



UNIVERSIDAD  
**COMPLUTENSE**  
MADRID

Facultad de Filología

**Redeeming in the Present the Failures of Our  
Hidden History. Towards a Theory of  
Acceptance in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*.**  
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Trabajo de Fin de Grado  
Grado en Estudios Ingleses  
Tutora: Dra. Carmen M. Méndez García  
Dpto. de Estudios Ingleses: Lingüística y Literatura  
Curso académico: 2018-2019  
Convocatoria: Junio 2019  
Calificación: Matrícula de Honor (10)



**Abstract:**

*Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006) is a compilation of Alison Bechdel's obsessive need to understand the true identity of her father; an attempt to find the truth of Bruce Bechdel's death. The author also explores and exorcizes the stigma and shame that homosexual people have endured, and revitalizes the present proposing two antagonistic visions of living and inserting sexuality into one's identity. In her effort to understand and cope with the death of her father, Alison Bechdel explores in her first memoir the themes of sexual discovery and sexual acceptance between the boundaries of repression and liberation, between the shameful past and the healing pride. Thus, this paper revises the lack of self-acceptance in the life of both characters (Alison and Bruce Bechdel) through the lenses of psycho-social analysis, queer theory and feminism, in order to dissociate the family heresy of stigmas of father and daughter bear through shared texts (based on Alison's discover of her father's closeted past, and her present celebration of her lesbian self through literature). In doing so, different theories by Erving Goffman, Judith Butler, Michael Foucault, Monique Wittig among others will be revised in order to connect them with Bechdel's graphic novel.

**Key words:** Alison Bechdel, stigma, performativity, queer history, sexual repression.

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## 1. Introduction.

There was a time when being gay was not allowed. Since the beginning of Christianity, homosexuality was persecuted and repressed because of its non-reproductive characteristics, and it was proclaimed to be against nature. However, this classification of homosexuality was merely based on societal values. It was not until the 18<sup>th</sup> century when different sexual acts, oral sex as an example, were criminalized as an act of “attempted sodomy” (Greenberg 400). By the 1780s, and as Greenberg exposes, there was “an upsurge in sodomy prosecutions that continued for half a century, especially in London” that persisted in the USA after the independence (354). Nevertheless, it was not until the 1890s when there was a rise of interest in male homosexuality due to the effeminate tendencies of American men which were supposedly caused by the absence of war, as one of the presidents of USA, Theodore Roosevelt, pointed out: "the greatest danger that a long period of profound peace offers to a nation is that of [creating] effeminate tendencies in young men" (qtd. in Greenberg 393). Curiously enough, laws and society penalized same sex intercourse between men while were ignoring sex between women (Jagose 13).

The beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the arrival of psychoanalysis did not help to the validation of homosexuality since this discipline cataloged it as pathology (for both men and women). Additionally, in the 20<sup>th</sup> mid-century, the behaviorist school appeared and shared its views on homosexuality and its solution. The general opinion of those thinkers was that neither homosexuality nor heterosexuality are inborn nature features but a result of encouragement of one of those sexual tendencies. Their solution was to treat them with electric shocks or with chemicals while being exposed to homosexual stimuli (Greenberg 431). Such an atmosphere was parallel to the homophile movement and the attempt to depathologize homosexual tendencies.

This persecution of gender and sexual dissidence was the origin of a collective narrative, whose beginning was based on the dangers of homophobia, of sexual repression, of depression, of suicides, and of stigmatization. *Fun Home* (2006), by Alison Bechdel, is a celebration of those stories that belong to queer history, a celebration of difference, but also is a compilation of stigmatic repression his father and she were experiencing. Bruce Allen Bechdel was Alison’s father, a closeted man who lived repressed in an unhappy marriage. He was a teacher and owned a funeral house. Apparently, he had a normative life.

However, this lifestyle was instigated by the fear of coming out as a homosexual man. Conversely, Alison was a girl who could experience life without any shame, even though she was homosexual too. Bechdel, as a writer, is able to capture the differences between Alison (a character based on her) and Bruce (her father). This differentiation exposes the split of behavior between the experience of being homosexual in a non-accepted environment; and how both generations carry the burden of the homosexual social stigma. The point of departure of this article is to problematize the contraposition of homosexual characters based on Alison and Bruce Bechdel, in the graphic novel *Fun Home*, and to shed light into the obscure history of homosexual narratives, and hidden closets, in order to overcome the sexual shame and fear instilled in us. In other words, I want to expose Bechdel's intention to contrast with Bruce's life experience to Alison's, and to search for herself and the queer community a living example of homosexual validation. The critical frame that will be carried throughout the entire text is Erving Goffman's *Stigma* (1963), and his concept of social stigma, parallel to Butler's ideas on performativity and gender dissidence. Thus, this article analyzes the repressive characterization of Bruce Bechdel, the problems of being gay in a small community, the authority of parents in gender development, and the importance of not replicating past failures by exploring new identities and new paths of sexual identification without being marked by society as stigmatized.

## **2. The Sex Which Is One: The Masculine Mystique and the Myth of American Masculinity.**

A man must commit to what it is expected from him: being a man. This is one of the gender rules that are asked of men in the United States of America in which Bruce Allen Bechdel was born. However, what does it mean to be a man? "Man" and "woman" as categories belong to the traditional gender dichotomy which discerns between masculinity and femininity. Butler describes gender as "a *corporeal style*, an 'act,' as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where 'performative' suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning" (139). Thus, the concept of gender as performance arises another question: what can be considered appropriate for a man in the context of post-World War Two? Erving Goffman contends in his seminal essay *Stigma* (1963) that the major norm of masculinity in America is to be "young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual

Protestant father of college education, fully employed of good complexion, weight and height, and a recent record in sports”(128). This is a first attempt to describe what values are praised in North-American society; which generates the “masculine mystique.” North-American sociologist Michael S. Kimmel explains that this concept means that the gender role assignment creates oppressions in men’s lives due to the gender impositions of masculine values. Additionally, Kimmel firmly believes that men during the ’50s and early ’60s must harmonize to “that impossible synthesis of sober, responsible breadwinner, imperviously stoic master of his fate and swashbuckling hero” (*Manhood in America* 173).

