

Fun Home:
A Tale of Gender and
Queer Identity

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Though it might be easier to “come out” in America today, there are still rights and freedoms that need political action. A number of those rights surround gender presentation. As history has shown, unity is important to invoke action in politics and uniting under labels, such as the larger label of LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer), can be helpful. As we progress as a society and become more accepting of others, it becomes easier for people to feel the freedom to express themselves in whatever way they choose, whether they claim a label or not. Personal identity is complex and when we try to confine it into a narrow set of rules, it can get lost.

There are a number of autobiographical graphic novels that have been written by women that discuss the development and complexities of personal identity. I will be examining *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*¹ by Alison Bechdel through the lens of Judith Butler’s writings on gender and queer theory. While *Fun Home* tends to support Butler’s ideas of gender and performance, Butler’s disdain for labels as a tool of the oppressor seems to go against what Bechdel reveals about herself and her father.

Graphic novels can be broken down in many ways; the visual elements: artistic style, color, framing, objects, and representation, or the literary elements: language, structure, metaphor, and narrative. Depending on the novel, you can apply various methods of critical theory. In the case of *Fun Home*, critical writers usually employ the use of feminist, gender, and queer theory. It is not surprising that writers use this novel, written by a woman who identifies as a lesbian, to study familial relationships, emotional abuse, sexual exploration, and personal identity. Through her autobiographical novel, Bechdel leads the reader through a spiraling journey of reflection that starts with the announcement of her father’s death - a potential suicide - and ends with the same news. *Fun Home*, which has won several awards and been turned into a Broadway play, allows you into Bechdel’s mind both as a child and as an adult. You get

gradually immersed into a family dynamic that is off-kilter due to hidden truths and untimely reveals. Upon coming out to her parents as a lesbian, Bechdel learns of her father's forays into homosexuality throughout his life, including during his marriage to her mother. This reveal casts old memories in new light, and we are walked through those recollections repeatedly with new realizations upon each retelling. The narrative clearly reveals a development of sexual and personal identity within both Bechdel and her father, but the visual tools and language that are used shed light on a deeper exploration of gender and queer theory.

Judith Butler and Identity

Gender theory “explores the variety of ways that ‘gender,’ our assignment to social roles in ways regulated to our biological sex, is connected intimately and variously to our experience of sexuality, and how that experience bears our own and others’ identities.”² Over time these identities impact our social lives and politics, leading us to structure our lives and decisions around a preset system of beliefs. By default, this system narrowly sorts the population to a binary of sexes, male or female, based on heterosexual relationships. This either/or binary is so engrained that we cannot remove ourselves from it, even in a state of awareness. It is a self-perpetuating cycle, based on either/or, whether you choose to adhere to the standards or not. If you choose to abide by the binary gender roles, you are enforcing them. Often individuals throw off the gender stereotype of their biological sex, only to conform to the other, thus still enforcing the either/or system. Judith Butler bases a number of her theoretical writings on the complexities of distilling gender down to a mere binary of two sexes.³ She addresses the complexities of gender and how gender representation is produced by society's influence on the individual. In *Gender Troubles* she writes,

In this sense, gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of

gender coherence. Hence, within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative — that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed.⁴

In her theory of performative gender she suggests that gender is a “scripted” choice and therefore has the opportunity to be changed and molded.⁵ This leaves gender identity in a fragile state and allows for all kinds of expression and performance. Similarly, in regards to sexual identity, particularly queer identity, Butler seems to find fault in the use of labels to distinguish oneself (gay, lesbian, bisexual, etc), for distinguishing oneself is a means of excluding others. Yet since personal identity in our society seems to default to the heterosexual, many people tend to find strength and belonging in the claiming of a label, especially those individuals who find themselves outside of heterosexual or “straight.”

