Degree Project

Level: Master’s

A Queer Phenomenological Analysis of Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*

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Subject/main field of study: English (literature)
Course code: EN3063
Credits: 15 ECTS
Date of examination: 16 December 2022
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I suppose that a lifetime spent hiding one’s erotic truth could have a cumulative renunciatory effect. Sexual shame is in itself a kind of death.
— Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*

**Introduction**

*Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* was published in 2006. However, much attention has been given to this graphic memoir by American cartoonist Alison Bechdel after its adaptation into the successful Broadway musical in 2015, where it won numerous awards and was labelled in *Vulture*, the online art magazine, as a “Play Therapy”¹ (Anderst 105). According to its author, “*Fun Home* is an intensely personal story, but it is also a story about the way our most intimate selves can’t escape their political and cultural context. This is illustrated by how different my father’s life turned out from mine” (Bechdel 2009). Alison Bechdel’s speech resonates through her graphic memoir, which reflects the realities of queer people, not only in the 1950s, when her father lived, but also in Alison Bechdel’s time through her own inclusion as a character in *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (hereafter: *Fun Home*). Bechdel,² using her family as characters in the memoir, forces readers to understand the possible reasons behind her father’s alleged suicide and, at the same time, the consequences of repressing crucial aspects of one’s identity by following normativity.

Through the narrative of her childhood and adolescence, Bechdel starts a creative process of collecting material to introduce her father Bruce, an English teacher in a local high school and a family man who runs a funeral home in Beech
Creek, Pennsylvania. Bruce is a married and closeted homosexual whose relationships with other men remain secret not only because some of them are his underage students but also due to the sexual repression he undergoes. As a child and adolescent, Alison spent her time between her family home — a neogothic mansion which Bruce was obsessed with redecorating and restoring — and the funeral home, a family business that Bruce inherited and Alison and her family ironically nickname *Fun Home*. By using this setting, Alison Bechdel can insightfully reflect on her own identity and her father’s past to come to terms with the conflicting feelings about the consequences that supposedly contributed to his tragic death. The revision Alison does to explore the story allows her to reflect on her own coming-of-age and the historical background in which her father lived; the Watergate scandal, Stonewall riots, AIDS, and Eisenhower and Reagan’s respective presidencies.

The memoir starts by showing the opposition between Alison and her father. Bechdel, the narrator, describes herself and her father as antagonistic individuals during Alison’s infancy. The voice of Alison Bechdel as a writer in the memoir is presented in unboxed text above each panel. At the same time, the dialogue of characters is materialised in speech bubbles (Connolly 14). Thus, there is a boundary between Alison, the fictional character, and Bechdel, the narrator, recollecting events to show readers a story that needs to be completed because Bechdel did not have enough time to ask her dad about his sexual identity. The biographical material used by Bechdel in the memoir is recreated through the prism of the tense relationship with her father. There is a confessional tendency in which Bechdel openly shows her father’s artifice and temperamental behaviour towards his family, which has an impact on Alison herself. She undergoes a period
of crisis, reflected in an obsessive-compulsive disorder that is motivated by her obsession to find the truth. However, as the story progresses, Alison has moments of identification that link her and her father together. The most notorious example is their passion for literature and how characters evolve through the memoir by reading books. Both Alison and her father use literature as a way out to escape a reality that is not satisfying and as a way to build an intimate relationship that can ease their problems with their identity as queers. Literature also serves to bring them closer together. The structure of Bechdel’s memoir takes the reader through a telescoping and spiralling chronology (Sakal 49). According to Jocelyn Sakal, Bechdel chooses critical moments in her childhood and adolescence in every chapter to bring those instants into the present and be able to show them to readers. By doing so, Bechdel grapples with a past that combines “pre- and post- Stonewall queerness in order to allow shame and pride to sit side by side” (Sakal 49). Themes such as gender identity, coming of age, repression, fiction and reality are skilfully depicted throughout the memoir.

What is interesting about Fun Home is that the “author, protagonist and narrator are all Alison Bechdel,” which is why Katelyn Connolly argues that the term graphic memoir is the most accurate to designate this text (Connolly 11). However, memoirs, as a mode of life narratives, place the attention towards the lives and actions of characters rather than focusing on the narrator (Smith and Watson 198). Therefore, in Fun Home attention is given to characters, more specifically, the protagonist Alison, who is made up of different embodiments of the author herself, including Alison the child and the college student. At the same time, Bechdel’s creative process of drawing the illustrations of this graphic memoir includes a pose technique taking pictures of herself incarnating characters
such as her father Bruce (Chute and Bechdel 1010). Bechdel uses this technique to depict the intricacies of American society regarding homosexuality and this realistic drawing process emphasises reality. Hence, a graphic memoir seems an optimum medium for Bechdel since the multilayered possibilities of the drawings of graphic memoirs create a new spectrum of options, able to give meaning to complex histories. To better achieve this purpose, Bechdel poses some questions and challenges the readers with graphical and narrative strategies in the text, such as intertextuality, alluding to more than sixty books throughout the memoir, and the revision of the family archive.