Bruce Bechdel was risen under the age of the masculine mystique (’40s, ’50s), based on the self-made man mold, and the whole community expected him to behave according to his gender. Butler stipulates that the body, conceptualized it as a node of patron behavior based on “figures of fantasy,” assimilates exterior patterns of other’s bodies performances and makes rules based on those perceptions. The result is a succession of exclusions and denials in future corporal conduct; imposing the absence and presence over the body’s surface of different acts, gestures, and desires (Butler 137-138). In concordance with Butler, Erving Goffman also exposes the trouble of acting and behaving erratically in a stereotypical environment, and the tensions created between his social and personal identity. But before that, one should understand the concept of ‘stigma’ regarding homosexual tendencies. Stigma is defined as an attribute that exposes the individual to a discrediting life (Goffman 3). Goffman creates a classification to understand the concept: first, “abominations of the body,” which deals with body malformations inter alia; second, “blemishes of individual character,” which includes mental disorders, addictions and homosexuality among others; and third, “the tribal stigma of race, nation, and religion.” He concretely discloses that homosexual tendencies are punished by the North-American society as unnatural passion, and dishonesty (Goffman 4). This categorization of same-sex love tendencies and same-sex intercourse is normal because it was not until the reformation of the DSM-III in 1987, when the American Psychiatric Association depathologized homosexuality from being an ego distortion (Spitzer xxi). Thus, the stigma was induced in queer people, and more specifically, in homosexual men, by creating in them the aforementioned masculine mystique, which entails to accomplish manhood and to cover their stigma through a process of ‘normification’. This term is understood as an effort the

stigmatized individual does to hide and compensate his failures in order to project towards society and family a distorted, and socially preferable, image of him (Goffman 31); concretely a performative cover of what it is considered acceptable within a community.

Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* presents the corrupted perception of her father as she reveals Bruce is a homosexual man. As a stigmatized individual, Bruce is bounded to this repressive masculine mystique which forces him to a heteronormative lifestyle, which makes him project a grieving and repressive sense of life. Alison's memoir opens with a strip in which both father and daughter are playing acrobatics. In this first panel, M.J. Kelley elucidates that there is a subtle foreshadowing of Bruce's death, created by an allusion to *Anna Karenina*, and as the heroine of Tolstoy's novel, Bruce Bechdel is also run over by "a large vehicle, probably of his own volition" (Kelley 44). Though both novels share similarities in the physical deaths of the main characters, they also partake of implications of gender and sexual repression. Notwithstanding the suicide of Bruce, the tensions between his social persona and Alison's perceptions of him are what carry the narrative structure. During this subjective act of seeing and portraying that Bechdel experiences while creating, she discloses the stigmatized private and social revelation of Bruce's mystique. Thus, the reader does not have open access to Bruce's experiences, but the caricature Alison produces through painting. The result of this observation is a cascade of examples of Bruce's social appearance, and his private self.

"He was an alchemist of appearance, a savant of surface, a Daedalus of décor" (*Fun Home* 6): this is the definition Bechdel sizes to create an accurate image of her father. Like a chameleon, Bruce is able to project into society a distorted image of his social persona. The truth is that an individual can manage to construct a certain public image which can be conformed to a brief selection of seen facts of suspicious veracity (Goffman 71). Thus, Bruce is able to create around himself an image of masculine behavior which contains his homosexual self. Hunter or craftsman, role model father or director of a funeral house, his image is always replicating a heteronormative man (see figure 1).

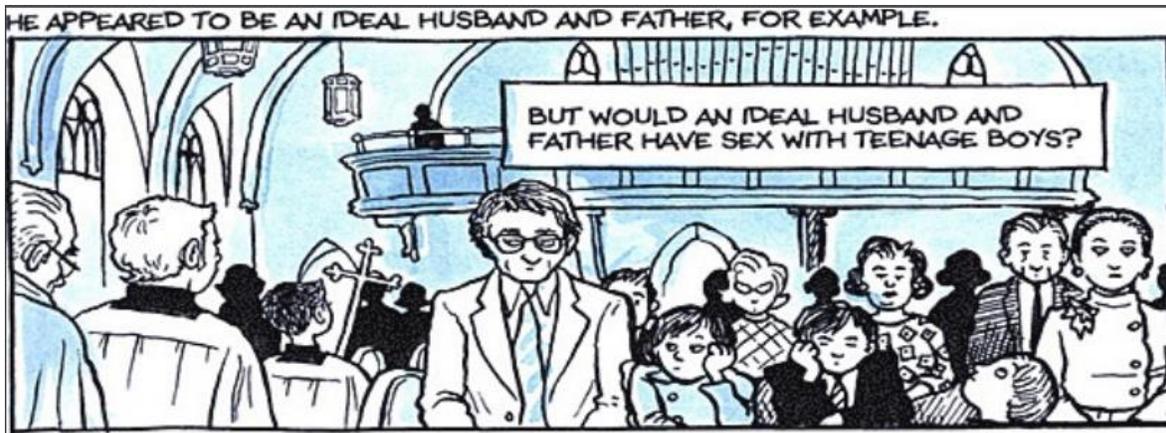


Figure 1. (*Fun Home* 17).

