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‘FALLING SHORT’ AND ‘STEPPING IN:’ TRANSCENDENCE OF FAMILIAL EXPECTATIONS IN ALISON BECHDEL’S GRAPHIC NOVELS

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Introduction

Expectations of familial roles can be strict and unforgiving, especially in terms of the relationships between parents and children. It is often expected that parents act a certain way that includes prioritizing the role of nurturing, teaching, and fostering the growth of their children. Similarly, children have certain expectations set on them to act as children do: to play games, listen to their parents, and mature with the framework of the traditional family structure so that they, too, will one day become parents. The origins of these expectations is from the mainstream American society’s ideas of what the family structure should look like. Pressure is created by the fact that American society puts worth on how well families can achieve certain expectations and downgrades deviance from the standard or traditional structure of familial expectations and roles. Society’s expectations of what a family should look like, then, influence every familial relationship, no matter how much its participants want to resist that influence.

Alison Bechdel discusses familial relationships extensively in her two autobiographical graphic novels, Fun Home and Are You My Mother? Bechdel portrays her relationships with both of her parents throughout these novels, using Fun Home as a way to discuss her relationship with her father, while Are You My Mother? focuses on her relationship with her mother. Fun Home tells the story of Alison’s childhood and early adulthood through the lens of her relationship with her father, a closeted gay man who committed suicide when Bechdel was in her early twenties. Are You My Mother? focuses on Alison’s relationship with her mother later in life and examines maternal relationships through the lens of the theories of several psychoanalysts. Throughout both novels, readers can see that the narratives Bechdel weaves about both parental relationships are not conventional and do not fit into the normative image of what a family
“should” look like based on society’s expectations. Bechdel portrays these relationships as quite ambiguous in order to help readers draw conclusions about family structures generally.

This ambiguity is supported by the fact that the structure of graphic novels forces readers to draw their own connections and conclusions between panels in order for sequences to make sense. Every single movement of every single action is not depicted in a panel; therefore, readers must piece together the story through the fragmented events that are presented. As Sam McBean says in her discussion about the fragmented scenes in *Fun Home*, “As readers move across the unconnected moments on the page, they create closure, smoothing out the comic’s fractured representation of time. This quality of comics inevitably represents narrative as irreconcilable, multiple, and constructed” (106). McBean explains that ambiguity is laced into the nature of presenting stories through sequential art because it is impossible to present every single frame of a movement or action without becoming excessive. Graphic art asks its reader to draw their own conclusions. In Bechdel’s graphic novels, this structure helps emphasize her ambivalence towards her discussion of family structures, as neither her words nor her drawings indicate any conclusion on her part. Rather, it is entirely up to the reader to use both elements in order to draw their own conclusions about what she presents.

*Fun Home* and *Are You My Mother?* set up expectations in Bechdel’s relationships with her parents that align with the normative structure of familial relationships, but those expectations are not fulfilled. Bechdel often portrays the roles and responsibilities of her parents and herself in their relationships as flipped or reversed to show characters making up for where the reality of their fulfillment of their roles falls short of the societal expectation. From the exchanges where people in the relationships fall short of their expectations or step in to make up for each other’s shortcomings, readers are invited to conclude that the blurring of family roles
suggests that queer familial relationships are created when members of the family are not able to fulfill their expected roles. The queer familial relationships, then, allow family members to navigate their roles in ways that allow the family unit to stay intact. Bechdel doesn’t outwardly assign value to her personal relationships as “successful” or “unsuccessful” at achieving normative expectations. Rather, she presents a consistently ambivalent tone when discussing her relationships, which leaves the reader to interpret that ambiguity and draw their own conclusions. This ambivalence causes readers to realize that society’s normative family structure is so difficult for families to fit into that, in order to navigate societal norms, the queering of familial relationships actually becomes more “normal” than the traditionally represented notions of the family. This thesis focuses on the ways in which Bechdel highlights her own family’s atypical structure and how the ambiguous presentation of familial roles causes readers to see that being in a “queer” family is actually ordinary, just as being in an “ordinary” family is queer.

**Discussion of Terms**

Some explanation and clarification of terms is necessary in order to ensure the reader’s understanding of my discussion. The first term which I widely discuss is “queer.” In the introduction to *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*, Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley discuss the differing ways in which their anthology uses “queer.” They say, “the term queer in its more traditional sense [indicates] a deviation from the normal” (Bruhm and Hurley x). In the context of this paper, I am mostly using queer in that traditional sense, to discuss the characteristics of something that is strange in relation to the norm. This is not necessarily always related to sexuality or identity, although Bruhm and Hurley also point out that, “queer derives also from its association with specifically sexual alterity” (x). Most of the time, I mean it as a way of describing how people are relating to each other within the bounds of social norms (so, a
relationship is queer if it transcends the boundaries of social norms). However, Alison and Bruce’s sexualities do come into play in the way that they relate to each other. In the case of talking about *Fun Home*, the word “queer” is sometimes used to discuss their sexualities; however, even when referring to queer in the context of their identities, I am using that discussion of queer identity to show the influence that their sexualities have on their relationship with each other.

The language that I use to discuss the relationships between Alison and her parents involves terms of movement that originate from *Fun Home*. “Falling short” and “stepping in” come from a passage in *Fun Home* in which Alison discusses the way she viewed her father’s masculinity throughout her childhood. In this case, he “falls short” of the expectations of normative masculinity, and she “steps in” by acting more masculine in order to make up for a space in their relationship where masculinity had been missing or lacking (*Fun Home* 96). So, in relation to the larger relationships in both novels, I discuss falling short and stepping in as a sort of movement of the characters to adjust to one another’s personalities and manifestations of identities. Most of the time, this movement is emotional or psychological, although it does manifest as a physical movement at certain points. Essentially, this involves picturing the two characters on a spectrum where either character is supposed to reach a certain point on the spectrum in order to fulfill what is expected of them in their role. When they refuse or cannot fulfill every expectation, someone else moves into the situation to fill that expectation in order for the relationship to continue to function as a part of the family structure. I picture falling short and stepping in as a tense, constant back-and-forth movement, in which a person in a relationship is trying to make up for where the other person cannot fulfill expectations, while also trying to allow the other person to make up for their shortcomings.
When I discuss blurring or transcending the lines of boundaries, I mean places where even that spectrum is unclear; it is not always a situation where one character takes a step in one direction and the other follows exactly so as to make up for the gap. Sometimes, where one character’s responsibilities end and another one’s begin is unclear, and thus blurs or transcends the space on the spectrum where that distinction would normally be clear. At other times in the novels, the roles are very clearly defined and have been entirely switched, where one character moves entirely out of their respective role for a time and another steps entirely into it.