Alison Bechdel’s oeuvre has been approached from different theoretical frameworks, including trauma, gender and the array of intertextual references not only from canonical Western books but also from queer texts. Katherine Kelp-Stebbins’s article “Queer Orientations and the Politics of Location,” published in 2019, utilises Sara Ahmed’s queer phenomenology, a theoretical framework that is also central to the analysis in this thesis. Kelp-Stebbins applies Ahmed’s theory to both *Fun Home* and *Are you My Mother?* to argue that Bechdel’s graphic memoirs deconstruct (phal)logocentrism. The article analyses maps, visual and verbal formats in both memoirs to argue that these regimes create autotopographies that challenge and queer the privileged white Western man’s perspective. The article explores space and time, taking up feminist geographers who insist on accounting for maps as objects that reorient readers toward a subjective space and time aside from the normative cartesian frames of reference. Consequently, Kelp-Stebbins considers the capacity of Bechdel’s drawings of maps in *Fun Home* to orient the reader to a particular way of interpretation as well as the use of non-linear narration to challenge the conventional Western “global linear thinking” (183).
This thesis, while taking up a similar approach to Kelp-Stebbins’s, addresses specifically the use of perspective in Bechdel’s spatial composition within the panels and the placement of objects such as books and newspapers. What is more, Kelp-Stebbins focuses on the white Western ways of location and hardly touches specifically upon the heteronormative implications in relation to sexual identity. Therefore, this thesis examines the implication of such dominant normative trends in the characters’s sexual identities in the memoir.

Ann Cvetkovich, a specialist in queer studies, explores *Fun Home*’s archival forms of representation—photographs, legal documents, letters, and newspapers, among others—to claim that Alison Bechdel explores the story of her father Bruce’s death for a specific reason, namely:

out of a desire to understand her own story and the genesis of her gender and her sexual identity, seeking to be the sympathetic witness who can make available the rich and contradictory story of his life that he is something more than a paedophile, suicide, or tragic homosexual. (113)

Cvetkovich links personal and historical trauma by redefining the relationship between individual lives and sexual traumas in a historical context in order to make room for “lives whose very ordinariness makes them historically meaningful” (111) in *Fun Home*. Moreover, in her article, she highlights that *Fun Home* “dares to claim historical significance and public space not only for a lesbian coming-out story but also for one that is tied to what some might see as shameful sexual histories” (Cvetkovich 112). For Cvetkovich, Alison Bechdel “carries the responsibility of not continuing to closet him [her father Bruce]”
This responsibility is perhaps an attempt to mobilise a set of claims that blame the political and historical context for Bruce Bechdel’s death.

In contextualising Fun Home within the feminist comic genre, Hillary Chute notes another hallmark which similarly acknowledges the capacity of graphic memoirs to “(re)imagine difference and alterity” (Chute 91). Engaging with trauma in her analysis of Bechdel’s memoir, Chute notes a fragmentation in the narrative, which she describes as “a prominent feature of traumatic memory” (4). Chute also states that Fun Home spirals around Bruce’s death as the story’s epicentre, like a traumatic text (Chute 183), which explains the unusual non-chronological order of events. Valery Rohy, in the same way as Cvetkovich, looks critically at the “queer witnessing of trauma” (Cvetkovich 114). She examines what Cvetkovich calls the “queer archive” of Fun Home (Rohy 342). Rohy’s central argument hinges upon Alison’s quest for historical accuracy and preoccupation with material evidence that “resonates with the difficulty of representing the past” (344), to be more specific, the queer past in a gender-blind system.

In line with a queer reading of Fun Home, several critics engage with Fun Home’s analysis of intertextuality, including Heike Bauer, who looks specifically at the use of queer books in the memoir to claim that Alison discovers her sexual orientation through the books she reads. Bauer, looking into the difficult emotional intricacies of Alison and Bruce’s story in the context of the West’s history of patriarchy and heterosexual expectations, claims that books serve to guide and conduit feelings. Likewise, as this thesis will prove, books connect characters into an intimate relationship and also help Alison in her coming-out process as a
lesbian. However, Bauer doubts whether intertextuality is used to question cultural canons, something that this thesis will consider in its analysis. Following the same line, Julia Watson’s analysis of *Fun Home* discusses ideas essential for this thesis since she argues that Bechdel invites readers to engage with the Other on a personal level so that it serves as an analogy to extend it to a broader audience, particularly for persecuted homosexuals and women around the world (Watson 53). Watson’s article is full of questions that lead to a questioning of the post-World War II American norm of compulsory heterosexuality that coded same-sex relationships as “inversion” (34).

As already mentioned, Bruce Bechdel’s secret sexual identity and ensuing tragic death act as a background leitmotiv for Bechdel to decipher precisely what contributed to such a fatal decision. Indeed, a starting point in the analysis that this thesis will undertake is the analysis and consequent breakdown of Bruce as a character who is disoriented regarding his sexual identity. This thesis will show the problematic aspects of the heteronormative American society by considering the tragic outcome of Bruce Bechdel’s life which, in Alison’s view, was a suicide. The theory of queer phenomenology coined by Sara Ahmed will prove helpful since both Alison and Bruce are constantly searching for orientation, promoted by societal expectations that force them to follow what Ahmed calls a “straight line”. A straight line encompasses following what has been previously considered valid by the politics of a specific place, in this case, American history, with President Ronald Reagan as the most representative, since he was about to take office when Bruce died.
In this way, this paper contributes to previous studies that have critically approached *Fun Home*, particularly focusing on allusion and intertextuality, gender approaches and trauma and adds Ahmed’s queer phenomenology to the analysis. In order to show this, the thesis explores the concept of (dis)orientation by claiming that *Fun Home* is deliberately structured and designed to enact a queer resistance, questioning the so-called normative; this thesis seeks to demonstrate that, through her examination of Bruce Bechdel’s death, Alison Bechdel critiques the repression her father suffered in a society conditioned by normativity. *Fun Home* utilises several narrative strategies that aim to challenge what Sara Ahmed calls the “straight line”.

