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# Sex on the Body: Representation of the Queer Individual in Alison Bechdel's 'Fun Home'

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In the graphic novel *Fun Home*, Alison Bechdel describes her struggle against conforming to societal expectations, at both a familial and cultural level. Her desire to fit in is contrasted by the need to be herself, though she struggles with her identity because it defies the ideology of what is “normal.” She chronicles her life as a lesbian while growing up in a time and household that restricted her from being who she was: an independent queer woman who felt that she did not fit into her feminine body. She writes about her life in her graphic novel, which was turned into a Broadway musical with the same name, written by Lisa Kron. Bechdel’s individual identity is one of a creative artist and gay individual, who faces oppression from her father and from social expectations of women. Through *Fun Home*, Bechdel argues that sex and sexuality, represented on the physical body and shown through the visual and performing arts, allow for people of the queer community to be accepted by the dominant heteronormative society that is prominent in Western cultures.

The innocence of childhood provides a perspective that is free of the knowledge of societal expectations, but this lack of knowledge means that childhood is a time of great confusion for Alison while she is developing physically and mentally. In both the graphic novel and the musical, Alison is able to look back at her own childhood and reflect on the moments leading up to her adulthood. In the musical, each significant stage of Alison’s life is expressed through three different Alisons with three different actresses (see

Figure 1): Small Alison, Medium Alison, and Adult Alison. Alison’s childhood is manifested in the body of Small Alison, which puts emphasis on Alison’s own awareness of her body as a child. Even at a young age, Alison realizes that she is different, from her discomfort in her own body to not wanting to look like other girls her age. In the musical, she expresses her discomfort in her own body in the song “Party Dress,” in which she says that wearing dresses makes her “feel like a clown” (Kron). She feels uncomfortable and ridiculous in feminine clothing. Even at a young age, she uses her body to express herself, even as she was forced to give in to expectations dictated by her father. Through the illustrations and lack of color, the novel gives a dark and somber representation of Alison’s childhood. However, the musical is more vibrant, with visual movement and brighter colors; this difference between the two brings out the vibrancy that is lost as a child grows up into adolescence and faces reality.

A patriarchal society maintains the idea of male domination, mirrored in Alison’s male-dominated home life and the physical and verbal abuse from her father, Bruce. Her father is a symbol of the dominant, oppressive society in which Alison lives. Just like how assimilating into a heteronormative society seems appealing, Alison’s father, Bruce, “appear[s] to be an ideal husband and father” (Bechdel 17). From an outside perspective, everything seems pleasant between him and his family, and he appears to be a good father to Alison. He is trying to be a father in the only way he knows how, by selfishly treating Alison like she is a physical extension of himself, or a do-over of his own childhood. He admits to her that, growing up, he wanted to have a female body, and so he gives Alison the childhood he could never have, with hair bows and dresses. He forces her to dress her body in a feminine way, often through violence and verbal abuse, even though he can see that she does not want to dress “like a girl.” His physical abuse is an attack on Alison’s body and on how Alison wants to express her gender. As a closeted gay man, Bruce lives a double life and does not want Alison to be tortured by a lifestyle she cannot have, so he tries to stop her. But while fitting into society may seem nice and appealing, as many queer individuals have found, it lets the oppressive patriarchal modern society succeed.

Going into hiding by wearing certain clothes, acting a certain way, or living a certain lifestyle causes a separation between the true mind and body, leading to the physical effects of stress and anxiety on an individual.

The ornate Gothic Revival house that serves as the Bechdel family home in *Fun Home* parallels the outward representation and interior true self of the human body. The exterior of a house is what is shown off to neighbors and visitors, but it often hides the interior space of the house and the true nature of the people who live there. Bruce Bechdel has an obsession with fixing the Bechdel family house, a type of control that he also dominates over his family. Alison and her siblings are limited as children because they cannot disturb the museum-like atmosphere of the house. Bruce is obsessed with “the gilt cornices, the marble fireplace, and the crystal chandeliers” (Bechdel 5) that suffocate every space in the Bechdel home. These numerous inanimate objects are all part of his collection, objects that would not move or disrupt his life, and the stillness of these objects suggests the stillness of a mausoleum. In the musical, the props and stage are simple and limited, juxtaposed with the gilded decor of the actual Bechdel home (see Figure 2).

There is a simplicity in the small stage, but in the graphic novel, Bechdel is able to provide a visual representation of what the house really looked like. Alison believes that, for Bruce, “the real object of his affection was his house” (Kron), not his children, nor his wife. His need to control his house symbolizes the need to control his own body, as a closeted gay man living inside the exterior of a heterosexual man. He desires to organize his mind amid the stress of a double life, and by trying to put everything in the house in the right spot, he is trying to make sense of his own mind. The connection between the body and the mind is important when it comes to gay representation, because ideally the body and mind would be unified and connected with each other, something queer individuals often struggle with.