Fun Home and Performative Identity

In *Fun Home*, the display and performance of heteronormative ideals and gender expressions were essential in Bechdel’s childhood home. However, it is the small visual indicators of gender outliers, such as a butch female trucker in flannel, jeans, and boots (Figure 1) that help Bechdel realize her own outward expressions and disgust at normative female presentation were not wrong, and that she wasn’t alone in these feelings. For as a child, Bechdel was naïve to the societal assumptions that would make her perceive this butch female truck driver as “lesbian,” deviant, or wrong. Instead, she just saw different, different from the expressions of femaleness she was surrounded by, and a different that immediately resonated with her. Gender expression can overlap with sexuality, but in the case of this graphic novel it is just another visual example of nonconformity. Up until that moment, Bechdel’s young identity was wrapped up in her hatred for all things pink, floral, and lace-ruffled. After this encounter,

she could slowly embrace an attraction to more masculine clothing and a minimalist aesthetic, all the while noticing her father's attraction to overly decorated surfaces and fancier clothing.



Figure 1. Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 118.

The use of reproducing key found-photographs throughout the novel suggests that the other drawn portrayals are not factually accurate, but rather linked to her subconscious or memory. The depictions of herself and her father both seem to be negated or verified by the photographic reproductions. The amplified appearance of her father's homosexuality in the depictions of Bechdel's recollections seems to be negated by a reproduction of a family passport photo (Figure 2). The photographs of her in a bathrobe and her father sunbathing, each taken while in college (Figure 3), seem to verify the similarities between them and their shared homosexuality. These photographs are an excellent way to show each character's true outward expression in that moment. The drawn depictions, relying on childhood memories mostly, show that subconsciously she is drawn to dressing much like her father and brothers. She seems to mirror their gender expression as a child.



Figure 2. Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 72.



Figure 3. Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 120.

Throughout the novel, Bechdel lays the narrative of a forced heteronormative adolescence for the viewer in the drawn depictions of the characters. There is a uniformity throughout the book with how Bechdel portrays herself that contrasts against how she portrays other female children and adults in regards to clothing and hair. The first time we see Bechdel she is young and clad in a baggy striped t-shirt, jeans, and has a boyish pixie haircut (Figure 4). There are no outward “normative” female indicators. A few pages later we can see her at the same age in a frame with another girl her age outside of her home (Figure 5). In this frame Bechdel is shown in tattered jean shorts, a similar striped t-shirt, and the same short hair. The

other girl in the frame however is wearing a fitted tank top, pedal pushers, and sporting chin-length flipped out hair. This sets the contrast that can be picked up throughout the entire book. In personal spaces and interactions Bechdel seems to embody androgyny or even what could be labeled as “boyish” appearance, but in more public outings and events she is forced into a performative state of female gender by her parents. We see her in a dress to attend a wedding, a skirt to attend a funeral, barrettes placed in her hair by her parents.⁶ Later as an adult we see her in a skirt to attend her own father’s visitation,⁷ but in her own world, at college, it is always pants, and a t-shirt or long sleeve shirt devoid of any femininity.⁸



Figure 4. Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 3.



Figure 5. Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 5.

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler outlines some of Monique Wittig's writings about societal norms:

Wittig argues that the "straight mind," evident in the discourses of the human sciences, "oppress all of us, lesbians, women, and homosexual men" because they "take for granted that what founds society, any society, is heterosexuality." Discourse becomes oppressive when it requires that the speaking subject, in order to speak, participate in the very terms of that oppression — that is, take for granted the speaking subject's own impossibility or unintelligibility. This presumptive heterosexuality, she argues, functions within discourse to communicate a threat: "you-will-be-straight-or-you-will-not-be."⁹

When we look to heterosexuality as the foundation, we set a precedent of two sexes, two genders. There can only be two. Therefore, you are one or the other, male or female, you cannot embody or express both, or somewhere in-between. If you do not express male or female in the societal binary terms of physical representation than you are an outlier. In the pages of *Fun Home*, you view Bechdel as an outlier, the sole existence of a non-conforming gender performance within her household. If we remove heterosexuality as the foundation for society, then gender norms can be viewed as performance in a greater sense. If our qualifying ideals shift away from two genders, two sexes, then gender performance could be expanded and extended as far as the imagination.