The thesis is divided into four sections. The first deals with the theoretical aspects of the queer phenomenological approach to the text. This analysis will examine the reasons behind queer people feeling out of place and marginalised. The second section explains how characters in the graphic memoir are presented as (dis)oriented. The third section is dedicated to the examination of the graphic material and its intentional effect on the memoir. Finally, the fourth section analyses the literary references in connection to the character’s stories, their familial relation, and their respective sexual orientation.

**A Queer Phenomenological Approach to Fun Home**

The issue of orientation plays a significant role in Alison and Bruce Bechdel’s lives. Ahmed’s theory of queer phenomenology offers guidance in terms of orientation for the analysis of *Fun Home* since she situates the problematics of non-normative gender subjectivities.
The term phenomenology is concerned with the study of appearances and how humans interact with objects in the world as they come in contact with subjects through their perception. However, appearances, despite having been claimed originally by phenomenologists to be neutral, due to their white male patriarchal history, are not objective but culturally, historically and socially determined. Thus, Ahmed challenges this suspected neutrality of phenomenology and questions the way the world is not organised to accommodate all people in a neutral way. For instance, she explains how the term ‘homosexual’ is “a type of person who deviates from what is neutral,” (69) so, following a different line to that of heterosexuality. The theoretical lens this thesis will use seeks to address the concepts of (dis)orientation and deviation from the “straight line” in the narrative as a subversion of the normative. This deviation from the objective world, influenced by patriarchal configurations, may initially lead to a feeling of fear on the part of the queer subject, but at the same time, it helps to “generate alternative lines,” (20) which serve as a model for queer people.

In the book *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Sara Ahmed explores the concept of orientation. Ahmed focuses on Edmund Husserl’s phenomenological approach that analyses the appearance and perception of objects as they materialise in our experience. She revisits philosophical phenomenologists to explore the relationship between objects and sexual orientation. Therefore, the question of orientation is linked to perception or consciousness of the world around us. Thus, for Ahmed, consciousness is intimately related to how we are situated in the world, and where we are located affects the way we inhabit the world as well as how we are oriented. Ahmed focuses on directions as followed
lines that tend to direct us towards particular objects (12) and interrogates how some dominant sociocultural objects seem to draw us more than others, correlating the body and the space with the social. For Ahmed, “some spaces extend certain bodies and simply do not leave room for others” (11) questioning what objects can enter the phenomenological arena or what objects get disavowed. As Ahmed suggests, spaces, such as the family home, are organised in such a way that people who do not extend or fit into them may become disoriented.

In her discussion, Ahmed urges readers to think about disorientation. She points to Merleau-Ponty in her text, who describes disorientation as “vital experiences of giddiness and nausea” to highlight the feeling of horror produced in the subject when diverting from the normative path (Merleau-Ponty qtd. in Ahmed 4). A counteraction to disorientation involves an attempt to reorient oneself into a straight line, into a logical normative narrative. However, it is through disorientation that one also deviates from (hetero)normativity and creates what Ahmed calls an “emergence of lines” (16). Such emergence is what allows queer people to extend into space in a way they could not before. For Ahmed, lesbianism is one side of queerness. It is fitting since it represents a difference, an alterity necessary to oppose the normalising tendencies. There is a disruptive act in leaving “the usual way or normal course,” (70) being biologically born a woman and taking all the so-called male codes and re-appropriating them.

Queerness is then considered a failure in a normative familiar and social order to stick to a straight line “whereby straightness gets attached to other values including decent, conventional, direct, and honest” (70). This explains why queer trajectories within the straight culture are not likely to be regarded as possible,
which is why Ahmed proposes a queer phenomenology in which particular objects labelled as deviant or deviate might be redirected into view (3). Such failure is connected with Adrienne Rich’s work on “compulsory heterosexuality,” in which Rich “discusses heterosexuality as a set of institutional practices that require men and women to be heterosexual” (Rich qtd. in Ahmed 84). Therefore, heterosexuality is viewed as a background where normative actions are repeated over time (87). Queer desires are suppressed because not only are they seen as perverted but also because they discontinue the paternal’s line and, consequently, omit the possibility of the father being the central figure in the societal system of a family. Thus, that is why Ahmed claims that “homosexual desire in a woman becomes ‘a case’ insofar as it challenges the family line […] and its ‘reputation’” (74). That ‘line’ is directed towards marriage and reproduction. Hence, Ahmed’s view clearly suggests that “a queer phenomenology, perhaps, might start by redirecting our attention toward different objects, those that are less proximate or even those that deviate or are deviant” (3). Those alternative objects, which are said to leave a mark on the ground, “can help generate alternative lines” (20) that can guide those not fulfilling the normative forms. Therefore, Ahmed’s book considers how objects can be read using queer phenomenology to function as orientation devices that are able to orient and disorient away from (hetero)normative objects. Seeing Fun Home through a lens of queer phenomenology then implies considering the background of American history as foundational to Bruce’s traumatic sexual experiences rather than incidental.

Reorientation through (Dis)orientation

Bechdel’s memoir makes a turn to portray Bruce’s story from a personal perspective. Alison’s task is to make her father’s secret sexual identity visible,
bringing her father’s life and her own to the fore to denounce a normative history that erases and displaces queer people. *Fun Home* captures the painful queer struggle under the weight of American homophobic culture and shows how the marginalised characters in the text, both Alison and her father Bruce, are disoriented in the sense of lacking directions as a consequence of a dominant culture that places them outside the established heteronormative orientation that rules their socio-cultural context.

