Let Her Wear Suits:
Normative Physical Appearance and Temporality in *Fun Home*

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The melodic sound of a broadway musical plays through the plastic headphones cutting into my ears: “Your swagger/and your bearing/and the just right clothes you’re wearing,/your short hair/and your dungarees,/and your lace-up boots/and your keys,/oh/your ring of keys./I thought it was supposed to be wrong/but you seem okay with being strong” (Sydney Lucas & Beth Malone, “Ring of Keys”) Listening to the Broadway hit “Ring of Keys” was the first time I had ever heard of Alison Bechdel’s graphic-novel-turned-musical, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. I was instantly captivated. During this song, young Alison sees a queer woman and per her father’s disdainful reaction, learns that the woman is “a bulldyke” (Bechdel 119). Alison sits stunned, feeling some form of emotional affiliation with the woman. Every time I listen to this song, it pulls at my heartstrings. It begins with young Alison stopping short before singing that she wants to be like the woman. Her voice wavers and she casts the thought from her mind. The song, however, ends with Alison singing “do you hear my heart saying ‘hi?’” (Sydney Lucas & Beth Malone, “Ring of Keys”). My eyes well with tears every time I hear this song, thinking about how I was once that little confused, closeted girl begging for someone to hear me. This song has never left my head; maybe it’s the words or the melody, or maybe I too share a queer kinship with the song. Regardless of the motivation, the song “Ring of Keys” was my gateway into *Fun Home*.

It wasn’t until I was alone, in a new city, browsing a random bookstore to get out of the pouring rain, that I finally read the graphic novel form of *Fun Home*. After reading it in a mere five hours (trust me, that’s very fast for the rate I read), I felt an immediate draw to the work. There was a symbolic parallel between Alison and myself--we were both queer and we both felt
alone in our experiences. Alison vocalizes what so many young queer people experience: a silent kinship and pull towards queer adults. This book has an intense canonical significance because it acts as an unraveling and demystifying of both internal and external homophobia. It deconstructs queer culture from different generations in an incredibly accessible way, which not many works can do successfully.

*Fun Home* is a complex, gripping, tragic, funny, and thought-provoking novel. This book is an autobiography, following the coming of age story of Alison Bechdel as she navigates the complicated and confusing relationship that she and her father share. The book centers around the death of her father, Bruce. This death, a possible suicide, occurs in the same timeline of Alison coming to terms with her sexuality and coming out as a lesbian. However, Alison’s coming out is overshadowed by the discovery that Bruce, who remained closeted until the day he died, also shares the identity of a gay man. The novel jumps back and forth in time, but the most constant theme throughout, is that Alison constantly disagrees with Bruce. These disagreements include things like their family home, what to wear, and how to act. All of their disagreements ultimately boil down to Bruce’s desire to create a facade around his family facing the outside world. He is obsessed with appearing normal, while Alison pushes back against this normativity. Because Bruce remains closeted--while still having affairs with various men--he takes numerous precautions ensuring that he would never be suspected of being gay. These measures take the form of wearing masculine clothing, taking on the appearance of the strong man of the house, and forcing normative gender roles onto Alison. Yet, all of these actions are clouded with the knowledge that he is enforcing such standards because he wishes to remain in the closet.
*Fun Home* is a graphic novel, meaning that every page has different illustrations on it, all of which have different structures and names. As graphic novels are a visual form, it is easier to understand the terminology through visual means. Image 1 shows the main words I will be using to describe the scenes I am discussing. The terms include: Panel (a singular illustration), Gutter (the white space between panels), and Tier (the group of panels all in the same line). Additionally, theorists Hillary Chute and Kate McCullough add valuable insights to the conversation of graphic novels.

![Image 1](image)

Chute’s work is pivotal to unraveling complexities of a graphic novel, as she points to the physical construction of the comic form as a way of de-mystifying time, and helps us to think more about appearance as both normative and a strategic tool. Reading Chute reminds us how Bechdel’s *Fun Home* uses negative space as a way to further exemplify forms of temporality.
The white space between comic drawings is like a “gutter” (Chute 108). They are a blank space where the reader’s (or observer’s) own interactions with the images can live; they are mechanisms in and of themselves. It is in the gutter that Bechdel emphasizes a temporal disconnect between appearance as normative and non-normative. By using Chute’s description of the gutter, I hope to analyze the blank spaces between pages. Without this tool, it would be impossible to make connections between the different formations of the page. The graphic novel is created of different panels plastered on a page in an extremely specific order. Without truly understanding how this order affects both the viewer’s perception and the process of time there would truly be no point in analyzing a graphic novel.

Similarly, McCullough works through temporality theory as it applies to Fun Home by examining how the images themselves function in expressing non-normative time. McCullough explains how the comic form provides more space and freedom to explore temporality as the writer/artist can use both language and image to explore differences in time. Images are often more important than the words on the page in Fun Home. These images allow for a secondary (and sometimes tertiary) level of temporality, as McCullough notes, “For what is queerest about this memoir [Fun Home] is less the sexuality of its protagonist or even the sexuality of her putatively straight father and more the temporalities through which the story is told” (378). Fun Home invokes many different forms of storytelling and narration, expanding the levels of time. It is only by including retrospective narration, character narration/conversations, and imagery, that Bechdel is able to fully explore deep levels of temporality.¹

