Autonomy through image: the path of identity formation in Fun Home, Calling Dr. Laura, and Lighter Than My Shadow

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Autonomy Through Image:  
The Path of Identity Formation in  
Fun Home, Calling Dr. Laura,  
and Lighter Than My Shadow

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I hazard the explanation that a shock is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it. I feel that I have had a blow; but it is not, as I thought as a child, simply a blow from an enemy hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life; it is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it a whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together. Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me. It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what; making a scene come right; making a character come together. From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art.

Virginia Woolf, Moments of Being
I’ve always seen myself as existing somewhere between being a nerd and being an artist. I liked the concept of being a nerd and I got good grades when I was young, but I was too impatient to win a game of chess, too full of self-doubt to excel in math classes, and too much of a girl to really fit in with this particular crowd of male misfits. Some girls do better at this than me; they find solace in Wonder Woman and Poison Ivy and they brave comic book stores full of adolescent boys who’ve been taught by their subculture that they will end up with a beautiful girl in a skin-tight rubber suit if they wait long enough. All of the media I consumed depicted comic books as the epitome of nerdom, and because they are the product of equal parts nerd and artist, I have been interested in them for most of my life. I’m not sure exactly when I decided comic books didn’t depict women that I could see myself in and therefore weren’t for me. Although, I expect it happened around the same time my brothers told me that girls couldn’t play video games and I developed the strange habit of reading books from the fantasy section of the library with a flashlight in my closet. I can, however, pinpoint the exact time and place that I realized there was some form of those comic books that was precisely for me.

During the spring break of 2014 I read Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* for my introductory English class. I read it in one sitting in my friend’s dorm in Idaho. I was so submerged in Bechdel’s world that I forgot to be careful about letting any of the people I was surrounded by at the particularly religious university that my friend attended see the many panels depicting queer lady sex; I received more than one shocked and suspicious look. Bechdel’s book was like nothing I had seen before; it was simultaneously complex and easy to understand. As I discovered soon after, Bechdel was not the first woman to create something like this and although I’ve attempted to catch up on the generations of women who’ve been creating this kind of art, Bechdel’s work remains the paragon of an impactful graphic novel for me. Even
though we’ve lived markedly different lives, I deeply identify with Bechdel’s depictions of herself and they have helped me to understand and grow in my own identity in ways the books of my childhood never could.

Having representations of women that I can see myself in has been critical to my own identity formation but before I found novels like Bechdel’s they were infrequent and often insufficient. My upbringing in a conservative and rural community certainly added to the lack of exposure I had to positive representations of women. Even after I had access to the internet and relationships with librarians who frequently recommended books to me, I was still missing something. I loved fantasy novels with female protagonists but they were often poisoned by heteronormative, unnecessary, and unhealthy romantic subplots. Girls in books were always beautiful and just quirky enough that after a few small adjustments they fit right into the mainstream. More importantly, they lacked depictions of the traumas many young girls go through by nature of being a girl. Sexual assault, eating disorders, and daily discrimination are not brought up by these novels and, when they are, it becomes the central plot. This does not mirror real life; girls do not either experience life rife with gender violence or life completely free of it. The reality is usually somewhere in the middle. These characters, even when literally written by women, were written by the patriarchy. Female characters are often products of stereotypes created by the patriarchy to keep women confined to limiting roles. There is something deeply artificial about the stereotypical characters that I grew up with that created a barrier between them and me as well as other young girls that could relate to them. Most of the time I did not see myself in these characters but, in hindsight, when I did, I developed unhealthy characteristics and ideologies from them. Not only is the content limiting, because of dominant structures like romantic subplots and stereotypical personalities, the form of literature itself is
limiting. Although I cannot claim this as a universal truth for people who interact with the world of language, image, and sound differently from me, coming from the perspective of an able-bodied person who hears, speaks, and sees in ways that are normative, I believe there are some experiences that cannot be captured adequately in language.

During the same semester I was introduced to *Fun Home*, I was also introduced to an author that shared the opinion that the traditional novel form was not adequate. Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, while discussing the means necessary for successful female writers, also brings up the question of how one can become a great writer. One of the questions she explores is how one can write with what she calls an incandescent and undivided mind (*A Room of One’s Own* 98). She sees this kind of mind as being free from the barriers that gender imposes and able to transcend the boundaries of language explained above. Since my first time reading her, Woolf has become the standard at which I set the bar for construction of characters in other novels. Her works call for a rethinking of the way authors create characters; rather than describing their appearance and the significant moments of their story, Woolf attempts to construct her characters with language from the inside. She infrequently describes their physical appearance and uses free indirect discourse to always stay at the edge of their thoughts. One tactic she uses is explained in her essay “A Sketch of the Past” as moments of “non-being” (70). Moments of non-being are the things that people do during their day without thinking much about them, they are things that by the next day one might forget about. Moments of being, however, are moments that one will remember. Woolf argues that these moments are anything that is exceptional, however, “there seems to be no reason why one thing is exceptional and another not” (“A Sketch of the Past” 69-70). These exceptional moments could be anything from a simple realization to something tragic and life altering. Non-being, also referred to as “the cotton wool of daily life,” fills up most of
people’s lives and so it is important to capture non-being as well as moments of being in a character in order for them to feel real and be relatable for the reader (72). While Woolf works with language to capture believable characters through her efforts to capture non-being, the language she uses to achieve this goal still falls into a trap of the patriarchy because of its inaccessibility.

In all her effort to find a new way of constructing a novel, Woolf did not seem to consider the accessibility of the language or the concepts she used. Although Woolf’s writing is often powerfully moving for me, I don’t think I could ever read a novel of hers in one sitting as I often do with graphic novels and comic books. I’ve read A Room of One’s Own three times now and I still doubt that I really understand it. Her novels are even more complex. She uses multiple levels of analogy, difficult sentence structure, constant interruption of thought, and references to specific cultural events that are often over my head to construct her stories and her characters. If I would have picked up To the Lighthouse as a young girl I would have put it down by the third page even though it is a novel that I now find relatable. I don't claim to have the best reading comprehension, but in general I think I do pretty well. So if I, as an educated and voracious reader, find Woolf difficult to read, other people who could benefit from relating to her characters likely do as well. Graphic novels like Bechdel’s have the capacity to capture the layered and disjointed effect of Woolf’s writing that contribute to the realness of her characters in a way that is simpler to read. Bechdel’s works are especially laden with long form metaphor, allusion, and hidden meaning. The reader won’t always catch everything on their first or even fourth read through, but I’m more likely to keep reading a graphic novel, even if I don’t understand all of the references, than a traditional novel that I have to struggle to even
comprehend the language. The more times I read through a graphic novel the more of the hidden meaning I’m able to pick up on.

Bechdel starts her counterpart to *Fun Home, Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama*, with an epigraph from Woolf that reads simply, “For nothing was simply one thing” (qtd. in Bechdel).

This statement holds true in Woolf’s novels and in the images Bechdel uses in her works. Sorting through one’s life or the life of a character in order to create a story requires that simple things sometimes mean something more. Bechdel uses Woolf throughout *Are You My Mother* to lend support through theory and to create a metaphor regarding Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*. In one particularly insightful page, Bechdel simultaneously asks and answers the question that I seek to explore in the following analysis. She says, “In contrast to Mrs. Ramsay’s apparent selflessness, Lily is trying to become a self, a subject./ A subject in the sense of one who does, not in the sense of one who is done to, the way Mrs. Ramsay is Mr. Ramsay’s subject./ Language gets very confusing as it approaches this place where outside and inside touch./ Or fail to” (see fig. 1). Bechdel outlines the idea that to be a subject could mean to be a product of someone else, particularly a man, or it could mean to become a self: a self that does, that acts, that has some kind of autonomy and agency. She also outlines the problem with attempting to depict a self because it is a place where outside and inside touch; or fail to. She
says that language can get confusing at this place. Although “or fail to” grammatically refers to “the place where outside and inside touch” I think it also refers to the failure of language to capture this place. I believe where the outside and the inside touch is the critical place where women begin to form many aspects of their identity. They see what the patriarchy has constructed on the outside and sometimes attempt to replicate this on the inside, but in that they replicate their own oppression. Comics and Graphic novels are in a unique position between outside and inside. They can depict simultaneously the outer appearance of a person or situation while also explaining in language and image the inside. Therefore, they are in a unique position to depict the lives of women.

In the three works I'm examining in the following analysis, the authors sort through the “cotton wool of daily life” and explain the ways in which they have formed their identities through their ability to relate to and see themselves in the world. These women have sorted through their own stories of identity formation and created something that other women can look to for help sorting out their own. They confront the oppressions that many young women face and they show the effects of that oppression in their story. In Bechdel's Fun Home, Nicole Georges’ Calling Dr. Laura, and Katie Green's Lighter Than My Shadow, each author tells her own story of patriarchal power and the somewhat ubiquitous ways it influences their identity formation. Although each author has a different story to tell, they all go through a three step process of identity formation. In the first chapter I will outline the ways in which each author forms the basis of their identities through reflections in the world around them. These women all attempt to find their place in the world through the people or images they see around themselves but all of these images are influenced by patriarchal power and control in some way. For Bechdel it is heavily enforced gender performance, Georges is influenced by the lack of a positive role
model, and for Green it is the proliferation of an unachievable feminine ideal. In the second chapter I will explore the ways in which each author reproduces the negative control enacted on them through the development of a medical condition or disorder as well as through other negative behavior patterns. Bechdel experiences obsessive compulsive disorder, Georges develops a condition called encopresis and becomes harmfully submissive, and Green goes through multiple forms of disordered eating. Finally, in the third chapter I will attempt to explain how each author has succeeded or failed to achieve a sense of self that is liberated from patriarchal power and dependence on others.
Women Without Power: Comparison, Competition, and Ever-Present Lack
The first stage of identity formation for these young women is to see themselves reflected in others. These reflections give them confirmation about their place in the world and allow their identity to develop toward some kind of goal. This idea does not apply just to young girls; society is full of divisions and labels that allow for, or force people to fulfill certain roles. In the case of Bechdel, Georges, and Green, this first stage is specifically gendered because of the way patriarchal power is enacted on them and influences their reflections. Katie Green’s adolescent identity formation is based around comparisons of herself with her peers, informed by the feminine stereotypes she finds in media. One striking scene in the beginning of her adolescence occurs when her friends gather together to talk about their bodies (see fig. 2). In this scene Katie is forced into her friends’ world of comparisons. It is unclear why she has this initial hesitation; she wants to focus on school and is not interested in discussing and comparing her body with theirs, but these comparisons seem inevitable. Perhaps she has a sense that this kind of comparison—the kind that places women in competition with each other—is dangerous. She participates in other structures of control and comparison willingly from the time she is young when she tries to achieve perfection in her school work. However, she hesitates to participate in this similar structure when it is applied to body image, unlike her friends, who Green shows as very willing. It is common, albeit somewhat stereotypical, for adolescent girls to discuss boys and how to become more beautiful when they spend time together. Although Green does not give much insight into how she thinks this tradition started amongst her friends, I imagine they were indoctrinated through media and adults and the heteronormativity and other forms of patriarchal enforcement that they were exposed to through those channels. In the first panel of this scene Katie is visible; she is in bed doing homework but appears to be watching the girls comparing themselves; she attempts to resist taking part in it (see fig. 2). One girl wonders if a boy would
like her bra. In the next panel Katie is not visible; although she is behind them in the room and the view point of the reader is directly in front of them, her absence gives the impression that her eyes, like the viewers, have focused in on them. The girls continue to disparage themselves and give each other reassurance onto the next page. The largest panel on this page shows a girl looking at her reflection, sucking in her stomach, and saying “I wish I could be anorexic” (see fig. 2). The perspective shifts in this panel and the reader now sees them from the side and back. It is feasible that this is seen from Katie’s physical position in the imagined room. The change in perspective shows Katie’s piqued interest in the conversation; if she was not looking at them before, she is now. The use of a mirror marks this change and introduces Katie’s participation in this competitive comparison of the female body.

Green uses mirrors throughout the retelling of her identity formation to denote comparisons between herself and others or her ideal self. After Katie’s attention is drawn through the mirror scene to the comparison of bodies, the girls move the comparison directly to her: “I’d do anything to be skinny like Katie” (see fig. 2). Katie, clearly uncomfortable with this situation and her involvement in the comparisons, tries to leave but gets battered by a barrage of insults “You won’t find a boyfriend in your maths book,” “When did you become so boring,”

Fig. 2. Katie Green, Lighter Than My Shadow, (Jonathon Cape, 2013), pp. 67-68, 70, 73.
“Who’d want to rape her?” (see fig. 2). These insults serve to reinforce the mandate that Katie construct her identity through others in this bodily way. If she resists she will be punished by the patriarchal power that enforces rape culture and the idea that women must live for male validation. Katie walks home followed by the dark cloud of scribbles that she uses to represent her disordered thoughts and difficult feelings (71). The scene culminates with a splash page, preceded by an emphatic blank page, depicting Katie looking at her reflection with a cloud of scribbles looming over her head (see fig. 2). Although this is not her first experience looking at herself in the mirror in this book, it is one of the most poignant. It is also one of the many times when she is either forced to or actively compares herself to her peers directly prior to a page where she looks at herself in a mirror. This reoccurring sequence solidifies the connection between an initial comparison, her own identity being changed or developed, and eventually the attempts she makes to exert control back over herself. In the pages following the mirror scene, Katie makes changes to her appearance, like shaving her legs, putting her hair in barrettes, and getting more fashionable accessories. Her friends give her positive feedback for these changes but she remains convinced they are lying. She even says “I’ll always be ugly compared to them,” placing her appearance in direct competition with theirs (81).

After her peers force comparisons on Katie, she begins to make them without any outside initiation. Outward appearance becomes a way for her to measure her identity development. In Katie’s view, her identity formation depends on becoming perfect in appearances and academics. It is hinged on both external and internal affirmations of perfection. The problem is that when Katie tries to find reflections of her successful growth in other people she always doubts the positive reactions she receives. This is a product of the context in which she tries to find growth. As demonstrated by the competitive way her friends talked about their bodies, as well as the
harsh response they had to Katie when she tried to resist, the model of traditional femininity is based on competition amongst girls for attention and affection from authority figures and men. Because she bases her measure of growth on competition, she distrusts the positive responses she gets from other girls and distrusts anything positive her own reflection shows. When Katie tries to look at her reflection, she compares her real self to an unrealistic ideal that she has gathered from comparisons to her friends influenced by the ideal feminine model. A physical form for the feminine ideal Katie bases her expectations off of is never portrayed through a body in the text or image because, as she comes to learn, it is an impossible standard. Green repeatedly draws herself fading from a young woman to just a few lines. The most striking example is on the inside of the front and back covers of the book but these images are reoccurring through the book. Although she uses these images to talk about her anorexia and the idea of fading away, they are also a visual reminder that the woman Green tries to be during her early identity formation and disordered eating stages cannot exist. She is only a wisp of a person (see fig. 3).

Although never fully formed in image, there are hints of the feminine ideal’s influence throughout the novel. In one scene, Katie looks at a magazine called Girlz which says “Stretch marks are caused by rapid weight gain…” and “Tips to get your perfect body” (90-91). While she reads this magazine, she looks at her reflection and grabs at parts of her body (90). She also thinks of when her friends said that they wished they were as skinny as her (91). Green compares
the intended compliment, the memory of which resides in a thought bubble above the bed, with the open magazine below. Because Katie does not see herself reflected in the ideal presented on the page, she believes what her friends said was actually malicious in its intent. Even before the scene where the magazine is explicitly shown on the page as something Katie compares herself to, she uses the words “skinny,” “curvy,” and “sporty” to describe the bodies of the girls in her ballet lesson (89). This is the language of a magazine. Many women’s magazines contain sections where women with different body types are classified and told how to dress in a way that will flatter their shape. Katie also says that she thinks “They all seem perfect,” while she “seemed somehow out of proportion” (89). If those other girls could be asked, of course they would disagree that their bodies were perfect. Although Green draws all of the bodies to look very similar, Katie does not see the similarities in her own body with theirs because the impossible ideal body stands in her way. Katie does not see herself reflected in the ideal and she feels the only way she can progress in her identity formation is to achieve this perfection. The problem she encounters but does not fully come to terms with until she is in the midst of her eating disorder, is that the feminine ideal is impossible to achieve because it is based in contradictions.

Beauty is an important element of Green’s identity formation and sexuality is inseparable from beauty within this context. The competition to be the most beautiful is a vital part of this ideal because it claims one of the main duties of women is to be desirable to men. An ideal woman within this framework must be beautiful, desirable, and sexualized while not being sexual herself. This is where the contradiction enters in; a woman cannot be simultaneously sexualized and sexless. It is from this thought pattern that rape culture, which blames victims for being overtly sexual, exists, and sexually active women are shamed for their behavior while men
are praised for the same. Following this pattern, Green is sexualized but taught that sexuality is shameful and embarrassing. One of the ways Katie is subtly sexualized by people in her life during her early identity formation is through the all too common act of commenting on her body. She describes one unidentified man as saying “You’ve really blossomed… a fine hourglass figure” (88). Even her friends sexualize her when they connect her appearance to her likelihood of being raped and her chances of having a boyfriend (see fig. 2). Although not always present on the page, the media Katie consumes likely contributes to her knowledge of the sexualization of women, especially because she is seen reading a magazine. In one interaction between her and her best friend as a child, her friend tells Katie her plans to have sex with her boyfriend when they are older (60). Katie promises that she won’t tell anyone about this with her fingers crossed behind her back and, as what Katie saw as a harmless joke at the time, shouts the news out into the yard. She is immediately reprimanded by her mother who says “The whole street could have heard you!” (60). Green then succinctly summarizes the part of her education that reinforced the notion that sex is not for women when she says “Since then, I’d learned that sex made you pregnant… and later that it made you a slut” (61). Although women are expected to have their physical desirability always in mind—as demonstrated by the girl from before who wonders if a boy will like her bra—they are also taught that they are not supposed to be sexual (see fig. 2). Katie tries to grow into her identity but is stopped from doing this in a healthy way by the impossible way she sees this growth reflected back at her. She tries to reach the unrealistic level of beauty and achieve the perfect balance between being sexualized and sexless that the feminine ideal tells girls they must achieve, but these standards are impossible for her to maintain.

Green forms her identity through a process of attempting to see her reflection in her peers and the feminine ideal, but ultimately she fails to see that reflection. Her identity then becomes
the product of that failure. Instead of seeing herself reflected in the ideal, she does not see herself, and so she defines herself as a failure to the model. Nicole Georges, however, shows her early identity formation in an almost entirely isolated environment. She does not show many scenes between herself and her peers, her family, or other representations of people where a comparison or a reflection is obvious. However, similar to Green, she defines herself through the lack of herself she sees reflected back at her by her surroundings. Where Green makes visible the differences between herself and her idea of who she should be, Georges insulates herself from the outside world and focuses in on the lack of reflection. However, the reach of the feminine ideal and the harmful effect of patriarchal power extends even into Georges’ shut in world.

Georges centers her lack of reflection on the theme of her absent father. She explains that because her two sisters have the same father, they both look like each other, and also resemble their mother, while “… there was no one in the family with whom I observed or felt a strong genetic bond” (15). Georges always felt disconnected to her family. Not only did Nicole not see herself physically reflected in her family members, she says did not feel a connection to them. I think many people would agree that they do not specifically feel a genetic connection to their families. They feel a specific kind of connection that comes from living with them during the beginnings of their identity development, or from the knowledge that their families are more likely to stick around than other people are. But do most people feel a connection to their family specifically because they share genes? I do not think so. However, Georges uses this amorphous feeling to emphasize the absence of something that she perceives other people to have: the ability to see and feel a reflection of themselves in their family. Georges does not look outside of her family to find reflections of herself in her novel like Green does with her friends. This could be due to the focus of her novel being her search for her father, not specifically the ways in which
she formed her identity, or it could be because she truly has not had much exposure to other people that she sees as significant. Her home life was somewhat unstable because they moved when her mother entered a new relationship and Nicole suffered emotional trauma due to her abusive step father Ed. The combination of these two things can explain why Nicole was distant from her peers. Because Georges does not render her relationships with people outside of her family as influential to her identity in her younger years, the reader is left with Nicole’s feelings and depictions of isolation and distance between herself and her family without an explanation for the ways she did develop many distinct parts of her identity such as her distinct style or her exploration of sexuality.

Unlike Green, whose physical and emotional developments are well-documented on the page, Georges portrays her body and identity throughout most of her novel as static. Green responds to the reflections of herself she does and does not see in her peers and the expectations the feminine ideal places on her by making changes to her clothes and her body. but Georges only has one dominant strategy for change. She splits the style of the novel between a simple, linear child-like form and a more complex adult form. Due to the initial absence of a figure she can see herself in and define herself through, Nicole is stuck from the start as her child self. When she draws the child version she uses simple, bold lines and she almost always portrays her physical self with blunt bangs and pig tails in her hair. When she is a bit older she usually draws herself with all of the same features as before but with glasses added. Her adult self is drawn in a more intricate style; she uses shading and defines her features more realistically than with her child self. She is portrayed in a variety of outfits and hairstyles but she has a consistent style. She always has bangs, sometimes blunt and sometimes on the side, she often has pig tails or a headband. She also always has glasses, and although she changes the specific pair, they are a
consistent shape and style: even the glasses from her young self are this cat-eye shape. Georges also portrays herself wearing a very specific style of child-like clothing. She wears cardigans, collared shirts, and a hat with ears on it. This is certainly a style that some adults wear, it is popular in creative circles, but it has the effect in this book of Nicole never ageing past her teen years. There are a few times when Georges uses the simpler, linear style to portray her adult self, and in those times it is clear that there is almost no difference other than the drawing style (see fig. 4). When she has a difficult talk with her mother and shows her adult self but in her child style, the only differences she draws are simplified lines, a slightly smaller body, and no glasses. She wears the same clothes and has the same hairstyle; it is believable as both her child and her adult self (see fig. 4).

Although she does not make physical changes in the same way the other authors do, she does form a part of her identity subtly through the reflections she lacks with her mother and, like Green, through the omnipresent feminine ideal.

The change of drawing style that Georges implements when she depicts herself talking to her mother demonstrates their tense relationship on a level that words struggle to do. In a simple style change Georges denotes that her mother makes her feel small, submissive, undermined, and child-like in her presence. While she says she does not see herself in her mother, she draws herself in opposition to her. While her mother is large and dominant, she is small and submissive. Although it may seem unrelated at first, one way she represents this opposition is
through the ever-present animals in her life and in her book. On the cover Georges draws herself, a phone, and a chicken. The image of herself and the phone are clearly connected to the plot, but why is the chicken, a product of a seemingly fleeting subplot, represented on the cover? Nicole is constantly caring for or living with animals or a stuffed animal toy. She does not talk specifically about her mother’s gender or the way in which she enacts gender roles as explicitly as someone like Bechdel does, nor does she claim that her mother’s inability to nurture has anything to do with gender. However, Georges emerges from her early identity formation with a strong feminine need to nurture and a distinct passivity. It seems to me that Nicole sees her mother’s failures in parenting as connected to her failure as a stereotypical woman. Even if Georges would disagree that this was a product of gender conformity or some unseen patriarchal power structure, it is certainly a reflection of the things her mother lacked. While her mother and Ed fight, Nicole says to her stuffed animal, “Don’t worry, Edmondo, I’ll take care of you. I’m right here with you” (see fig. 5). Her mother does not portray a conventional nurturing femininity and this creates difficulty for Nicole because of the emotional abuse at the hands of her mother and her partners. Nicole sees this lacking and implements what she sees as the solution into her own identity. She carries this trait with her throughout her life; she rescues chickens and does what she can to keep the dogs in her life safe and happy, something her mother failed to do for her. And she continues to be passive to her mother and the other people in her life. The ability to nurture is undervalued
in a patriarchal culture and I do not think this is a negative trait for Georges, however, like with the other authors, the traditional femininity that creeps into Georges’ identity will have negative implications for her when she enters the next stages of her identity formation.

Unlike Georges, Bechdel shows the ways in which her identity developed through her relationships with others on nearly every page of *Fun Home*. Similar to Green, she uses mirroring as a reoccurring motif to establish and emphasize comparisons. One thing that sets Bechdel apart from the other authors is that she depicts her upbringing in an acutely unconventional household. Specifically, when it comes to gender and sexuality, Bechdel deals with representations that are at odds with the messages about normalcy she receives from outside sources. Bechdel makes up for a perceived lacking in her father’s portrayal of masculinity like Georges does with her mother. One major difference is that Bechdel offers ample insight into the comparisons she sees that allow her to decide that her father deviates from the norm. Roy, Alison’s babysitter, offers a glance at a man other than her father inside her house. In one depiction of Roy’s presence at their house, he lounges on a chair while Alison takes off his shoes and one of her brothers shows him a toy; Bruce brings him a record and beer (see fig. 6). In the next panel Alison looks intently at his arm while she holds it and asks him to make a muscle. Roy looks at the album art that Bruce brought him and drinks the beer. The record is the self-titled from the band Blind Faith. On the cover is a topless young woman holding a toy airplane: a young woman in a vulnerable state holding a phallic object meant for men’s
consumption. In the next panel, Alison stares fixedly on a television that shows The Rifleman with the protagonist holding a rifle. Roy is worshipped by her brothers, herself and—as she discovers later—her father. He is a nearly perfect masculine example. When framed with the woman from the album on the left, looking at the reader, and the man holding the rifle on the right, also looking out at the reader, the choice between masculine and feminine is easy to make.

If being feminine means being half naked and objectified for men’s consumption and masculinity means having power, why wouldn’t Alison prefer masculinity? Her choice is punctuated by the toy gun at her side. After comparing the rifleman to Roy and the woman on the album cover, she compares him to her father. In the fourth panel she looks intently at her father, after having just been looking at the television in the previous panel. Her gaze places the two men in opposition on the page. While the rifleman shoots guns with his son in the fourth panel, Bruce adjusts flowers. Bechdel elaborates on this parallel with the words above the fourth panel “I sensed a chink in my family’s armor, an undefended gap in the circle of our wagons which cried out, it seemed to me, for some plain, two-fisted sinew” (see fig. 6).

Strangers also confirm the faulty Bechdel family armor for Alison. When she sees “…grimy deer hunters at the gas station uptown…” she says she measured her father against them (see fig. 7). In the first panel Bechdel draws the hunter on the right with his right arm in motion cleaning the windshield and his left bent and resting on the side of the car. In the third panel, Bruce is in nearly the
same position, with his right arm in motion putting in a barrette and his left hand held against Alison’s head. Their similar facial features, a pointed noise, small mouth, and pronounced frown lines, accentuate their paralleled position. While the hunter does manual labor, clearly gendered male, Bruce forces Alison to wear a barrette (see fig. 7). The other hunter in the first panel is described as having an “ever-present chew tin” (see fig. 7). Bruce, in the second panel, has his ever-present florals. Roy and these men confirm to Alison that something is different about her father. She internalizes this difference: “And where he fell short, I stepped in” (see fig. 7). She defines herself through her father’s lack of conventional masculinity. He is both in opposition to her, because he is feminine while she is masculine, and a reflection of her, because he is deviant from gender norms and so is she. Bechdel’s feeling that her family is in danger because of her father’s flawed gender performance causes her to reject the feminine and take pride in the masculine while also exposing a flaw in the feminine ideal: it is not ideal at all. She counts it as a success when her cousins call her butch (see fig. 7).

Bechdel makes the reflections that she sees and does not see in her father literal on the page when she places herself and Bruce in mirrors together (see fig. 8). The clear line between them is confused by the crossing speech bubbles coming from their reflections. Bruce and Alison both define themselves through each other. Bruce, because he expresses his femininity through Alison and Alison, because she tries to make up for the lack of masculinity in Bruce that she interprets as dangerous. No one ever sees their true self, the self can only be seen

Fig. 8. Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, (Mariner Books, 2007), p. 98.
through reflections, be that in a mirror, photograph, or through a comparison to someone else. Bechdel emphasizes the way she and her father’s identities depend on each other through the use of these reflections. They do not look at their own bodily reflections in either mirror but rather the reflection of the other person (see fig. 8). Herein lies the problem for Alison’s identity formation: she tries to define herself through the images of gender she sees in the people around her but those representations of gender are not cohesive. Alison is exposed to mainstream representations of gender through television, books, music, and some of the people around her, like Roy or her mother. But she is also exposed to her father, and through him develops and discovers her own desires to deviate from traditional gender expression.

Alison discovers some stability and hope that Green and Georges do not encounter, when she sees a woman in Philadelphia who presents masculinity (see fig. 9). However, it is also reaffirmed to her that the goal she sees as being good for herself and her family is not okay with her father or society. Her father, who is one of her main examples of deviance from gender norms, shuts down the reflections of herself she sees in this woman. The reflections Alison sees are supported by the form of the images. A pillar separates the first panel roughly in half and draws the eye to the faces closest to each side (see fig. 9). On the right, Bruce glances toward the woman and on the left stands a restaurant worker who bears a striking resemblance to Bruce. Bruce and this man both
have pointed noses, small mouths, prominent frown lines, and similarly drawn hair. At first, this comparison seems strange, but it is confirmed by the fifth panel on the next page where Bruce looks down at a book, very much mirroring the pose of the worker on the previous page (see fig. 9). Although Alison and the woman bear little resemblance, they do share a similarly open and rounded face, as well as patterned shirts that make them look like a pair. Once again these suspicions are supported on the next page; in the first panel, the faces of Alison and the woman are placed next to each other in clear comparison (see fig. 9). But the image also supports Bruce’s distaste for obvious gender deviance. The man, acting as a stand-in for Bruce, does not look at the woman: a sign of passive discomfort. Bruce actively expresses disapproval to Alison when he says “Is that what you want to look like?” (see fig. 9). Alison knows, from his tone and the emphasis of the word that, that this question is something she should say no to. Bruce looking down at his book on the next page, as the diner worker looks down at his clipboard, is a reminder that Bruce also looks away from Alison’s gender rebellion.

Although Bruce’s inability to pass as a normative straight man allows for Alison to find and develop the deviance from a traditional feminine woman within herself, this reflection is not so simple. She is punished for her attempts to deviate from the traditional model of femininity, even though in the context she is given, she sees this as the most beneficial stance to take for herself and her family. All three authors are exposed to the traditional model of femininity but Georges and Green end up replicating those feminine forms in ways that harm them. Alison exposes flaws in the traditional gender system and finds herself deviating from that system in ways that Green and Georges do not. Because Bechdel is given representations of people that she can see deviance in, she is able to see that deviance in herself and develop it. However, Alison is not free from the harms that arise from all three author’s identity formation processes. Alison, in
her efforts to protect her family from emotional harm, fulfills the feminine role of taking on the emotional labor of a family. This contradiction in her stance as masculine leads to the development of a harmful and false sense of control. Georges and Green also develop this negative control through their respective attempts at taking hold of their identities.
Replicating and Embodying Negative Control
The process of developing their identities through reflections in the people and media around them leaves Bechdel, Green, and Georges with little control over who they become. Green and Georges struggle to fit into a feminine ideal while Bechdel struggles to fight against it. Patriarchal assertions of femininity on them take away the agency in their identity formation. Although Bechdel tries to choose to see herself reflected in masculine women as a solution to her father’s failure to enact traditional masculinity, she is reprimanded constantly by her parent’s enforcement of the patriarchy’s standard of femininity. Although she tries to abandon the feminine, part of her reason for doing this is that she wants to defend and protect her family from a lacking she sees in her father. Even though she attempts to fight against femininity, she enacts the particularly feminine task of carrying the emotional labor of her family. The combination of this monumental task with the constant fight for free expression of her gender leaves Alison with a need for control. Because she cannot control the patriarchy or her family’s emotional wellbeing she transfers this control to the things in her life she does have influence over.

Alison’s obsessive-compulsive disorder is the self-destructive way she attempts to enact control. Because it is partly a product of her effort to be responsible for her family’s emotional wellbeing, to defend their circle of wagons as she puts it before, this desire for control is also a consequence of the patriarchy that she unintentionally duplicates. Her OCD does not give her autonomy or control; it dominates her in the same way the patriarchy does while creating the illusion that she has some control over herself and her world. Bechdel makes clear the ways in which her OCD is a reproduction of the control enacted on her through her art. On the inside cover of the hardback version of Fun Home and the outside cover of the paperback version, she draws an intricate replication of a William Morris wallpaper design. In a YouTube video she made about this process, entitled “penance” she says “… I’m having, to like, trace, reenact,
relive, all this horrific Victorian minutia… of my youth, things that I hated about that house…” (00:01:07). Bechdel could have obtained permission to print the wallpaper design on her covers or drawn it in a less intricate style, but instead she reproduced every repetitive detail in a style that seems to have taken her some time, as her video about it denotes. In this act she attempts to take power over her house, pay penance in some way, but she also puts this burden of replication on herself. In her effort to take control over her childhood home, which in many ways represents the influence of her father, she replicates his control over her. Even in her attempts to pay penance and get past her childhood in order to gain some positive control for herself through the creation of this book, which will be discussed in the next chapter, she still falls into her father’s web of control.

One specific compulsion that she includes in her novel she describes as “… the invisible substance that hung in doorways, and that, I soon realized, hung like swags of drapery between all solid objects” (see fig. 10). In the panel under this text she moves the substance with her hand, with curtains behind her and a doorway that looks like drapery on each side. This connects the invisible substance inextricably to the house and all of its drapery: the “horrific Victorian minutia” that she hates about her father’s house (“penance”). It is also reminiscent to the earlier passage where she implies her disdain for dusting, one of the many chores that her father forces her to do (15-16). This compulsion is a replication of her father’s control over her through

![Fig. 10. Alison Bechdel, Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic, (Mariner Books, 2007), p. 135.](image_url)
the house itself and the tedious tasks she is made to perform in it to keep its appearance maintained.

Alison is also made to maintain her own appearance in the same feminine manner the house is kept in. The main vehicle for this maintenance is another form of drapery, her clothing. Her OCD manifests through her clothes as well. She mentions that she has rules about which clothes she can wear on which day and the order in which they have to be taken off (see fig. 11). Once again this is a clear replication of the rules her father imposes on her about which clothes she is allowed to wear in order to appear feminine. Although, her compulsions regarding her clothes are not about the gender they present, but rather an effort for control over the few aspects of her clothing that are not dictated by her father. Bechdel’s desire for emotional security and balance in her family is also manifested through the compulsions she experiences with her clothing. Alison takes on the emotional labor of the family and attempts to balance her parent’s needs through her shoes. She says “It took several painstaking minutes to line up my shoes exactly, so as to show neither one preference. (The left one was my father.) (The right one was my mother)” (see fig. 11).

In a similar effort for balance, Bechdel writes a book for her father that replicates him in many ways, and one for her mother that follows a similar pattern. Her father’s book is focused on house imagery and given a monochromatic blue/green scheme while her mother’s is pink/red and contains ample mirror imagery and psychoanalysis. The inclusion of green and red hues in
her two books is another example of the ways in which she conveys her parent’s deviance from norms and how she tries to make up for them. While she tries to balance both of her parent’s needs she also tries to balance out how she should embody the representations they each give her. In the scene following her shoe compulsion, she shows another example of her compulsive need to take on the emotional work of the whole family. “I had to kiss each of my stuffed animals—and not just in a perfunctory way. Then I’d bring one of the three bears to bed with me, alternating nightly between mother, father, and baby” (see fig. 11). Bechdel’s various compulsions demonstrate the ways in which she attempts to gain back some control over her gender performance as well as the balance of her family which are both threatened by the patriarchy.

While Bechdel attempts to have control over her clothing, hair, and other indicators of gender performance, Green’s attempts for control are over not just her clothes and gender indicators but also her physical body. The patriarchal control exerted on Green during her early development is focused on the impossible standards of both the physical appearance of an ideal woman and a simultaneous sexualization and expectation for so-called purity. She tries to gain control over both of these aspects of her life but ends up reproducing these negative forms of control in herself with serious consequences. Green’s anorexia is the subject of her novel and clearly her replication of the negative control inflicted on her in terms of the unachievable feminine image. While Bechdel’s OCD is certainly influential in her life and debilitating at times, she does not represent it as influencing all aspects of her life like Green does with her disordered eating. Although their conditions are different, they do share an aspect of compulsion and control. Anorexia, as Green depicts it, is not just about always wanting to look thinner, but also about the compulsion to have any control over her appearance because she feels she does
not have control in other aspects of her life. This is emphasized by her focus on counting calories and, in one example, her visible ribs (129). She also has particular ways of preparing, arranging, and eating her food. Green’s pages are often repetitive panels of looking in a mirror and/or getting dressed or undressed; this repetitive control over the making of the book is also reminiscent of Bechdel.

Green’s reflection is often a distorted version of the person that looks into the mirror. This is an important representation of the way anorexia truly impacts people. Katie literally does not see herself as thin and dying during some parts of her illness, she just sees that she is still imperfect and uses losing weight as a way to deal with that and attempt to achieve some form of that perfection. It is also an important form that the novel uses to illustrate the way in which the unrealistic feminine ideal is transferred onto her own body. In one of these instances she says “I couldn’t see my whole body in the mirror. I only saw parts of myself. The parts I hated” (see fig. 12). She is shown touching her thigh in one panel and her stomach in the next. In the reflection in each panel the scribbles are enclosed within the frame of the mirror and she is shown grabbing what looks like fat, although that is impossible because she is extremely thin and would only be able to grab skin. The image in the mirror is also zoomed in on just the part of her body that she is touching; this is the only part of herself that she sees because she has to find something to improve in order to fit the impossible ideal. She sees this distortion because even though she is thin, a sick dying girl does not fit the model.
of perfection any more than a girl of a healthy weight. If she sees herself distorted as larger than she is, at least she has something to continue to work on.

Even after Green becomes aware of her anorexia and tries to recover, she experiences this distortion of her reflection. This happens because by its nature, anorexia does not just go away. Also, because she tries to see herself reflected in the ideal image, which, of course, she cannot supply. She continues to have times where she feels like she needs to lose weight, count calories, and restrict her food, but she also experiences feelings of failure regarding her actual recovery. When Green returns from school after her parents pull her out, she has a day where no one says anything about her anorexia or mentions anything about her recovery. This leaves her with feelings of doubt and a reassurance that she has failed at yet another thing. She says “How can they know I’m struggling if I don’t look sick? Maybe I got better too quickly, made it seem easy… like it was some silly phase and now I’ve snapped out of it. Maybe that’s all it was. I wasn’t really anorexic…” (see fig. 13; p. 212). She feels like she has failed to properly be anorexic and has also failed to perform her recovery properly. Even though she successfully improves some aspects of her health, although certainly has not dealt with the root of the problems yet, she becomes concerned that she is not doing something right. This exemplifies the idea that there is not a path she can follow that will be right because to be a woman is to constantly be in the wrong. This doubt is shown in her reflection. At first she is reflected accurately but as she doubts her recovery and her

Fig. 13. Katie Green, *Lighter Than My Shadow*, (Jonathon Cape, 2013), p. 213.
illness further, her reflection looks sickly again. Relatively healthy Katie looks at a Katie in the midst of her anorexia; she is thin, has lines under her eyes, and her hair is messy (see fig. 13). In the last panel of this scene her reflection is only a wisp and she says simply “I wasn’t sick enough” (see fig. 13). Try as she might to gain control, she cannot achieve the feminine ideal, nor can she succeed at anorexia or at recovery. There seem to be no option of success left. Even later into her recovery and her battle with trying to overcome the effort for perfection, she says “People believed I was recovered. I believed I was in control” (261). But when she brushes her hair and some of it comes out, an indicator she is still severely underweight, she sees a shape in the mirror reminiscent of a lock of hair and of the wisp version of herself we saw in the last passage and throughout the novel. She fails again at recovery.

Georges does not show herself interacting with the world or her own reflection in the same ways Bechdel and Green do. Her life seems almost untouched by blatant misogyny and influences of the patriarchy except for the times she shows her mother’s homophobia and her stepfather’s abuse. Although her early identity formation is based more on a lack of reflection than the other authors, she does develop negative forms of self-control. These take the form of the condition Encopresis and her tendency to be submissive and to shut down. Although there is no concise way to explain how these conditions developed through gender and female oppression as with the other authors, the end result of those conditions is specifically gendered.

The first manifestation of Georges’ self-imposed damaging control is her stomach pains. Georges says, “My stomach pains started around the time Mom & Ray got together. I didn’t want to go to the bathroom. I just didn’t. I would go to great lengths to avoid the toilet. Sitting down, waiting out the urge, was my usual state of affairs” (41). On the splash page where Georges’ hand holds a sheet, possibly torn from a dictionary or printed from a medical website,
she explains that this problem is called Encopresis and that there are both emotional and physical causes for it (see fig. 14). At the bottom she includes “Emotional stress may also trigger Encopresis” and emphasizes this statement with an image of her child-self remembering images of her mother (see fig. 14). The emotional stress that Georges cites as the cause of her condition is harder to pin down than the stress of Bechdel or Green. While theirs can be clearly linked to oppressions committed by the patriarchy and fit neatly into my analysis because of that, Georges does not give this clear connection. The third image in her memory bubble is her stepfather Ed hitting her mother. If this was the only image it would be easy to say that this emotional stress was caused by masculine violence, a product of the patriarchy. However, the second image is her mother yelling at Nicole. Her mother also holds her own face; it is possible this is the scene directly following the hit from her husband. If this is the case it seems that she is blaming Nicole for this fight. The first memory is just her mother kissing Faisal, the boyfriend she had right after leaving Nicole’s father. These two images seem to place the blame on her mother rather than on a male figure, or the patriarchy more generally. It is possible to say that Nicole’s mother enacted the patriarchy on her, she clearly replicated masculine violence in some way, and does engage in emotional manipulation throughout Nicole’s life. However, as an abused woman herself, her trauma—very much caused by the patriarchy through her abusive husband—may have manifested in ways that hurt Nicole. I hesitate to say that her mother’s
abuse was directly a product of the patriarchy though, because Georges does not give enough information about who her mother was and how she was treated by her in order for me to analyze her in this way. This is quite unlike Bechdel, whose book is an extremely detailed exploration of her relationship with her father. However, Georges does make it clear that this stomach condition was a product of feeling a lack of control and an attempt to gain control over herself in some way. One way that she did seem to gain some control was through her ability to gain her mother’s attention. This is the only part of the book in which her mother offers her comfort and Nicole seems to want it. Nicole causing her own illness, and sometimes faking it as well, allowed her to have some control over the attention her mother often did not give her. She even demonstrates how it allowed her and her mother to have a bond that was kept secret from Ed when she talks about the method they had for answering the phone when she was home from school (66-67). Of course the condition also made things more difficult for her due to the physical pain and problems she encountered with her school’s truancy officer. Nicole eventually recovered from this condition but develops another, less medical, but stemming from the same problems.

One of the physical causes of encopresis is constipation. As Georges quotes from “Childhood Encopresis: Causes and Treatment,” “When children experience constant constipation, the stool can become large, hard and dry. It creates a lot of pain that causes young children to avoid going to the toilet, creating more pain and difficulties” (see fig. 14). The initial constipation may have discouraged Georges to use the toilet because she was scared of the pain, but not using the toilet only makes it worse. Georges replicates this pattern in other areas of her life. She compares this behavior to the way a fainting goat’s muscles lock up when they are startled (162). She gives plenty of examples of times where she physically shuts down either
through becoming tired or spacing out whenever something difficult comes up (164-165). In one particularly striking example, she shows an argument between her and her mother resulting in her transformation into some kind of rodent, crying and huddled in a corner, while her mother transforms into a lion (see fig. 15). At the resolution of this argument she draws a wheel depicting the "Anatomy of a Mom Fight," cementing this comparison to predator and prey even further (see fig. 16). When Georges encounters something difficult, instead of facing it and trying to sort through it, she shuts off so she does not have to feel the pain. Although this does not seem like a form of taking control, it is. She chooses to stop interacting with things that cause her pain. Although it is submission to the submissiveness placed on her by her mother, it is also an active choice to not interact with pain. Just as with her stomach pain, this catches up to her eventually; her relationship with Radar is damaged by it.

Radar is frustrated with Nicole for not confronting her mother about her deceit and for not coming out to her. On the pages where they break up, Nicole wears her hat with ears and looks very small and young compared to Radar. She draws a fainting goat in a thought bubble above herself while Radar explains her reasons for the breakup (218-219). Even though Nicole calls herself a "giant exposed nerve, primal and neurotic" she continues to shut down while they discuss the break up (see fig. 17). She goes on to draw herself much smaller than Radar sitting in
a boat in the fetal position, then she draws herself in her child style in the boat with sharks surrounding her (see fig. 17). Although she argues somewhat with Radar, she mostly complies. This scene concludes with her dogs floating in on a life raft to save her. Georges very clearly shows her femininity saving her here. Although, like the other authors’ experiences with femininity, this is complex and contradictory. Georges’ passivity is part of her feminine identity which gets her into trouble, in this case contributes to her girlfriend breaking up with her, while her nurturing characteristic—also a part of her femininity—saves her through the representation of the dogs.

Fig. 17. Nicole J. Georges, *Calling Dr. Laura*, (2013), pp. 220-221, 224.
Illustrated Autonomy
Radar's breakup with Nicole and the subsequent saving performed by her dogs seems to push her out of her submissive pattern. After five dark panels of grief and recovery, Nicole is woken up by the dogs and a phone call from Radar. Radar tells Nicole she is going to take one of the dogs and this is one of the first times in this book that Nicole reacts strongly to something (225-226). She jabs the answering machine, says "I hate you," uses profanity, and a dog is even shown in the background looking startled (see fig. 18). When Radar comes over, Nicole is forceful and stands her ground during their argument more than she has in the past. She remains adult sized and in her adult drawing style throughout the argument (228). This change is marked by the depiction of the horse head masks that they wore in the beginning of their relationship now cast aside (230). Although they seem silly, these masks represent the adolescent and casual nature that Georges embodied prior to their disposal. The change is reaffirmed in many ways throughout the rest of the book. First, she sets up a humorous and assertive Q&A "re: This whole Dad thing" in which she addresses the readers directly and confidently about her search, or lack thereof, for her father (232). Although the reasons she gives fall into some of the passivity that she displayed before, she does take responsibility for answering those questions. She decides that it is her decision not to look for her dad. Next, she begins her coming out story with a panel where she stands in front of a mirror and cuts her bangs (237). This is one of the few times we see her look at a reflection of herself and also the only
time we see her make a decision to change her appearance. Although she stays in the same style family with her hair, and later when she changes her glasses, she does show herself take ownership of her appearance. Next, she confronts her mom over email about being gay and knowing about her father being alive (240). Although Georges does say that she does it because her mom is pushing her and that she is following Radar's advice, her mom had been pushing her for years and she did not need to follow Radar's advice, in fact she had not been doing so for a while because it was more passive for her not to. Although somewhat coerced, Georges does make the decision to come out to her mother. After she receives no response for three days, and after the three dark panels representing these days, Nicole wakes herself up. She cross-stitches a picture of a zebra with the words "Tell that triflin bitch she can have you" (see fig. 19). While still quirky and true to Nicole's style, this is an extremely confrontational message for her to send out. She is no longer passive in this breakup or in her life.

Georges' conviction falters when her mother tells her that her father left because he did not want her. In a familiar style tactic, Georges portrays herself in her child style for these two panels (see fig. 4). But there is hope; she becomes an adult again and says "Mmm Hmm" with a skeptic raised eyebrow (247). Perhaps she does not believe her mom. At the end of this scene the book appears to come to an end. She closes on a line that could have easily closed the book and
the next page is entirely dark (251-252). But this is not the end. Prior to the epilogue Georges
draws a black page with a simple white linear drawing of her open palm (see fig. 20). This hand
is reminiscent of the small drawing of her hand on the
page where she gets the palm reading that begins the
search for truth about her father. Initially, I thought this
drawing was here to remind the reader of the influence
of fate in this story. It began with a palm reading and it
would end with fate bringing Georges to her father's
identity. However, with the changes to her attitude in
mind, this palm actually appears to be a message of her
autonomy. Although fate brought her to this point, she
decides to stop trusting the explanation that her mother
gives her and actually find out who her father is. With
this open palm she signifies that she begins to grab hold of her own fate here. In many ways the
epilogue feels like a preface to another story. Georges finally finds someone who looks like her
to see herself reflected in and to further develop her identity through. It is unclear if the new start
will allow her to totally change her self-defeating pattern of submissiveness. Will she confront
her mother again about the lies? She seems satisfied with the tenuous truce they have so it seems
unlikely for her to push her mother any further. If this is the case, she has not fully overcome her
negative self-control, although there is certainly hope.

Bechdel demonstrates the same hope for recovery from her OCD when she tosses aside
the shoes she uses to represent her parents (see fig. 21). However, like Georges, her recovery is
not definite: she writes, “My recovery was hardly a joyous embrace of life’s attendant chaos—I
was as obsessive in giving up the behaviors as I had been in pursuing them” (see fig. 21). She plans out which compulsion she will stop on which day, but, of course, one cannot recover from OCD by just planning on stopping it. Although Bechdel abandons some of her compulsions in her youth, her work reveals that some of her compulsions did not disappear but rather transformed into something new. One compulsion she writes on her calendar to overcome is lining up her shoes exactly when she takes them off. The specific goal she writes is “Toss shoes” (see fig. 21). In the panel below her calendar full of goals, she sits up in bed to turn the lamp off and looks anxiously at her tossed shoes (see fig. 21). When she had to align them perfectly, they represented her parents, and when she decides to quit performing that compulsion, her anxiety about her parents is transferred to a much bigger aspect of her life than her shoes. Bechdel wrote Fun Home about her father and Are You My Mother? about her mother. Not only is each book about a parent, but each book embodies the parent in ways that are reminiscent of her compulsions. As discussed before in regard to the wallpaper on the cover, Fun Home as an object is the father’s house; most of the action of the book even takes place in the house. The book is illustrated in a monochrome blue/green which may not seem compelling alone, except that Are You My Mother? is illustrated in a monochrome red/pink. The books themselves are gendered for her parents. The focus of each novel is also connected to the parents, not just in content but also in the themes. Helen’s book is steeped in
feminist theory and psychoanalysis while Bruce’s is full of metaphors from literature and largely about sexuality, this mimics the content of these individual’s lives.

One compulsion that she does not list on her wall calendar but spends many pages explaining is the symbol for the phrase “I think” that she writes in her journal. This compulsion is transferred into all of the tiny details that create and reaffirm the ever-present metaphors and themes in Fun Home. Bechdel explains that this compulsion developed from her decision to keep a diary and the crisis she describes as epistemological; she is not sure if she can know that the things she writes are “absolutely, objectively true” (141). She starts by writing “I think” between words and phrases, moves on to writing “I think” over itself so many times it becomes indecipherable, and ends up creating a shorthand symbol to represent her doubt that she writes between words, on top of them, and over whole sections of her entries. Bechdel eventually stops using this shorthand but continues to obscure her entries with ellipses that she uses to denote hesitation (162). The diaries are a product of the same kind of compulsion that the books are a product of: Bechdel’s need to understand and sort through her life. The books are made possible by the details in her diaries and because the books are a retelling of her life, they become diaries themselves. The doubt she shows in her ellipses and her “I think” symbol is present in the books just as it is in the other diaries. One way she metaphorically draws the “I think” symbol is by placing reminders of metaphors subtly and sometimes obviously throughout her novels.

She opens and closes Fun Home with a comparison of herself and Bruce to Icarus and Daedalus. This is certainly an interesting comparison to make and it immediately brings up the idea of the inversion in their relationship. Bechdel acts mostly as the father character in this metaphor but she also says that “in the tricky reverse narration that impels our entwined stories, he was there to catch me when I leapt” (232). However, it is brought up infrequently throughout
the novel and even seems, although beautiful and powerful in its impact, a bit forced at the end due to her use of a seemingly random swimming scene to make the falling into the sea aspect of the comparison make sense visually. This metaphor is not necessary to the story. It adds interest and a literary allusion that may be an homage to her father’s literary interests, but it also serves as the “I think” symbol for Bechdel. She uses this metaphor to frame the book and compare her story to an outside story in order to validate it. As she says about her early journals, “My simple, declarative sentences began to strike me as hubristic at best, utter lies at worst. All I could speak for was my own perceptions, perhaps not even those” (141). This self-doubt and anxiety about hubris almost certainly spilled over into Bechdel’s adult work. How could it not when she is writing about personal and sensitive material and attempting to form connections between these events and her own identity development? She suppresses this self-doubt by filling the book with metaphors that support her claims, just as Icarus and Daedalus support and explain her ideas about the inversion of the roles of herself and Bruce.

There are countless other examples of smaller “I think” markers throughout the text. Two notable examples that I have already mentioned are the Blind Faith album cover, which had notable controversy regarding the sexist representation of the woman, and the inclusion of The Rifleman, in which Chuck Connors, the actor who starred in it, was rumored to be gay. An even subtler example occurs in the panel where Alison realizes she is a lesbian; although she is in her college campus’ bookstore and the silhouette of the man standing behind her cannot literally be Roy, it is Roy (see fig. 22). All of these little inclusions allow Bechdel to say “I think.” I think
my being a lesbian has something to do with my father and I think I always knew about him and Roy. I think I only had negative representations of women in my childhood. I think my conception of masculinity is complicated by my father’s sexuality. They also give her protection from the claim that her retelling of simple facts is influenced by her hubris; if she can show that these concepts make sense compared to outside examples and all connect together, then the overall argument that she makes is harder to take apart.

Out of all three authors, Green gives the clearest insight into her recovery process. It is present even in the physical presence of the book. The first thing I noticed about this book is that it is about anorexia but it is a physically large tome, containing over five-hundred pages. The front and back covers also give insight into Green’s recovery. The front depicts a young Katie walking into the woods with her heavy shadow following her and the back depicts an older Katie coming out. On the back cover, the path out of the woods is easy to see and Green’s body faces forward, toward the reader. Her head, however, is turned back toward the trees, giving a nod to the journey she has emerged from. The adult version of herself that appears on the back also appears throughout the book. She frequently breaks the fourth wall, so to speak, and reminds the reader that she is a real woman who had to struggle to create this book. She first appears on page five where she looks up from her desk at a chain of the fading away versions of herself connected by scribbles (see fig. 23). In the following pages the scribbles condense into a stream directed into

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Fig. 22. Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, (Mariner Books, 2007), p. 203.
her pen and then release onto the page in front of her. The next page, apparently the page she had just drawn on, bears the scribbles. This insight into her writing process, and the difficulties she has with it, continues throughout the book. In addition to the drawings of herself drawing, she also writes notes to the reader. These notes are disconnected from any image, so they appear like letters to the reader rather than part of the regular text of the book. The first of these letters appears after a series of pages depicting a suicide attempt and where the forms of a graphic novel are literally torn apart. Green uses torn paper and self-aware drawings of herself drawing to emphasize the connection of the physical book to her trauma and her connection with the audience. Green ends this letter with “I want to live. / I want to draw” (403). She uses the letter to mark a change in her story and to draw attention to the ways in which the book itself has aided in her recovery. The most striking page in Lighter Than My Shadow is a stark white splash page where the drawn Katie draws her own reflection (see fig. 24). Before she can draw herself she must draw the story of her life, which she literally does both on the pages directly prior to her self-drawing, and throughout the process of creating the book.

This seems to me one of the most crucial ways each author has taken control of their identity. Each of these women very literally sorted through, as Woolf calls it, the wool of daily
life, found where their power had been taken away, recognized how that affected them, and then took their stories out of the hands of that power and into their own. They have achieved Woolf’s goal which she writes in “A Sketch of the Past” about why she writes, “It is only by putting it into words that I make it a whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together” (73). Green, like Bechdel and Georges, does not spontaneously recover. Toward the end of the book she says, “Things are not perfect… but I’m OK with that” (498). On the concluding pages, Katie looks back at the woods and sees the jumble of scribbles. On the next page, the scribbles transform into a teary-eyed little girl, and on the next, Green kneels down to comfort her. This little girl appears to be Katie’s young self. This final page demonstrates how getting to know the past—comforting her child-self—has helped Green work to overcome her heavy shadow.
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