A cultural and political climate that upholds normative families as preferable over queer individuals leads queer people to experience a feeling of shame. As Bechdel points out, referring to Bruce, “his shame inhabited our house as pervasively and invisibly as the aromatic musk of ageing mahogany” (Bechdel 20). According to Heather Love, the feelings of shame, resentment, self-hatred, and bitterness “are tied to the experience of social exclusion and the historical ‘impossibility’ of same-sex desire” (Love 4). Alison, in her search for answers after his father’s death, reproduces a page from Webster’s dictionary with the word ‘queer’ in an attempt to pinpoint her and her father’s identities. The term queer is presented in the panel (figure 1). The first entry of the dictionary describes queer as follows: “at variance with what is usual or normal in character […] differing in some odd way from what is ordinary,” the second: “suspicious” and the third one: “qualmish; faint” (Bechdel 57). If the three entries point toward the unusual, different from the traditional, and strangeness of the term, it should not be surprising to see how queer people are perceived in the world as distinct from the norm and, at times, excluded and deviated “from the normal course of things”

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3 The word ‘queer’ was used as a derogatory term until the early 1990s. The word is embraced nowadays as a celebratory term from the queer community; however, Webster’s online dictionary continues using the exact first definition as Bechdel’s panel nowadays.
Bechdel presents Webster’s dictionary as a failed depiction of queer people since Alison is not able to find answers for her father’s suicide and from their identity as queers: “his death was bound up for me with the one definition conspicuously missing from our mammoth Webster’s” dictionary (57). A source of meaning, such as the dictionary, is not able to describe the social scope of the word “queer.” Therefore, as Heike Bauer suggests, “the absence of a queer definition for Bruce […] locates his life at that curious temporal fissure” (11), a place where queer people are relegated.

This absence from the dictionary has symbolically contributed to Bruce’s disorientation in a normative society where alternative modes of existence are disregarded. This is to say that when certain bodies do not fit into space because of
their nature, which might be different from the norm, they might feel out of space and, in fact, excluded, with a feeling of horror of being displaced and rejected.

The central theme of *Fun Home* revolves around the enigma of Bruce Bechdel’s suicide. Alison describes him as having “killed himself because he was a manic-depressive, closeted fag and he couldn’t face living in this small-minded small town one more second” (Bechdel 125). However, what Alison portrays in her memoir is more complex than a mere description. Bechdel writes and draws her father’s story and archive concerning queer history. By doing so, she combines a balance between his manic depressed and complex personality with her and her family and recognises his contribution to her own story of coming of age as a queer person. She states that “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, sexual shame and fear, of life considered expendable” (Bechdel 196). In this formulation, Bechdel guides her father’s story outside the normative community, accompanying his moment of disorientation toward other forms of being. According to Jocelyn Sakal, the need to claim a space for queer representation “is a political act in and of itself […] that acts as a response to historical exclusion” (Sakal 10). This historical exclusion seems to be the trigger point that prompted Bruce’s suicide and, consequently, Alison’s confessional urge to tell her truth and thus make Bruce’s silence and suffering heard. There are moments in the memoir when Bruce admits to having lived queer oppression. In a letter sent to Alison before his death, Bruce describes his shame about his inability to come out, saying that in “the fifties it was not even considered an option” (Bechdel 212). Historically, the 1950s coincided with the US’s Lavender Scare,
which took place in the late 1940s lasting nearly 25 years. It consisted of police arresting and the federal government firing gay and lesbian people because of the mere fact of their sexuality (Robinson 213).

Ann Cvetkovich’s work, which uses the second-wave feminism claim that the personal is political, traces the history of non-normative chronologies by examining Bechdel’s queer archive and witnessing Bechdels's intimate life to include a series of significant moments in history (111). In other words, Fun Home carries on the mission of showing the personal as political. Ahmed’s theories of orientation, in accordance, point toward the fact that phenomenology can be read and made queer by facing the back of the room; what is behind the normative line is what was never part of a normative vision; she wonders whether a queer phenomenology “might be one that faces the back”. Therefore, “what gets our attention depends too on which direction we are facing” (29). In the case of Fun Home, Bechdel is pointing the readers toward the back; what was missing from an official historical record and by doing so, she is reorienting what was deprived into view. Using deviation as a new form of orientation, she reconstructs Bruce’s sudden death into a logical narrative that allows her to grasp the nuances left unsaid by history.

At the start of chapter two, an example of placing what is missing in front of readers occurs. The chapter called “A happy death” (Bechdel 25) opens with Bruce Bethel’s funeral. Alison reproduces a grid of panels that shows two different documents in the form of newspapers. The first newspaper front is placed at the very beginning of the page (figure 1), dated July 3, 1980 (27), a day after Bruce’s death, whose big headline reads: “local man dies after being hit by truck” (27).
Underneath, on the same panel, the same newspaper shows another headline, in smaller print than the headline relating to Bruce’s death, which informs the reader about 88 deaths caused by a heat wave in the Southwest (27). Remarkably, further down the page, Bechdel draws a panel (figure 2) that shows a copy of Albert Camus’s *A Happy Death* which was the last novel Bruce was reading before he died. The main character in Camus’s book is called Patrice, and similar to Bruce, Patrice is troubled in his attempt to find happiness in marriage. The book is accompanied by another newspaper dated July 1, 1980, a day before Bruce’s death. It says: “Reagan has Reservations about Running with Bush,” which is located in the same headline space of Bruce’s death preceding the page, “Justices Uphold Hyde Amendment: Curbs on Abortion Stand,” and “Heat Persists in Southwest: Wheat in Trouble” (27).