¹The ‘retrospective narrative voice’ describes the narration of ‘Bechdel the author’ as she reflects on the events she is illustrating and writing. This voice is the narration that is shown above each panel, while the text that is included inside the panels is the voice of younger characters, and will be referred to as ‘young Alison/Bruce.’
With this understanding of the graphic form in place, we can move towards deconstructing and analyzing moments of physical normativity. Bruce is all consumed by his outward appearance—both of his home and his physical body. This preoccupation is constantly projected onto Alison in an odd mirror image, ultimately making her experience an equally intense dissatisfaction with outward appearance. Bruce finds solace in flipping trash into beauty, using both the decoration of his house as well as his normative physical appearance as a form of protection—protection for his queer identity. Alison, however, rejects normative appearance as a way of expressing her own queer identity in her youth. The retrospective voice of Bechdel, the author, explains that “my father could spin garbage… into gold… It was his passion. And I mean passion in every sense of the word” (Bechdel 6-7). In the language of “Every sense of the word” Bechdel demands her reader to look beyond the definition of passion as simply a strong emotion, but rather the more obsolete relationship of passion and religion—“The sufferings of Jesus in the last days of his life, from the Last Supper to his death; the Crucifixion itself” (“passion, n1c”). The illustrated comic linked with this verbiage shows a hunched over, shirtless, disheveled
Bruce, carrying a wooden lamp post over his shoulder (Image 2). This image alludes to a disheveled Jesus carrying his cross, his burden, to his death. There is an intense parallel drawn here, suggesting that Bruce will carry the weight of his choices--those of cheating and closeted life--with him to his death. These choices will be what drive him to die. Bechdel’s motive however, is not to depict Bruce as a martyr. The point of this parallel rather is to highlight the severity and importance with which Bruce took the reconstruction of his home and by extension the outward image that served to protect his queer identity. Yet this ardor creates a disdain in Alison. Bruce’s obsession with outward appearance, and more importantly outward normative appearance, creates a space where Alison is not able to express herself and develop in a healthy manner. Because of this, Alison refuses to adhere to the strict constructs that Bruce creates.

Bruce’s passion for the ordained invokes thinking about how temporality functions in *Fun Home* in order to place an emphasis on normative physical appearance. Alison and Bruce experience and express physical appearance in very different ways, but they are informed from one another. Bruce imposes a strict binary for Alison, yet sometimes breaks that binary himself. Alison, smothered by Bruce, constantly fights back. Temporality, as discussed below, generally highlights moments of trauma and allows the reader to see moments in which Bechdel prods the reader to dig deeper. In *Fun Home* specifically, Bechdel highlights moments and muddles time by commenting back on them. There is an immense difference in knowledge between the retrospective narrative voice, the characters, and the readers. This difference in knowing flips time on its head. In this prodding, the reader sees connections between Alison and Bruce that may not be completely clear from an initial reading. As noted above, *Fun Home* is not a novel dwelling in mixed temporal moments simply because of the story Bechdel tells. Rather, the
temporality lives in the complex layering, repetition, and juxtaposition of images and text as well as the difference in narrative voices. Through noting and analyzing these moments, I hope to explore four scenes in which Bruce and Alison both adhere to and stray from the binary of appearance. It is largely in moments of disagreement surrounding physical appearance that the retrospective narrative voice provides the reader with insight, while still leaving Alison to fend for herself; this creates a difference in knowing. We often know more than Alison. Bechdel and the reader understand why Bruce does certain things, yet Alison doesn’t. This is a time slip, as will be discussed further.

While the graphic form described by McCullough and Chute allows for more understanding of how the physical form affects the reader’s understanding, only when applying Jaclyn Pryor’s work on queer temporality to Fun Home is it possible to make more in-depth connections and analyses. Pryor discusses straight and queer time, noting that moments when time is muddled or disrupted are moments “which racial, gender, sexual, and economic violence” is acknowledged (Pryor 4). Rather than masking the systemic discrimination, non-normative time brings it to the forefront. Fun Home deploys temporality as a means of highlighting moments in which Bruce and Alison experience this “gender [and] sexual...violence” (Pryor 4).

Pryor’s book acts as an entry point to analyzing Fun Home because they simultaneously provide an analysis of temporality theory, and narrowing that focus to queer temporality theory. In this narrowing, Pryor provides the vocabulary necessary to unpack the warped timeline of Fun Home, as well as providing the groundwork for exploring how temporality relates to normative appearance. “Time slips,” a term Pryor coined, denote moments in which a viewer feels, sees, or otherwise notices a queer sense of time:
When, because time was given permission to do those deviant things it is not supposed to--move backward, luge forward, loop, jump, stack, stop, pause, layer, elongate, pulsate, slip--[they were] given recourse to feel the violence of linear time and historical ‘progress’ and a way out of this narrow view of history. (Pryor 9)

In other words, “time slips” are moments when the reader or viewer sees the non-linear movement of time. Perhaps the “deviant” moment is the repetition of a scene or an image, or perhaps there is an intense referencing to a moment from earlier in the work; “time slips” are moments in which normative time stands still (Pryor 9). There is no longer linear movement--from beginning to middle to end--but rather a jumbling of experiences. This view of time that Pryor describes (the past affecting the present and future, the future affecting the past and present, and the present affecting the past and future) is a glimpse at temporality theory.

However, Pryor then takes these time slips one step further to define them as *queer* time. They explain that straight time is constructed by a normative timeline: birth, school, marriage, kids, work, death (Pryor 9). There are rarely moments for time slips because straight time “negates a trauma survivor’s lived experience of past events’” and “reproduces the logic of capitalism: the system, that is, that creates the conditions under which racial, gender, sexual, and economic violence gets enacted in the first place” (Pryor 4). Pryor suggests that to be living in straight time is to be ignoring and concealing moments of trauma against minority groups. However, “time slips” are when moments of concealment and whitewashing are noted. Queer time defies a normative act of living. Queer time is the radical way that queer and trans folks exist in a world built for straight cisgender folks. Pryor makes the point that everything, every action, moment, and day, is different in the lives of queer people: “Working, playing, fucking, organizing, educating, parenting, making home, making art, and creating ritual that defy
normative patterns of clock, biological and nuclear” (Pryor 5). There is a defiance in living and in being different. This defiance is the living breathing entity of “time slips.”