Figure 6. Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 9.

Fun Home does not only address gender performativity within Bechdel herself, but also of her father and her father's wishes for her. We find out early that her father was a closeted gay man living within a heterosexual marriage, but he is depicted early on wearing short shorts, no shirt, and an interest in all things ornately decorated (Figure 6). Every opportunity is taken to layout what appears to be a stereotypical depiction of a gay man. Marjorie C. Allison writes of this introduction in her article (*Not*) *Lost in the Margins: Gender and Identity in Graphic Texts*,

Reflecting life in the nineteen-seventies and-eighties, that graphic depiction underscores her theme of discovering her father as a homosexual—he looks and acts the part throughout her storyline even before she, as the character within the text, discovers this fact. Interestingly, her depictions of him play into stereotypes and prejudices many readers might have about gay men. Readers are left to grapple with that tension—does she see her father as a flat stereotype or is there more below the surface?¹⁰

Bechdel uses a circular repetition so that you can see this stereotypical depiction of her father after she delivers pieces of information regarding her father's homosexuality as her character learns them throughout her life. It is as if she needs the readers to see her father's homosexuality in a stereotypical way only to point out that the others in the story, such as her own character, should have seen it from the beginning. As you loop through these images again after learning about his true sexual identity, you begin to add layers of depth to his character and are pulled back from the stereotype. It's as if she needs to reveal his true identity for him, in writing this after his death, to unburden his character of the performative hetero-masculine gender expression he undertook in his adult life – and at which he failed miserably.

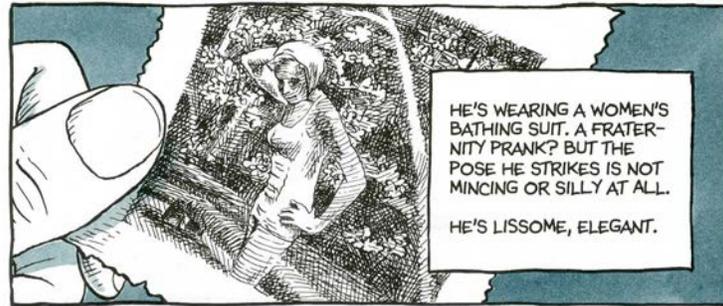


Figure 7. Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 72.

Though Bechdel depicts her father as a man who tries to hide his true identity, we learn later, through reproduced photographs, that earlier in his life it was quite the opposite. We see her father in these photographs as a young man sunbathing on a roof in shorts (Figure 3) and then dressed in a woman's swimsuit (Figure 7). The photographs are taken when he was attending college and in a fraternity house, but Bechdel even comments that her father's pose doesn't feel like a prank or a joke. In his adult life he felt the need to create a performative male gender identity that fit a more masculine, and therefore, acceptable social role. In fact, it is he who pushes young Bechdel's character the hardest into a hetero-normative feminine performance as a child. Perhaps this is another way to complete and guard his own identity, but nonetheless, his need for Bechdel to perform and wear perfect little dresses, pearls, and pink is strong. We get insight on what she thinks might be the motivation behind her father's need to present her in a feminine way when she talks of how they are constantly trying to express what they view the other is lacking (Figure 8). Her father's need to enforce feminine ideals is at its strongest when the two encounter her first "truck-driving bulldyke" and she is overwhelmed by seeing a woman in men's clothes with a men's haircut (Figure 1). Her father sees her interest and pulls her away from the scene, but the image haunts her. This is the earliest point at which we see Bechdel realize that she may not be a single outlier and that perhaps not everyone conforms to normative

gender roles and expression applied by society. Within these interactions between her and her father we see an argument for casting aside of hetero-normative gender expectations and the embracing of the labels of “gay” and “lesbian.” which refutes Butler’s claims on the oppressiveness of labeling. *Fun Home* tells a sad tale of discourse in a home where the father’s hidden identity, his refusal of the gay or homosexual label disrupts and destroys his life and relationships.