The reading and disposition of headlines attempt to approximate Bruce’s death to suicide with Camus’s copy, triggered by the political background of America at that time. Bruce’s death is highlighted as a more significant event that is linked to
the political climate of the time and carries a critical affective meaning; that there are different ways of telling a story than the official one and that he was not just a manic depressive closeted homosexual, but that he was experiencing a disorder “of giddiness and nausea” (Ahmed 4) by the backdrop of American history in the 1980s, where homosexuals were disregarded. Both newspapers reflect that Bruce Bechdel’s death occurred four months before the American elections, where the republican Ronald Reagan was elected. Therefore, as Julia Watson remarks, Bechdel is reframing homosexuality in the contemporary American political context using “her ‘autographical avatars’ to introduce readers to engage with ‘othering’ practices that have habitually subjected homosexuals to dismissal and persecution as either perverse or diseased” (Watson 53). Characters enduring the difficulties of queer life in a heteronormative context and panels, created with material reality, which are emotional rather than factual are used as artifacts by Alison to provide access to an alternative narrative that disrupts the one that is in the public domain, as represented by the newspapers. The memoir functions as an “emotional truth” (Miller 543), an archive from the past that recollects information for its publication in the present and makes queer hidden histories visible as a valuable historical source.

A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words

The representation of the familial past is significantly dependent on the visual material Alison uses in composing the memories. Bechdel, in an interview about her creative process, states that: “In many ways photographs really generated the book” (Chute and Bechdel 1005) and in the same interview, she acknowledges that, despite the cartoony style, “photos are drawn very realistically. It’s a way to
keep reminding readers, these are real people. This stuff really happened” (Chute and Bechdel 1009). Moreover, in the memoir Alison is said to experience an epistemological crisis due to the impossibility of finding answers to what she sees or experiences, which is reflected in her journal entries. Alison, in her obsessive desire to record, relies on the task of drawing, which, together with visual material and detailed drawing technique, creates the book that acts as an expansion of her childhood diary (Alison qtd. in Chute 189), where Alison reflects upon the figure of her father.

The first chapter of the memoir is devoted to presenting Bruce. Bruce is a full-time English teacher and a funeral director, but arguably, his most outstanding achievement “was his monomaniacal restoration of our old house” (Bechdel 4). Alison portrays Bruce’s obsession to restore the Victorian family house, which he rebuilt after eighteen years into its original condition of 1867 (8). For this craft, Bechdel, in a conference at Cornell University, referred to her childhood, stating that she grew up in “a house full of secrets where appearances were extremely important” (Bechdel 2009). Bechdel emphasises Bruce’s obsessive tendency with the restoration of the family house and reproduces accurately every detail, from the pattern of carpets to that of the wallpaper. The tendency to focus attention on material things in the drawing process presents readers with an awareness of Bruce’s maniacal restoration of the house as a way to highlight his commitment to the heteropatriarchal familiar system, emplaced in the Victorian house. It is through the restoration of the house that Bruce attempts “to make things appear to be what they were not. He appeared to be an ideal husband and father” (Bechdel 16-17). This also echoes Connolly’s interpretation of Bruce’s obsession with the
house, which also points to Bruce’s repression of his homosexual desire, which he is not able to express through his public identity (Connolly 22). However, his detailed obsession with the house also foregrounds his emotional distance from the members of his family: “my father treated his furniture like children, and his children like furniture” (Bechdel 14). The house can be a metonym for Bruce’s life, a mask that hides his latent homosexuality under the rigid Victorian morality. The house interiors were expressly designed to conceal Bruce’s shame, where visitors usually got lost upstairs (Bechdel 20). Bruce is being shaped and strives to achieve “norms that are repeated over time and with force” (Ahmed 91), norms culturally established that perpetuate the typical image of the family. Hence, the house symbolically stands for a familial heterosexual background where Bruce hides and resists his queerness.

In response to Bruce’s deceitful behaviour, Alison experiences an “epistemological crisis” as the onset of an OCD that leads her to obsessively record everything. In her documentary task, she is paralysed after experiencing a growing awareness that links the “troubling gap between word and meaning” (143). Cvetkovich associates this crisis of documenting truthfully with Bethel’s family secrecies and silences implied in her father’s traumatic sexuality (Cvetkovich 121). This echoes some theories of trauma, which link trauma with the impossibility of telling (Caruth 1995, 1996). Bechdel relates Alison’s emotional distress to Bruce’s secrecy and deceitful behaviour that surrounds him, which is exemplified by Alison’s obsessive-compulsive disorder of recording everything to lessen the anxiety that produces the uncertainty. However, this graphic, visual aspect of the memoir is an attempt to resolve and overcome this
crisis by witnessing and recreating the familial archive: journal entries, correspondence, police reports, and family photographs. According to Cvetkovich, not only does witnessing cause emotional distress but it also leads to its cure (Cvetkovich 122). This creative obsession with documenting everything in the narration is linked to seeking the truth for Alison to understand what happened to “her father’s stigmatised identity” (Cvetkovich 125). Alison’s research project aims at analysing and documenting her father’s life events to be able to understand the reasons that may have prompted his death.