Finally, discussion of familial expectations happens often throughout the rest of this thesis. When I refer to expectations or roles in familial relationships, I am referring to those expectations or roles set upon people by the mainstream society and its emphasis on normativity. Normative roles and expectations of parents and children in relationships originate from what society widely tells people families should look like, be, and do, along with how each participant should interact with other members of the family to achieve what society says is the ultimate goal: perceived familial perfection. Michael Warner discusses that heteronormativity is the basis for these expectations in *The Trouble with Normal*, saying, “People are constantly encouraged to believe that heterosexual desire, dating, marriage, reproduction, childrearing, and home life are not only valuable to themselves, but the bedrock on which every other value in the world rests” (47). Warner also says, “Heterosexual desire and romance are thought to be the very core of humanity” (47). Warner’s discussion showcases the parts of life that a “normal” person would complete, such as bearing and raising children. Each person, then, is expected by society to act this certain way in order to fit in or be accepted into the traditional mass narrative of society. Within that expectation are even more narrowed requirements based on factors like gender and age. Thus, the roles and expectations being discussed here can generally be thought of as not any
one person’s specific expectations, but rather as originating from the influence that mainstream society’s pressure to fit into the primary narrative of normality has on individuals.

*Fun Home*

In *Fun Home*, Alison and Bruce’s relationship is queer because of the way they relate to each other with regard to their role as parent and child but also in relation to sexuality and gender presentation. There are moments in their relationship where one falls short of the societal expectations set on them and the other steps up to fill the role or break the expectation. When they are relating to each other through masculinity and femininity, Alison often takes on the masculine roles and concerns because Bruce does not, and Bruce does the same with the feminine roles. Similarly, when they are interacting as parent and child, in a lot of situations, Alison is required to take on the role of parent to make up for the fact that her father is acting in the child role. They are in a constant movement of fulfilling different expectations in their relationship; the situations that Bechdel chooses to present this movement leads readers to the conclusion that it has both benefits and drawbacks for the characters.

There are two ways in which Alison and Bruce’s relationship shows a switching of the roles that would typically be expected of a middle-aged man and of a young girl. The first is a switch in performing the roles of their respective genders; Bruce takes on feminine roles whereas Alison resists femininity and instead makes up for where Bruce’s masculinity falls short. For example, in one scene, Bechdel mentions that she compared her father’s masculinity to other masculine people she saw as a young child. She says, “I measured my father against the grimy deer hunters at the gas station uptown, with their yellow workboots and shorn-sheep haircuts. And where he fell short, I stepped in” (*Fun Home* 96). This line is accompanied by two panels that depict a skirmish between Alison and her father about her hairstyle. He asks “Where’s your
barrette?” and then, as he proceeds to put it into her hair, says, “It keeps the hair out of your eyes.” Alison responds, “So would a crewcut” (96). The graphic art of this scene also leads the reader to the conclusion that Bruce is dissatisfied with how Alison performs femininity, and Alison is consistently frustrated with his reaction to her gender expression. Alison’s face is depicted in a grimace or a frown in every panel involving the barrette (96). Additionally, readers can see Alison pulling the barrette out of her hair after her father has just put it there in the another panel, showcasing her acknowledgement of and active resistance to her father’s desire for her to be more feminine (96). Based on Alison’s facial expressions and the haste with which she removes the barrette, this is not the first time the two of them have discussions about the way Alison presents herself. Bruce’s frustration seems to stem from the thought that Alison’s inability to correctly follow the gendered expectation that she should hold her hair back with a barrette instead of cutting it short means that she is not performing her gender correctly, and he makes up for it by forcing her to wear the barrette even though she doesn’t want to.

Bruce also makes up for Alison’s lack of caring about her appearance by caring about it intensely. In another barrette-focused scene on the next page, he asks her again where it is, and proceeds to force it into her hair despite her resistance (97). Bruce tells Alison: “Next time I see you without it, I’ll wale you” (97). Additionally, in a difference instance, Bruce is upset about Alison not wanting to wear a pearl necklace, and he remarks, “What’re you afraid of? Being beautiful? Put it on, goddamn it!” (99). Bruce harbors an anger towards Alison for not doing as she is told about her gender expression, and that anger stems from a place of his own insecurity. His attempt to “express something feminine” through Alison fails when she does not respond to the forced femininity, and therefore he is not able to make up for his own insecurity about his femininity and becomes angry (98). It is clear that he needs to feel that Alison is performing her
gender correctly in order to feel like he is performing his own correctly, and therefore is concerned about her barrette even though she resists wearing it. Bechdel mentions that “It was clear to me that my father was a big sissy” (97). This is portrayed as something that Alison has understands that she is not supposed to know, as it is only shown as being clear to her, not anyone else. Bruce’s attempts to cover up his femininity in order to appear more outwardly masculine are lost on Alison, who still senses and hones in on her father’s feminine traits. The reader certainly gathers that Bruce knows this is how he is perceived, and ensuring that his own daughter is correctly displaying her gender is a way for him to portray a “normally” or “correctly” structured family, especially in terms of gender normativity. His forced attempts at enhancing Alison’s femininity stem from a desire for no one to know that he is not fulfilling his own masculine role adequately. When combined with Bechdel’s constant returns to her father’s femininity, the reader can see that Bruce’s masculinity was not being achieved in both his own and Alison’s eyes, but that he attempts to make up for it in himself by forcing femininity on Alison. Bechdel perhaps sums it up best herself when she says: “Not only were we inverts. We were inversions of each other. While I was trying to compensate for something unmanly in him... he was attempting to express something feminine through me” (see fig. 1). The use of captions in the panels also emphasize this concern for masculinity and femininity: two boxes with arrows point to Bruce and Alison’s outfits, labeled respectively, “Velvet!” and “Least girly dress in the store” (98). Bechdel’s choice to include details about each of their outfits helps readers understand the intricacies of their interactions with gender expression. Bruce and Alison can both see that they encompass what the other is missing, and they navigate the space of gender in their relationship by using their own desires to make up for where the other one is lacking.
Although a lot of examples that involve Bruce and Alison navigating their gender expressions together depict them as arguing or being upset with each other, there is also a positive side to the queerness that presents itself in their interactions. Bechdel mentions, “Between us lay a slender demilitarized zone—our shared reverence for masculine beauty” (99). When she says this, Alison is looking at a male model in a magazine and admiring his clothing. She suggests to Bruce, “you should get a suit with a vest,” prompting him to look at the magazine from over her shoulder (99). From the angle which Bruce looks, over Alison’s shoulder in a way that prevents her from seeing his gaze, it is clear that the object he is desiring in the picture is not the suit with a vest, but rather the man modeling the suit. The structure of the panels on the page also help the reader understand Bruce’s desire. Bechdel positions this scene at the end of a two-page spread in which Alison and her father argue about clothing choices (see figure 1). From the previous panels, readers gather what elements of appearance Bruce is focused on. These include his want for Alison to wear a hat, his frustration at her skirt and lack of pearl necklace, and his own velvet jacket that will “upstage the bride” of the wedding for which they’re preparing (98-99). All of these elements are more feminine in nature, including Bruce’s own jacket because of its unconventional material. Then, when Bechdel places the panels with the magazine at the end of this sequence, readers are already familiar with Bruce’s desires when it comes to appearance. The logical flow of the sequence then helps them conclude that he is not desiring the suit itself in that photo, as he has shown no previous affinity for masculine clothing that does not have feminine elements. Rather, his desire for romantic and sexual relationships with men is reinforced when, on the next page, Bechdel includes a full spread of a photograph of one of Bruce’s lovers. By situating the instance with the magazine in the context of these other
discussions of desire, Bechdel shows readers that Bruce’s masculine desire is for the model himself, not the clothing.

Additionally, it is worth noting that Bechdel includes small details in individual panels that help the reader understand that the man is the object of Bruce’s desire, not the clothing. In this scene, Bruce stands in front of a bookcase that is full of books with no titles, authors, or hints about their subject matter. The only book that is visible, positioned right between the characters, is titled *The Nude* and depicts a partial figure without clothing (99). In this panel, Alison also sits with her back to Bruce; from where each character is positioned, she would not be able to see the book, whereas Bruce would. The fact that this book stands out from the rest of Bruce’s collection, and that Alison would not be able to see it, helps readers understand that Bruce’s desire is not based in the clothing the model is wearing, as Alison’s is, but instead is focused on the body of model himself.

Bruce’s attraction to the man speaks to his queerness, and his disregard for the suit itself speaks to the fact that he is not as interested in his own masculine appearance as he in the appearance of other men. On the other hand, Alison in this scene is looking at the man and seeing someone she desires to look like. Bechdel says, “But I wanted the muscles and tweed... subjectively, for myself” (99). She is admiring the clothing as something she wants to wear, rather than admiring the man for his attractiveness. In this situation, she makes up for the fact that Bruce doesn’t care about the masculinity of the clothing with her desire to wear it; Bruce steps in and supplies the feminine gaze of looking at the man’s appearance. This situation primarily shows that not every interaction that the two had about gender was negative; in fact, navigating the space in between where they don’t fit into their prescribed gender roles occasionally allows them both to accept their desires in ways that help them relate to each other.
For instance, looking at the magazine allows both characters to express something about their desires casually in a situation that does not merit formal discussion. In this way, they are able to share some of their own queer identities with less shame, and for a time, that bridges the gap from shame that often separates them. Sharing the same object of attraction in different ways helps them navigate the tension that comes with the queerness of their relationship.

It is noteworthy that the scenes of Alison and Bruce arguing and the one of their casual discussion of the magazine page all take place in close proximity to one another, in a range of four pages. Showing Bruce and Alison at different ages and stages of their relationship enforces the idea that breaking from their gender norms was a part of how they related to each other and how they were both individually able to express their queerness. In making up for the lacking of the other, they were each given a valid “excuse” to act on their own queerness, especially in relation to appearance; this excuse provided a way to temporarily work around the shame attached to their queerness. For example, Alison was able to embrace the masculine aspects of her identity because she felt it was a part of what she needed to do to make up for her father’s lack of masculine traits. Through this display, she derives a certain pleasure in being able to use her masculinity to make up for her father’s lack of masculinity. Bruce, on the other hand, was given opportunities to act on his femininity through his enforcement of Alison’s appearance. These instances, although they are often not beneficial to both parties at once, do allow for each character to accept to the queer aspects of their identities and embrace that queerness because the other person isn’t adequately doing so. Essentially, being able to act on their queerness, while using each other as a sort of “excuse” for exercising the queer parts of themselves, allows both characters to ease the pressure of the societal expectation to appear heterosexual and
heteronormative. Additionally, this situation shows that attempts at fitting into the normative structure, in some cases, make space for queer expression.

The second way in which Alison and Bruce relate to each other is through their relationship as parent and child. In these situations, they make up for what is lacking in those roles. There are scenes where Bruce clearly thinks that Alison is not performing the role of a child correctly, and therefore steps in to “help” her in a way that puts him into the child position and her to the parent position. One such scene takes place when Alison is coloring a picture of a caravan from *The Wind in the Willows*. She colors the caravan “midnight blue,” but her father remarks, “What are you doing? That’s the *canary-colored* caravan!” (130). In the next panels, he takes over coloring the picture and she walks away as he becomes absorbed by the task (131). By not using the correct color, Alison is not coloring in a way that follows Bruce’s expectation of what coloring should be. In this case, Bruce physically intervenes when he believes Alison is wrong, and because he becomes so absorbed in the picture, Alison loses interest and walks away. They switch roles here, with Bruce becoming a child-like figure who is intent on coloring a photo “correctly,” while Alison becomes an indifferent, adult-like figure who has no choice but to let the coloring go and move on to something else. The graphic art in this scene also emphasizes the switching of roles that occurs. When Bruce first appears in the situation, he is looking over Alison’s shoulder at the coloring book while she is sitting on the floor (130). In the next two panels, Alison is looking over his shoulder, after he has physically taken her place at the table, which positions her above him (131). Alison, then, moves from the child position of sitting on the floor looking at the book to the adult position of standing above and looking over the shoulder of the child figure, whom her father has become. In showing readers the physical switch of positions, Bechdel emphasizes that Alison and Bruce switch roles in this situation in a
way that places Bruce into the child role and Alison into the parent role. Although there are
certainly times throughout the novel where Bruce functions as the parent and Alison as the child,
when they transcend the expectations of the place they each hold in the relationship, that
transcendence creates an ambiguity of who is acting as the parent and who is acting as the child
in their relationship as a whole.

Another example of Bruce and Alison reversing roles in their parent/child relationship
happens when Alison takes an English class in college and Bruce becomes involved with what
she is reading and learning in the class. Bechdel mentions that, “books... continued to serve as
our currency” after she went away to college (200). Although books may have functioned as a
way for them to relate to each other, Bruce’s absorption and Alison’s exhaustion with the reading
assignments shows that, in this situation, Bruce’s role as the childlike figure prevents them from
fully connecting. Bruce, excited to discuss the literature with Alison, actually creates a void in
their relationship when he talks about it so extensively that she doesn’t enjoy it or relate to him
anymore. Bechdel says, “Though now that I think of it, it’s unclear whether the was the vicarious
teacher or the vicarious student... Eventually, his excitement began to leave little room for my
own... And by the end of the year I was suffocating” (201). The reader also feels Bruce’s
overwhelming presence when looking at the pages in which Bechdel tells this part of the story.
The English class is discussed over a spread of two pages in which Bruce does not appear in
person at all (200-201). However, his presence is felt through the huge blocks of text that depict
his end of phone conversations with Alison (201). Alison appears in every panel on the second
page of the spread and barely speaks a word (201). Bechdel’s choice in depicting the situation
this way helps readers understand the one-sided nature of the conversations Bruce and Alison
were having while also emphasizing how stifling those conversations were for Alison. In this
situation, Bruce is unable to recognize that he is squashing Alison’s potential as a student by becoming absorbed in the books himself; she becomes the parent figure who humors him in his discussions while he is the childlike figure who is too absorbed in the books to notice that Alison is not enjoying the class or their discussions.

One scene towards the end of the book ties together both of the ways in which Bruce and Alison relate to each other throughout. While they are in the car on the way to the movie theater, Bruce and Alison discuss the origins and beginnings of realizing their sexualities. Bruce says, “When I was little, I really wanted to be a girl. I’d dress up in girls’ clothes” (221). Alison, suddenly finding herself in a position to relate to her father, replies, “I wanted to be a boy! I dressed in boys’ clothes! Remember?” (221). Bruce’s lack of response shows that he is absorbed in his own thoughts about his past and does not sense the connection Alison is feeling. At the same time, Bechdel notes that the situation was similar to one from *Ulysses*, saying: “It was more like fatherless Stephen and sonless Bloom... but which of us was the father? I had felt distinctly parental listening to his shamefaced recitation” (221). In discussing their sexuality, they find a point where they almost converge but fail because their roles are not being fulfilled in a manner that lends itself to such a connection. Alison, although desperate for the space to talk about her sexuality with her father, finds herself again in the role of the parent as he becomes absorbed with his own concerns and indifferent to hers. In “Growing Sideways, or Versions of the Queer Child,” Kathryn Bond Stockton discusses that part of being a queer child is developing into an adult with a clearer sense of identity. She discusses stages of life in which queer children are expected to develop their sense of identity and place a technical label on it, moving from being “strange” or “queer” to identifying as gay, for instance (Stockton 287). By combining this perspective with the instance in the car, readers can see that Bruce is the version of the queer
child who has not yet developed his own personal sense of identity. On the other hand, Alison, in a much more adult role, is more secure in her sense of identity and her willingness to discuss it. However, because she must be the adult and concede to Bruce’s shame and confusion about his identity, she is not able to establish the emotional connection that her exclamation tells readers she is hoping for.

The graphic setup of the pages where this conversation takes place also emphasize the idea that they are struggling to connect. Over the course of two pages, there is barely any variation in the style of each panel, and the panels are much smaller and more uniform than any of the other pages in the novel (Fun Home 220-221). Throughout the course of 24 panels, Alison and Bruce never make eye contact with each other; in an emphasis of the shame he felt in this situation, Bruce never looks at Alison at all, despite the fact that she occasionally glances at him (see figure 2). The immobility in these panels suggests that, although they have certain things in common, Alison’s position as the parent in this situation and Bruce’s as the child are static in this situation, which prevents them from fully connecting. There are various other moments in the novel where there is movement happening between who is performing certain aspects of each role. In opposition to that movement, this spread’s lack of physical movement shows that the characters are locked into their current roles when this conversation happens because the traditional family structure does not allow for discussions of queerness. Looking at the page halts any sort of movement when reading the novel as well because the panels are so repetitive. In this way, readers can relate to the feeling of the stunted conversation and understand the lack of connection between Alison and Bruce in that moment.

Although an important part of Fun Home is recognizing the delicate intricacies of the way Alison and Bruce relate to each other, it is important to realize that Bechdel rarely places
value judgments on the situations herself. She doesn’t directly tell readers that the relationship was either good or bad, or whether stepping up to fulfill roles that the other person was missing was successful in then fitting their relationship into the norm that they (mainly Bruce) were reaching for. Instead, she presents experiences, both positive and negative, as a way of creating ambiguity that forces readers to face the fact that the tenets of Alison and Bruce’s relationship were blurred and unclear. By forcing readers to reconcile the fact that she is not going to explain the conclusion they should draw, Bechdel creates a space in her novel to emphasize that nontraditional familial relationships have an element of ambivalence that prevents them from being distinguished as entirely good or bad. More discussion on this topic can be found in the “Effects of a Combined Reading” section of the thesis.

*Are You My Mother?*

Alison and her mother have a much different relationship than the one she has with her father, but their relationship is still queer. Moments in *Are You My Mother?* show Alison and her mother switching roles or making up for one another’s shortcomings in their mother/child relationship as they both grow older. There are times in *Are You My Mother?* where, like *Fun Home*, Alison must step into the role of parent because her mother is embodying the role of the child, and vice versa. The discussion of psychoanalysis in this novel frames these interactions as not inherently queer, but as something that normally happens between a mother and a child, although Bechdel occasionally disagrees that nothing is queer about her relationship with her mother. Therefore, the ambiguity that Bechdel creates about whether queer family structures are harmful or helpful remains as strongly as it does in *Fun Home*.

Alison and her mother certainly blur the line between the roles of mother and child. One example of where they do this involves the dedication to journaling and documentation of their
lives that they both value. As told in both *Fun Home* and *Are You My Mother?*, Alison struggled with OCD as a child and had trouble writing in her own journal. Because of this difficulty, for a time, her mother transcribed her journal entries for her as Alison dictated. Bechdel remarks, “Getting her undivided attention was a rare treat... she was listening to me. Whatever I said, she wrote down” (*Are You My Mother?* 13). However, as Bechdel shows readers on the previous pages of the book, Alison and her mother switched roles as they both got older. In their phone calls, which happen in the ‘present day’ of the novel, Alison writes down everything her mother says in order to “capture her voice, her precise wording, her deadpan humor” (12). Alison’s role switches from the person who dictates to the one who listens and writes, while her mother’s role does the opposite. They have switched roles from where they were when Alison was a child. This switch characterizes Helen in a childish way and places Alison in the position of the reasonable adult. Helen doesn’t necessarily need someone to write down her conversations, as young Alison did, but Alison also considers her to be “drafting her own daily journal entry out loud” in the same way as she did as a child (12). The intent of the dictation and recording of conversations is not necessarily as important here as its effect: it shows that Alison and her mother have moved to a place in their relationship where Helen is speaking and Alison is listening, when it used to be the other way around. As Bechdel even says herself, “My mother composed me as I now compose her” (14). This addition to the passage shows that its importance lies in the fact that Bechdel is now doing something for her mother that her mother used to do for her; on the spectrum of who dictates and who listens and writes, they have entirely switched positions.

As a child, Alison also relates to her mother by stepping up to fill the roles Helen is not fulfilling. Similar to her relationship with her father, Alison finds places where her mother is
lacking in performing her maternal role and takes steps to account for what is lacking. This novel’s focus on psychoanalysis leads Bechdel to the work of Alice Miller and the concept of the “gifted child.” Bechdel clarifies the necessary characteristics for a child to be considered “gifted” while also showing readers that she herself was a “gifted” child that fit those requirements. Bechdel says, “‘Every one’ of the psychoanalytic trainees [Miller] has supervised has the same history: an insecure parent who did not appear to be insecure, but who depended on the child behaving in a particular way... and an “amazing ability” on the part of the child to perceive this and take on the assigned role” (149). In the panel behind this text, young Alison prompts her brothers to go to bed at exactly nine o’clock, despite their insistence that “it’s summer!” and “Medical Center’s on [television] next!” (149). Helen can be seen in the background of the panel in another room reading a book, completely ignoring the conversation between the children (149). Alison’s urgency to fulfill the role her mother has missed is also portrayed through the graphic art in this part of the novel. The situation starts off with a panel that largely depicts a clock reading “8:59” (149). Then, in the next panel, it is revealed to the reader that Alison is sitting in front of the clock, waiting diligently for it to turn to 9:00, before she immediately gets up and tells her brothers it is time for bed (149). In this situation, Alison takes on a parental role; feeling that it is her duty, she follows the strict schedule of what she has figured out her mother needs from her. Helen, then, moves out of the maternal role at that moment, as she shows no sign of attention or care about whether or not her children go to bed on time. Because Helen is lacking in this instance, and because Alison is the “gifted child,” Alison is able to fill the void that is left by Helen’s maternal absence.

Bechdel also establishes Helen as the “insecure parent who did not appear to be insecure” a few pages later (149). In a scene where Alison is sneaking back into the house to get a toy, she
hears her mother sobbing behind a closed door (153). Bechdel describes that the situation takes place when “Mom had a bad migraine... [and] dad was taking us kids away somewhere to give her a break” (153). Alison’s reentering the house quietly and hearing the sobbing shows that Helen believed herself to be alone in the house before crying. Helen’s “private agony” hints towards the fact that she did not appear to be insecure about her role in the family but, to some extent, was internally insecure (153). The concept of the gifted child is a two-way street: Helen depends on Alison to do certain things because she is insecure, while Alison takes on the assigned roles in order to keep the family structure intact.

Similar to Bruce, though, Helen is not necessarily always lacking in her role as a parent. There are specific times, like the bedtime example, where Alison is able to figure out that she needs to step up because her mother is not fulfilling one part of her role. However, that does not mean that Helen abandons all roles of motherhood all the time; in fact, later in this section, I discuss an instance where Helen fulfills her maternal role in a way that benefits Alison. Instead of portraying the entire relationship as harmful or neglectful, Alison’s occasional movement into maternal roles emphasizes that Helen and Alison’s relationship is an inconsistent one in which they navigate the spaces where one of them needs something from the other that would not normally be expected. Similar to *Fun Home*, Bechdel presents this inconsistency ambiguously, never quite drawing conclusions for the reader. Instead, the ambiguity emphasizes that this was a part of Bechdel’s family structure whether readers believe it to be beneficial or not.

In another instance influenced by Miller’s psychoanalysis, Bechdel describes the relationship with her mother more directly when discussing the first time she discovered Miller’s book *The Drama of the Gifted Child*. She says, “The book described perfectly the strangely inverted relationship I’d always felt I had with my mother... this sense that I was her mother”
In this situation, Bechdel directly states her perspective on the way she and her mother navigate their relationship. Since she has “always” had this feeling that she is the mother to her own mother, Bechdel acknowledges that she and her mother have been defining and redefining the roles of their relationship since it began. In comparison, the normative expectation in society would be that the mother fulfills all roles of the mother and the child all roles of the child, and that those roles are set and never switch. What we see in the example of Alison telling her brothers it is time for bed is an anxiety on her part surrounding the fact that their mother did not tell them it was bedtime. Alison moving into the adult role in this situation comes from a desire for consistency in her daily routine. Stockton also discusses a reversal of parent/child roles in “Growing Sideways.” Stockton frames the “inversion of child/adult conventions” as originating with ideas of deception on the part of the child, as conventions of adulthood are threatened by children who know too much (293). I don’t necessarily think that this is what Alison is doing – her concern for things like bedtime do not seem to stem from a desire to be in control of her family or to be deceptive in any way; rather, it seems that Alison’s concern stems from a desire for consistency. In “Queer and Now,” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick outlines societal expectations for what a family should have; one of these things is, “a daily routine” (6). Alison’s compensation for her mother’s lack of parenting here could point to the fact that she is trying to make up for where her mother fails in establishing a daily routine as part of the family structure. However, the Bechdel family is not missing everything off of Sedgwick’s list; therefore, readers can gather that Alison is not required to be in the maternal role all the time. This prompts a sensation of movement into and out of roles when fulfilling them is necessary for someone in the relationship; sometimes Alison functions as the mother, whereas sometimes she functions as the child. The sensation of moving into and out of roles as Alison and Helen do is a queer
movement, and that queer movement characterizes their relationship. Alison’s feeling of being the mother is a direct result of that movement, which follows from Helen not fulfilling the role of mother in the way that Alison expects her to.

Some psychological concepts developed by psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott and presented by Bechdel in Are You My Mother? also help readers understand that the relationship between Alison and her mother has normative elements but is still queer. The first concept is one from Winnicott’s book The Ordinary Devoted Mother, in which Winnicott says, “ordinarily the woman enters into a phase, a phase from which she ordinarily recovers in the weeks and months after the baby’s birth, in which to a large extent she is the baby and the baby is her” (Are You My Mother? 32). Bechdel notes in a separate text box that Winnicott also says, “There is nothing mystical about this [identification with one another]” (32). These pieces of Winnicott’s text are accompanied by a set of photos recreated by Bechdel from her infancy in which she and her mother make mirroring faces at one another (see figure 3). When describing the photos, Bechdel says, “Mom is making faces and presumably sounds at me. In each shot, I reflect her expression and the shape of her mouth with uncanny precision” (32). The presence of the photos in this discussion point to the fact that, at this age, Alison and her mother feel a strong identification with each other that puts them in a state where they are unaware of anyone else. The undivided attention that they both give to each other blurs them in a way into two people who exist as one being. In this way, the nature of the typical mother/child distinction, especially in considering the expected maternal role of caretaking, is disturbed by the notion that the mother and the baby are two parts of the same person. This situation, then, speaks to the idea of a blurred line in their relationship: the relationship between two people who are so intimately related that they are inseparable from each other is gone and is instead replaced by the individual distinction between
mother and child. This break allows them to begin moving into and out of the mother and child roles in order to navigate their relationship.

What is distinct about the discussion of the baby and the mother as one figure is not necessarily that it is a queered version of a mother/child relationship. Winnicott’s psychoanalysis says that this way of relating to each other in which the mother and the baby become part of one another is not mystical and is, in fact, a component of the ordinary devoted mother. In his view, the concepts of imperfect motherhood are normal facets of familial relationships. Therefore, the “ordinary devoted mother” concept itself is does not represent a queer version of a mother/child relationship, but rather a common one. However, Bechdel queers the relationship herself when she says, “I disagree that there is nothing mystical about this. For two separate beings to be identical—to be one... this seems to me as mystical, as transcendent of the laws of everyday reality, as it gets” (36). Even with her own knowledge of the ordinary devoted mother, Bechdel sees this early component of her relationship with her mother as something that is completely beyond the terms of reality. For that reason, Bechdel pushes readers to understand the difference between her relationship with her mother and what is normative, which is understood through examining the elements of queerness that are present in their relationship and attending to what feels queer. Bechdel’s relationship with her mother, which is queer in comparison to normative expectations, is normal in the fact that it is queer. That is, Winnicott’s explanation helps readers understand that the concept of the ordinary devoted mother, which would not be considered within acceptable guidelines of normative family structures, still encompasses the experiences of many mothers. Thus, the queerness that results from straying away from the confines of normative expectations actually becomes something normal or common. Readers begin to see the queering of familial roles as a normal way to navigate normative expectations in families.
On future pages, a continuation of Winnicott’s idea of the “ordinary devoted mother” shows the beginning of a distinction in the mother/child relationship. One way in which Bechdel helps readers understand the queerness present in her relationship with her mother from the beginning is when she shows the breaking of eye contact at the end of the aforementioned photo set. The last photo in the set portrays Helen still looking directly at infant Alison, as she has in past frames, but Alison is looking away and making eye contact with the camera. As she breaks their eye contact, “the moment is shattered” (33). This breaking of eye contact signifies a breaking of the indistinguishable parts of Alison and Helen; Alison is no longer mirroring Helen, and therefore has moved on to function as her own individual person. Notably, this abrupt disruption of the harmony of their early understanding of each other is brought on by “the man with the camera,” or Alison’s father (33). Although they are temporarily mesmerized by each other, as Winnicott indicates mother and child tend to be, the sudden break in eye contact represents the beginning of the movement between the two of them that continues on throughout their relationship.

In the next spread, Bechdel’s recreation of Winnicott’s passage reads, “At three or four months after being born the baby may be able to show that he or she knows what it is like to be a mother, that is a mother in her state of being devoted to something that is not in fact herself” (35). To accompany this, Bechdel mentions that the last photo in the previous spread’s collage (on pages 32-33), “feels like a picture of the end of my childhood” (35). When Alison breaks the eye contact between her and her mother, moving them both into individual roles rather than one inseparable figure, their individuality also signifies the “end” of Alison’s childhood, as Bechdel puts it, and the baby “knowing what it is like to be a mother,” as Winnicott puts it (35). Bechdel, then, means that the breaking of eye contact jolts infant Alison into being an individual figure,
rather than someone who is intimately linked to another person. The fact that this sequence takes place over a two-page spread allows the reader to have a similar experience to Bechdel’s of viewing the photos. Since they are in a particular order, readers make it all the way to the bottom of the second page of the spread before they are surprised by Alison’s sudden break of eye contact and development of independence from her mother. The addition of Winnicott’s idea shows readers that part of that initial separation includes the baby beginning to understand motherhood as something separate from their own existence. This is significant when accompanied by the notion that “at three months, [Alison] had seen enough of [her] father’s rages to be wary of him” (33). The concern on infant Alison’s face in the last photo, paired with that caption, indicates a complex understanding of rage that would be less understood by a “normal” infant and more understood by someone who is in a typically protective role (see figure 3). This section of the book represents a key transition in the way that Alison and her mother relate to one another because, as she begins to understand both her own individuality and the rage of her father, she moves directly from being a part of her mother to being in the mother role. Alison’s mother does not acknowledge the presence of her father in the same way that Alison does; Alison’s clear concern represents a movement into a protective, maternal role. The way Alison and Helen relate to each other as separate individuals, then, begins with this sequence, in which readers see Alison beginning to understand what the distinction between mother and child even in her infancy.

The other psychoanalytical concept on which the novel draws is the “good-enough mother,” which can be applied to Alison and Helen’s relationship to show that Helen is an example of the good-enough mother (61). Bechdel reproduces Winnicott’s words in a panel and highlights this text: “The good-enough ’mother’ (not necessarily the infant’s own mother) is one
who makes active adaptation to the infant’s needs, an adaptation that gradually lessens, according to the infant’s growing ability to account for failure of adaptation and to tolerate the results of frustration” (61). The good-enough mother, then, does not necessarily fulfill every role of a mother who would be considered ‘perfect’ in terms of normative social expectations of what a mother should be or do. Instead, she gradually lessens her contributions as a mother as her child learns to make up for where those contributions cease. This description fits the relationship between Alison and her mother, and the concept is even interlaced with panels depicting scenes from Alison’s infancy. Bechdel depicts her mother bottle-feeding her instead of breastfeeding and says, “I don’t want to suggest that my own highly capable mother was not ‘good-enough.’ But some babies can ‘tolerate the results of frustration’ sooner than others” (61). This quote helps readers understand that Helen is an example of the good-enough mother, while Alison (as a gifted child figure) is able to tolerate the frustration of that lacking sooner than other infants might have been able to. Therefore, what queers this part of the relationship is that Alison begins to notice the lack of adaptation of her mother, and then is able to make up for it earlier than most other infants. Bechdel says of Winnicott’s theory, “Mothers do not have to be perfect, just good enough” (61). It is not that Helen’s status as a good-enough mother is innately queer, then, but rather that Alison is so attuned to the places where the shortcomings of her good-enough mother come through even as an infant. This speaks to a complex understanding on Alison’s part of what her mother could and couldn’t do for her, which helps readers understand why Alison’s status as a “gifted child” causes her to step in where her mother falls short at every stage of her life. Additionally, the concept of the good-enough mother plays into the distinction between normal and normative relationships. Whereas the normative expectation would be that a mother is “perfect” and fulfills every role expected of her, Bechdel is showing that being a “good-
enough” mother is actually a normal part of the family structure. So, while Winnicott does not believe the good-enough mother to be innately queer, the effect of showing its normalcy enforces that the normative family structure is queer (in the sense of abnormal or uncommon) and the lack of perfection is normal.

Bechdel places the discussion of the good-enough mother right before another section in which she talks about her relationship with her mother in a therapy session. In the session, Alison explains how the two of them communicate, saying, “I always call her. She never calls me. I listen to her go on and on about people I don’t know, I support her, encourage her. But she doesn’t want to hear about my life... It’s like I’m the mother” (62). This passage emphasizes that, even in adulthood, Alison feels more like the mother in their relationship than she feels like the child. Alison’s feeling that this is a queer part of their relationship comes across not only in the dialogue but in the art as well; she is depicted as leaning over on the couch, her back hunched and eyes wide. Clearly, this part of the relationship is putting stress on Alison because of the fact that she is expected to call her mother solely to listen to her talk. By placing this scene right after her discussion of the good-enough mother, Bechdel is able to show readers how the relationship has changed; while, in the past, Helen has held the primary role of mother, in this given case, Alison identifies with the role. Bechdel’s choice to describe her mother in the primary caretaker role, and then herself directly after, speaks to the way in which the dynamic of the relationship is constantly changing, no matter what ages the people in the relationship are. This is especially true given the closeness of these two scenes to one another; the good-enough mother discussion ends on the same page on which the therapist office conversation begins. Alison represents the part of the good-enough mother that aims to respond to the needs of the child; in this situation, she discusses how her mother has no concern for her personal life, but needs someone to listen to
her own musings. Therefore, the role of the good-enough mother is shown as moving rather than static. Depending on what type of interaction they are having, both Alison and Helen move in and out of that role in order to make up for the fact that neither of them is able to embody it consistently.

These distinctions in the roles of mother and child do not come with a timeline. In the discussion of the ordinary devoted mother, representing the “end of [Alison’s] childhood” means that she is painted in the role of an adult even as an infant. However, this does not necessarily mean that she never takes on the role of the child, nor that Helen stopped embodying the role of the mother after three months of Alison’s life. Part of what makes this fluctuation of roles a queer version of a “normal” relationship is that it is constantly moving; there is not necessarily a distinct time where either person takes on a role and stays in it forever. Rather, Alison and Helen adjust to changing elements of their lives and relationship in order to find some sort of balance that allows them to function within the family structure and everyday life.

In order to convey the importance of movement between the expectations of their roles, it is necessary to show that there are times where Helen and Alison both embody the roles that would normatively be assigned to them. The movement and fluctuation between their roles would not exist if they stayed in opposite roles all the time; the movement exists in the spaces where they are moving from mother to child and vice versa. At times, Helen does embody parts of the maternal role, just as Alison embodies parts of the child role. For example, in Alison’s childhood, she plays a game she refers to as the “crippled child” game, wherein she would “pretend [she] was a ‘crippled’ child, and [her] mom would play along with it” (19-20). As an adult, Bechdel expresses how fun it was when her mother got involved with the game because, “wherever I went with the fantasy, she was right there” (20). In a similar physical positioning
situation to *Fun Home*’s example of the coloring book, the crippled child game always requires Alison to be on the floor in a child role and her mother to be standing over her into a more authoritative parent role. In this situation, Helen functions in the more traditional role of the mother who pays attention to and plays games with the child. It is notable that she assists Alison in playing a game that she wouldn’t be able to play on her own; since the focus of the game was Alison getting attention for being “crippled,” she couldn’t have played it without another person to give her attention. In this way, the crippled child game shows Helen stepping up in her role as mother to help Alison fulfill some roles as the child (play, receiving attention) that she could not have fulfilled on her own. This example emphasizes that the queerness of the relationship originates not in the fact that they are sometimes fulfilling different roles, but in that these roles are constantly moving and adjusting to each other so that the relationship works for both people in the way that it needs to.

This is not to suggest that Helen is really benefitting from the crippled child game, but rather that, in this situation, Alison is benefitting while Helen is fulfilling the maternal role that helps her child play the game. This is especially true considering the visuals of the crippled child scenes. Helen is shown through side profiles and from above; because of the angles at which she is drawn, the reader never gets a full view of her facial expressions (see figure 4). These angles emphasize Bechdel’s ambiguity; rather than showing readers directly if her mother was enjoying or loathing the game, Bechdel leaves Helen’s facial expressions neutral or invisible in order to show that the ambivalence of their relationship rests in the fact that they are constantly switching roles. While Helen may or may not be benefitting from the game, what is important is that readers recognize that she is temporarily in the maternal role helping Alison to benefit from the
situation; this comes with a recognition of the fact that she will ultimately switch again at some point, as the relationship is constantly moving, into a role where she is being helped by Alison.

As readers have seen, the movement between who is fulfilling the roles of mother and child in Alison and Helen’s relationship removes a clear definition of what each role is “supposed” to look like in the eyes of the author. For example, on the very last pages of the book, Bechdel says, “There was a certain thing I did not get from my mother. There is a lack, a gap, a void. But in its place, she has given me something else. Something, I would argue, that is far more valuable. She has given me the way out” (288-289). This passage comes in the context of the crippled child game, where a young Alison is given leg braces and special shoes by her mother and says, “I think I can get up now” (287-289). Alison’s act of getting up off the floor signifies a movement away from a strictly childlike role in that situation, which is a result of her mother giving her “the way out” in place of other things she has not given her (289). It is clear that, although the reader doesn’t know what exactly is missing in their relationship, there are both positive and negative results of the fluidity in their roles and expectations of each other.

By presenting the queer relationship she has with her mother as having both positive and negative effects, and by not expressly directing readers’ conclusions of the relationship itself, Bechdel creates ambiguity that challenges traditional notions of family structure. She is not saying that this relationship structure was entirely ordinary or entirely queered; she is not saying that the outcome was entirely good or entirely bad. Rather, what comes through is the idea that this relationship structure worked for Alison and her mother in that it allowed them to function within their family. The sense of normalcy in Alison and Helen’s relationship originates from the knowledge that the fluidity of their roles and actions allows them to relate to each other uniquely. In this way, Bechdel challenges the idea that ordinary relationships are the ones that are normal;
instead, she shows that ordinary familial relationships, in which all participants fit perfectly into the roles expected of them, have a certain element of queerness to them because they are virtually unattainable. Queer familial relationships, then, become the ordinary or normal type of relationship, because it is likely that people in familial relationships will find a way to work around the unrealistic expectations of the normative relationship structure.

**Effects of a Combined Reading**

Reading the two works together allows for a comparison that helps readers see that, although the relationships are queer in different ways, the queerness originates from attempts by people in relationships to make up for where others fall short. This reinforces Bechdel’s theme that developing queer ways to navigate spaces where expected roles are not being met in relationships is actually a normal component of familial relationships. This queerness in relationships is not presented as entirely positive or negative, but rather is ambiguous in order to push the reader to accept its inevitability. Additionally, when drawing conclusions about each novel’s given familial relationship, the ambivalence that Bechdel presents causes readers to experience a significant reversal in thinking about the family structure where the queer family becomes normalized and the normative family appears queer.

The above examples about places in both novels where Alison makes up for her parents’ failure to perform their parenting roles show that both relationships are queer relationships. Although they manifest themselves differently, both represent a space where the child and the parent navigate their relationship by making up for where they each fall short of their societal expectations. Comparing the relationships from both novels shows the reader that it is not necessarily specific tenets of each relationship that makes them queer relationships, but rather the general principle of being unable to achieve society’s expectations of certain roles and having to
still find a way to function within the family structure. That is, even though there are different things happening in each relationship with her parents, there are significant similarities in the queerness established; they are making up for each other’s shortcomings in terms of normative expectations. When thinking of the two novels together rather than as separate pieces, readers are able to understand that queerness is not limited to a certain kind of parent/child relationship. Regardless of how relationships end up queered, that queering is a result of finding a way to fit into an impossible family structure. Any familial relationships in which the participants do not fit perfectly into society’s ideals of the family structure is a queer familial relationship.

Throughout her presentation of her relationships with both of her parents, Bechdel maintains an ambivalent tone and attitude. She doesn’t present either relationship as entirely good or entirely bad, but she does show instances where people are both helped and harmed by the queerness of the relationships. For example, *Fun Home* shows situations wherein Alison and/or Bruce are actively benefitting from a situation in which they are falling short and stepping in for each other. One example of this is when they are looking at the male model in the magazine together. In this situation, they are both able to project their desires related to masculinity onto the model. This allows for an outlet of their queer identities that may not have otherwise been present, while also allowing them to bond over something that they both enjoy looking at. Although they desire the model differently, they are still able to both appreciate the advertisement and acknowledge each other’s desires with respect to masculinity.

Despite the presence of positivity in relation to the queer parts of their relationship, there are also instances in *Fun Home* where the reader can see that the way Bruce and Alison are navigating their roles is harmful to one or both of them. A clear example of this is when Bruce physically takes Alison’s place in front of the coloring book. Alison walks away and is no longer
given the physical space where she can color. Bruce is more concerned with correcting what he perceives as an error of Alison’s performance as the child than with ensuring that she is able to embrace her status as a child and just be “wrong.” He becomes so absorbed in his own action that he doesn’t even notice when she walks away; she concedes so easily because, as readers realize, this is not the only time something like this has happened between them. Bruce completely abandoning his role as the father in favor of becoming the child himself, and Alison showing impeccable maturity at just walking away from the situation, brings forth a pang of pain from the reader; it calls into question what other experiences Alison has had to give up as a child because her parents were too concerned with other things to parent her. Therefore, when Bruce steps into the child role in certain instances, Alison loses out on opportunities to act childish. Even though the relationship seems to work for the family’s general functioning, there is certainly an effort on Bechdel’s part to help the reader understand that the ambiguity in the relationship exists because not every situation is starkly good or bad for the people in the relationships.

The element of ambiguity that Bechdel is emphasizing in *Fun Home* also comes through in *Are You My Mother?* and its discussion of Alison’s relationship with Helen. Helen and Alison make up for each other’s shortcoming in terms of their expected roles as mother and child in ways that both benefit and hinder their relationship with one another. For example, when Bechdel portrays her mother taking dictation for Alison’s journal as a child, and then shows the reversal of that situation when adult Alison writes down her phone conversations with her mother, readers can see that these interactions were beneficial to both participants at one point or another. When they each needed someone to be the listener rather than the speaker, or the writer of dictated journal entries, the other one stepped in. In that way, Alison and Helen were able to
communicate effectively in a way that allowed them each to express what they needed at certain times and to listen at other times. However, the ambivalence lies in the fact that the listener is often not gaining anything from the conversation. For example, Helen does not benefit from writing down Alison’s journal entries, but Alison receives help with a task that is difficult for her. In a similar way, Alison does not benefit from listening to her mother talk on the phone, but she still listens because she suspects that Helen simply needs to say her thoughts aloud in the same way Alison once did. Therefore, there are times in the relationship where one of them is benefitting from something that the other person is doing; this is ambivalent because who is experiencing which types of effects depends on each situation. In the situation of listening to each other speak, one person is receiving the benefit of a listener, while the other is not necessarily being harmed by the fact that they are listening but is also not experiencing any benefit.

However, there are certainly times in the relationship when filling the gaps in each other’s’ expectations is damaging to the relationship between Alison and Helen. In an example similar to Bruce coloring Alison’s book in *Fun Home*, Alison is forced to show maturity beyond her age when she tells her brothers it is time for bed because their mother does not. Helen can be seen sitting in the background of those frames, presumably hearing the interaction but not stepping up to take on her role. In this situation, Alison’s brothers can be seen in roles typically expected of children: they protest and argue that they should not have to go to bed yet. Alison, on the other hand, is seen waiting until exactly 9:00 to tell her brothers it is time for bed. This comparison allows readers to see that, because Alison is so concerned with fulfilling the role her mother is not, she thinks more like an adult and less like a child. Therefore, the feeling of needing to step into the mother role at that time pulls Alison away from being allowed to act like
a child and stay up late to watch television in the summer. This situation feels a bit like abandonment to the reader, as one can see that Alison’s mother is not concerned in that moment for Alison’s ability to act like a child; rather, she takes no action because Alison makes it unnecessary to do so. Alison’s readiness and intent staring at the clock, while Helen sits in the background of another frame, speak to the fact that Helen has temporarily abandoned her role as a mother, as she does not care about her children’s’ bedtime as much as Alison does. This example shows that, even when it seems like the family is functioning fine, there are still parts of childhood that Alison misses out on because she is so concerned with picking up responsibilities where her mother leaves off. From these two examples, readers can see that the relationship between Alison and Helen is neither entirely harmful nor entirely beneficial; rather, the situations presented by Bechdel forces readers to acknowledge to the ambiguity of the relationship.

Bechdel includes the ambivalent tone about her relationships with her parents in order to create a purposeful lack of conclusion on her part. Instead of stating exactly what she thinks of her relationships, she leaves readers to conclude on their own based on the ambiguous evidence she offers. When presented with a story in which the typical family structure is upset, a knee-jerk reaction of readers would be to assume that an upset to the family structure has a negative effect on the child involved. This response is conditioned by the repetition across media of norms dictating what a family should look like, be, and do, and therefore is not a reflection of the reader’s ignorance or adherence to social norms. However, Bechdel challenges readers to break from that type of thinking. Even though there are certainly parts of the relationships that are negative, there are also aspects of them that have positive outcomes for each of the people involved. Bechdel challenges the idea that all relationships in which the roles stray from traditional expectations are harmful or inadequate representations of familial relationships.
With this challenge comes the indication to the reader that the traditional family structure’s strict requirements are so inaccessible to people in actual families that they cannot possibly fulfill every expectation. Relationships in which the family members are, in fact, able to fulfill every expectation then come off as queer. Because the ideal family structure and roles are so distorted, people who can fit into them do not represent a “typical” family at all, but rather a strange, uncommon perfection. Those relationships that would, in theory, be able to fulfill every requirement asked of families by society then become queer, in the sense of being strange or uncommon. Bechdel’s ambiguity leads readers to the conclusion that most families, then, have some queer aspects in their relationships in order to function as a family unit. Because families need the kinds of movement Bechdel portrays in order to navigate their relationships, the queering of relationships based on breaking from norms actually becomes more commonplace and understandable than the norm itself. The distinction between normal and normative family structures becomes important here; whereas it may not be possible to fulfill every normative familial expectation, the queerness that families develop in order to be able to function within the family structure becomes the normal way of navigating that normativity. In a way, Bechdel’s instances of roles being flipped leads to the ultimate flipping of the family itself, wherein queer familial relationships become ordinary and typical familial relationships become queer.

Conclusion

In examining both of Alison Bechdel’s graphic novels, *Fun Home* and *Are You My Mother?*, it becomes clear that both novels present familial relationships that transcend the traditional way of thinking about the structure of familial relationships. Bechdel uses a strategic selection of instances from her life to show that her relationships with her parents were queered by the fact that they each were consistently stepping up for where the other fell short of the
expectations of parent and child. Readers learn that the distinction of how or why the queerness is there does not necessarily matter. *Fun Home* shows queerness not only in how the characters navigate gender expression and sexuality, but also in how they make up for each other’s shortcomings in relation to Bruce’s extreme standards of outward familial perfection. On the other hand, *Are You My Mother?* portrays its characters’ relationship as queer because the psychoanalytical concepts indicate that Alison and Helen interact in ways that keep them constantly moving into and out of mother and child roles. In reading the two novels together, readers gain an understanding of the fact that the reasons or causes for the queerness is less important than the sheer existence of the queerness in the relationship. Indeed, Bechdel shows readers that both relationships are queer in different ways. The result of this is an ability on the part of the reader to grasp that queerness is a way to ease the pressures of strict expectations that people in familial roles cannot fulfill. Queerness enables the roles to be filled by somebody, even if not the person originally meant to hold the role, in order for the perceived family structure to stay intact. The result of this is that Bechdel’s novels show a reverse approach to thinking about familial relationships, in which queer familial relationships become normalized and normative familial relationships become queer.
Figure 1. Alison and Bruce argue about appearance, then discuss the male model in the magazine. *Fun Home*, pp. 98-99.

Figure 2. Alison and Bruce in the car. *Fun Home*, pp. 220-221.
Figure 3. Full spread of recreated photographs from Alison’s infancy. *Are You My Mother?*, pp. 32-33.

Figure 4. Helen and Alison play the crippled child game. *Are You My Mother?*, pp. 286-287.
Works Cited


Bruhm, Steven, and Natasha Hurley, editors. *Curiouser: On the Queerness of Children*.