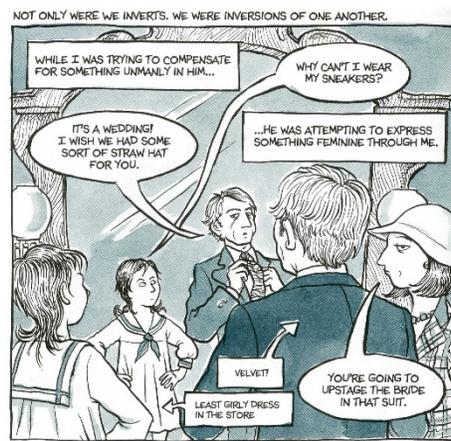


Figure 8. Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 98.

At times we confuse or even overlap gender expression with sexuality. In *Fun Home* we are seeing two examples in which the two gay characters are portrayed with a stereotypical outward expression – a feminine-acting man, a butch-dressing and acting female, but sexuality and gender expression are not always so intertwined. The fact that Bechdel is so drawn to the butch appearance of the woman in the diner (Figure 1) and chooses a more androgynous appearance herself does not in its own label her as a “lesbian.” This label is not directly associated to her gender expression because she is not relating her performative gender to heterosexual ideals. Her attraction to a non- feminine expression of herself does not mean that she embodies the male hetero- normative ideal and therefore must be attracted to women, rather

that her gender expression simply does not conform to those standards. Even the way we describe gender expression is based on heterosexual ideals. This is effectively shown in how we describe non-conforming gender performance, a “butch” woman, or a “feminine” man. Hetero-norms are so engrained into our language surrounding how we talk about gender presentation that we cannot even describe appearance without referring to the default binary.

For Judith Butler there are some problems with claiming labels, particularly the label of “lesbian.” In *Imitation and Gender Insubordination* she states, “identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structure or as that rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression.”¹¹ Though Butler likes to address the negatives of labeling oneself or labels being given to people, Alison Bechdel’s character in *Fun Home* finds power in claiming a label. I can appreciate Butler’s claims that labels only exclude people,¹² but labels create communities and rejecting labels often times rejects those communities. In the case of Bechdel’s character, she embraces the label upon finding it in lesbian and queer literature in her college library, and is relieved to learn of other people who experienced similar feelings.¹³ She finds herself going back to the library over and over again to find more literature on homosexuality until finally finding the courage to buy a book of her own. Bechdel finds comfort and strength of identity in claiming her label. The ideal of taking up a label, whatever that label might be, gives a sense of being part of a greater whole. Though Butler argues that it can be destructive for humans to separate themselves into groups by labeling,¹⁴ the character of Bechdel’s father shows how destructive it can be to denounce a label. The oppression for him comes in denying the “gay” label and trying to force himself into the more socially acceptable role of the default heterosexual male who does not need a label to be understood. As stated earlier, if heterosexuality is the default standard by which we base gender

and sexual identity, then queer identities can only benefit from embracing a label that removes them from that standard.

In the case of Bechdel's father, as a closeted gay man, it is destructive to hold himself back from claiming a community. Upon trips to New York, Bechdel describes how they would often stay with friends that lived in a neighborhood with a large gay scene in which her father would participate at night. In her father's search for a community, he still lacked that label or that power behind the ownership of calling himself gay. Through the journey of her father's character in *Fun Home*, you see how destructive this hidden and suppressed identity can be. Bechdel even surmises that her father killed himself because he couldn't take it anymore. This book reflects how enforcing heteronormative behavior onto people is destructive and oppressive. The unity that a label can provide is important.

It is easy to point out the faultiness or negative aspects of labels such as Judith Butler does in her writings, but identity is complex in both gender and sexuality. Yes, exclusion can hurt society, but community does not. The need for community is strong and in an age where it is becoming easier to "come out" in most parts of America as gay, as bisexual, as lesbian, or even to claim broader labels like queer or non-straight, to be transgender, or express gender in a nonconforming way, it is helpful. To claim one label does not exclude the others, but rather embraces a particular community. To say that all labels, especially the label of "lesbian" have a negative effect on humanity is a bit of an overstatement. For Alison Bechdel, the strength she gained from her label afforded her life, and her father's refusal took his.