Pryor’s time slips are the first step in deciphering the complex relationship that Bruce and Alison have with each other and with their queer identities. Linear time breeds “ambient feelings of danger and threats of violence,” and this breakage from time occurs when queer folks feel the threat of linear time (Pryor 5). Throughout this thesis, I explore how these prodding moments question and complicated normative physical appearance. To do so, I will look at four scenes all relating to normative physical appearance. The first scene shows the day-to-day experience in the Bechdel household with Bruce and Alison interacting with each other. A young Alison moves and plays around the home in the background with Bruce reacting to the ways she is (mis)behaving. The second scene begins with Bruce ensuring that Alison looks like a ‘traditional’ girl, but ends with both Alison and Bruce admiring a shirtless man in a suit for incredibly different reasons. The third scene, one of the most touching moments in the novel, follows Alison and her friend, as they play dress-up with some of Bruce’s old clothes. Finally, the last scene combines and sums up the first three moments. This is the first and only moment in the novel in which Alison and Bruce directly speak about identity and appearance. Fun Home exists both in linear and in flux time, yet it is only in scenes where, through the visual, textual, or a combination of both, Bechdel nudges her reader to dig deeper, that these “time slips” exist. Bruce and Alison are constantly equated and tied together. They are equated in text and imagery, but taken together time is muddled, allowing the reader to see how their two very different experiences in fact inform each other.

Alison the Spartan versus Bruce the Athenian
Again, the graphic novel gives us a special insight into temporality, specifically in moments where the retrospective narrative voice knows more than the characters in the panels. Bruce and Alison differ quite intensely in their outward physical appearances, yet they constantly complement each other; where Bruce fails to be traditionally masculine, Alison steps in, and where Alison fails to be traditionally feminine, Bruce takes charge. The first scene that I will discuss introduces Alison and Bruce’s relationship. This scene involves the retrospective voice of Bechdel reflecting on her relationship with Bruce, while the younger Alison and Bruce are depicted interacting in their day-to-day lives. These moments include: Alison playing while Bruce reads, Alison throwing something out, Bruce and Alison squabbling about clothing, and finally Alison cleaning part of the house while Bruce reads the mail. These rather innocuous moments are perfect examples of how different voices in narration can affect and complicate linear time. Through reflecting on the relationship between the retrospective narrative voice and the character voices I hope to pinpoint how the difference in knowings acts as a form of temporality.

Chapter One, “Old Father, Old Artificer,” opens quickly, noting the disconnect between Alison’s and Bruce’s opinions towards outward appearance. Alison and Bruce largely diverge in their taste of the ornamental, as Alison expresses a dislike of her father's obsession with his house. Yet this discontent quickly shifts towards Alison growing “to resent the way [her] father treated his furniture like children and his children like furniture” (Bechdel 14). Alison feels that her father has turned into “Daedalus” (Bechdel 9) creating and inventing, but not bearing in mind the “human cost” (Bechdel 11) of his constructions. Bechdel suggests that she felt silenced and ignored, that Bruce spent more time and energy on ensuring his home was properly furnished
than ensuring that his children knew he loved them. From an early age, this resentment guaranteed that Alison had a “preference for the unadorned and purely functional” (Bechdel 14). Bechdel quickly establishes the relationship between Bruce and Alison so that the reader is wary of their interactions, especially those regarding the home or other moments of appearance.

Bechdel continues to describe the differences in physical dress that Alison and Bruce display, and in doing so she draws attention to the ways in which both characters use normative appearance to express the things they must leave unsaid. The narration continues, with the retrospective voice saying: “I was Spartan to my father’s Athenian. Modern to his victorian,
Butch to his Nelly. Utilitarian to his aesthete” (Bechdel 15). Examining the images associated evokes more understanding that Alison and Bruce diverge not simply on the appearance of the house, but also Bruce’s disapproval of Alison’s physical presentation (in clothes and actions). She falls outside of the normative gender binary. Importantly, there is a disconnect, or knowledge gap, between the retrospective narration and the character narration. Inside the panels, Alison’s childhood appearance and actions are early notations of her sexuality, which she is vitally unaware of. Yet the voice of Bechdel, the older narrator, reflecting back on the moment allows time to loop and be muddled. It is only in hearing from Bechdel that the reader can unpack these moments. It is only when the present reflects on the past, that “a previously unseen aspect of…the past” is highlighted (Pryor 9).

The page shows young Alison pretending to be a soldier while Bruce reclines, reading *The Nude*. In this moment, Alison is the “spartan” playing soldier, while her father is the “Athenian” lounging on the couch reading about the naked body (Bechdel 15). The second image shows Alison sitting at a desk trying to throw wadded up paper into a trashcan. Bruce is in the corner of the illustration with his hand on his head looking disappointed at Alison’s actions. She is “modern” in action, to his “Victorian” etiquette (Bechdel 15). The third image shows Bruce forcing Alison into a dress, making her change saying that the necklines don’t match. Alison asks “Who cares?” (Bechdel 15). Alison is “butch,” not caring about the dress and the neckline matching, while her father is “nelly”—a slur referring to a stereotypical feminine gay man—spending countless hours making sure Alison dresses ‘correctly’ (Bechdel 15). The final image shows young Alison dusting a chair, asking “What’s the point of making something that’s
so hard to dust?” while Bruce looks on, reading the mail, responding: “it’s beautiful” (Bechdel 15). She is “utilitarian” to his “aesthetic” passion (Bechdel 15).