The family unit represents a structured space that can often be entrapping, so leaving home is a process of literal liberation. Alison’s home is ruled by her father; he is a “lowering, malevolent

presence” (Bechdel 197). Her father’s presence is a constant in Alison’s life, suppressing the presence of her differences from others.

*Fun Home* suggests that an oppressive childhood space affects queer adult life by forcing the adult to take the journey of self-discovery through leaving home. If they never leave the family unit, the oppression continues and they can never escape, constantly living a lie of a life. Alison’s home symbolizes a cage, trapping her body into gender roles. She grows up with clearly identified lines of how a man should behave and how a woman should behave, and there is no room for her lesbian lifestyle. However, Alison is able to escape her prison, the sphere of what she calls home, when she leaves for college. Going to college allows her to escape the repression of her father, and she is able to make her own sexual discoveries. She is able to admit to herself who she really is and to come out of hiding.

Violence toward queer individuals makes evident the danger they are in because of their identity. *Fun Home* shows that maintaining one’s queer individuality can be not only difficult, but also very dangerous, often leaving escape as the only option. Alison is eventually able to rebel against the oppressive aspects of her life and create a better life for herself, becoming who she wants to be as an adult. But for many years she finds it difficult to be an independent queer individual because of the inequality in society and fears of the violent backlash and hate crimes queer people experience just for being who they are. Bechdel references the Stonewall riots, a symbol of rebellion in the gay community, as well as of violent backlash against them. As a child, she visits New York City just a few weeks after the Stonewall riots and sees a community radically different from her home life. Her own rebellion that had started in early childhood gets stronger after this eye-opening family trip to New York City, where she feels “a quantum particle of rebellion” (Bechdel 104) in the air. She is revived by that energy, and her true self blossoms even more. It is important that the musical is currently playing on Broadway in New York City; New York has a long history of gay culture, and the *Fun Home* musical is now an important aspect of the queer story in that city. For Alison, resisting the male influence in her life is her own personal rebellion. Rebellion against the heteronormative society in

Western culture is necessary for members of queer communities to get the rights they deserve.

The realization of her own lesbianism is a coming-of-age moment for Alison; the realization of her sexuality comes from both queer literature and sexual interactions. Literature and the arts provide a voice for queer individuals, and Alison realizes her own voice while reading about other queer individuals. Alison first realizes she is a lesbian when she finds at a bookstore a book of gay individuals' stories about coming out. After that first book, she reads as much as she can on homosexuality and queer culture, trying to learn the history and find her place in it. Alison considers her realization "a revelation not of the flesh, but of the mind" (Bechdel 59), indicating that her realization is one of intellect, and that she is trying to analyze herself like a piece of literature. While she is growing up, Alison's father gives her many books for her to read and analyze, though he tells her how she should think about the literature he gives her. Her later experience in the bookstore is her first opportunity to find books for herself, and she quickly learns how to think for herself, a turning point in her life.

While realizing she is a lesbian is a step toward independence and transformation, the actual moment of change for Alison is in her first sexual encounter. In the musical, her adolescent existence is shown in physical form by the character Medium Alison. Having sex is a coming-of-age moment for Medium Alison, portrayed in the song "Changing My Major," in which she describes her first sexual encounter and the impact it has on her. She had told her parents that she is a lesbian before having sex, but having sex defines the word lesbianism in a corporeal way, unifying the written word with the physical world. Alison believes she has "become someone new" (Kron) after her first sexual experience. She is emancipated from her past of repression and is free to live her life as a new individual.

Death is a constant motif throughout Alison's life, as the literal and figurative death of the queer individual is a way to continue the history of repression common in queer culture. When Alison is 19 years old, she receives the news of her father's death. Although his death appears to be an accident, Alison believes it is a suicide

because it had been recently exposed that Bruce is a closeted gay man. Bechdel believes that Bruce was trapped in the family unit, and the only escape he saw, without having to accept himself for who he is, is through death. He gives in to society's mission to eliminate queer individuals and anyone who is deemed different by eliminating himself. Bruce had restrained himself his whole life, never living freely, and is met by his own demise. Alison sees her father's death as "a queer business" because she considers it "suspicious, perhaps even counterfeit" (Bechdel 57), mainly because she thinks it is somehow related to her lesbianism.

Nonetheless, Bruce's death symbolizes the release of Alison from her final cage. Alison is not fazed by her father's death, mainly because she is used to seeing death, having grown up in her family's business, the Bechdel Funeral Home. She sees death as a bodily function—something that happens to everybody. In Alison's experience, death unifies everyone, whether they are gay or straight. The visual aspect of death, namely the body in the casket, is accentuated in both the novel and the musical, allowing the reader or the viewer to visualize the deceased. Alison's reflections suggest, though, that a physical death is not necessary for the annihilation of the individual personality because a life of personal lies and a life in hiding is seen as equivalent to death.