Alison’s process of documentation relies partly on her own drawings of her family. Panels present a vital source of representation which gives readers a more precise grasp of the story, a visual medium capable of showing what is behind words, while at the same time emphasising the limited viewpoint and fictional component that is inherently characteristic to the memoir genre. In her inability to write, Bechdel finds solace in the drawing medium: “the new realisation that I could illustrate my own fantasies filled me with an omnipotence that was in itself erotic” (Bechdel 170). Considering the formal aspects, Robyn Warhol posits that the pictorial level is the one referring to the drawings that sometimes accompany the voice-over narrator and sometimes do not. Warhol adds that this pictorial level also includes:

drawing of pictures and maps copied from books; original maps drawn by Bechdel; copies of handwritten and typed letters, notes, and diary pages; hand-inked copies of photographs, newspapers and book pages; drawings based on photographs; and drawings of books. (5)
All of this archive material contributes to an effort to tell an emotionally accurate story, filtered through Alison’s viewpoint, to fill the gaps left unsaid by memory. The visual elements that constitute the narration are argued by Scott McCloud who claims that cartoons serve as a “vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled” and proceeds by saying that “we don’t just observe the cartoon, we become it” (McCloud 36). For example, the book centrefold shows Alison holding photographs (Bechdel 100, 101, 120). The hands are drawn precisely where readers are supposed to be holding the book while reading, thus creating a direct interaction with the audience. Julia Watson analyses this act as calling the reader’s attention to her intimacy in “investigating her father’s hidden story and her own identification with it” (Watson 33). Drawing encompasses the double task of depicting the intricacies of Bruce and presenting the readers with an alternative to that of words, representing Alison’s personal truth rather than a universal truth. As Alison states: “there’s no proof, actually, that my father killed himself […] no one knew it wasn’t an accident” (Bechdel 27). Bruce’s alleged suicide is pictorially constructed out of the need to give meaning to the political and social circumstances that surround Bruce’s death.

One of the aspects worth commenting on about the pictorial level is Alison’s physical appearance. At first sight, Alison does not match the normative feminine standards of a conventional girl. She enjoys passing as a boy, hates wearing girly clothes, keeps her hair short and likes playing with their male relatives. As an example, in a panel that shows Alison and Bruce in a dining bar, a “truck-driving bulldyke” appears, and Alison recognises her “with a surge of joy” (Bechdel 118). At the same time, Bruce sneeringly asks Alison: “is that what you
want to look like?” (Bechdel 118 emphasis added). This feeling prompted the realisation that “there were women who wore men’s clothes and had men’s haircuts” (118). On one level, this event helps Alison’s consciousness of her own queer identity and, on the other, shows Bruce’s efforts to prevent Alison’s sexual urges. Therefore, her queer desire is nullified. Moreover, wearing her father’s clothes produces a feeling of being at home. Alison states that it is “like finding myself fluent in a language I’d never been taught” (182). However, this reaction also contradicts Bruce’s disapproval of masculine femininity and his numerous tense efforts to feminise Alison throughout her childhood which can be seen in chapter 4 of the memoir. She complains and revolts against Bruce’s attempts to decorate her bedroom with flowered wallpaper and disguise her with hair barrettes and pearls (96, 99), reinforcing the oppositional characterisation. A queer phenomenological reading of this reaction on the part of Alison would suggest that she is trying to overcome normativity by embracing as familiar what has been culturally branded as strange or queer (Ahmed 11). Alison feels those impositions to wear girly accessories as pressure points, but she is reorienting herself into a new space that gives her pleasure and joy. Hence, Alison is not following what has been socially given to her (21), but instead, she is wandering the space into different “sides” (14). It is at a particular moment that Alison decides not to follow suit: “Perhaps this was when I cemented the unspoken compact with [my parents] that I would never get married, that I would carry on to live the artist’s life they had abdicated” (Bechdel 73). In other words, she is aligning herself “out of line” into a queer space distant from normative and normalising paths to remain visibly queer and, therefore, obtain that feeling of joy. On the contrary, Bruce is being shaped by the repetition of social actions usually attributed to the normative that
blocks his inner self (Ahmed 66). Bruce is afraid of discontinuing the heterosexual line that aligns individuals into the family and the house and remains in this social imagination.

Despite the apparent disconnection between the two characters, often presented in contrastive terms, there seems to be a parallelism between the two. In the first chapter of the graphics memoir, the contrast is made evident when the description begins: “I was Spartan to my father’s Athenian. Modern to his victorian. Butch to his nelly. Utilitarian to his aesthete” (Bechdel 15). Furthermore, visually Bechdel draws different panels, presenting them as opposites (86). In figure 4, Bechdel draws a contiguous image which at the same time is divided by the windows to emphasise the separating connection of characters, therefore while “occupying the same space yet [they] engaged in separate pursuits” (Lemberg 137).

However, while exploring her father’s archive, Alison discovers a photograph that leads to a deeper connection between her and Bruce. The picture,
which has been referred to previously as the book’s “centerfold” (Watson 39), shows Roy, Alison’s babysitter, dated “AUG 69” (Bechdel 100, 101). The photo skilfully interpellates the readers using the same strategy of drawing the hands holding it, which aims at engaging and addressing readers. Therefore, Alison recognises that “not only were we *inverts*. We were *inversions* of one another” (98, emphasis added). The term “invert” suggests that Alison and Bruce not only are an inversion of one another but also they are at odds with their assigned gender. Watson indicates that “Alison’s rejection of femininity is a compensation for her father’s lack of manliness” (Watson 39). This is also evident when Bechdel draws Alison and Bruce while watching a magazine showing a male model’s body. The reader can see what both are seeing but at the same time, they are focusing on different aspects: “I wanted the muscles and tweed like my father wanted the velvet and pearls—subjectively, for myself” (Bechdel 99). Alison focuses on the idea of masculinity, whereas Bruce projects his desire to perform femininity. This marks the onset of what Ahmed calls the “emergence of lines” (16) between Alison and her father: “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” (Bechdel 117). Hence, deviation from the normative helps generate alternative lines (Ahmed 20) that will serve as a backing for queer people.