There is an interesting juxtaposition of both image to image and image to text in this page which prods the reader to look deeper at the disconnect between narrative voice and character voice. The combination of image to text reveals the full meaning of Bruce and Alison’s relationship with each other and to normative physical appearance. In this scene, the images are some of the only ones in the entire book that are displayed in a perfectly symmetrical grid. There is no difference in spacing, making the reader’s eye first examine all of the text, and then look to the images. Because of this visual effect, at first glance, the reader is further convinced that Alison simply dislikes her father’s obsession with their house, as most of the adjectives (“modern” “victorian”) can also be used to describe a home. But upon following the photos, it becomes clear that this dislike is more deeply rooted in physical appearance than home appearance. Bechdel deftly uses the gutter as a way of complicating the narrative, forcing her reader to look at each section individually before placing them together. Prompting the reader to experience the page like this, points to the timeline of Alison/Bechdel’s development. She first existed as a child (Alison) who disagreed with her father, then as an adult who understood these disagreements were based in both of their expressions of queer identity, and finally as an author (Bechdel) linking these two narratives together.

Unpacking and understanding the physical construction of the page is a vital piece of fully analyzing (non)normative appearance in this moment. The page employs much of McCullough’s argument of the juxtaposition of the “pictorial...in deliberate sequences” as a way to “convey information and/or...produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (McCullough
Hans 15

377-379). The first tier doesn’t include dialogue between the two characters; the first tier shows Alison acting as the stereotypical masculine character while Bruce is acting as the stereotypically feminine character. It isn’t until both characters begin talking that this fixation on normative appearance occurs. The first illustration shows Alison with a gun and what looks like a colander on her head as a helmet. The plant in the background makes it feel like she is in a jungle, either hunting or partaking in a war. Bruce is lying on the couch reading The Nude, a book that examines how the naked body is posed in ancient art. This book illustrates Bruce’s breakage from normative masculinity. To depict Bruce reading a book which categorizes ‘nude’ as “not...a huddled and defenseless body, but...a balanced, prosperous, and confident body: the body re-formed” suggests perhaps that Bruce wants his body to transform from defenseless to confident (Clark 3). It also suggests that Bruce is reading the book as a queer act of voyeurism; to read a book specifically discussing how the exposed body (usually the male body) functions as a piece of art suggests that Bruce is using this book as a way of seeing and ogling the naked male body.

In this snapshot of day-to-day life in the Bechdel home: Alison in her make-believe adoption of an active masculine role, and Bruce not engaging in this play, instead reclining on the couch, assuming a passive and more feminine role. The reader begins to see a reversal of normative gender roles. In the second illustration, Bruce scowls at Alison’s boyish behavior, again reinforcing the idea that there is a shift in normative gender roles. Alison shooting paper into a trash can is reminiscent of so many boys lining up their shot and trying to get their fake basketball into the fake hoop. This action, while not strictly adhering to the masculine, alludes to the aforementioned mirroring of Alison taking on the stereotypically masculine role. Yet, Bruce
shows disdain for her action, and the reader could imagine Bruce scolding Alison for this action (though it is not shown). And in fact, the bottom tier shows Bruce’s overcompensation to appear normatively masculine. In the third panel Bruce forces Alison to wear a dress and makes sure that she looks put together, and demands an even higher aesthetic, that the necklines match. While one may think that forcing her to wear a dress simply means that he is the one who wants to be wearing the dress, it is also possible that his demand for Alison to fit the mold of a stereotypical girl is because it upholds the outward image of normative appearance in the Bechdel home. Similarly, the fourth panel, depicting Alison cleaning a chair, again reinforces normative gender roles as she is the one dusting furniture in the house, while Bruce is seen performing his manly duty of reading the mail and paying the bills. In this four-paneled page, Bechdel places images and text in a specific order, allowing the reader to see a disconnect between what is being said and what is being shown. The first tier suggests that Bruce’s characteristics hold feminine qualities, while Alison’s characteristics hold masculine qualities. However, in the conscious choice of verbiage, Bruce proposes adherence to a strict gender binary while Alison rebels against him.

With this understanding of the page, we can then make connections back to time slips and temporality. The most notable moments of time slips are moments when there is a difference in knowing when the retrospective narrative voice--and the reader--know more than the characters in the panels. The bottom two tiers directly point to a lack of knowing in Alison. We know why Bruce cares that the necklines don’t match. Bechdel knows why he cares. But Alison is still unknowing. We know why Bruce wants his home to be immaculate. Bechdel knows why he is obsessed with appearance. But Alison is still in the dark. There is an immense disconnect
between the two narrative voices, Bechdel/Alison. This disconnect isn’t an act of naivety on Bechdel’s part but rather calls attention to the deep internal agony and strife that Alison was feeling. Just like “Ring of Keys” evokes an emotional response from listeners, the reader knowing, while Alison isn’t self-aware, conjures the desire to jump into the pages and tell her what is happening and what will happen. This feeling, these moments of disconnect, are time slips. These are moments when the author points towards and the reader sees moments of “hidden histories, buried traumas, unclaimed experiences, invisible structures, and previously unimaginable futures” (Pryor 9). Reading Fun Home without the retrospective narrative voice would be like watching a documentary on mute. It is only possible to truly, fully, and deeply, understand these moments with Bechdel looping back in time to comment on her childhood.