Bruce's life shows the seductive qualities of acclimating to society—drawing people in, allowing the cycle of oppression to continue, and making it very difficult to leave. A life of repression leads to the continuation of repression, often continuing generation after generation through the birth and death of individuals. Alison Bechdel believes that "[her] father's end was [her] beginning" (Bechdel 117). With his death, she is freed from having to repress her feelings. Her birth, the creation of her physical body, had been a beginning for her, but it had been the beginning of the end for her father. Alison and Bruce had become "inversions of one another" (Bechdel 98), representing both the opposites and similarities in each other. They are two sides of the same coin: both gay individuals, but living two totally different lives; both trying to push against "normal" heterosexuality.

The heterosexual lifestyle is a well-known cycle: one grows up, gets married, and has kids, and then those kids will do the same. It is considered the norm, a forced idea that will keep repeating, unless a rebellion changes things. The musical itself takes place in the Circle-in-the-Square Theater, which emphasizes the circular aspect of Bruce's and Alison's lives. In the song "Maps," Adult Alison points out that she "can draw a circle [which his] whole life fit inside" (Kron). Bruce's birth, life, and death are all very close to each other on a map of his hometown. He had been unable to escape the circle that represents society's heteronormative lifestyle and its cycle of oppression.

In our binary society, the struggle to define an individual's gender and sexuality can cause a disconnect between one's body and mind when one finds it impossible to fit into the typical images of masculinity or femininity. The option to escape the binary does not even exist for many; they are only given one option, and that option is the gender given to them at birth. For some, there is shame that comes with realizing they are veering from what is expected. With the abuse that so many queer people face, accepting their sexual and/or gender identity can be a deep personal struggle. But Bechdel's story asserts that it is a struggle well worthwhile—that "sexual shame is in itself a kind of death" (Bechdel 228). The unique individual dies away even if the body might still be living. The body turns into an empty shell, a mask hiding the individual; the body can even be seen as the enemy.

The intense struggle to define one's gender and sexuality is evident in the Bechdel family, where Bruce is feminine and Alison masculine in some aspects. They each represent the varying struggles of queer individuals to define who they are. With the hiding of one's true self, as Bruce shows, comes the eradication of the individual as well as of a vibrant culture. The same kind of eradication could have happened to Alison. She could have been forced into hiding as a straight woman, as even she wonders whether she would have eventually given into a heterosexual marriage. *Fun Home* makes explicit the erasure of lives that occurs when queer people cannot live truthfully.

Art is not only a way to visually represent a person or an idea, but also allows for broader representation—in this case, representation of queer individuals in a society that tries to silent their voices. Bechdel has spent her adult life working as a "lesbian cartoonist" and has made a career out of out of documenting her life and experiences as a queer individual. She says there is something satisfyingly physical about drawing her world and her body how she wants to. She does not hold back in her story, revealing very personal things about her life in *Fun Home*, not wanting any of it to be censored. She reflects back on her earlier life, telling her story from an adult's perspective, expressed through the character of Adult Alison in the musical.

Bechdel's story told as a Broadway musical is the first of its kind. It is the "first mainstream musical about a young lesbian," according to June Thomas in an article about the show for *Slate* magazine. Despite Bechdel's nervousness about how the show would be received by Broadway audiences, the musical won five Tony awards in 2015 (Thomas). Such honors indicate that art has the power to make strides toward equality. When stories like Alison Bechdel's are told, they start to undo the efforts to erase queer people from history and culture. Queer history is often not labeled or identified; although it exists, it is not well-known or accepted. In the musical, Alison receives a letter from her father after her coming out, in which he says he "can't see the point in putting a label" on her sexual orientation (Kron). But labels are ways of naming and defining—valuable ways for queer people to identify themselves and not feel so alone.

Alison Bechdel has become an icon in popular culture who is using her talents and fame to share stories of queer people overcoming oppression and being who they are. Bechdel shows that all individuals must have the right and freedom to express their gender identity and sexuality. She encourages queer individuals to express themselves through sexuality and their bodies, and in doing so, she is rewriting history and creating a path for the future of queer individuals. *Fun Home* suggests that stopping the oppression of queer people requires pushing for equality in social movements, but

also, on a personal level, discovering what makes one unique and accepting differences; the novel and the musical demonstrate the power of claiming one's difference and rebelling against anyone who suggests otherwise.

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## About the Author



Samantha Correia is a first-year student majoring in English with a minor in Secondary Education. Her research project was conducted in the Fall 2015 and Spring 2016 semesters under the mentorship of Dr. Ellen Scheible (English). It was made possible with funding provided by BSU's Undergraduate Research Semester Grant. Sam presented her paper at the 2016 Massachusetts Statewide Undergraduate Research Conference at UMass-Amherst and at BSU's Student Arts & Research Symposium. She plans to graduate in 2019.