This shows that the juxtaposition of both Alison and Bruce enriches the purpose of the narration and takes it to a new possible scenario where alternative modes of existence deviate from heteronormativity and become possible. In other words, what was previously eclipsed by normative modes of truth now becomes visible and tangible as a reality, and queer objects “come into view” (Ahmed 91). Bechdel is then creating a new angle with Alison, sustained in the past with the
character of Bruce, that aims to move forward into a queer alternative line from normativity.

**The Preference of Fiction to Reality**

The fact that Bechdel, in her memoir research project, incorporates an extensive list of literary texts, demonstrates how she engages in an intertextual exercise that works as a vehicle between Alison and Bruce but also serves as a means to decipher Alison’s sexuality for herself. Additionally, due to the absence of institutionalised documentation (Cvetkovich qtd. in Griffith 22), and the secrecy of the story that Bruce’s secret life entails, *Fun Home* alludes to the family drama with the support of books such as *Ulysses, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, A Happy Death, The Myth of Sisyphus*, and *The Great Gatsby*, among others. Alison, in chapter 3 called “That old catastrophe” (55) claims to use these allusions “not only as descriptive devices but because my parents are most real to me in fictional terms. And perhaps my cool aesthetic distance itself does more to convey the arctic climate of our family than any particular literary comparison” (Bechdel 67). Due to the lack of feelings within the familial relationship, where Bruce treated his children like furniture, Bechdel draws on books to add another resource to the multimodal form of the narration that contributes to the organisation of the memoir.

In its numerous research approaches, *Fun Home* has been analysed in light of its intertextual references and allusions. Quentin Miller elaborates on questioning this narrative strategy and arguing that allusions to literary references “serve to destabilise meaning rather than clarify it” (Miller 24). Miller writes that perhaps allusions serve to blur the line between fiction and reality so as to erase
the line between literature and graphics narrative (24). Alison, in the memoir, states: “the line that Dad drew between reality and fiction was indeed a blurry one” (Bechdel 59). Therefore, Miller argues that despite the considerable fraction of allusions in *Fun Home*, there is a clear strategy for using books to interpret the unspoken codes that surround Bechdel’s father’s life and, at the same time, engage the readers to question the nature of the literary canon “by juxtaposing accepted classics with less canonical works that facilitated [Alison] understanding of her sexual identity” (Miller 25). This echoes the already mentioned strategy of using the comic medium as a mediating force between the secrecy of events and images in chapter 2 of this thesis. Hence, there are numerous intentional moves in using intertextuality on the part of Bechdel, but all point to the same factor, which is to convey and negotiate the meaning behind the reasons that explain the ultimate close relationship with her father, his sexual secrets and what may have led to his tragic death in the (hetero)normative historical context of America, and Alison’s own process of coming out as a lesbian in the late 1970s.

There is evidence in the text that shows that Alison and her father were linked by their mutual passion for books. However, their taste for literature evolves differently through the narration. In the beginning, Alison admits that she “ended up in [Bruce] English class, a course called ‘Rites of passage,’ and I found that I liked the books Dad wanted me to read” (Bechdel 198). This realisation eventually connects them on a deeper emotional level. Hence, after an English class, Bruce confesses to Alison in the car that she is “the only one in the class worth teaching” and, at the same time, she replies that “it’s the only class I have worth taking” (199). However, even though their love for books leads to forging
closer communication, it is remarkable how Alison hides, when she is in college, part of her homosexual reading material to Bruce (76). 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” (Cvetkovich 123). Hence, the books shown in figure 5 are not part of a Western literary canon but help Alison in her coming out. On the contrary, Bruce’s “preference of fiction to reality” (Bechdel 85), by hiding his true self, portrays the different modes of existence between the two characters and a different way of understanding literature.

In this regard, a line can be drawn between what her father considers ‘good literature’ and what Alison is immersed in, researching lesbian literature to find existential answers. At the same time, there seem to be books that conform to that ‘good literature’ category that irritate Alison, as in the case of *Ulysses*, which is, according to Miller, the book “most frequently alluded to in Fun Home” (Miller 25). Alison admits having “little patience for Joyce’s divagations when [her] own odyssey was calling so seductively” (Bechdel 207, emphasis added). Alison’s odyssey refers to a stack of homosexual books piled on her bedroom desk, shown in the accompanying panel.

Subsequently, another instance that shows Alison’s willingness to approach the conversation about homosexuality occurs in the car when Alison asks her father about Colette’s *Earthly Paradise* (220). This scene takes place after Alison has come out and is trying to bring up the conversation about homosexuality with
her dad: “I wondered if you knew what you were doing when you gave me that Colette book” and Bruce replies: “it was just a guess” (220). This is argued to be the peak moment of genuine connection that both Alison and Bruce undergo.

There is also an essential allusion in this graphic memoir to F. Scott Fitzgerald, who fascinates Bruce. He notes in a letter to his wife that one of the protagonists of Fitzgerald’s story Winter Dream: “He is me” (63). Moreover, The Great Gatsby offers significance in the depiction of Bruce. There is an identity construction built upon books such as this, which not only alludes to Bruce’s premature death similar to Gatsby, but also to the way Gatsby is obsessed with beauty and luxury as a facade to hide the unpleasant reality (61, 63, 64, 65, 84). According to Bechdel, “such a suspension of the imaginary in the real was, after all, my father’s stock in trade” (65), a way to conceal his inner self and in an attempt to overcome all social obstacles in the same way Gatsby did. Furthermore, it is essential to notice that the sequence of panels alluding to Fitzgerald’s work is framed in the context where Bruce was in the army. He is presented as reading books in each panel and being mocked by another soldier who says: “you got a playboy stuck in there?” and eventually, when Bruce shows him the book, he states: “is this your boyfriend?” (Bechdel 62, 63). The soldier is constructing
Bruce as a similar heterosexual who is expected to fulfil normative roles usually attributed to men in the army, like watching girls in a magazine; by doing so, the soldier thus is avoiding the possibility of homosexuality. The soldier’s reaction to Bruce’s watching a picture of a man, in this case of Fitzgerald is one of mockery because Bruce is not what he was expected to be; therefore, Bruce is eclipsed by a “field of heterosexual objects” (Rich qtd. in Ahmed 87) which precludes any queer objects to “come into view” (91). This is what eventually leads homosexuals to experience shame about their sexual orientation. However, for Bruce relating to books such as *The Great Gatsby* provides him with an escapist route from a reality that is not satisfying and denies him the right to his sexuality that is at the root of his own dis-orientation, in this case, from the army and from what the military world encompasses in terms of normativity and restrictions. However, despite his passion for Fitzgerald, Bruce does not experience a similar coming out while reading *Gatsby* or Fitzgerald’s biography as Alison does while reading lesbian literature, perhaps because, as Ahmed suggests, he instead adapts to “lines that are already given” (23).