Judith Butler asks, "Does 'unity'" set up an exclusionary norm of solidarity at the level of identity that rules out the possibility of a set of actions which disrupt the very borders of identity concepts, or which seek to accomplish precisely that disruption as an explicit political aim? Without the presupposition or goal of "unity," which is, in either case, always instituted at a

conceptual level, provisional unities might emerge in the context of concrete actions that have purposes other than the articulation of identity.”¹⁵

It is the unity of the label and the provisional unities that create communities and allow people to take action. *Fun Home* embraces non-conformity and queer identity and is a case for owning your performative gender identity. By doing so, you will find unity and community with others that share your need to reject hetero-normative ideals. It is only through this unity that change can really happen. History shows us that there is power in numbers. Embracing and reclaiming queer labels, refusal to conform and be silent, and embracing LGBTQ community is the reason gay rights have come so far.

Endnotes

1. Bechdel, Alison, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006).
2. Hall, Donald E., "Gender and Queer Theory," in *The Routledge Companion to Critical and Cultural Theory*, ed. By Simon Malpas and Paul Wake (New York: Routledge, 2013), 107.
3. Butler, Judith, "Subjects of Sex/ Gender/ Desire," In *Gender Trouble*, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 22- 33.
4. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 33.
5. Hall, "Gender and Queer Theory," 112.
6. Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 98-9.
7. Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 27, 50-2.
8. Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 74-7.
9. Butler, Judith, "Subversive Bodily Acts," in *Gender Trouble*, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 147.
10. Allison, Marjorie C. "(Not) Lost in the Margins: Gender and Identity in Graphic Texts," *Mosaic* 47, no.4 (2014): 73. Academic OneFile.
11. Butler, Judith, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," In *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. by Henry Abelove, et al., (New York: Routledge, 1993), 308.
12. Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination."
13. Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, 74-5.
14. Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination."
15. Butler, "Subjects of Sex/ Gender/ Desire," in *Gender Trouble*, 21.

Annotated Bibliography

- Allison, Marjorie C. "(Not) Lost in the Margins: Gender and Identity in Graphic Texts." *Mosaic* 47, no.4 (2014): 73. Academic OneFile.
-Marjorie Allison outlines the usage of the labyrinth metaphor and visual structure in *Fun Home* as a means of reflecting the world. The usage of replicating photographs as a means of mirroring Alison Bechdel's father's identity and her own are shining examples of how marginal topics such as gender and identity are represented in contemporary graphic texts. This article was key in helping me understand how to view graphic novels within relation to critical theory. It also allowed me some insight into *Fun Home* and some of the visual clues used within the illustrations that were not spelled out for the reader in text.
- Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006.
-The autobiographical graphic novel that I used as my piece of visual culture.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
-Key writing on Gender Theory and Identity used as a lens in my analysis of *Fun Home*. Butler not only writes of her own views but also analyzes other key writings and their ideas on gender binaries and our hetero- normative society.
- Butler, Judith. "Imitation and Gender Insubordination." In *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. by Henry Abelove, et al., 308-320. New York: Routledge, 1993.
-Key writing on Gender and Queer Theory that I used to analyze *Fun Home*. Though *Gender trouble* also speaks to the idea of performative gender, this article distills Butler's ideas on the subject and links it to Queer Theory and the queer identity.
- Hall, Donald E. "Gender and Queer Theory." In *The Routledge Companion to Critical and Cultural Theory*, ed. Simon Malpas and Paul Wake, 107-119. New York: Routledge, 2013.
-This chapter in our text gave me a simple overview of Gender and Queer Theory that helped me to understand the language used within these theories and gave me necessary background on the timeline of key critical writers.