” is “a skilled craftsman or inventor.” If her father is the skilled craftsman, Bechdel presents herself as a *craftsperson* playing with her own memories. As I will show in this chapter, *Fun Home* can be understood as Bechdel’s ultimate artifice, mainly because of the many tricks she plays when constructing her book.

3.1 Alison Bechdel: Queer Daughter, Documenter and Artist

One of the first aspects worth commenting on regarding Alison is her physical appearance, since Bechdel represents her own gender ambiguity in a very intelligent way. In a visual work like this one, it is easy for the reader to see how her physical appearance is different to the standard physical appearance of conventional girls.

During her childhood, Alison dresses like a boy, keeps her hair short and plays with her brothers and male cousins (Bechdel 96). Following this description, Alison can be fitted into the definition of a “tomboy girl.” In *Female Masculinity*, Judith Halberstam explains the different ways in which women can create and portray different models of masculinity. This author describes tomboyism as “an extended childhood period of female masculinity” (5). Alison showed the first signals of female masculinity during her childhood, and an example of this can be found in the European tour that she made with her family when she was a girl. It was at this time when she started to bargain with her mother to be able to wear hiking boots and shorts (see fig. 1). It is interesting to note that in the second panel, Alison and her brother

are completely undistinguishable. Both siblings play in the sand and Bechdel does not draw some sort of indication pointing out to Alison. The reader is left with the gender ambiguity of one of the protagonists.



Fig. 1: Alison's first displays of masculinity (Bechdel 73).

A second example is found in another family gathering. During a trip to the family deer camp, Alison asks her brother to call her "Albert" instead of "Alison" when she understands that the man that shows them around the camp has not realized that she is a girl (Bechdel 113). It is interesting to see how Alison, despite being a young girl, plays with her own gender identity, finding ways to slip out of the feminine identity that has been assigned to her. As Halberstam suggests, tomboyism "is punished, however, when it appears to be the sign of extreme male identification (taking a boy's name or refusing girl clothing of any type) and when it threatens to extend beyond childhood into adolescence" (6). At another particular point in her life, Alison is forced to wear feminine accessories by her father (see fig. 2). When she was a child she could get her way with behaving like a boy and wearing boy's clothes, but once she grows up and becomes a teenager, she is forced to be more feminine and ladylike.



Fig. 2: Alison and her father argue over a necklace (Bechdel 99).

Another remarkable aspect about Alison is that she begins to document her own life in her childhood. Encouraged by her father, she starts to write a daily entry in a personal diary to manage the OCD (Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder) that she develops when she is ten years old (Bechdel 140). Chute draws attention to the use of marks and written symbols in Alison’s diary (189). After a few months of writing, the entries in the diary are full of small phrases saying “I think” cramped between sentences (see fig. 3). After several experiments, Alison realizes that she can draw those small “I think” as a symbol in the form of “an upside-down V” over an entire entry (Bechdel 143). The use of these small phrases and marks confirms her uncertainty about the reality that she perceives. It seems now seems that Alison fails at the task of documenting everything that happens in her family.

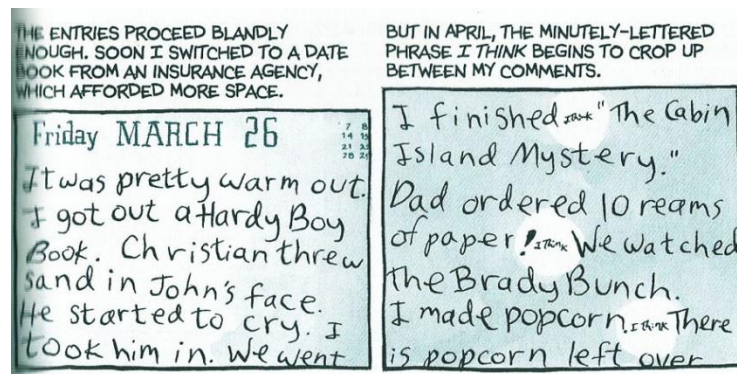


Fig. 3: Alison’s diary (Bechdel 149).

Drawing over written words is a manifestation of Alison’s inability to rely on words alone. She needs something else to accompany them, something that allows her to be as open as she wants to be, and she finds it in the visual. These marks drawn in the diary are a precursory activity of her future profession as a cartoonist. Drawings help her to offer a clearer portrait of her memories and give her power to record the events that take place in her family. As Warhol points out, *Fun Home* is the “corrected version of Alison’s journal” (10). According to this critic, language in a graphic novel like the one that occupies this analysis does not need to carry “the whole weight of the visual” (10). As Chute remarks, “*Fun Home* charts a process of recognizing the unsolvability of the gap between word and image and approaching the aporetic through comics” (189). What Alison could not know in her childhood is that drawings and cartoons would come to fill the gap in meaning that she could not express with words alone. Watson claims that Alison uses the diary during puberty to “encode discoveries about her lesbian identity” (128); thus, she begins to conceal words like “menstruation” and “masturbating” (Bechdel 169-170). It is significant to note that this covering of physical

processes produces a huge contrast with the work that she will develop later as a cartoonist. Bechdel goes from encrypting words related to female sexuality in her adolescence to, as an adult, representing explicit female bodies (particularly her own body and that of her college girlfriend) touching and having sexual relationships.

At a particular moment in her life, Alison decides not to follow the way of her parents: “Perhaps this was when I cemented the unspoken compact with them that I would never get married, that I would carry on to live the artist’s life they had abdicated” (Bechdel 73). The word “married” in this context can be interpreted in the sense of her own sexuality as she will never get married to a man in a conventional way. What is more, later in life she will follow the artist’s life that her parents were not able to pursue. Unlike her parents, she will never have children: instead, she will devote her life to create her own artistic works that at the same time can be considered as “children” in a figurative sense.

3.2 Bruce Bechdel: “Old Father, Old Artificer”

Bechdel employs the first chapter of her graphic novel to present Bruce as an authoritarian parent obsessed with order and aesthetic beauty. Even though he works as a full-time English teacher and a part-time mortician, his true passion is the restoration of the Gothic revival home where the family lives. Bechdel describes him as libidinal, manic, martyred man (7) who is able to perform “dazzling displays of artfulness” (9). The panel below (see fig. 4) presents Bruce alone in the living room placing a flowerpot while his wife and child stay in the next room. Despite the tidiness and elegance of the room, his only comment is “slightly perfect,” which reflects his extremely perfectionist personality.



Fig. 4: Bruce’s skills as an artificer (Bechdel 6).

However, Bechdel does not stop at the presentation of her father as a “Daedalus of decor”: instead, she starts to unveil from the very beginning details that draw attention to the hidden nature of her father. Bruce tries to be perceived as the perfect father and the perfect husband, but his public image has been damaged by several sexual scandals with young boys. In figure 5, below the lines “he appeared to be an ideal husband and father” (17), Bechdel draws her family in church, her father occupying the central position. He is not looking ahead to the service, but subtly directs his gaze to his right, where young church boys are walking by. The rest of the family looks ahead, except Alison, who is looking at her father.



Fig. 5: A breaking point in Bruce’s perfect external appearance (Bechdel 17).

Bechdel remarks that her father “used his skillful artifice not to make things, but to make things appear to be what they were not” (16). It is not that he is an artificer only for the sake of art: the artifice serves him to cover aspects of his personality and sexuality that are supposed to be hidden. In the same way that he can redecorate the old house and grow a garden, he is able to craft a different personality around himself, one where he is an ideal husband and father. Nevertheless, his obsession with presenting the perfect picture of his life and with maintaining the perfect house leads him to mistreat his children in some occasions. Bechdel describes a scene where she and her brother Christian get hit over a vase that got too close to the edge of the living room table (18). This moment serves her to recall that “something vital was missing” in Bruce as a father: “An elasticity, a margin for error” (18). Interestingly enough, Bechdel works on that something that is missing in her graphic novel.

This image of Bruce as a skilled craftsman and an authoritarian parent contrasts with his first picture in *Fun Home*. The first image that the reader sees of Bruce is the reproduced photograph of the cover of the first chapter (see fig. 6):

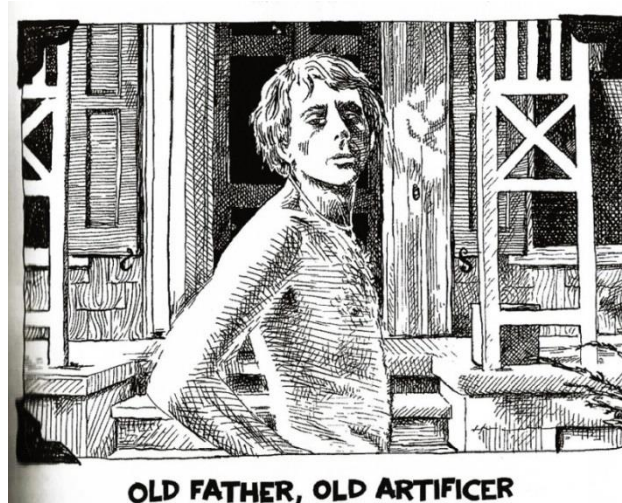


Fig. 6: Behind the façade of the perfect husband and father (Bechdel 1).

Bruce appears almost naked, facing the camera with his hands on his hips. The picture shows a sort of vulnerability that does not fit with the image that we would get of an authoritarian parent, and reveals a certain duality in his nature: while he is strict and almost dictatorial, he also shows a defenceless, unprotected side in this photograph. It is interesting for Alison to explore that other closeted side of her father, open to many interpretations.

3.3 “His shame inhabited our house”: Father, Daughter and the Family Home

In the subsection that follows, it will be argued that the role of the house in *Fun Home* goes beyond that of a mere physical setting for the cartoonist to set her characters. I would like to consider first how the characters in this graphic memoir react to the physical space that surrounds them. For Bruce, decorating and restoring the old Gothic revival house is a means to find some sort of personal freedom, and a way to portray his beauty aesthetics in the open. If Bruce is a “Daedalus of decor,” then the house is his personal labyrinth, his opera prima. It is in the privacy of a home made by himself where he can supposedly *be* himself, yet there is no final liberation for him. As Bechdel points out, “His shame inhabited our house as pervasively and invisibly as the aromatic musk of aging mahogany” (20). The house seems to be constructed in order to conceal his shame and secrecy. Not only is Bruce unable to give a voice to his closeted desires, but the artifice of the house is as close as he gets to living the life of the artist that he dreamt about when he was younger. By contrast, Alison disapproves of the restoration work that her father carries out. As a little girl, she states that when she grows up,

her house will be “all metal, like a submarine” (Bechdel 14). For her, the house embodies the overwhelming, oppressive figure of her father, and she finds freedom in imagining her own simple, minimalist house.

Bechdel does not consider her home as real, but as a “simulacrum of one” (17; see fig. 7.1), just like her father is not a conventional father, but a *simulacrum* of what a good father and a heterosexual husband should be. It is interesting to see how Bechdel plays with the images in her own panel composition: on the left she reproduces a picture of the perfect Bechdel family, and on the right she draws a corner of her perfectly decorated home. These two panels point out to a constructed reality:



Fig. 7.1: The perfect family and the perfect home (Bechdel 17).

Still, Bechdel portrays the family “really living” in that artificially recreated house (17; see fig. 7.2), which offers a great contrast with the previous panels: it suggests that Bechdel gives space for reality and real life to meet (and interrupt) artifice inside her home. The living room, carefully redecorated by Bruce to look like a period room, is invaded by children’s toys. The siblings play together and the parents watch television and eat popcorn.

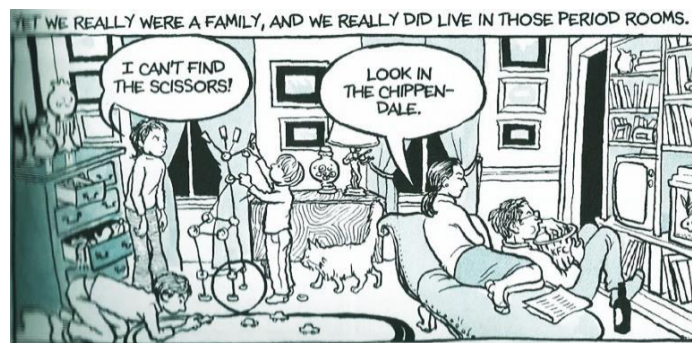


Fig. 7.2: The Bechdel family living in the old house (Bechdel 17).

McBean draws a comparison between the external and the internal regarding these panels, and explains that father and daughter offer “two ways of seeing the family” (107). Bechdel draws a realistic, intimate version of the family living in the period rooms, whereas Bruce photographs an artificial, static portrait of the family. However, it must be taken into account that Bechdel presents a carefully constructed portrait of her family in her graphic novel, where she manipulates reality, chronology and memory, and reveals only what she wants to reveal. While her father is the architect of the Gothic revival home, (Alison) Bechdel is the architect of *Fun Home*, of her own book, becoming the artist that her father always wanted to be. With this it can be said that, regarding the construction of the artifice, there are not many differences between father and daughter.

4. Queer Narratives in *Fun Home*: Binaries, Crossings and Inversions

In this section, which is the core of my dissertation, I will provide a deeper analysis of the many different contrasts between father and daughter, considering in the first place the manifold binary games that *Fun Home* presents. This section also pays attention to the many queer crossings included in this text. Bechdel presents Alison and Bruce in a constant battlefield where certain moments offer them a common ground where they are able to stand closer to each other. What is more, they are able to recognize themselves throughout these queer crossings, not only through the failed, frustrated conversation that they maintain about their sexual preferences and their gendered identity. I play with the notion of (in)visibility applied to a text like this one, that includes several coming-out moments. I also analyse the way in which Bechdel takes photographs out of her family album to reconstruct the gaps left in her father's story. Having discussed how Alison tries to perceive a queer identity on her father, in the final subsection the focus of the analysis moves to the intertwined narratives of father and daughter.

4.1 “Butch to his Nelly, Utilitarian to his Aesthete”: Binary Games

Bechdel, being the *craftperson* she is, plays with the binary and its many forms throughout *Fun Home*. In the first chapter of her graphic memoir, she presents a clear contrast between father and daughter in binary terms: “I was Spartan to my father's Athenian. Modern to his victorian. Butch to his nelly. Utilitarian to his aesthete” (15; see fig. 8). Visually, Bechdel is playing with the binary, drawing four panels of identical size with Alison and Bruce as central figures working as antithesis of each other.



Fig. 8: Father and daughter described in a binary opposition (Bechdel 15).

Despite their differences, father and daughter are detail-oriented and obsessed with order. Both of them are drawn towards the visual, but in different manners. Bruce is inclined towards ornamentation and elegance, whereas Alison prefers the “unadorned and purely functional” (Bechdel 14). Alison has trouble understanding the election of house decoration that is hard to clean, yet the answer of her father is very representative of his personality: “It’s beautiful” (15). His preference for the aesthetically pleasing is also seen in the way he dresses his young daughter: whenever she chooses her clothes freely, her father forces her to change and wear a well-balanced, fashionable outfit.

An important point for discussion is that father and daughter share the same ideal of masculine beauty. Even though their personalities crash at many points, they are able to meet in this “slender demilitarized zone” (Bechdel 99) where they recognize and appreciate (male) masculinity. It is important to mention the scene where Alison is reading a magazine about male fashion, while her father looks at the magazine over her shoulder (see fig. 9). In the third panel, the gazes of father and daughter meet in the magazine. At the same time, Bechdel draws the scene so that the reader can see what the characters are seeing. The sentence that

precedes the second panel in the narrative voice is quite interesting: “But I wanted the muscles and tweed like my father wanted the velvet and pearls—subjectively, for myself” (99). The gazes of father and daughter meet at the same point but they are *seeing* different things: she desires the ideal of masculinity that the magazine sells, whereas her father’s desires go beyond the ideal and focus on the body of the male model. This is very explicit in the sentence “The objects of our desire were very different” (Bechdel 99). In the first panel, Alison recommends Bruce to “get a suit with a vest” (Bechdel 99), in the same way that Bruce frequently comments on her clothes and selects complements for her. McBean states that when father and daughter select clothes and accessories for each other, they “adorn each other in the kind of clothes they desire for themselves” (113). Moreover, they “displace their own desires onto one another, creating mirrors of themselves” (McBean 113). Through these mirrors, they work as reflections of each other: when the father appreciates femininity, the daughter desires masculinity. They are able to find freedom when dressing the other in the clothes that each of them wants to wear.



Fig. 9: The gazes of father and daughter *meet* in the magazine (Bechdel 99).

An aspect worth commenting on is how Bechdel depicts father and daughter in relation to other bodies. Watson highlights the “depiction of bodies” in *Fun Home* as one of its most striking visual characteristics, especially the contrast between “bodies in rigor mortis” and “erotic bodies in action” (131). Once again, there is a binary contrast; this time between the

“erotic” and the “necrotic.” For my part I want to draw attention to two panels that fit Watson’s argument and that serve me to make the link between the sexualities of father and daughter. Throughout the graphic novel, Bruce is never depicted having some sort of intimate sexual contact with living bodies. Instead, he touches corpses during his job as a mortician, whereas Alison is represented in several panels having sex with her girlfriend. In both panels a body is lying on a surface, and the main characters are close to them. In the first panel, situated in the funeral home, Bruce only touches the corpse with his tool (see fig. 10.1), while Alison as a teenager observes the scene from a distance. She appears as a shadowed figure, nothing but an observer of her father’s actions. In the second panel, Alison physically touches the body of her girlfriend in the most intimate way (see fig. 10.2). It is interesting to note that in both panels the reader gets to see the scene from behind Alison, being thus included as a witness to the story.

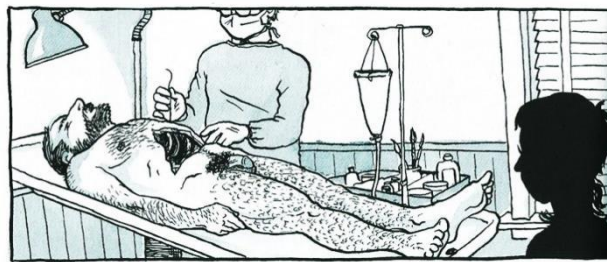


Fig. 10.1: Bruce working in the funeral home (Bechdel 44).



Fig. 10.2: Alison having sex with her girlfriend (Bechdel 214).

Another trait that father and daughter have in common is their artistic development. At one point during her childhood, Alison writes a poem that her father finishes, and then she illustrates it with her own drawing (Bechdel 129-130; see fig. 11.1 and 11.2). Both of them complement each other when creating a piece of art, and there is a certain duality between the image and the word. Image and word work as another system of opposed binaries in *Fun Home*. Bruce is inclined towards words (evidence is found in the way he is depicted reading in many panels and in the efforts that he makes in order to take care of his personal library), but Alison is able to move between the word and the image, and thus these two opposed positions find a reconciliation in her. Later on, as Bechdel writes, Alison abandons poetry (130), as if she were trying to distance herself from the media where her father moves best.



Fig. 11.1: Bruce adds a second stanza to Alison's poem (Bechdel 129).



Fig. 11.2: The finished piece, a combination of word and image (Bechdel 130).

Related to this point is the passion that both characters feel towards literature. Books are what connect Alison with her father. During her high school years, Alison is a student in her father's English class. Bruce describes her daughter as "the only one in that class worth teaching," and Alison confesses to him, during a conversation in the car, that his class is the only one that she has "worth taking" (Bechdel 199). As I will show later, it is in the car where father and daughter are able to be more open and honest with each other; yet, this particular conversation is not fluid, since they do not say much more than that. Later on, Alison tells her father that she will be reading *The Portrait of The Artist as a Young Man* for her college

English class, and his reply is “Good. You damn well better identify with every page” (Bechdel 201). Bechdel uses this Modernist novel to (re)write her own development as an artist. *Fun Home* becomes thus “The Portrait of The Artist as a Young Person,” being now the story of the development of an artist (among other things) that is not male and heterosexual, but female and queer.

4.2 “We were inversions of one another”: Queer Crossings

Even though Bechdel does not seem to be interested in reflecting or introducing gender theories as part of her text, it is clear that she is addressing some of the most important concepts of Feminist and Queer Theory. One of them is essentialism, which is the belief that considers “unique female and male natures” where the differences between women and men are essences assumed to be biologic, universal and natural (Humm 80). Thus, essentialism understands identity as something fixed, clearly defined and unable to change. Since the late 20th century there has been an anti-essentialist response, as the negation of ambiguity provided by essentialism regarding identity has been challenged by Third Wave Feminists and Queer Theory. The main reason for this reaction was the use that the Second Wave of Feminism made of the essentialist doctrine in order to reinforce their claims on women’s rights.⁵ Theorist Judith Butler, for example, challenged this bodily essentialism in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990) defending that gender is not natural or innate. According to Butler, gender is a social construction, a performance of reiterative acts that are learned and repeated to “create the illusion of an innate and stable (gender) core” (qtd. in Sullivan 82). Moreover, gender is socially constructed to serve “particular purposes and institutions” (qtd. in Sullivan 82). Thus, social constructionism has also been part of the gender debate, claiming that identity is not something natural but constructed. As Marinucci points out, it suggests “that the categories associated with sexual pleasure and desire are historical and cultural developments” (116).

Some parallels can be drawn between this theory and *Fun Home*, and not only in terms of gender issues: on the one hand, Bechdel built up (or *constructed*) her own identity in a fictional character that is part of a fictional text based on her life. Identity in *Fun Home* is

⁵ See the chapter titled “Feminism Examined and Explored” in Marinucci’s book *Feminism is Queer: The Intimate Connection between Queer and Feminist Theory* (2010) for more information about the Feminist Movement.

treated as something artificial, just like the graphic novel per se is an artifice: Bechdel produces a constructed graphic memoir that does not appear in a natural linear way, but in the way she wants to address the issues at hand. *Fun Home* clearly challenges the hegemonic binaries that represent a “dualistic vision usually in service of some form of essentialism” (Marinucci 127). Following the doctrine of essentialism, the hegemonic binary “refers to the coalescence of gender, sex and sexuality into exactly two fundamentally distinct natural kinds: women and men” (Marinucci 127). The natural kinds must be clear and unambiguous. The doctrine of natural kinds “depicts an orderly world that divides into thoroughly informative categories inclusive of all phenomena without leftovers or crossovers” (Marinucci 127). As I will explain later, *Fun Home* is precisely presented as a game of “crossovers,” of crossings between the (again, constructed) identities of father and daughter.

Following the way Alison looks for the word “queer” in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) (Bechdel 57), it is interesting to include here the definition of the word “inverse,” since it is a central topic in Bruce and Alison’s narratives. The OED, in its 1989 edition, defines “inverse” as “turned upside down, inverted,” and only in the eleventh definition of this word is where the direct reference to “sexual inversion, homosexuality” can be found. Marinucci remarks that female homosexuality, for example, was not recognized by the medical community “until late 19th- and early 20th-century sexologists addressed what they referred to as ‘sexual inversion,’ a condition believed to be characterized by the complete reversal of gender, including sexual attraction to members of the same sex” (22). In contrast, as Schoene points out, the queer movement celebrates sexual diversity and releases “sexuality’s subversive power” from the constraint of Victorian sexology (285). *Fun Home* offers an interesting reading of homosexuality because, on the one hand, in a transgressive gesture, Bechdel appropriates the term “invert” from Victorian sexology to talk about herself and her father while, on the other hand, she is very disruptive with her text, being as queer as she can be. I also want to suggest that Bechdel takes the concept of “inversion,” that belongs to a particular sociohistorical context, and makes it become something personal in her own history.

Watson highlights that while father and daughter are “inverts” (as in “not heterosexual”), they are also inversions of each other in the family (135). At the same time that Alison rejects femininity, Bruce lacks manliness and appreciates (and desires to perform) femininity. It seems that the daughter occupies the place of the father and vice versa. According to Watson, Alison “is critical of her father as a ‘sissy,’ a version of the identity he attempts on her” (136). This is exemplified in a panel where Alison identifies her father as “sissy” (see fig. 12), a

designation that contrasts with the term “butch” that was bestowed on her by her male cousins (Bechdel 96). The girl had been playing with her cousins, and when she gets home her father scolds for not wearing her barrete. The car in the foreground in the first panel and the barrete in the third seem to be there to reinforce the identities of the characters. Bruce forces Alison to be more girly and to perform femininity, while he represses the femininity within himself. At the end, both of them are displaced from the conventional heteronormative gender roles that are assigned on them.

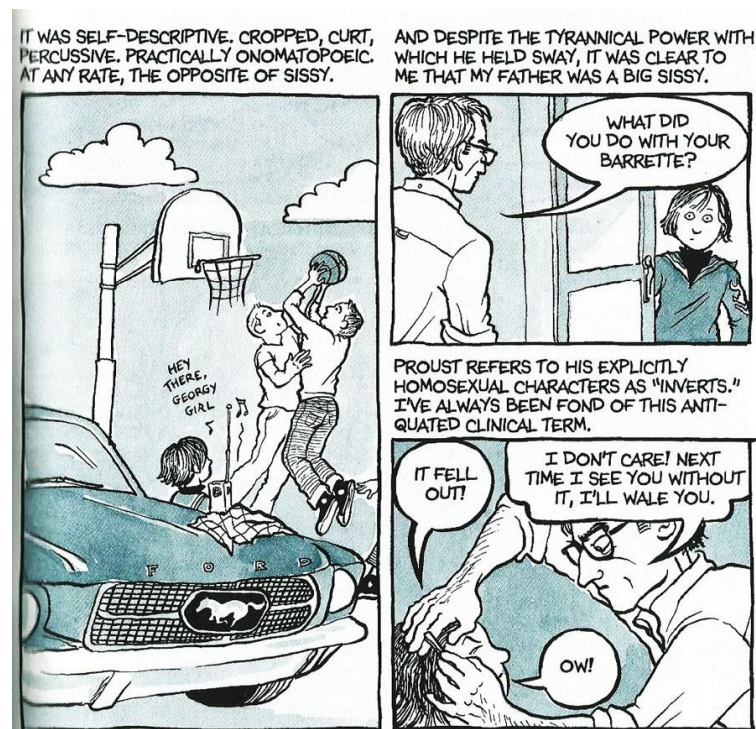


Fig. 12: Bruce represses Alison’s early displays of masculinity (Bechdel 97).

Bechdel takes Marcel Proust as one of the examples of how the term “invert” has been used in literature (97). For Bechdel, “It is imprecise and insufficient, defining the homosexual as a person whose gender expression is at odds with his or her sex” (97). However, her writing offers an interesting turn of events: “But in the admittedly limited sample comprising my father and me, perhaps it is sufficient” (97). When it comes to everyday relationships and coming to terms with your own sexuality, these theoretical notions fall short. Bechdel simplifies the theory and attempts to understand, rather than theorize, her sexuality and experiences, as well as her father’s.

There is another scene (see fig. 13) where Alison is watching a western show on television while her father is decorating the living room with flowers. This panel offers an interesting analysis from two different perspectives: on the one hand, it is the daughter and

not the father who is watching a TV show typically targeted at a male audience, and on the other hand, the daughter sees the prototype of masculinity portrayed by media and realizes that it does not fit with the figure of her father.



Fig. 13: Alison evaluates her father's masculinity (Bechdel 95).

Fun Home presents a narrative not only full of inversions, but one that also shows many twists and crossings. McBean argues that Bechdel “represents her relationship to her father through a queer crossing,” even though Bechdel employs the term “invert” in her narration (112). Bechdel presents a scene where the reader can perceive queer crossings through formal aspects (98; see fig. 14.1). According to McBean, readers can position themselves behind Bruce and Alison, who at the same time are being reflected on the mirror (112). However, none of them are looking directly at their own reflection: they are looking at each other instead. Even the bubbles of text containing their conversation are located above each other, being criss-crossed as well. Alison's mother is barely included in this scene. She stands in the right side in the first panel, looking at Bruce but not participating in their (queer) crossing of looks. McBean indicates that the narration in this panel “moves from one side to the other, ensuring that the reader crosses back and forth in order to follow the long-standing argument over Alison's appearance” (113). It is also interesting to note that in this panel there is a bubble of text pointing to Bruce that reads “velvet!” and another bubble pointing to Alison reading “least girly dress in the store.” This manifests the way in which they do not conform completely to their assigned gender roles, because they always find a way to escape from them. While Alison wears the least feminine dress she could find, her father dresses himself with the most luxurious suit available to him.

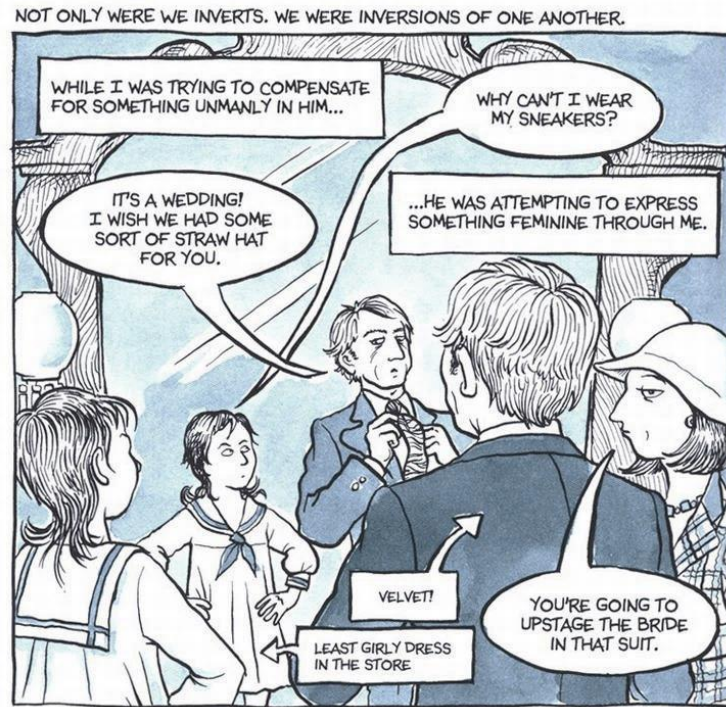


Fig. 14.1: Queer crossings between father and daughter (Bechdel 98).

In the second panel, situated seven years after the first one (see fig. 14.2), Alison and Bruce are reflected in a mirror but, once again, they are looking at each other. Alison's mother stands alone in the next room, not taking place in the conversation. She does not belong to that queer space where her husband and daughter belong and where they *meet* during these crossed looks. It is important to remark the wording that Bechdel uses to accompany the drawing: "it was a war of cross-purposes" (98). Bechdel does not produce a theoretical book based on Queer Theory: instead, she challenges the established gender binaries presenting Alison and Bruce as opposed characters. Returning briefly to the issue of binaries, it is evident that the natural kinds in *Fun Home* do not produce an orderly world but a chaotic, ambiguous one, where it is very difficult to include the identities of father and daughter in a fixed category.

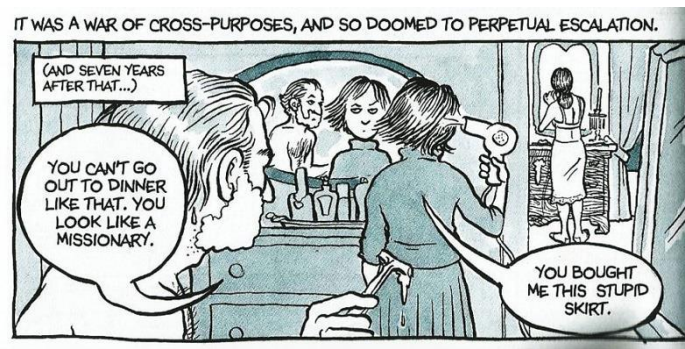


Fig. 14.2: "A war of cross-purposes" (Bechdel 98).

At this point it is important to draw attention to one of the most relevant scenes in *Fun Home*, one that takes place during Alison's childhood and that is crucial for the development of her gender identity. Bruce takes her daughter on a business trip to Philadelphia, and when they are sitting in a luncheonette, they see "a most unsettling sight" (Bechdel 117): a butch woman steps into the place and, instantly, Alison's gaze is glued on her (see fig. 15). In Marinucci's words, a butch woman would be one who "exhibit[s] a traditionally masculine personal style without identifying as trans" (125). Alison "know[s] by sight" that butch woman, and this moment is crucial for her because for the first time she is able to recognize something about her identity in another person. The girl, despite being attracted to the conventional male masculinity that she sees on magazines and TV shows, recognizes with joy the form of female masculinity of that butch woman. Even as a child who has been forced to follow heteronormative models, Alison is able to perceive that there is something transgressive in that woman.



Fig. 15: Alison recognizes the butch woman (Bechdel 118).

I want to compare this scene of Alison recognizing the butch woman with the scene where she sees the picture of a naked woman adorning a calendar (see fig. 16). Alison, still a child, feels "inexplicably ashamed" when confronted with that sight. She describes the situation as if she had had to get naked herself, reacting against this ogling of the female body that is aimed to the male gaze. As McBean maintains, Alison does not identify with this over-sexualized, feminized woman depicted in the calendar: instead, she finds identification in the butch woman (108).



Fig. 16: Alison sees the woman in the calendar (Bechdel 112).

McBean also highlights the scene where young Alison plays with her friend Breth to dress up with her father's clothes (Bechdel 110-111; see fig. 17). For Alison, that play feels “too good to actually be good” (Bechdel 182). In that childish play, Alison is free from the gender norms imposed on her.



Fig. 17: Alison and her friend dress up as men (Bechdel 182).

For this part of the analysis, I want to suggest Butler's conception of drag as a subversion of “the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true identity because ‘in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the initiative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency’” (qtd. in Sullivan 86). According to this concept, gender is a parody of the very notion of an origin, “revealing that the supposed ‘original’ that the ‘performer’ copies ‘is an imitation without an origin’” (qtd. in Sullivan 86). What gender does is to imitate other performances of other genders that cannot be considered originals. Sullivan claims that parody according to

Butler is “inherently subversive in that it demonstrates the plasticity and groundlessness of identity” (86). When Alison dresses up as her father, she is parodying something without a clear origin. If we trace back to the “origin” where Alison finds her clothes, her father, we can see that even her father is not an “original” model of what a heterosexual married man should be.

4.3 The Family Album: Photographs and Queer (Dis)identity

It is relevant to discuss the role of photographs within this graphic novel, since photographs are linked to the process that Alison undergoes in order to interpret her father's identity (and her own) as queer. In the making of the graphic memoir no actual photos were reproduced, because Bechdel recreated everything by her own hand (Watson 134). McBean remarks that Bechdel posed for reference photographs to draw every character in her book (118-119). The reader sees a panel that Bechdel has “acted out, photographed, and then drawn” (McBean 119), thus being subjected to the artist's manipulation of the real Bechdel family album. As Watson points out, the fact that the author steps into the role of many of her characters in a text so concerned with gender and sexuality is quite provocative (135; see fig. 18.1 and 18.2). Bechdel *becomes* for a while a character in a photograph that will be drawn later and adapted into a panel. Her identity is so unfixed that she can cross conventional boundaries and become someone else for an artistic purpose. Thus, Bechdel is able to *perform* as her father, posing for picture references in the making of her graphic novel.



Fig. 18.1: Alison Bechdel posing as Bruce. Photograph extracted from Watson (201).



Fig. 18.2: The final product (Bechdel 197).

In this way, Bechdel manages to go beyond the gender binary imposed on her, which can be related to the definition of queer identity as dis-identity. As Schoene points out, “By repudiating all attempts at identification—be derogatory or affirmative, systemic or counter-discursive—queer politics insists on its essential anti-identity” (286). This lack of any fixed, definitive identity allows Bechdel to perform as someone else. Watson remarks that photographs in *Fun Home* are used as “evidence of the material reality of what Bechdel investigates as her father’s double life” (134), and that they can be read for their transgressive content, since they are visual clues that “offer Alison occasions for introspection, as she rereads her past to discover untold family stories” (135). Bechdel reinterprets the history told by these photos in a subjective manner, thus distancing herself from the official family history. My proposition is that photographs in *Fun Home* work as a sort of text within a text that can be read and interpreted at the same time that the main character (the author herself) interprets them. The reader receives a photograph that is open to his or her own interpretation, yet at the same time the author is working through the meaning of that particular piece of her family history. One could extract all the photographs from *Fun Home* and realign them in a different manner, and still they would tell their own particular stories.

Watson points out that the moment in which Alison finds a box of old photographs after his father’s death brings out an opportunity to read “the narrative not as linear but as a recursively spiraling story along a ‘network of transversals’” (135). The first half of the story seems to be directed towards the centerfold of the book, a panel that occupies two whole pages right in the middle of the graphic novel (Watson 135). Roy is the subject of this photograph; he is a young man that worked for the Bechdel family as an “occasional yardwork assistant/Babysitter” (Bechdel 94), and Alison suspects that her father had an affair with him. The boy lies on a bed, posing almost naked, and there is a sort of vulnerability and intimacy in this shot that reminds of Bruce’s photograph for the cover of the first chapter. There is a near life-size drawing of Bechdel’s hand holding the photograph, as if showing it to the reader (see fig. 19). The reader is forced to look at Bechdel’s intimacy in a voyeuristic way, seeing what Alison sees in the story and interpreting the clues that she has exposed to reconstruct her father’s history. According to Cvetkovich, “Alison moves away from moral condemnation of the image, letting it sit uncomfortably within ambiguous distinctions between the erotic and the aesthetic, the past and the present, the father’s sexuality and his daughter’s” (117). When Alison tries to see from her father’s eyes, she gets closer to him. Thus, Bechdel is looking at patterns that to compare her own self (and experience as a lesbian) to her father's.

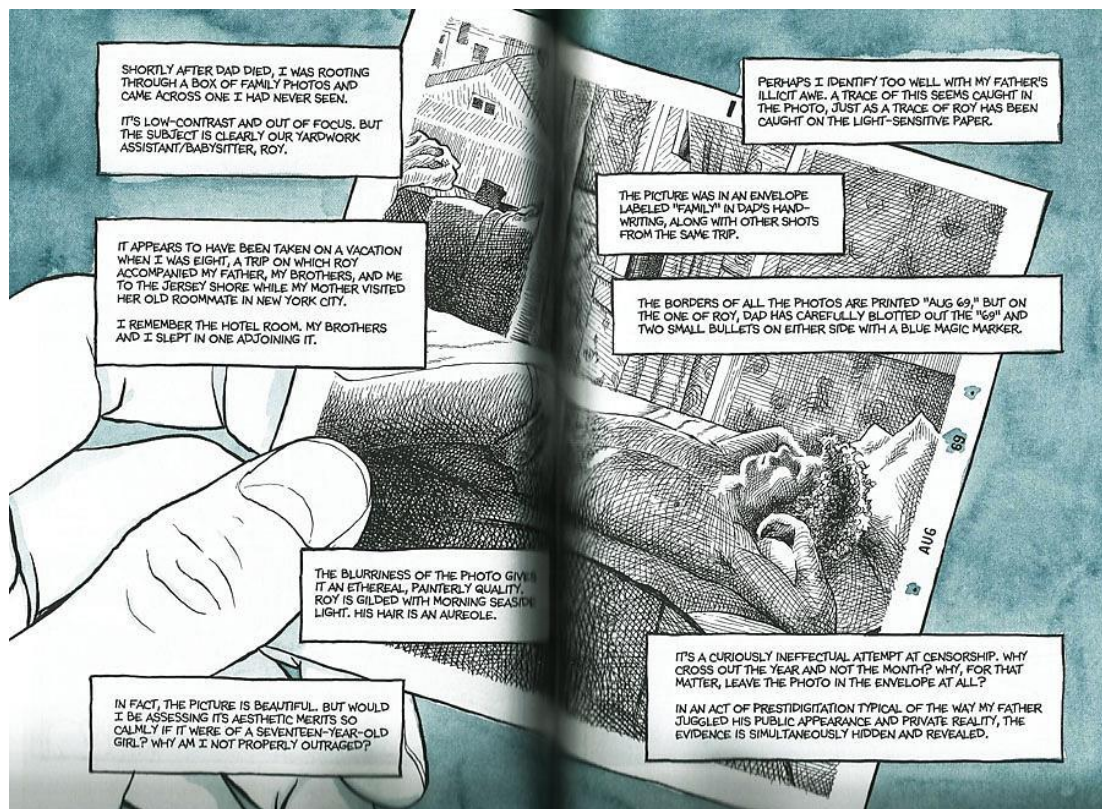


Fig. 19: *Fun Home*'s centerfold (Bechdel 100-101).

It is worth to remark another scene where Alison explores the contents of that old box full of family photographs taken from the Bechdel family album. Again, Bechdel draws her own hand holding these archival documents, as if showing them to the reader to indicate the evidence that she finds in them. In the first panel (see fig. 20.1) Bechdel holds a photograph of a younger Bruce wearing a women bathing suit. She stops to admire the pose of her father, which strikes her as “lissome” and “elegant” (120). In the second panel, Bruce’s photograph is set aside and the hand holds now two photographs. In the first one her father appears again, in a relaxed pose and smiling; the second one shows Alison wearing a robe (see fig. 20.2). Watson points out that in the bottom panel Bruce shows more naked skin while the robe that Alison wears covers most of her body (142). These photographs offer a moment for Alison to reflect on their sexuality, as she tries to draw a line between them, questioning if these photographs were taken by their same-sex partners.

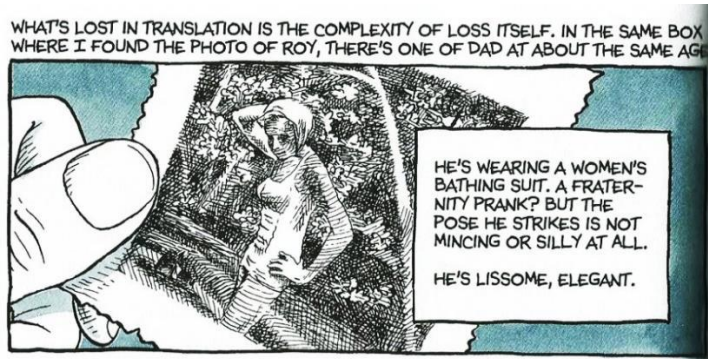


Fig. 20.1: Bruce wearing a women's bathing suit (Bechdel 120).



Fig. 20.2: Photographs of father and daughter (Bechdel 120).

These photographs also present a queer crossing, since they show a connection beyond gender binaries of what is traditionally feminine and masculine. Both of them play a game of cross-dressing that is against the gender norms imposed on them. This shows that there is an ultimate affinity between father and daughter, and parallels between them hidden in these photos. Watson states that photographs serve as a bridge over generations and as visual evidence for Alison to interpret the reality that surrounded her father (142). Photographs are also useful for her to speculate that the heterosexual identity that he carefully constructed may not be real. *Fun Home* presents an opportunity for Bechdel to recognize and remember her father. It enables her to find identification in his figure, since she can see in her father someone that is queer as she is.

4.4 The Process of Coming-out: (In)Visibility

The process of coming-out is also portrayed in this graphic memoir, and it is interesting to analyze how it plays out for father and daughter. Alison's coming out and realization of her sexuality is linked to the lesbian literature she has discovered and read. As Bechdel writes, in her situation it was "a revelation not of the flesh, but of the mind" (74). She discards her compulsory readings (such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* when she is in college) to read books written by lesbian and feminist authors (Bechdel 207). Alison comes out as a lesbian in a letter to her parents, which gives a clue of how frustrated direct conversations about sexuality are in that family. Shortly after coming out, Alison is told by her mother that her father had had several affairs with other men and that he was molested when he was young (Bechdel 58). Alison feels that she has been "upstaged, demoted from protagonist in [her] own drama to comic relief in [her] parents' tragedy" (58). Alison is removed from the position of certain power and freedom that would follow her coming out, and "pulled back into their orbit" (59). There is a clear contrast between Bruce's closeted homosexuality and Alison's coming to terms with being a lesbian, to the point in which there is an inversion of their situations. Watson interestingly remarks that the graphic novel presents "Two narrated stories, in parallels and inversions of each other" (131).

Cvetkovich maintains that Alison "comes out in a culture of 1970s lesbian feminism that is part of her college experience," whereas her father, despite having the opportunity to travel abroad and being in contact with literature, "does not have access to the social world that might allow him to assume a more overtly gay identity" (123). This is one of the reasons why these coming-out stories (or lack of coming out in the case of Bruce) are so different from each other: it is not only their personal lives, but also the historical period in which each of them lives their youth. There is a generational gap between father and daughter. Alison can afford to be more open about her sexuality, whereas her father is unable to do so. She also tries to understand the situation in which her father was: "There's no mystery! He killed himself because he was a manic-depressive, closeted fag and he couldn't face living in this small-minded town one more second" (Bechdel 125). She interprets that the repression and the scandals that followed in his life may be some of the reasons why her father committed suicide at age forty-four, when she was only nineteen years old. Bruce's death serves as a turning point for Alison to explore what happened in his life and triggers the project of writing her book. Alison, in fact, tries to picture what would she have done if she were in her father's situation: "Would I have had the guts to be one of those Eisenhower-era butches? Or would I

have married and sought succor from my high school students?” (Bechdel 108; see fig. 21). These panels present a situation where Bechdel imagines a younger version of her father in a conventional marriage. Bruce’s gaze recognizes the butch woman that walks down the street. Bechdel plays with this panel as well: it is a scene imagined by Alison that it cannot be proven to be true, yet the author presents it as if Bruce saw and *recognized* an adult, queer version of his daughter. He sees the same daughter he has been forcing on a heteronormative model of femininity on a butch woman. In these two panels, the butch woman crosses past Bruce and his wife: it is an actual crossing.

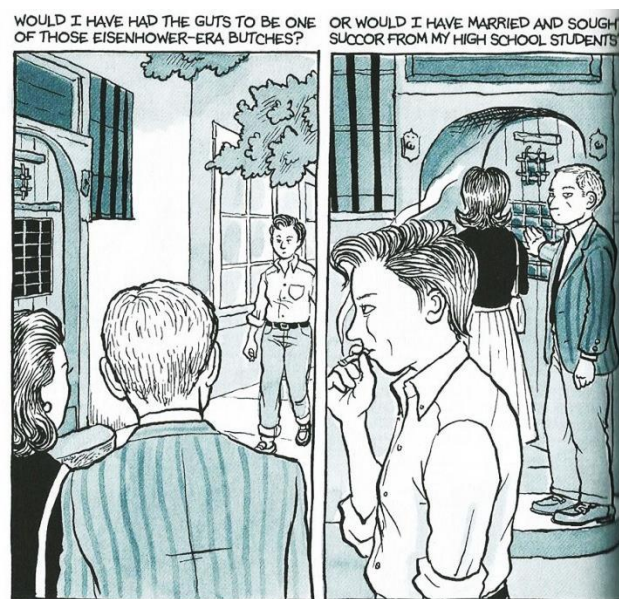


Fig. 21: Bruce recognizes a butch woman (Bechdel 108).

The only moment in which father and daughter share a process of coming out is found near the end of the graphic novel (Bechdel 220-221; see fig. 22.1 and 22.2). Watson describes these panels as a “tightly framed sequence of headshots” (140) on a black background that emphasize the characters. It is the only time in the novel in which father and daughter maintain a conversation about their respective sexualities. For Bruce, it is his first time explaining his experiences with men and confessing that he wanted to be a girl when he was younger. Alison, encouraged by her father’s attitude, replies that she wanted to be a boy instead. As McBean interestingly points out, the gaze of the characters never meet during this scene (144); they barely change their positions and there is a lack of movement and fluidity. Bruce is always looking straight ahead, whereas Alison looks at him in a few panels. As McBean remarks, “The two do not only look at each other as father and daughter; their gazes at each other are bound up with their queerly gendered and sexual desires” (155). Not only

that, they also confirm their positions as inverters of each other (McBean 115). For McBean, this conversation is frustrated in comparison with what father and daughter are able to communicate in their crossed gazes in other scenes (such as the one of the magazine). Yet, I want to draw attention to this scene because it is the only time when these characters express their sexual preferences openly. Bechdel subverts heteronormativity, but not in a radical way: there is never a clear, final answer to her questions about sexuality. The question “Remember?” is a mark of Alison’s desire to continue the conversation, but it is frustrated. This shows that Alison is able to talk about her sexuality, while her father is not.

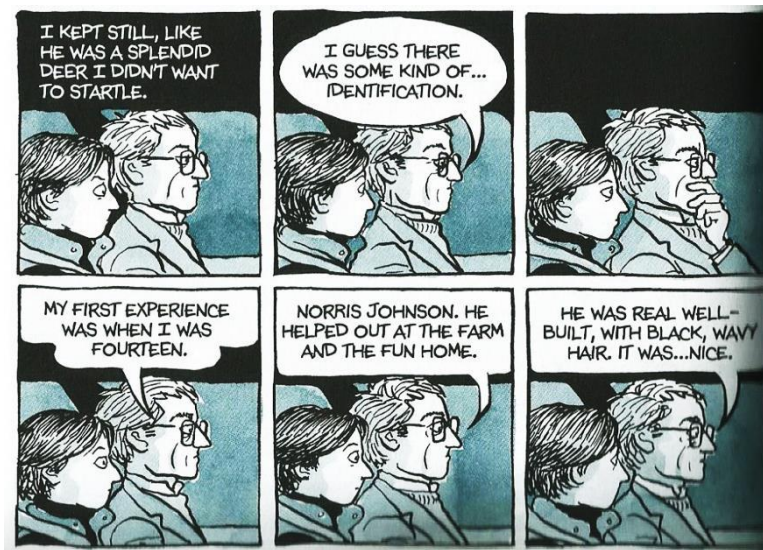


Fig. 22.1: Bruce reveals his queer experiences (Bechdel 220).

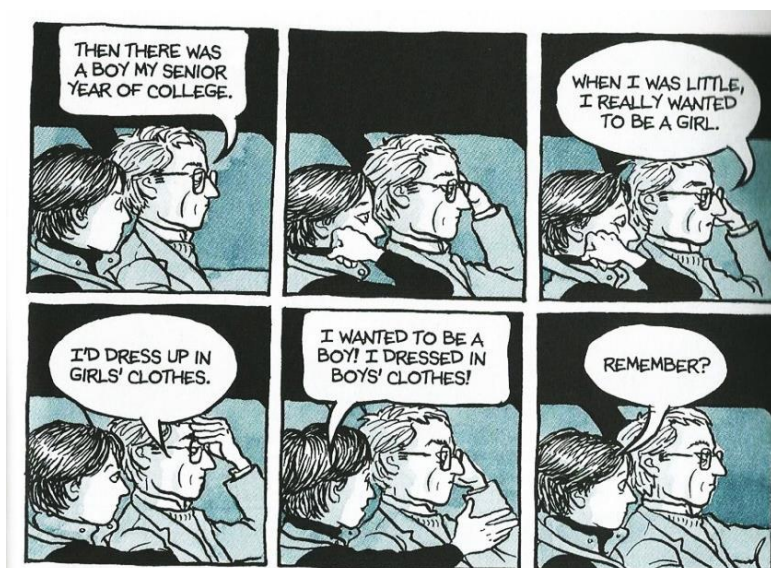


Fig. 22.2: Alison replies with her own (Bechdel 221).

According to Schoene, coming-out in a queer framework is “a strategic gesture of defiance,” never a “feat of liberation” (290). His words are worth quoting:

Within the framework of lesbian and gay liberation, coming out invariably coincides with a demand for integration and is thus perceived as a self-assertive step out of the political no-man’s-land of society’s obscure margins into the very center of mainstream decisionmaking. As Diana Fuss explains: “to be out, in common gay parlance, is precisely to be no longer out, to be out is to be finally outside of exteriority and all the exclusions and deprivations such outsiderhood imposes. Or, put another way, to be out is really to be in—inside the realm of the visible, the speakable, the culturally intelligible.” (289-290)

For Alison, to be out as a lesbian is *to be no longer out*, to start gaining agency of her own life, and to reach a certain position of power that allows her to become an artist that deals with queer themes in her work. Following the ideas of the quotation above, Bechdel moves from the margins to the “culturally intelligible,” to the visibility where her own experiences as a lesbian are open and can be shared with her readers. Bruce, however, remains in the invisibility: he appears as a distant, veiled figure even for his daughter. Alison’s coming-out story gives her a chance to question the (lack of) coming-out story of her father. Her reflection on her own story allows her to try to imagine the situation that her father had to face. Cvetkovich states that Alison and Bruce are “intertwined in a way that doesn’t allow easy distinctions between perverse and normal sexuality, obsession and art, or pre-liberation closeted queers and out and proud lesbians and gays” (119). Again, *Fun Home* presents an obvious ambiguity, which seems to have been Bechdel’s aim when projecting this text.

4.5 “He was there to catch me when I leapt”: Entwined Narratives

The last pages of *Fun Home* offer an interesting reflection in a particular scene near the end, where Alison and Bruce swim together and the mother is left behind (see fig. 23). Both father and daughter look happy and relaxed in one of the few panels in which they are seen having some sort of physical contact or intimacy. Bechdel finally recognizes that she has been trying to picture him as queer in the way that she is queer: “Perhaps my eagerness to claim his as ‘gay’ in the way I am ‘gay,’ as opposed to bisexual or some other category, is just a way of keeping him to myself [...]” (230).



Fig. 23: Alison and Bruce swim together (Bechdel 230).

The panel belonging to the very first page of *Fun Home* (see fig. 24) is re-enacted in the second panel corresponding to the last page of this graphic novel (see fig. 25). Alison is positioned above her father in both panels, with her arms extended reaching towards him, as Bruce is reaching towards her. Again, both panels are seen from behind Alison, as if inviting the reader to witness this moment of intimacy between father and daughter.



Fig. 24: "Icarian games" at the beginning of *Fun Home* (Bechdel 3).



Fig. 25: Alison jumps into her father's arms (Bechdel 232).

In the first panel, as Watson indicates, there is a “frontal close up” of the truck that killed Bruce (145). Bechdel takes this space to imagine that this was the last sight that her father saw before dying. In the second panel, Alison is seen from behind “midair over a pool, while her father, arms outstretched, waits to catch her when she jumps” (Watson 147). These two panels that compose the last page of *Fun Home* function as opposites: one moment is tragic, and the other is intimate, a moment between father and daughter. With these panels, Bechdel remarks the presence of her father in her life: “He was there to catch me when I leapt” (232). Her memories about him are controlled and created as an artifice, crafted in her graphic novel, but she still makes an emphasis on the presence of her father in her life. The fact that she decides to begin and end her text with the same pictures is very significant. As Watson points out, “the frame also recalls—and reverses—the Icarus-Daedalus myth, because Bechdel’s retelling of the story of her father’s life, for all its duplicities and shame, as intertwined with her own, enables her to “fly” as an artist and woman” (147).

I want to draw attention to the usage of the words “tricky reverse narration” and “entwined stories” in this panel, since I believe that they summarize the essence of *Fun*

Home: entwined stories; stories that are opposite but that meet at certain points or crossings. Yet, the memories and the presence of her father were there when she needed to create her book.

5. “My father’s end was my beginning”: A Conclusion and a New Opening

At this point of my dissertation, I want to emphasize the reconciliation of the figures of father and daughter, in the same way that Bechdel does at the end of her book. This reconciliation does not only take place in these characters, but also in the book itself, since the author does not present a limited closure. Watson draws attention to the snake as a symbol in *Fun Home* (138), and I consider that this symbol is useful for me to support my main argument. The snake in *Fun Home* appears almost in passing during the story that Bechdel narrates. As a child, Alison sees a snake during a family trip (Bechdel 114) and later she speculates about the snake that apparently her father saw when he was killed (116). For Bechdel, the serpent “is a vexingly ambiguous archetype” (see fig. 26), which represents a phallus and a symbol of the feminine at the same time (116). Bechdel is once again undoing the gender binary with this symbol: within one animal, both feminine and masculine identities are contained. As Watson remarks, “the narrative proposes a more fluid understanding of identification and desire, in which seeming oppositions are revealed to have always been convergent” (138). Instead of portraying herself and her father as completely opposed characters, Bechdel seeks for a final reconciliation: “Perhaps this undifferentiation, this nonduality, is the point” (116). Bechdel wants to reinforce the idea of non-duality, which brings her closer to her father, because they are not so different in the end.

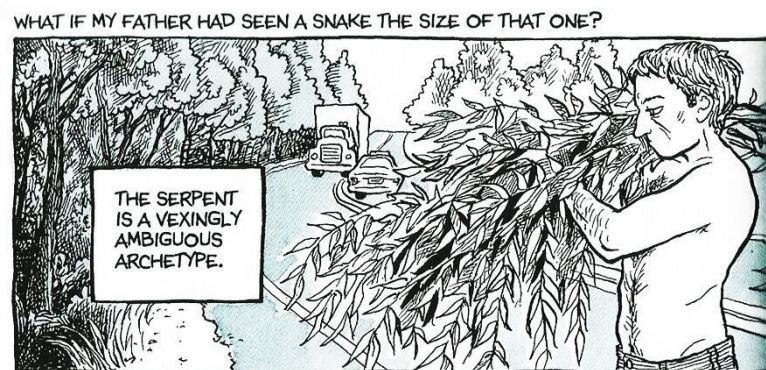


Fig. 26: The serpent as an “ambiguous archetype” (Bechdel 116).

It is most interesting to me to introduce now the second definition of the word “inverse” provided by the OED and which I, intentionally, did not mention before: “Inverted in position, order, or relations; that proceeds in the opposite or reverse direction or order; that *begins where something else ends, and ends where the other begins*” (my italics). Bruce and Alison can be understood as characters whose lives develop in parallel lines where they become

opposites of each other (“inverted” versions of each other) and where they only meet at certain points or “crossings” that are connected with their sexualities and gender identities. Yet, at the end, these two parallels converge into one: Alison takes the path that her father is unable to take, becoming the artist that he always wanted to be, and making him a fictional character in *Fun Home*. For Bechdel, her father’s end was her beginning. Bruce’s death served as a turning point for Alison to work on her memories and on her own ideas about her father, constructing and reconstructing a series of scenes of their daily lives into drawings, panels and words, until she created her ultimate artifice.

The picture that I have selected to finish this dissertation belongs not to the end, but to the middle of *Fun Home* (see fig. 27). I find that it is a compelling, powerful image in its own way: Bechdel draws in this panel the road where her father was killed, and uses it to talk about her own beginning after his absence. *Fun Home* offers at its end, as Watson suggests, a closure and an opening (134). While Bechdel goes through her father’s past, reworking her own memories and speculating about his identity and what happened to him, the stage is set for her to start her adult life with her sexuality and her desire to be an artist in the open. The road in this particular panel leads her to adulthood and to the beginning of her own truth. With *Fun Home*, Bechdel explores the artifice, not only as a memoir but also as an aesthetic product, thus showing a perfect control on her drawings and story. At the end, Alison became the *young daughter, young artificer*.

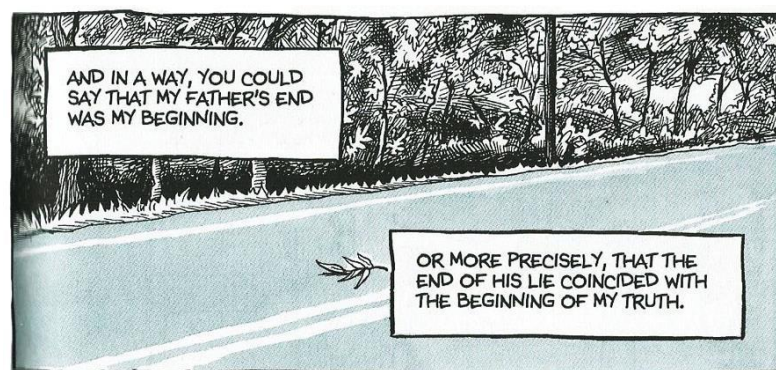


Fig. 27: The road: endings and beginnings (Bechdel 117).

I must admit that *Fun Home* represents a new beginning for me as well. Not only has it marked the end of my degree while being a very illustrative book to support my argument, it also has served me to discover that this is the field where I would like to do my future research. I would like to study this topic in depth, since this time I feel that I have only been able to explore its surface. Still, it was important for me to introduce myself in this field and

to use the final degree dissertation as an opportunity to focus my studies in a field that is lacking in this degree: the study of non-normative identities.

6. Works Cited

“About.” In *Alison Bechdel*. N.p, n.d. Web. 13 Mar. 2015.

Alvarez, John. “Bechdel, Alison.” *The Pennsylvanian Center for the Book*. 2009. Web. 13 Mar. 2015.

“Artifice.” *Oxford Dictionaries*, Oxford University Press, n.d. Web. 20 Mar. 2015.

“Artificer.” *Oxford Dictionaries*, Oxford University Press, n.d. Web. 20 Mar. 2015.

Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. New York: Mariner Book, 2007. Print.

Chute, Hillary L. “Animating an Archive: Repetition and Regeneration in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*.” *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. 175-217. Print.

Cvetkovich, Ann. “Drawing the Archive in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*.” *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36.1-2 (2008): 111-128. Web. 25 Apr. 2015.

Freedman, Ariela. “Drawing on Modernism in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*.” *Journal of Modern Literature* 32.4 (n.d.): 125-140. Web. 25 Apr. 2015.

“Inverse.” *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. Print.

Halberstam, Judith. *Female Masculinity*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998. Print.

Humm, Maggie. “Essentialism.” *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*. 2nd ed. New York: Prentice Hall, 1995. Print.

Marinucci, Mimi. *Feminism is Queer: The Intimate Connection between Queer and Feminist Theory*. London and New York: Zed Books, 2010. Print.

- McBean, Sam. "Seeing in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*." *Camera Obscura* 28.3 (2013): 103-123. Web. 25 Apr. 2015.
- McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics*. Northampton: Tundra, 1993. Print.
- Schoene, Berthold. "Queer Politics, Queer Theory, and the Future of 'Identity': Spiralling Out of Culture." *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory*. Ed. Ellen Rooney. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 283-301. Print.
- Sullivan, Nikki. *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory*. New York: New York University Press, 2007. Print.
- Warhol, Robyn. "The Space Between: A Narrative Approach to Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*." *College Literature* 38.3 (2011): 1-20. Web. 25 Apr. 2015.
- Watson, Julia. "Autographic Disclosures and Genealogies of Desire in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*." *Graphic Subjects: Critical Essays on Autobiography and Graphic Novels*. Ed. Michael A. Chaney. Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011. 123-151. Print.
- Wolk, Douglass. *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novel Work and What They Mean*. Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2007. Print.