On a superficial layer, Bruce's marriage is stable, yet, it is all *façade*. He constructs the house but also does the same with his identity. In this superficial image, Bechdel represents her father as the head of the family, in a happy marriage, which obviously relates to the appropriate management of social and personal identity (see figure 1). It is a stereotypical representation of an American family of the '60s in which Bruce is characterized as an ideal husband, father, and man; attending mass with his family as a good Christian. In this panel, Bechdel draws her mother, Hellen Bechdel, who is trapped in what Goffman calls "conjugal service" (93) which is used as a cover for the failures Bruce commits through his life. As J. K. Gardiner elucidates, the principal questions regarding Bruce's social performance of behavior are who knows, what knows and when knows about his absences (195). The answer to who knows what is his failure is his wife since she is the one who exposes Bruce's masquerade at the end of the book: "and when we'd go to New York, He'd go out alone at night. Once he got body lice!" (*Fun Home* 216). Nevertheless, and as Alison insists: "he appeared to be an ideal husband and father for example. It's tempting to suggest, in retrospect, that our family was a sham" (17). Bruce's appearance becomes the major subject of his life and, that is, because as Kimmel reveals men are subjected to "maintain a manly front cover everything we do. [...] How we talk. How we walk. What we eat. Every mannerism, every movement contains a coded gendered language" (*The Gender of Desire* 36). This means that there is a huge pressure in men's behavior and the compulsory heterosexual norms of them which involves certain appearances in society. Additionally, this idea of perfect husband overextends beyond his body to the family members as seen in Bechdel's memoir (see fig. 1). In this aural

evocation of uncorrupt behavior, presented in figure 1, Alison detects that “something vital was missing” that there was a lack of “elasticity, a margin for error” (18) due to the violent way of acting he performs over the years towards his family. As shown, Bruce is capable of shouting or hitting violently the members of the family when the appearance of perfection in his life is tainted. As a victim of the masculine mystique, Bruce must not let any situation turn against the equilibrium of his normative ideal life. His way of obtaining and restoring any situation in which his heterosexuality is questioned is carried out by force, because “the definition of manhood is a man *in* power, a man *with* power, and a man *of* power” (*The Gender of Desire* 30). Kimmel understands that a source of masculinity is violence (*The Gender of Desire* 36) which might be intensified, as Goffman explains, because of his condition as a closeted homosexual and the tendency stigmatized people have to be aggressive in mixed social situations (18). Thus, Bruce’s appearance is preserved by his violent masquerade. Through these violent acts, he pretends to be in line with the masculine gender impositions; but also, it helps him to control and avoid any kind of stigma symbols in his family. Normality for Bruce is not a possibility but an imposition, not to create any suspicious in the arena of gender performativity that the public spaces are.

In his private sphere, Bruce appears to be more accessible to expose his true self; a partial truth in which he is condemned to live. Indeed, Bechdel stresses: “my father began to seem morally suspect to me long before I knew that he actually had a dark secret” (*Fun Home* 16). While Alison is observing him applying a bronzing stick to his face, or even when she makes a small comment on his tie and he needs nervously to go upstairs to change it (18-19), Bruce’s masculine performativity is always in the spotlight. His obsession for appearances is justified since, as Goffman claims, “the stigmatized individual may find that he feels unsure of how we normals will identify him and receive him” (13). As Bechdel continues to analyze Bruce, she gets into the following conclusion: “his shame inhabited our house as pervasively and invisibly as the aromatic musk of aging mahogany” (*Fun Home* 20), as if the house were a result of his sexual repression projected into the house decoration. Interior design and ornamentation is a task which is typically bounded to women’s activities, however, Bruce’s ability and passion do not surrender “to the laws of society, but to those of his craft” (7). The result of Bruce’s social image is considered for Alison as a replica of a Fitzgerald character, who represents in *The Great Gatsby* the figure

of the self-made man; and Christopher Pizzano exposes that in reading, Bruce Bechdel learns to fake his identity into a straight man (115). Nevertheless, in an odd turn, Alison discovers her father's failure when she comes out to her family and when she gets access to a part of his real persona through some photos that Bechdel draws throughout the novel.

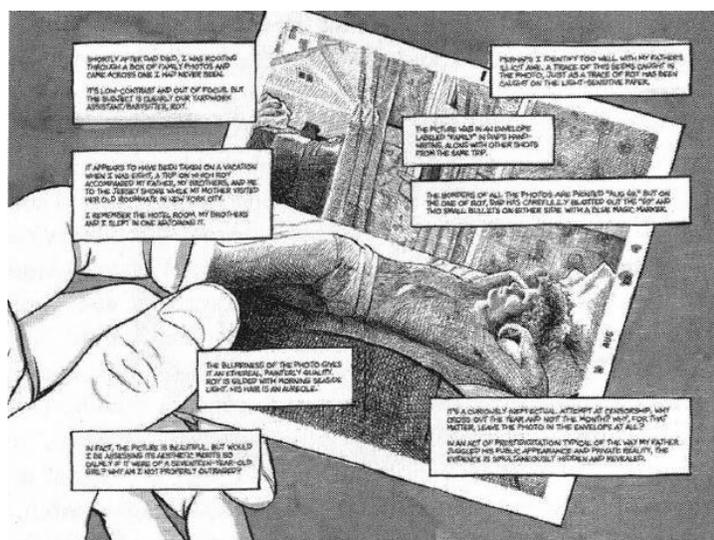


Figure 2. (*Fun Home* 100-101)