Ultimately, Alison’s quest for lesbian books, “which [she] quickly ravished” (Bechdel 75), in the bookshop opens a new spectrum of possibilities for her. Afterward, she attends a “Gay Union” meeting (76), which provides her with the necessary support to come out as a lesbian to her parents. In Alison’s case, books play a central role because, by the time Alison was in college around 1980, the Stonewall Riots in 1969 for gay acceptance had happened ten years before. The Stonewall Riots triggered the battle for gay rights. In this context, it was possible that lesbian books existed, providing an alternative mode of existence
where Alison formulated a sense of self and collective identity. As Bauer claims, books also prove that Alison’s story can be told (Bauer 25). However, Bruce’s identification with Western canonical books proves insufficient for him to come out at that time since they are not representations of queer existence within the normative. Thus, there seems to be an inevitable transition in the story by juxtaposing Bruce and Alison’s uses of books that Alison can utilise to understand his father as a subject conditioned by his time. Therefore, literary allusions are used to challenge the reader’s perception of stories and simultaneously complement images to support Alison’s research project to find answers. Moreover, the composition Alison makes claims for some representation in history that seeks to repair the generational trauma that impacted on her through her father’s secret life and consequent death. She questions normative versions of the official history in the absence of queer narratives. Under this spectrum, the social setting keeps putting pressure on Bruce due to the historical circumstances he underwent in his formative years. Still, Alison is opening a new mode of existence by negotiating a place for alternative literature in history and, with it, in the story she has tried to recompose.

**Conclusion**

Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* provides its audience with the reality of a family seen through the eyes of Alison Bechdel. Bruce Bechdel is believed to have committed suicide, and on a deeper level, the graphic memoir relates such a decision with the struggles queer people undergo under the normative backcloth of the American society of the “Lavender Scare”. Ahmed’s
queer phenomenology provides a suitable framework to analyse in *Fun Home* the feeling of (dis)orientation that individuals experience when they feel out of the normative line. The multidimensionality of the characters, together with the political and social background they inhabit, affects their condition as homosexuals.

Alison has been presented as resisting the normative and using such disorientation as an artefact that challenges normative versions of history. Additionally, literature is used in the memoir as a meditating tool that facilitates Alison’s relationship with her feelings in a non-heteronormative way, wandering the space into a different side and creating an alternative line; that is what Ahmed’s queer phenomenology advocates for. Bechdel’s detailed recollection of material for her archive to reproduce the history of her and her father negotiates and claims a sort of justice via memories. Bruce is a complex character whose fatal end is reconstructed via clues Alison finds in her familial archive and books that are utilised by Alison to complete her idea about her father. There is a relationship between truth and fiction that relates her father’s death to the historical circumstances. She rewrites the story of her father as a victim of the homophobic culture and society surrounding his death. At the same time, she joins him in a search for her own identity, leading Bechdel to use the book as an artefact that deconstructs normative tendencies and canons and helps her to generate what Ahmed identifies as “alternative lines” (Ahmed 20).

This thesis shows that Alison’s sense of duty to her father in her search for clues leads her to find alternative answers. Bechdel then reorients readers into her own familial story to understand her father’s struggle through history and construct
a different narrative using graphic support. Documents are presented as reliable sources of feelings and are placed strategically in the panels for readers to draw conclusions, as in the case of Camus’s copy and the newspaper. The triangulation of words, graphics and intertextuality pertain to the oppression of Bruce Bechdel and play an essential role in his death.

Overall, Alison presents Bruce not only as a rigid father who likes younger boys but as a victim of the historical circumstances that fostered his instability as a queer. There is a moral duty on the part of Alison, who is deviating from the trajectory of the normative story and forcing readers to look at the complexities that potentially lead Bruce to commit suicide since his condition would not have been socially accepted. She is claiming a space for the representation of marginalised subjects as a counter-reaction to historical exclusion. Their shared sexual orientation links both individuals and helps them establish a closer relationship and a sense of belonging using books as also contributing to their identity formation. Bruce and Alison share a common identity as queers that, as Alison states, it “begins where her father ends” (Bechdel 117). Their parallel lines presented them as inversions of one another but with some points in common such as their passion for books. Ultimately, Alison takes up the alternative line her father could not follow, becoming a proud lesbian, overcoming normativity, and proving that alternative modes of existence are possible. Through this shift in the story, from repression to openness, Bechdel succeeds in presenting an alternative to Bruce’s hidden secret story. In the end, Bechdel shows that her father set the stage for her when she came out: “he was there to catch me when I leapt” (Bechdel 232).
Works cited:


