

“Like a Comic Book by Virginia Woolf”: Alison Bechdel’s Dialogue with *To the Lighthouse* in *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama*

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to discuss Alison Bechdel’s second graphic memoir, *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama* (2012) in order to analyse the American cartoonist’s interest in myth, and her dialogic relationship with Virginia Woolf’s autobiographical writings, in particular *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Bechdel’s *Are You My Mother?* is first introduced via its brief comparison with Bechdel’s debut memoir, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006), devoted to her father. Then, the paper traces the parallels and differences between Bechdel’s and Woolf’s works and quests to examine their respective relationships with their own mothers. In both daughters’ autobiographical writings, the mothers appear as mythical figures, who are subjected to demythicisation necessary for the daughters’ liberation as artists. In addition, the paper discusses both authors’ reflections on the process of artistic creation seen in Woolf’s depiction of Lily Briscoe’s painting and in Bechdel’s own self-portrait. Finally, the paper demonstrates Bechdel’s postmodernist intensification of Woolf’s modernist, already self-reflexive model of writing, made possible thanks to the medium of the graphic narrative itself.

Keywords: mother–daughter relationship, graphic narrative, memoir, modernism, postmodernism, feminism, myth.

Introduction

In her “Foreword” to Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* (published in 1927), Eudora Welty wrote:

From its beginning, the novel never departs from the subjective.
(1981, viii)

[In it] life has been intensified, not constricted, not lessened in range but given its expansion. Inside, in this novel’s multiple, time-affected

view, is ever more boundless and more mysterious than Outside. (viii)
Love indeed pervades the whole novel. If reality is what looms, love
is what pervades – so much so that it is quite rarely present in the
specific; it is both everywhere and nowhere at a given time. (x)
[...] what is really out there is time. (x)

All these comments, capturing the essence of *To the Lighthouse*, serve well to describe also the major qualities of Alison Bechdel’s *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama* (published in 2012), which engages in an intertextual dialogue with Virginia Woolf’s autobiographical writings, especially her fifth novel. It will be the purpose of this paper to demonstrate how Bechdel “intensifies” and “expands” Woolf’s project in her own even more “multiple, time-affected view,” where Inside is not so much contrasted with Outside as merged with it. It will be shown how this happens on the level of both Bechdel’s use of the graphic memoir genre, as well as the book’s main theme signalled by its title. Both *To the Lighthouse* and *Are You My Mother?* are their feminist authors’ quests to examine their respective relationships with their own mothers. In both daughters’ autobiographical writings the mother / mother figure appears to be mythical, but is later demythicised, so that the daughter / daughter figure can break free – as an artist. Both authors reflect on the process of artistic creation, seen in Woolf’s depiction of Lily Briscoe’s painting and in Bechdel’s own self-portrait, both of which can be read as an artist’s quest – and, indeed, struggle – to have and complete her vision. Ultimately, this paper intends to show how Bechdel starts with Woolf’s modernist, already self-reflexive, project and ends with its considerable amplification into a post-modernist hall of mirrors, in large part achieved thanks to the medium of the graphic narrative itself.

One Parent at a Time: *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, then *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama*

The American cartoonist Alison Bechdel is famous for the Bechdel test used in film criticism, first formulated in “The Rule” in 1985,¹ but inspired by Virginia Woolf’s observations in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929).² Bechdel was already known for her groundbreaking comic strip *Dykes to Watch out For* (which ran from the early 1980s for twenty-five years), when she won enormous and

well-deserved critical acclaim after publishing her first graphic memoir *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* in 2006. *Fun Home* was selected as the best book of 2006 by *Time Magazine*; in 2013 it was adapted into an award-winning musical, and is soon to be adapted into a film (Stuck... 2021). In 2014 Bechdel was granted the MacArthur “Genius” Award. Her latest, third, graphic memoir is *The Secret to Superhuman Strength*, published in 2021.

Already *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* shows Bechdel’s interest in myth and a crucial link to modernism. The book is a double portrait: of the artist as a young girl, woman, and lesbian, and at the same time of her father, also an artist, and a closeted gay or bisexual man. *Fun Home* is intertextually framed and shaped throughout by references to James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (it refers to *Ulysses* as well). Moreover, like Joyce’s first novel, it is also shaped by the myth of Daedalus and Icarus. Essential to this myth is the labyrinth that Daedalus designs, and later escapes. The title of *Fun Home* refers, among other things, to Bechdel’s maze-like childhood home,³ and the book is itself a hybrid labyrinth built with words and drawings. In it, the father–daughter relationship is complicated, with the father being both Daedalus and Icarus, the Icarus who, in the end, falls, and the daughter being Daedalus, who flies and is saved thanks to her Icarus-father, to whom she expresses gratitude.

Perhaps most memorably, in her paper on *Fun Home*, Ariela Freedman observed that “Bechdel makes the very Joycean point that books have other books as babies while adding an implicit twist; that graphic narratives are the queer bastard child of high modernism” (2009, 138) – however, it is worth highlighting the fact that high modernism was already quite queer, as manifested by Virginia Woolf herself and e.g. her *Orlando*. To further reflect on Freedman’s comment, I will look at Bechdel’s second graphic memoir, *Are You My Mother? A Comic Drama*, which can be seen as an intertextual offspring of even more texts, letting us into an even more complex, fragmentary, non-linear labyrinth than the one Bechdel created in her debut book. This time Bechdel writes even more metatextually, because directly and openly, about the creation of both memoirs. Moreover, the second time round Bechdel enters into a dialogue not only with a number of literary texts, but with many non-literary texts, too, engaging in bibliotherapy as much as in scripotherapy. As Heike Bauer states in “Vital Lines Drawn from Books: Difficult Feelings in Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* and *Are You My Mother?*”:

reading as much as writing and drawing is part of Bechdel’s creative process, allowing her to ask difficult questions about familial relationships, how such relationships are shaped by the sexual politics of the time and place in which they are formed, and what kind of stories can be told about them. (2014, 3–4)

The non-literary texts Bechdel relies on are books on psychology, especially *The Drama of the Gifted Child* by Alice Miller (1979), and psychoanalysis, by Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung,⁴ but above all by Donald Winnicott.⁵ At the same time she documents her own psychoanalysis, and engages in interpretations of her own dreams, which open each of the seven chapters, and appear throughout the book. This very complex, jargon-laden psychoanalytical thread calls for its own series of papers (see e.g. Giaimo 2013). Here I leave it out altogether, instead focusing on Bechdel’s dialogue with Woolf. Bechdel quotes from Woolf’s *Diaries* and the collection of essays, *Moments of Being*, including “A Sketch of the Past.” But, arguably, the strongest correspondence exists between *Are You My Mother?* and *To the Lighthouse*, from which Bechdel takes her epigraph to the graphic memoir: “For nothing was simply one thing” (Woolf 1981, 186). Indeed, it is not.

Are You My Mother? and *To the Lighthouse* as (at Least) Double Writing

Neither Woolf’s novel nor Bechdel’s graphic narrative is “simply one thing,” as in different ways both literary works blur a simple distinction between reality and fiction, which additionally legitimises their joint comparative analysis. Even though the proportions between how the two concepts are ostensibly approached in each work put some distance between them on an imaginary, for the time being very simply conceived and unproblematised, “truth – fiction scale,” both works can be seen as instances of “stereography” – a category introduced by Philippe Lejeune to designate “double writing,” “i.e. writing fiction as autobiography, and writing autobiography as fiction” (Kusek 2017, 28). In the case of memoir, and especially graphic memoir (on which I will focus at the end of this paper), it can be said that it represents even more than duality, as the texts belonging to the genre, even in a non-graphic medium, are inherently hybrid.

In his *Through the Looking Glass: Writers’ Memoirs at the Turn of the 21st Century*, Robert Kusek stresses “memoir’s freedom in terms of form” (2017, 58), and states:

Memoir is [...] never “straight” but always a “mediated” form of life writing whose relationship to truth/fiction is in a constant process of negotiation and whose consumer is inevitably implicated in the process of reading and determining the degree/quality of referentiality (or, alternatively, asserting the truth-value) of a given text. (63–64)

In other words, in such “referential texts” (60) – “it remains for the reader to decide whether they wish to read a particular [text] *autobiographically* or not; whether they wish to accept its invitation to do so, or dismiss it (be it partly, or altogether)” (63). In the present analysis of *Are You My Mother?* seen as a “queer bastard child of high modernism” (Freedman 2009, 138), it is additionally fitting that “in memoirs, their subjects are neither autobiographically or biographically ‘straight’; they are always sylleptic; always ambiguous; always real and literary at the same time” (Kusek 2017, 67).

Moreover, memoirs, while belonging to this broad generic category, at the same time can be classified as members of one or simultaneously more memoir subgenres. Both of Bechdel’s graphic memoirs can be included in the subgenre of “filial narrative” – the first one being patriographical and the second one – matriographical. In fact, both works perfectly match the definition of “filiation narrative” formulated by G. Thomas Couser, author of *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability and Life-Writing* (1997). According to this definition: “filial memoirs are ‘mostly about absence’” and are “written out of a certain sense of lack” (qtd. in Kusek 2017, 86); “the relationship between a parent and their offspring needs to be in some way ‘inadequate or deficient’” (ibid.); “the aim of filial narrative is not to commemorate the beloved figure but either to ‘compensate for or repair a flawed relationship’” (ibid.); “the genre is characterised by its writer’s fundamental bafflement with their parents, an ‘inherent aporia’ and ‘inaccessibility of key features’ of parents lives” (ibid.), and finally, “filial narratives combine biographical methods of research with their authors’ (auto)biographical motives or agendas” (ibid.).

Another theoretician, David Parker, author of “Narratives of Autonomy and Narratives of Relationality in Auto/Biography” (2004), adds to our understanding of filial narratives’ duality or hybridity by observing that “such intergenerational ‘narratives of relationality’ may often be seen not only as stories of inevitable dependence (biological, emotional, intellectual) but as ‘narratives

of autonomy” – “the sources of the ‘self’ may be legitimately sought by a memoir’s writer in his or her parent(s)”; however, the writer can also “perform the act of dis-identification with their mother or father” (Kusek 2017, 85) through the filial memoir. Despite the considerable differences in genre and medium, the same act can be found in Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* and in Bechdel’s *Are You My Mother?*

Writing as Exorcism: From Dependence to Autonomy

Bechdel and Woolf have a lot in common as two innovative queer feminist autobiographical writers. There are more significant similarities between their respective families. Both authors had a volatile father, a complicated man, just like Mr. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, feared by the children, and accommodated by the wife. Bechdel recognises that “Mr. Ramsay is a harsh but fairly accurate portrait of Woolf’s father, exhausting his wife with his rages and neediness. But Mrs. Ramsay is more idealised” (Bechdel 2013, 256). Indeed, she is, described as “astonishingly beautiful” (Woolf 1981, 121), having a certain mystical aura: “her beauty took one’s breath away” (196). In reality, as Bechdel observes, quoting from Woolf herself, she

found it “difficult to give any clear description” of her actual, non-fictional mother. She [too] was “astonishingly beautiful...” “But apart from her beauty, if the two can be separated, what was she herself like? Very quick; very direct; practical; and amusing [...]. She could be sharp, she disliked affectation.” (Bechdel 2013, 29)

And Bechdel adds, “All these things will do very well to describe my mother, too” (ibid.). Consequently, Bechdel presents her mother to a large degree similarly. This time she employs no Greek or other ancient myths to deal with her parent – but it is the mother herself who is presented as a mythical or rather mythologised figure, certainly a mysterious and mystifying figure, who could be seen as the archetype of the artist’s mother – the mother of the artist, the mother of art.

Mrs. Ramsay and Woolf’s actual mother, Julia Stephen, born as Julia Prinsep Jackson, could also be seen in this way. Mrs. Ramsay is Lily Briscoe’s mother figure and muse for what clearly is her most important painting. Julia Stephen inspired the Pre-Raphaelites, and was Edward Burne-Jones’s model (Bell 1976,

17). On the one hand, it is surprising that Bechdel, whose artistic process includes drawing on archives and redrawing photographs, did not incorporate any of Julia Stephen's photographs in her book, considering how haunting they are. On the other hand, Bechdel must have realised that the early, sepia-toned photography could not be reproduced in her medium; a drawing of such a photograph would certainly lose its otherworldly, ghostly quality.

Bechdel's own mother, Helen Fontana Bechdel, apparently made a similarly mesmerising impression on Alison as a child and a young person. Helen also seems otherworldly, inaccessible, and indeed at times most readers may find her excessively aloof, and, especially by today's standards, even cold in Alison's childhood. To young Alison, there is a seeming mystery behind this coldness, which, as evidenced by glimpses at her therapy sessions, haunts her still well into her adulthood. In fact, it was not until her "forty-fifth year, that [she] sat down to begin writing about [her] mother" (Bechdel 2013, 7), not knowing that trying to solve this "enigma" would absorb her still for years to come.

Early on in the book, Bechdel quotes from Woolf, who said in *Moments of Being* that she was obsessed with her mother, who died when she was thirteen. The obsession ended only when Virginia was forty-four (18) and began to work on *To the Lighthouse*. Then, as she said:

I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice;
I do not see her.
I suppose that I did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion.
And in expressing it I explained it and then laid it to rest. (qtd. in Lee 1997, 482)

In fact, in her *Diary*, Woolf admitted that she had been haunted by both her parents:

I used to think of him [father] and mother daily; but writing the *Lighthouse* laid them in my mind. And now he comes back sometimes, but differently. (I believe this to be true that I was obsessed by them both, unhealthily; & writing of them was a necessary act). (qtd. in *ibid.*, 481–482)

Bechdel wrote the memoir about her father after his death, which she believes was suicide (Bechdel 2007, 23, 27). But while working on the memoir about her mother, the mother was alive⁶ and even reluctantly involved in the process of Bechdel’s writing through the author’s conversations with her, some of which are recorded in the book. Still, it can certainly be stated that, like Woolf, Bechdel was highly preoccupied with both her parents. Clearly, for her, also, “writing of them was a necessary act”; she also “expressed some very long felt and deeply felt emotion. And in expressing it [...] explained it and then laid it to rest.” In her own words about *Fun Home*: “I had to dismantle his [the father’s] inhibiting critical power over me before I could tell the story. But telling the story was the only way to do the dismantling” (Bechdel qtd. in Chute 2010, 175). The same sentiment persists in *Are You My Mother?*: “The thing is, I can’t write this book until I get her [the mother] out of my head. But the only way to get her out of my head is by writing the book!” (Bechdel 2013, 23).

However, unlike Woolf, Bechdel did not just do for herself “what psychoanalysts do for their patients” *only* through writing. Bechdel underwent actual psychoanalysis (which she finished in 2021 after thirty [sic!] years [Stuck... 2021]), and wrote about it. As a series of panels illustrates it, in hindsight self-critically, as the extreme self-absorption affected her romantic relationship: “I went to therapy. I read about therapy. I wrote about therapy” (Bechdel 2013, 100). A number of panels recurring across the book (16, 80, 208, 253) show Alison reading or taking notes about her dreams, with a headlamp on, in the dead of night, toiling away like a coal miner digging deeper and deeper into her own psyche. Already here Bechdel took Woolf’s model to another level.

Woolf and Bechdel: Two Daughters, Two Mothers, One Patriarchal Myth

It is very fitting that one prominent review of Bechdel’s second memoir observes that it is “Like a comic book by Virginia Woolf” (Bechdel 2013, n.p.). It is additionally fitting that the review is by the iconic second-wave feminist-activist and author, Gloria Steinem. As mentioned, both Woolf and Bechdel are queer, female, feminist writers. By thinking of themselves and their mothers – or,

in Woolf's case, also their proxies: Lily Briscoe and Mrs. Ramsay, both reflect on feminism and the differences between generations of women, the changing times, norms, and possibilities: in Woolf's case the shift from the Victorian era to the early 20th century; in Bechdel's case the shift from before to after the second wave of feminism in the late 1960s and 70s, which came too late for her mother, whose fate Alison recognises in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) (172).

Both Bechdel and Woolf (or her alter ego) face a feminine mystique embodied in their mother (or mother-figure) – and both demythicise the mystique. In this way the daughters can break free, which works in a circular fashion: they break free from social norms to become artists (Lily *must* do so to become an artist), and becoming artists gives them freedom, a way out of the social norms and their constricting heritage.