This hidden side that Alison discovered of her father is captured in drawn photos, from where she interprets Bruce is experiencing different pleasures regarding homosexuality and cross-dressing. Pizzano argues that “even if, as we will see in *Fun Home*, pleasure might seem to be its own reward and its own justification, invariably it must enter a political and social economy that works to value it on other terms” (113). In this case, pleasure experienced by Bruce became the subject of Bechdel’s criticism for being a pedophile: “but would an ideal husband and father have sex with teenage boys?” (*Fun Home* 17); but also the author criticizes how Bruce is concealing his secrets and regrets, in order to surrender to heteronormativity. In these photos, Bechdel ponders over Bruce’s decision of not accepting his gender identity and sexuality while remaining to be a closeted homosexual. This turns the making of *Fun Home* into a political stance against Bruce’s choice in life to subdue to the masculine mystique and its toxicity. Regarding the first photo (see figure 2), Alison classifies it as “an act of prestidigitation typical of the way my father juggles his public and private reality, the evidence is simultaneously hidden and revealed” (101). Additionally, Bechdel criticizes slightly her father: “in fact, the picture is beautiful but would I be adding its aesthetics merits so calmly if it were of a seventeen-

year-old girl? Why am I not properly outraged?” (100). Hélèn Tison contends that “the composition [of the first photo presented in the novel (see figure 2)] forcefully places the reader in a position of identification with Bruce as spelled out in the text box in the upper right-hand corner” (350). In this identification among reader, writer, and fictional character, Alison Bechdel attempts to persuade the reader to get involved with her mixed feelings while realizing his father is a homosexual man, who has sexual affairs with minors. However, Bechdel positions herself as the moral and ethical source of revision of her father’s image.



Figure 3. (*Fun Home* 120)

The next relevant photo that Bechdel offers is the one in which Bruce is “wearing a woman’s bathing suit” (*Fun Home* 120) (see figure 3). At first, Alison catalogs it as a fraternity prank but then she discovers in it that “the pose he strikes is not mincing or silly at all. He’s lissome, elegant” (120). By picturing this photo and Alison’s thoughts, Bechdel reveals the *façade* of Bruce’s public image, and deconstructs the social image that he is carrying during his marriage, as a white Anglican heterosexual man, father of three children and a good citizen. In this photo (see figure 3), he is playing with his gender, adopting and exploring his femininity, playing with clothes. Yet, in this sexual experimentation, while he is in his early twenties, Bruce exposes another lie that he tells to her daughter when he comes out of the closet with his family: “there’ve been a few times I thought I might have preferred to take a stand. but I never really considered it when I was young. In fact, I don’t htink [sic] I ever considered it till I was over thirty” (211). Bruce suffers what Goffman catalogs as “in-deeper-ism” which means “pressure to elaborate a lie further and further to prevent a given disclosure” (83). What Bruce Bechdel wants is to conceal his sexuality, disregarding any participation in the construction of his social persona and a sham family to

be used as cover for his own stigma. In a latter letter, Bruce confesses his sexual life and shame to Alison: “in the fifties it was not even considered an option. [...] You know I was never even in New York until I was about twenty. But even seeing it then was not quite a revelation. There was not much in the Village that I hadn’t known in Beecher Creek” (*Fun Home* 212). Bruce’s conscience does not allow him to show his wounds of a hidden history in the closet at first. Through this experimentation of letting his masculine mystique disappears, he shows his sorrowful stigmata to his daughter, the only gay stronghold that still is with him. Goffman explains that in the process of acquiring and self-realizing the stigma in oneself, the marked person is likely to surround him/herself by people who share the same or similar stigmas (36). For Bruce, Alison is his way out of the lie, out of the self-compassion and victimization. Besides, he sees in his daughter a companion to understand and accept himself as a stigmatized subject. Soon after Bruce becomes homosexual in the eyes of his family, he dies. Monica B. Pearl stresses that Bechdel’s ambivalence in the memoir revolves around the death of her father and whether she killed him by coming out (299). Nevertheless, the graphic novel goes beyond Bruce’s suicide to create a stigma acknowledgment narrative in order to search for a queer liberation through his image as a prisoner of masculine gender values, whose life is trapped into a hermetic body forced to commit with the mimicry of heteronormativity, against the presented childhood image of Alison. The major question of Bruce’s life is not really why he commits suicide or how he passes away but how he lives without his own acceptance.

## **2. Crime and Punishment: The *Panopticon* Among us.**

From the beginning of the novel, allusions to the geographical disposition of Beecher Creek are revealed as a symbol of repression in the construction of gender identities. Bechdel presents us with two antagonistic heroes (Alison and Bruce) as counterparts one from the other. On the one hand, Bruce represents the sexually repressed homosexual people living in small communities; and on the other hand, Alison exemplifies those people who are capable of growing their homosexual self and accepting the burden of her stigma for being homosexual, thanks to the discretion and anonymity New York offers to her.

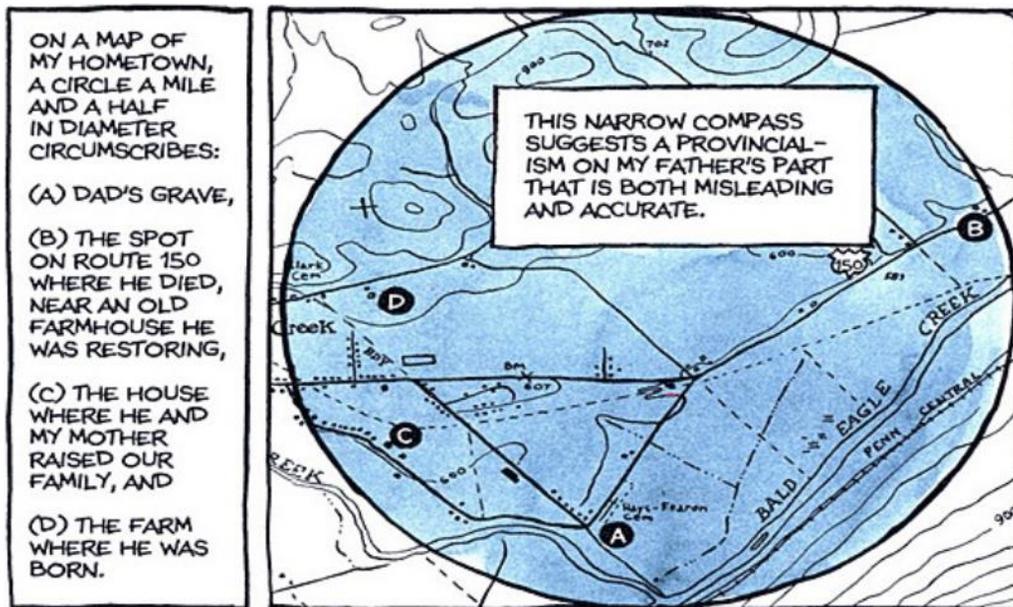


Figure 4. (*Fun Home* 30)

Fiorenzo Iuliano contends that Bechdel's use of maps is "a mark of her father's solipsistic existence," a possible instance of his provincialism (296). Bruce's life can be reduced to this picture because it can be drawn within a map. In his essay "Refugee from Amerika: A Gay Manifesto" (1970), queer activist Carl Wittman expresses that small towns are places which "endanger [...] any hope of decent life" (157), i.e. small towns in North America create unities of hegemonic heteronormative dominance which coils around homosexuals and force them to mimic the straight rural society to the point of asphyxiation. As Bechdel's reflections point out: "If only he'd been able to escape the gravitational tug of Beech Creek, I tell myself, his particular sun might not have set in so precipitate a manner" (*Fun Home* 125), i.e. Bruce Bechdel's problems comes from the place where he lives. The area explicitly depicted by Bechdel on two occasions in the book is inscribed in two big circles as imitating a *panopticon*; or metaphorically representing the corseted imprisonment his father was living in (see figure 4). These circles are configurations of the living map his father is captured in; as if his own life were within a circular cage in Beecher Creek, from which he could escape in special moments for liberation. This geographical description alludes to Foucault's interpretation of Bentham's *panopticon* concept explained in *Discipline and Punishment* (1975). Philosopher Michael Foucault defines the *panopticon* as a circular area that contains a huge tower in the middle that was used to supervise prisoners (200). He considers that the major use of this schema is "to induce a permanent visibility

that assures the automatic function of power” (*Discipline and Punishment* 201). In spite of its being a model of a penitentiary, the *panopticon* “must not being understood as dream building,” but as a schema that can monitor all social stratum since the power of discipline and punishment relies on the social body (*Discipline and Punishment* 205-207). In these panoptical terms, Bechdel’s town could correlate to a *panopticon* in which all gender identifications are observed by the inhabitants of the town but also are observed and controlled by oneself; as Bruce does with his appearance. In this way, it forms a structure of surveillance over the population of Beecher Creek, understanding as its *panopticon* the town itself as an unconfirmed identity, a global persona, which initiates Bruce’s sexual repression. Alison Bechdel fully understands that small towns in North America follow their own values since the public arena is where heteronormative values domain the dissidents and the dissidents restrained themselves. She is aware that this annular construction around the city was one of the reasons her father committed suicide: “There’s no mystery! He killed himself because he was a manic-depressive, closeted fag and he couldn’t face living in this small town one more second.” (*Fun Home* 125). In this identification of geographies, Margaret Galvan contends that Alison is “the one who survives, the one who moves beyond the map” (189); and indeed she is the one who takes refuge in the metaphorical concentration camp which is her university and later on New York. As a homosexual writer, she was capable of breaking with Bruce’s values, and experimenting without the repression of small towns, without the necessity of maintaining her heteronormative social persona. Just when she liberates from those elements that restrain her, she is capable of writing *Fun Home*.

### **3. The Sex Which Is Not One: Inheriting Stigmas.**

One question that enfolds the narrative of *Fun Home* is the following: “Would I have the guts to be one of those Eisenhower-era butches? Or would I have married and sought succor from my high school students?” (108). These questions represent verbally Alison’s dichotomy between her own aesthetic and sexual acceptance and the fear of replicating her father’s life. As a girl, Alison is trapped in Bruce’s aesthetic impositions in order to fulfill his repressed femininity; or maybe he is just schooling his daughter to be aware of her stigma: being a “butch”. Through different panels, the reader is exposed to the

girlish aesthetic principles which Alison is forced to acquire. In this process, Alison becomes aware of aesthetic values associated with femininity, as if she were inheriting her father's external layer of identification onto her body. Butler alleges that "the body appears as a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed as the instrument through which an appropriative and interpretive will determines a cultural meaning for itself" (*Gender Trouble* 8). However, the elections regarding the appropriative and interpretive will over our own body are subjected to a superior entity since every life is "given over from the start to the world of others" (*Undoing Gender* 21). This exposure to others implicates a risk of violence towards our own embodiment "that includes the eradication of our being at the one end, and the physical support for our lives, at the other" (*Undoing Gender* 23). Focusing on Alison, as female, she is forced to perform femininity. Philosopher and psychoanalyst, Luce Irigaray, in her work *The Sex Which Is Not One*, elucidates that just because one is born a human female, women's lives are altered forever (207). This altered situation is because men define themselves with positive attributes whereas the negative counterparts of those attributes are assigned to women by default (Irigaray 207). These gender-associated values imprison women in the discourse of "fatherland, family, [and] home" (Irigaray 212); tearing down any possibility to express their multiplicity (Irigaray 210). In relation with *Fun Home*, Alison is guided by her father's discourse to become a woman. This value inculcation is indeed an inheritance of stigmata, which came from Bruce while he was forcing her to be more feminine.