Alison the Viewer and Bruce the Photographer

The continuing thread throughout the novel is the difference in ‘knowing,’ that occurs between the retrospective narrative voice, the character voices, and the reader. A later scene depicts Alison’s relationship with her older male cousins. While alluding to the first scene discussed above this moment shows how Alison has begun to develop a unique--more ‘masculine’--identity even with Bruce’s disapproval. A later scene that we will look at, jumps forward in time by twelve years, showing Alison and Bruce discussing and ogling over a magazine filled with men’s suits (for very different reasons). This moment then expands into the final scene, in which Alison finds a photograph of Bruce’s lover, Roy. Through analyzing the muddle of time--seen in the difference of knowing-- I hope to discuss moments in which Bruce’s and Alison’s expression of appearance is noted. Through these muddlings, the underlying causes of both characters’ expressions of appearance begins to take on more power.
Bruce’s verbal reaction to Alison defying his sense of normative appearance is noted in the panel of the first scene. While this moment is late in the book, the scene depicts a younger Alison, who still doesn’t know about her father’s sexuality, let alone her own. She initially is depicted at a gas station, in the passenger seat of the car staring--examining even--the men working there. Inside the panels, Alison simply disobeys Bruce’s attempt to maintain her lady-like appearance. Bruce is depicted fixing Alison’s hair, against her will, while she plays basketball with her older male cousins. He ensures that Alison always looks lady-like, saying, “Where’s your barrette? It keeps the hair out of your eyes...Next time I see you without it, I’ll wale you” (Bechdel 96-97). When Bruce leaves, she takes the barrette out and keeps playing basketball with them. She balances Bruce’s lack of masculinity by playing basketball with
groups of boys, trying to prove herself as one of them. In the act of playing with them, even transforming into one of the boys, Alison feels as if she is picking up some of Bruce’s slack. While Bruce hangs a piece of art inside, a stereotypically feminine activity, Alison chooses instead to venture outside the sphere of the home and play basketball, a stereotypically masculine activity. The boys nicknamed Alison “Butch,” and she explains that even though she didn’t completely know what that word meant, no one needed to explain it to her. It was “cropped, curt, percussive...the opposite of sissy” (Bechdel 97). In this nickname comes the understanding that Bruce indeed “was a big sissy,” furthering Alison’s belief that she indeed does need to counterbalance Bruce’s lack of normative masculinity (Bechdel 97). The nickname of “butch” paired with playing basketball interestingly makes time loop because it is a nod back to the first scene in which Alison was shooting a piece of wadded up paper into the trash can. Alison has graduated up to playing with a real basketball with other boys but is still “Butch to [Bruce’s] Nelly” (Bechdel 15). Instead of Bechdel calling Alison a butch and Bruce a Nelly, now it is her cousins nicknaming her, while Bruce is “an effeminate homosexual” (“Nelly, n21”). This nod back to the initial moment between Bruce and Alison further strengthens the reader’s understanding that Alison purses a more normative masculine appearance, even against Bruce’s best efforts.²

It is only when noting the retrospective narrative voice that the reader can fully understand the implications of Alison and Bruce disagreeing simply about a barrette and basketball. Bechdel explains that “I measured my father against the grimy deer hunters at the gas

²This scene also includes a radio with the song “Georgy Girl” playing. This song choice is quite apropos. The narrative arc of the song describes a girl, Georgy, feeling lonely, wondering why “all the boys pass by” (The Seekers). The lyrics continue, asking: “Could it be you just don’t try/Or is it the clothes you wear?” (The Seekers). To include a song that directly speaks towards crossing lines between feminine and masculine is quite interesting, and simply adds more to the narrative of questioning appearance.
station uptown, with their yellow work boots and shorn-sheep haircuts. And where he fell short, I stepped in” (Bechdel 96). In this self-assessment, Bechdel suggests that even from a young age she knew something was ‘wrong’ with Bruce’s obsession with normative appearance. She notices a difference between the burly, grimy men she sees at gas stations or on the street, and the clean-cut appearance of her father; where Bruce lacks masculinity, Alison makes up for it. Alison had an innate desire and understanding that she needed to make up for her father’s shortcomings. Because however, the character Alison doesn’t understand and can’t unpack why she feels that her father falls short, it is only with the retrospective narrative voice that the reader can understand why Alison feels this way. As noted in the previous section, this difference in knowing is the direct result of a non-linear timeline. The reader and the narrator know why Alison feels drawn to her older male cousins. We also know that Alison likely thinks Bruce is simply being a nagging parent making sure that his daughter looks put together, and wants to rebel against him (as most teenagers do). However, the more knowing narrative voice overlays the understanding that Alison was indeed, subconsciously, comparing Bruce’s masculinity to other men around her.
The novel quickly shifts, jumping forward, to a scene with an older Alison sitting in the family library reading Esquire magazine, looking at suits. Alison simply suggests that Bruce “should get a suit with a vest,” but it is clear to the reader that she is talking about herself. The retrospective narrative voice explains there she had “reverence for masculine beauty” (Bechdel 99). Bechdel zooms in on the magazine, showing a muscular man with his shirt open, displaying his abs and a woman's hand over his chest. The next panel zooms out from the magazine and depicts Bruce looking over Alison’s shoulder also staring at this image. He says “Nice, I should” (Bechdel 99). This moment between Bruce and Alison suggests yet again that Alison wants to step out from the mold Bruce is forcing her into as she is imaging herself in the suit rather than a man in it. However, because Bruce has clung to appearing stereotypically masculine for so long
(and forces that same binary onto Alison), Alison simply suggests that Bruce buy the suit, not her. In doing so, Alison succumbs to his will and compensates for his lack of normative masculinity. Because Bruce has spent the entirety of Alison’s life forcing her into ‘female’ clothes, she isn’t allowed the space or opportunity to explore other options. In suggesting that Bruce himself buy the suit rather than her, Alison reinforces Bruce’s desire that she, and the rest of the family, outwardly appear normative. However, Alison still compensates for Bruce’s lack of masculinity in the fact that she does indeed suggest that he buy a suit to fit the mold.

While the dialogue in this scene is important, the more jarring and significant moment is the reappearance of *The Nude*. *The Nude* was initially illustrated when Bruce lay on the couch, like an “Athenian” and Alison played soldier like the “Spartan” (Bechdel 15). This easter-egg of a symbol makes time slip. The cover of *The Nude* is not illustrated anywhere other than in these two moments. Bechdel very intentionally includes this book, making the reader stop and feel a pull to dig deeper. The cover is more battered and shows how time has damaged it. This weathering shows the reading and re-reading that Bruce has conducted. The inclusion of *The Nude* further muddles time because of the difference in knowing and desire. As mentioned above, Bruce and Alison have intensely different motivations for being interested in the suit; Alison admires the suit and the man wearing it because she wants his physique and style. Bruce, on the other hand, desires the man within the suit, rather than the garment itself. This difference in desire and motivation is only apparent because of the difference in knowing. The retrospective narrative voice notes that: “I wanted the muscles and tweed like my father wanted the velvet and pearls...the objects of our desire were quite different” (Bechdel 99). An unknowing Alison simply suggests that Bruce buy a suit with a vest. However, it is only in the reflection that
Bechdel strings together Alison’s and Bruce’s motivation. Without this knowing voice, it would be impossible for the reader to understand that Bruce and Alison are both drawn to the suit because of their sexualities, but with two incredibly different motivations.

In this moment, this difference of desires, “the monolithic experience” of Bruce and Alison’s relationship almost shifts; Alison and Bruce are almost united in their shared identity. But because the character voices can’t be altered by the narration, Bechdel can’t explain both characters similarities and no change occurs (Pryor 9). At this point in the novel, Alison is aware of her sexuality and knows that she wants to be wearing the suit; however, she doesn’t know that Bruce is also gay and having his own internal conversation about the magazine. Nor does Bruce know that Alison is a lesbian. Both characters are tragically unknowing of the other’s experiences. Because the narrative voice points directly to the two passing ships, this is yet another painful moment of slippage for the reader. There is a missed opportunity. Perhaps if Alison had known what Bechdel knows, she and Bruce would have been able to truly speak and support each other. But Alison isn’t blessed with the same knowing that we are.
The reproduction of *The Nude* also creates a second moment of muddling because of parallels the reader can see between a later depiction of a photograph of Bruce’s lover, Roy, and the naked bodies discussed in Bruce’s book. Alison finds a photograph of Roy soon after Bruce’s death. It is one of the first ‘pieces of evidence’ she finds confirming that Bruce was indeed having affairs with men. The photograph of Roy, naked on a hotel bed, is arguably the climax of the book. Roy is sprawled on the bed, arms above his head, looking up at the ceiling, his underwear covered genitals are facing the man behind the camera. This photograph, the wispy background and “the blurriness of the photo” gives it “an ethereal, painterly quality” that is quite reminiscent of the paintings discussed in *The Nude* (Bechdel 100). The positioning of Roy, as well as the photograph’s objective “aesthetic merits,” summons up the nudes of art history (Bechdel 99). More specifically, the photograph closely resembles that of Sleeping Venus, by Renaissance painter Giorgione. In this painting, Venus, goddess of love, lies on the ground, one
arm above her head, one arm covering her genitals. It seems that Bechdel wants the reader to be considering this example of nude art because Roy is depicted in a very similar way.

The photograph represents two very different perceptions of the same moment and deeply complicates Alison’s definition of family. Alison, around twenty-one years old, finds the photograph after her father’s death. To this older Alison the photograph is clearly a tender moment between Bruce and Roy. Perhaps it is one of the few moments they could have together. Because there are two very different gazes that fall upon the photograph (that of Bruce and of Alison), it acts as an intense disruption of normative appearance. For Bruce, this photograph is a representation of his desire, and perhaps love, for Roy. Perhaps in a defiant act against the straight norm, Bruce places the photograph in “an envelope labeled ‘family’” (Bechdel 100). In doing so, Bruce insists that his relationship with Roy be considered that of familial love and attraction. Bruce is no longer simply having an affair but rather is having sex with a man he loves—as he should love his wife. However, for Alison, this photograph represents her father cheating on her mother. Alison stares into a moment between lovers, perhaps even disturbing two lovers. The thumb included in this reproduction further emphasizes this feeling. It would have been potentially easier simply to draw the photograph as an entire spread, but Bechdel chooses to include Alison’s hand. In this inclusion, the reader is looking at a piece of art. Along with Bruce placing this photograph in the ‘family’ album, he also tries to censor it. In an “ineffectual attempt at censorship” Bruce, “blotted out the... Aug 69” date (Bechdel 100). Alison is drawn to this censorship. In crossing out the date, Bruce seems to be attempting to distance himself from the act of cheating, while also negating that attempt by placing the photograph in the family album. Perhaps by leaving out the date, this photograph could have been taken any
time by anyone; it didn’t have to be Bruce. Yet, he then keeps it in an album with photographs from this trip. A trip that Alison’s mom was not on.

This photograph allows for a complex layer of temporality in the diverging memories. Alison finds this photograph after Bruce has died. In this moment, she understands both her and her father’s identities. Yet, the photograph transports her (and the reader) back into a moment when she did not know all of this--when she was simply an eight-year old on a family vacation. We are again presented with a difference in knowing, which further complicates the implications of the nude photograph. There is no longer simply a disconnect between Bechdel and Alison, but rather a temporal shift between young Alison and older Alison. It is fitting that the climax of Fun Home includes both queer intimacy and complex temporal shifts.

Throughout the scenes discussed, Bruce has been obsessed with ensuring that the Bechdel family follows a normative appearance: he makes Alison wear dresses and barrettes, he designs the home so it outwardly looks perfect, and he ensures that he looks and acts like a normative man. There is a desire for the normal, the mundane, the heterosexual. Alison constantly challenges Bruce’s demands, refusing to fit into the mold that he has laid out for her. Yet ultimately, Bruce too breaks that mold. He queers time, intimacy, and family. Even when taking on the role of Daedalus to make “things appear to be what they were not,” he fails (Bechdel 16).

Let Her Wear Suits

The final moment in which Alison’s desire to step outside of Bruce’s forced binary of normative appearance is in a scene in which Alison and her friend Beth play an innocent game of dress-up. Alison and Beth get left behind from a school function, and in an attempt to not let the
afternoon go to waste, they put on Bruce’s clothes and pretend they are con men. While this scene mainly shows a fourteen-year-old Alison, still largely unknowing in her sexuality quest, it also depicts Alison choosing what she wears in absence of Bruce. It is one of the only moments in *Fun Home* in which Bruce is not forcing his normative gender roles onto Alison. This moment is incredibly vital to the plot, as the reader sees for the first time, what young Alison would like to wear, not what Bruce forces onto her. Up until now, we have been making educated guesses about what Alison wants, based on the retrospective narrative voice, and moments when older Alison is depicted. But in this moment, Alison finally catches up, even just for a second, with Bechdel and the reader. While the first scene discussed differences in knowing, leading to a muddled temporality, the scene in question instead is a moment of calm, rather linear time. It is surely still queer time, but there is no difference in knowing. The retrospective voice of Bechdel matches quite closely with the illustrations of Alison putting on her father’s clothes, and Alison’s expressions throughout this scene are quite visceral, tugging at the heartstrings.
The scene opens with Beth and Alison getting left behind, at Alison’s home. Alison quickly comes to the rescue saying “I know what we could do instead” (Bechdel 182). Alison explains that she “had recently discovered some of Dad’s old clothes” and the two girls begin “putting on the formal shirt[s] with its studs and cufflinks” (Bechdel 182). The moment depicting Alison and Beth dressing is one of the most intimate scenes in *Fun Home*, even more so in my opinion than Alison having sex with her girlfriend. The reader can feel the excitement pulsing through Alison’s veins as she puts on the suit and helps Beth get dressed. This tender moment depicts Alison, wearing an untied bowtie and an untucked shirt, helping Beth with her oversized
cummerbund. Alison’s gaze is not on the clasp of the cummerbund but rather on the mirror in front of both girls, looking in on the scene.

Alison and Beth experience this game of dress-up in very different ways. When Beth is putting on Bruce’s clothes, she puts his pants on over her shorts, however, it seems that Alison puts Bruce’s clothes on over her underwear. In Beth choosing to keep her shorts and t-shirt on under the clothes, these clothes turn into a costume. For Beth, wearing men’s clothes is an act--an act of make-believe, not something that she would ever do in ‘real life.’ However, the viewer sees Alison already changed into a shirt, putting on cufflinks. We do not know whether she took her shorts and shirt off, or if she kept them on. Without knowing, we are prodded to assume that she is simply wearing her underwear and bra under these clothes. Bruce’s clothes are then seen as her clothes. They are not simply worn for the game. This tuxedo “was a nearly mystical pleasure, like finding myself fluent in a language I’d never been taught...it felt too good to actually be good” (Bechdel 182). This difference in perceptual play is again reflected in Beth ending the game before Alison would like to. The two girls go on “fleshing out a scenario” (Bechdel 183). There were “Billy McKean” and “Bobby McCool,” con-men selling life
insurance to unsuspecting victims--Alison’s little brother. They however “couldn’t sustain” their ruse (Bechdel 183). Beth’s verbal excuse is the weather, and Alison agrees with her. After what seems like seconds of this play, Beth exclaims “Man, it’s hot. Let’s take this stuff off” (Image 9) (Bechdel 183). Alison responds with a dejected “yeah” (Bechdel 183). Because Beth feels that these clothes are simply a costume, she can draw an end to the game. However, for Alison, the clothes have adhered to her. They are the new identity that she never thought she could have.

This scene includes one of the most intense breakages from normative physical appearance, and it occurs because Bruce is not present to pull Alison back into the binary. In the previous two scenes discussed, Alison simply displayed disgust towards Bruce and his insistence that Alison fit the traditionally feminine role. When Alison is the “Butch to [Bruce’s] Nelly” not caring if “her necklines don’t match,” her face shows something like frustration or irritation (Bechdel 15). Similarly, when Alison refuses to wear her barrette, she is angry--her eyes squinted into a scowl. When she tells Bruce to buy a suit, her face is neutral, making sure not to show emotion either way. However, when she wears a suit, it is one of the first times when the
viewer sees excitement on Alison’s face in regard to clothes. Her eyebrows pop up when she tells Beth “I know what we could do instead” (Bechdel 182). Her eyes show a tender concentration when she helps Beth with the cummerbund, and she shows a cool confidence that the reader hasn’t seen before when she introduces herself as “Bobby McCool” (Bechdel 183). These emotions are available to Alison because she no longer has Bruce’s booming voice surrounding her. However, when Beth ends their game (too soon in Alison’s opinion), the reader once again sees a new emotion: disappointment and shame. Alison’s eyes shift to the ground and her head tilts forward when Beth says they need to stop playing because of the heat. The reader can see Alison’s disappointment and sorrow that their games are over.

Even with the game ending too early, throughout these fleeting moments of make-believe play, Alison’s emotions and words finally match the retrospective narrative voice. It is only when re-telling the story to Alison’s journal, that Bechdel needs to make amends to history; Alison simply writes that she was disappointed she and Beth missed the football game, and Bechdel corrects, saying “My profession of disappointment at missing the game and the dance was an utter falsehood, of course” (Bechdel 183). Alison’s retelling of the moment muddles time and knowing, but the act of playing and of dressing (up) is quite linear. Bechdel steps back in this moment, popping up less frequently than in previous scenes because this is a moment when Alison and Bechdel truly are in the same level of knowing. Alison knows that these suits make her feel a “mystical pleasure” (Bechdel 182). Although she can not fully explain the reason, Bechdel still doesn’t offer an answer to the reader, because that isn’t the point. The beauty of this moment isn’t why Alison feels more true in suits, but rather that she simply does.

Closing Thoughts
Throughout this thesis, we have examined moments when normative physical appearance is questioned, adhered to, challenged, and mandated; *Fun Home* has a confusing, meaningful, and interesting mix of these moments. With these moments also comes the muddling of time through the difference in knowings each character has. Allison’s and Bechdel’s thoughts and opinions about normative appearance are quite often provided to the reader, however, Bruce is rarely given interiority. This lack of internal reflection is logical because Bruce never divulges this information. He never tells Alison what he is feeling, much less why he is feeling it. In order for Bechdel to include Bruce’s consciousness into the novel, she would have needed to make something up; he was never forthcoming. However, one of the last scenes in the book includes Bruce and Alison having, what seems to be, their first true, open conversation. In this culminating conversation Bruce and Alison simultaneously bond and separate, and it is in this moment that the reader is able to make sense of the previous scenes of normative physical appearance.

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The interesting visual effects of this scene present the reader with the intensity and importance of the conversation at hand. The panels are all incredibly small and in a perfect grid. Because there are so many images on each page, this is the only page with four tiers onto the page, not two or three, the gutter plays a crucial role. All of the panels are essentially the same image, with very subtle changes. The pages feel almost like a flipbook of images that the reader is darting through. The gutter is similar to the split second in a flipbook where the viewer’s eyes are ‘reset’ so they can see the moving image. Because of this effect, the viewer’s eyes can pick up on very small, slight differences in the face—such as an eyebrow raise or eye widening—because there is a break between each image. It seems that Bechdel illustrates this page in quite a different style than the rest of the novel because it is the culminating scene between Alison and Bruce.
In this scene, the tension that has been building throughout the entire novel is finally addressed. Alison questions Bruce, wondering if he had intentionally given her a book, *Earthly Paradise* by Colette, because of its queer undertones. Bruce's eyes open wide with fear and confusion, saying “What?” but he slowly continues saying “I didn’t really. It was just a guess” (Bechdel 220). Alison’s goal in asking is to finally force Bruce into opening up about his identity. She is largely successful in this endeavor as he continues the one-sided conversation recounting his most influential experiences with other men. This truly is a one-sided conversation, with Alison feeling “distinctly parental listening to his shamefaced recitation” until Bruce remembers: “I really wanted to be a girl. I’d dress up in girls’ clothes” (Bechdel 221).
Alison jumps in saying excitedly “I wanted to be a boy! I dressed in boys’ clothes!” (Bechdel 221). It seems that this is the first time that Bruce and Alison have related so closely in their queer identities. Bruce breaks down his walls of silence and speaks openly of moments in which he himself defied normative appearance. In this moment, Alison (and the reader) finally feels a kinship towards Bruce.

Yet, this kinship doesn’t last very long. The disagreements and differences that Alison and Bruce have regarding physical dress are fully realized through both character’s verbiage and actions. When Bruce says “I’d dress up in girls’ clothes,” his hand is on his head as if he is ashamed by his past self (Bechdel 221). This physical action, in combination with the word choice of “I’d dress up” suggests that, like Beth, he felt wearing traditionally female clothing was nothing but a game (Bechdel 221; emphasis added). It seems that Bruce has disconnected wanting “to be a girl” and dressing “up in girls’ clothes” as a way of protecting himself (Bechdel 221; emphasis added). If dressing up in girls’ clothes is simply an act, a facade, he can’t truly be seen as straying from normative appearance. However, when Alison responds to his statement, she looks excited, shows a slight smile, and seems like she is gesticulating, saying “I dressed in boys’ clothes” (Bechdel 221; emphasis added). Again Alison expresses a different experience than Bruce (and Beth). To her, these were clothes that she wanted to wear, not as an act, but as a genuine display of her outward appearance. She is excited for this affinity with Bruce. However, Bruce says nothing to confirm or agree with Alison. Alison is forced to ask “Remember?” to a still unanswering Bruce (Bechdel 221). Alison, defeated, stares out the window, forlorn.

This interaction epitomizes the relationships that Alison and Bruce have with physical appearance. Throughout all of the previous scenes discussed, Alison has actively fought against
the normative, while Bruce has struggled to stay within the lines. While Bruce often breaks out of the traditionally masculine role, he strives to construct a house--in design and in occupants--that adheres to traditional appearance, and often gender roles (Bechdel 15). In this culminating conversation, Bruce uses conditional language to distance himself from his ‘feminine’ behavior. He refuses to acknowledge Alison’s experiences as moments that relate to him, because Alison rejects this conditional--dress up in--that Bruce clings onto. In contrast, Alison both breaks from normative appearance expectations, playing “spartan” and “butch” (Bechdel 15). She very intentionally plays basketball with her older male cousins and even seems to enjoy their nickname of “Butch” (Bechdel 96). In this final scene between protagonist and antihero, Alison plays a parental role, hearing Bruce’s confessions of guilt. She offers a hand towards acceptance, similarity and excitement, but Bruce refuses it. Alison accepts and celebrates her breakage from normative physical appearance while Bruce abhors it.

While the book continues for a few more pages, this moment between Bruce and Alison feels like their last. It is the first (and only) moment between the two characters in which they directly speak about sexuality and the breakage from normative physical appearance. Yet in this moment, Bruce still holds back. He still fails to validate Alison’s desire to dress in ‘masculine’ clothes. And he still adheres to the binary. In the first scene that was discussed the reader felt pained by young Alison being so lost. We felt her confusion exuding through the pages simply because we knew more than she did. We knew why Bruce cared about the way she looked. We knew why Bruce cared about the way his home looked. And we knew why Bruce put so much emphasis on both Alison and the home appearing within the binary. We felt that pain because a young helpless Alison was still completely in the dark. Yet now, Alison is older, she is in the
knowing community. She essentially knows as much as the reader does. But we still feel this pain, this longing to help her when Bruce is unaccepting. Though I try time and time again to pinpoint why we feel this empathy, I cannot. Perhaps--as noted in the previous section--the beauty and the pain of this scene, this novel, isn’t why we feel this sympathy, but rather that we simply do.
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