The novel starts with the chapter "Old father, old artificer" (*Fun Home* 1). "Artificer" stands out because of its double meaning, craftsman, but also author, and indeed, Bruce is the creator of his house (by decoration); of his family (as a cover); but also of his daughter (in gender performativity terms). As Bechdel elucidates, Bruce is invading the aesthetic gender performance that Alison conveys through her body: "while I was trying to compensate for something unmanly in him... He was attempting to express something feminine through me" (*Fun Home* 98). His decisions are always directed to embellish her in a traditional style as much as he projects his own fears as an unconfessed gay man, against gender anomaly and sexual dissidence in his progeny. This stigmatic repression is caused by Bruce's closeted homosexuality, which triggers different episodes in which he compels his daughter to wear a barrette, to wear a pearl necklace, or to wear clothes Bruce

buys for her. This means that Bruce forces Alison to surrender to the compulsory gender norms in relation with feminine attitudes, categorizing her as the sex which is not one, concept created by Irigaray to expose that female entities are defined by men for men; as Bechdel expresses: “it was a war of a cross-purposes, and so doomed to perpetual escalation” (*Fun Home* 98). Alison’s internal fight became a political conflict just in Bechdel’s act of portraying her past reality to an audience and staging her gender struggle through vignettes.



Figure 5 (*Fun Home* 97)

The relevance of this battle between Bruce’s aesthetic repression and Alison’s internal gender trouble can be seen in figure 5, which reveals the contingency of breaking the realm of traditional values by the effort of self-conceiving. First, Bechdel expresses through the panel a challenge to Alison’s “‘cognitive recognition’ [which is] a perceptual act of placing an individual, whether as having a particular social identity or a particular personal identity” (Goffman 67); but also represents an effort to politicize her life so that “the next generation of his fellows may greatly profit” (Goffman 114), i.e. Alison’s life is an example in which any other person who carries the same stigma, being a homosexual, can learn from. In this particular vignette, Bechdel creates political defiance against her father’s aesthetic view and the cognitive recognition he wanted for Alison, by contrasting her almost naked body, turned to the wall, without a face, without an identity, looking to a dress. This panel (see figure 5) is created as a political stance to expose Alison’s stigma without knowing she is oppressed. Butler contends that,

[In order] to be oppressed you must first become intelligible ... [if still you are unintelligible is] to find that you have not yet achieved access to the human, to find yourself speaking only and always as if you were human, but with the sense that you are not, to find that your language is hollow, that no recognition is forthcoming because the norms by which recognition takes place are not in your favor. (*Undoing Gender* 30)

In *Fun Home*, Bechdel's representation of Alison is to categorize her experience, lost in the realm of the father as an unintelligible being who does not recognize her problem. In consonance with Butler's thoughts, Bechdel creates a language based on drawings to disclose Alison's struggle related to her gender misidentification. Additionally, Bechdel presents Alison as an entity oppressed by the system of gender values, as an aesthetic slave to her father.

The second factor from which Alison acknowledges her stigmatic identification comes from the external models of femininity which disturbs Alison's conception of womanhood: first, with the encounter of a naked woman on a calendar; and second, when she and her father were at a luncheonette, where Alison encounters a female truck driver. The discovery of a pornographic photo of a woman in a calendar produces a reorganization of Alison's thoughts, "as if I'd been stripped naked myself, inexplicably ashamed" (*Fun Home* 112). As Sam McBean elucidates, "these pages show Alison's feelings of constraint as a young woman -namely the way in which she sees how women are to be looked at, displayed, and sexualized" (108). Paradoxically, this awareness of female sexual objectification is related to Irigaray's thoughts, which expose that "women are trapped in a system of meaning which serves the auto-affection of the (masculine) subject" (123). Thus, Alison is able to recodify the meaning of the calendar, and the symbolic value of a woman treated like an erotic object for men, which induces her to a misidentification of her femininity, asking her brother to call her Albert (McBean 108). Hence, Alison is capable of unfastening herself from the masculine discourse, categorizing the woman on the calendar as a servant for men's pleasure. Secondly, the other model that Alison uses for her development as a woman and as a lesbian is the truck driver. While they are eating at the luncheonette, Alison keeps her eyes on this "bulldyke" woman and Bruce asks her if she

wants to look like her. Alison's response is "no" (*Fun Home* 118-119). In this particular scene, Susan R. Van Dyne expresses that "Alison's response demonstrates that conscious resistance cannot prevent the process of normative interpellation, but the unconscious identification she experiences will 'sustain' her as much as it 'haunts' her father" (111). Indeed, Alison imitates the performance expected from her and rejects these masculine tendencies. However, Bechdel reveals to the reader that this vision "sustained" Alison spiritually for years (*Fun Home* 119), as if it were a role model, a forerunner, a point of departure for her fantasy in gender performance. As Butler stipulates, "fantasy is not the opposite of reality; it is what reality forecloses, and, as a result, it defines the limits of reality, constituting it as its constitutive outside. The critical promise of fantasy, when and where it exists, is to challenge the contingent limits of what will and will not be called reality" (*Undoing Gender* 29). This means that fantasy is a contingency tool which enabled Alison to desire other definitions of femininity beyond the prohibitions of gender. This pattern of performativity offered by the truck driver becomes an aspiration for Alison's gender identity; as if it were her desired parody since all gender performances are parodies or imitations, that authorizes her to challenge her category as woman, and go beyond the aesthetic definition Bruce imposes on her. Additionally, Butler contends that "gender identity might be reconceived as a personal/cultural history of received meanings subject to a set of imitative practices which refer laterally to other imitations and which jointly, construct the illusion of a primary and interior gendered self or parody the mechanism of that construction" (*Gender Trouble* 138). In *Fun Home*, Alison gathers this image of a butch woman in her memory as a fantasy object of performativity, as a parody of the construction of gender, but also as her true gendered self. In this remembrance, Alison Bechdel starts to disassemble the aesthetic imposition of her father, just by gathering this fantasy, and presenting it to the readers, as the beginning of the death of Bruce's artifice.

#### **4. A Post-Stonewall Daughter: Pride Beyond Prejudices.**

As an author, Bechdel decides that by fictionalizing Alison, she should start to define her as something beyond the category of woman, beyond Bruce's desires, and portrays herself as an intelligible being, who now should be understood as human. In Alison's process of intelligibility, Bechdel draws Alison's aesthetic development since

she goes outside Beecher Creek. As Goffman reflects in his essay, “when an individual leaves a community after residing there for some years, he leaves a personal identification behind” (Goffman 78); hence, when Alison escapes the *panopticon* which encloses her in the straight mold, she initiates an exploration of her sexuality and gender performativity. According to Ian MacRae, Bechdel offers a “plurality of voices” which “allow for a more in-depth portrayal of the past, and also creates a distancing, analytical and critical vision, as Alison can both be engaged in dialogue and event (as a youth) in a panel and comment upon it (as an adult artist, some twenty-seven years after the fact) in the text’s voice-over narration” (135). In this amalgamation of narrators across time, Bechdel portrays herself as the one who succeeded in accepting her condition as a masculine woman, and as a homosexual. Indeed, the author takes a stance against her father’s decisions in life, as if Bruce’s vision of homosexuality were the switch for her to start a new life: “and in a way, you could say that my father’s end was my beginning. Or more precisely, that the end of his lie coincided with the beginning of my truth” (*Fun Home* 117). Goffman asserts that “often those with a particular stigma sponsors a publication of some kind which gives voice to shared feelings, consolidating and stabilizing for the reader his sense of the realness of ‘his’ group and his attachment to it” (21). Thus, Bechdel represents her father as a negative example for the queer community and for her, positioning Alison’s image as the new model for behavior in LGBT+ society. Bechdel’s intentions are to represent her living experience to a homosexual audience in order to offer models which can initiate a process of intelligibility in the reader. It is usual that stories of heroes bearing a particular stigma, in order to create exemplary moral conducts, originate new patterns of behavior (Goffman 21). As such, both performativity patterns are analyzed together by an adult Bechdel, who will take a political stance against her progenitor: “maybe I’m trying to render my senseless personal loss meaningful by linking it, however posthumously, to a more coherent narrative. A narrative of injustice, of sexual shame and fear, of life considered expendable [sic]” (*Fun Home* 196). Bechdel openly criticizes Bruce’s life by elaborating her father’s narrative of sexual shame and fear. Additionally, the moral burden of the characterization sanctions the image of Bruce and approves Alison’s dissidence with the traditional values.

A way Bechdel has of elevating morally the figure of Alison is to represent her learning from others experience. Thus, Alison is presented in a compulsive exploration of

homosexual lives, seeking historical recognition, produced by reading. She catalogs her sexual identification as lesbian, and it comes as “a revelation not of the flesh, but of the mind” (*Fun Home* 74). MacRae insists upon the fact that Bechdel “is creating culture as she is documenting it, forging a self-legitimizing and accurate cultural history not only of hers, but also for her generation” (146). Alison’s compilation of homosexual texts grows as much as her own knowledge of her lesbian self does; almost parallel to one of the principles of philosopher Monique Wittig: “lesbians should always remember and acknowledge how ‘unnatural,’ compelling, totally oppressive and destructive being a ‘woman’ was for us in the old days before the women’s liberation movement” (12), i.e. one way of liberation comes from others’ experiences that we must understand. Hence, once she is at University, Alison starts to trace her bookish upbringing by reading the most relevant works in homosexual literature, and Bechdel presents it to the readers, to find different forerunners, examples of sexual deviations that illustrate us as intelligible beings, as part of a community which shares experiences (e.g. the appearances of *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) by Radclyffe Hall, *Maurice* by Foster, published posthumously in 1971, or the studies of Adrienne Rich, inter alia). Besides, by drawing Alison’s investigation of queer literature, Bechdel elevates her political figure as an example of the right way to live, which is to be involved in your own culture as part of the LGBTQ+ community. Wittig elucidates that we live within a system where the straight mind is “totalizing [the] interpretation of history, social reality, culture, language, and all the subjective phenomena at the same time” (27). This straight mind creates upon woman a generalization of sexual living experiences according to the “woman myth” (Wittig 11), i.e. women should be defined as the sexual partner of men; disassociating same sex desire and femininity in her gender performance. Concurrently, Alison fights against the political system that her father uses as an indoctrination, a system based on compulsory heterosexuality and aesthetic impositions in which disallows a woman to be masculine. This process corresponds to the concept of “‘good adjustment’, which means “that the stigmatized individual cheerfully and unself-consciously accept himself as essentially the same as normals” (Goffman 121). This was indeed part of the process Alison carries out to become intelligible, and validated.

Soon after Alison’s literary investigations, she becomes aware of her sexual discovery and initiates a process by which she presents herself as a lesbian to her family, in

a letter to her parents: “I had made an announcement to my parents. I am a lesbian” (*Fun Home* 58). This act turned political since Alison contradicted the regulations her parents imposed on her; and Bechdel presents it to an audience in a book. Wittig exposes that “a lesbian *has* to be something else, a not-woman, a not-man, a product of society, not a product of nature, for there is not nature in society” (13). Thus, Alison’s coming out challenges the compulsory heterosexuality, where she has to label herself to her family in order to be a product of society, to exist, and to be as natural as any other human being. In other words, Alison has to “descend into the underworld” (*Fun Home* 209) of her lesbian existence, and has to create a space of her own to recognize herself as a human, in order to transform the deviant into acceptable; which is done through Bechdel’s act of writing this graphic novel. Still, the reaction of Alison’s parents is quite different. On the one hand, her father does not fully stand by her but he does not deny her to be homosexual either; on the other hand, her mother is not convinced of her ‘decision’: “I imagine that, if in the long run, your choice turns out to be a serious one, I could live with it, but I truly hope that this does not happen. There are dangers that your idealistic outlook seems not to have faced” (*Fun Home* 77). However, this does not stop Alison from her experimentation and soon her identification with lesbianism extended to physical practice representing her early sex experimentation.

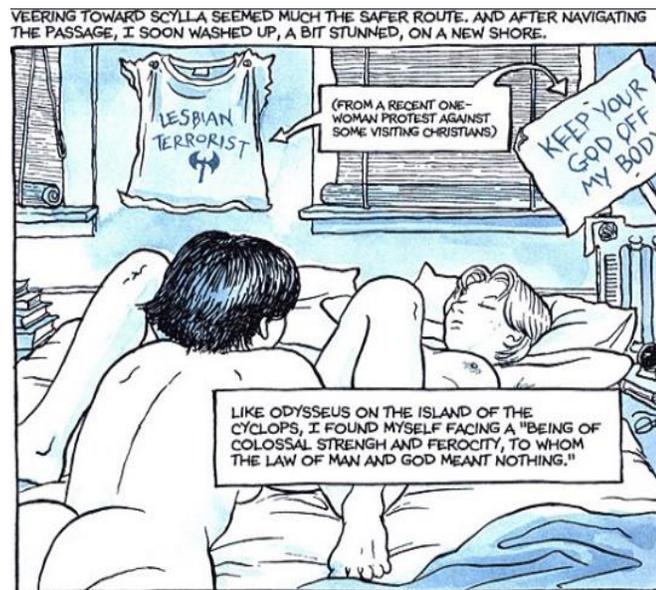


Figure 6. (*Fun Home* 214)

At the same time Bechdel is portraying Alison's sexuality, she also takes a political stance towards a self-acceptance process, by depicting sexual intercourse in which there is no psychiatric deviation implied, no divine punishment, no any sense of guilt (see figure 6). The physical environment in which sexual intercourse is represented is surrounded around feminist lemmas: "keep your God off my body" or "Lesbian terrorism" (*Fun Home* 214). These political signs advocates for a vindication of the lesbian subject, and as Butler claims: "indeed, the task of international lesbian and gay politics is no less than a remaking of reality, a reconstituting of the human" (*Undoing Gender* 30). Supplementary to Butler's thoughts, feminist Mary Dely affirms, "women loving women do not seek to lose our identity, but to express it, discover it, create it" (234). Thus, Bechdel wants to create a dialogue between the present, and the past self, exhibiting the power of the erotic as a resource for self-acceptance through the use of sex. Feminist Audre Lorde claims that recognizing the erotic as a source of knowledge and nourishment, we will empower our soul to cease the resignation, depression and self-negation within our lives (56-58). In the same line of thought and regarding *Fun Home*, Julia Watson contends: "it is Alison who will fly on the wings of homosexual desire that her father never trusted" (35). In this sense, Bechdel recreates sex scenes in which Alison discovered herself as a lesbian, without self-negating her gender identity, not resigning to replicate her father's repressive life. The author's choice of representation offers enough material to project her experience as a source of power, as a hero in the battle against heteronormativity. This struggle towards the validation of homoerotic desire is enacted by a *cunnilingus* between two women, and portrays a positive image of lesbianism. Moreover, Alison contends: "in true heroic fashion, I moved towards the thing I feared. Yet while Odysseus schemed desperately to escape Polyphemus's cave, I found that I was quite content to stay here forever" (*Fun Home* 214). In making connections with the *Odyssey* Bechdel contributes to the process of self-validation, relating her character to Greece epic mythology. Thus, Alison experienced the power of the erotic passion in bed, but Bechdel divulges it to the reader, as a source of her knowledge, which represents the validation of her sexual deviation.

## **5. Conclusion.**

Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* reflects her discomfort with her father, Bruce Bechdel, with his choice of gender performance, and with his vision of life based on shame and repugnance for being homosexual. Certainly, Bechdel's memoir is a narrative of stigmatization and self-revulsion, but also it deals with the insecurities in newer generations. The character of Bruce Bechdel is offered to set the old values and the archaic western tradition of invalidating the other, of repressing the other. Additionally, Bechdel fictionalizes her experience to represent to an audience her father's indoctrination of her bodily expressions, of her behavior. Nevertheless, Bechdel also leverages Bruce's narrative to enact a mirrored discourse through which she encourages an audience to express themselves as intelligible human beings, i.e. to be real, but also to fight against our own psychic oppressions. Alison Bechdel shares how she acknowledged her stigma, and incorporated it into herself as a sign of rebellious bravery, creating a new theory of acceptance. Through history learning or through sexual enjoyment, the author validates new references of what being means in a heterosexual society, enriching the LGBTQ+ movement. Therefore, the question *Fun Home* posits to the reader is: and now, what about you? Are you going to surrender to mimicry or to be yourself?

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