Lily Briscoe and Mrs. Ramsay

In her time, in the 1910s and 1920s, as a female artist, Lily Briscoe had to face the kind of prejudice that Bechdel was spared many decades later; but, admittedly, Bechdel started working in a still rather niche medium and in a subculture in the 1980s, while Lily struggled to enter the traditionally male-dominated field of painting. Both Lily, partly standing for Woolf, and Bechdel have had to struggle, but Lily considerably more so. Her challenge was significantly exacerbated by the still dominant Victorian gender ideology embodied by Mrs. Ramsay, a wife and a mother of eight children, Lily's mother figure, who believed in the "admirable fabric of the masculine intelligence" (Woolf 1981, 106), and agreed with her husband about the "hopeless" "vagueness" of women's minds, which was "part of their extraordinary charm" (167). (To this we can add that, as Bechdel mentions, Woolf's mother actually signed a petition against female suffrage [2013, 256]).

Lily's feelings towards her mother figure are complex. On the one hand, like everyone else (with the exception of the sceptical and uniquely perceptive Mr. Carmichael), she admires her beauty and extraordinary aura ("One wanted fifty pairs of eyes to see with, she reflected. Fifty pairs of eyes were not enough

to get round that one woman with, she thought” [Woolf 1981, 198]). At one point she even sees both Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay as timeless archetypes, surrounded by a “symbolical outline which transcended the real figures” making them “the symbols of marriage, husband and wife” (72). On the other hand, Lily recognises Mrs. Ramsay’s “limited, old-fashioned ideas” (174), which she finds oppressive: “There was something frightening about her. She was irresistible. Always she got her own way in the end, Lily thought [...] led her victims, Lily felt, to the altar” (101), insisting that “she must, [...] they all must marry, [...] there could be no disputing this: an unmarried woman [...] has missed the best of life” (50).

Very progressively for her time, Lily disagrees, even though she does not dare articulate it fully:

Oh, but, Lily would say, there was her father; her home; even, had she dared to say it, her painting. [...] gathering a desperate courage she would urge her own exemption from the universal law; plead for it; she liked to be alone; she liked to be herself; she was not made for that [...]. Then, she remembered, she had laid her head on Mrs. Ramsay’s lap and laughed and laughed and laughed, laughed almost hysterically at the thought of Mrs. Ramsay presiding with immutable calm over destinies which she completely failed to understand. (50)

Her thoughts during the dinner party in “The Window” illustrate her sentiment and prove to what extent Mrs. Ramsay’s views were overbearing to her:

For at any rate, she said to herself, catching sight of the salt cellar on the pattern, she need not marry, thank Heaven: she need not undergo that degradation. She was saved from that dilution. She would move the tree rather more to the middle. (102)

It was thanks to her dedication to her own artistic work – where, to her relief, her mind could take refuge even as she was engaged in the artifice of socialising (“She remembered, all of a sudden as if she had found a treasure, that she had her work” [84]) – that she “only escaped by the skin of her teeth” (176). Over a decade later, in “The Lighthouse,” she reminisces about the late Mrs. Ramsay and “[f]or a moment [even] triumphed over [her], who would never know [...]

how she stood here painting, had never married" (175): "It has all gone against your wishes. [...] I'm happy like this. Life has changed completely" (ibid.).

Thus the mother figure and daughter figure relationship in *To the Lighthouse* represents a major historical shift in a Western country such as Great Britain that coincided with the hard-won achievements of the first wave of feminism. This moment is still characterised by the ever-present impact of women's own collusion with the patriarchal system (see Lerner 1986), represented by Mrs. Ramsay, as well as even a progressive woman's deep-seated internalisation of patriarchal norms. This is demonstrated by Lily's own self-doubt, which accompanied her work from the beginning, also because she had so little tradition of women's painting to rely on, learn from and be encouraged by:

She could have wept. It was bad, it was bad, it was infinitely bad!
[...] And it would never be seen; never be hung even, and there was
Mr. Tansley whispering in her ear, "Women can't paint, women
can't write...." (48)

Even a decade later, when she returns to this painting inspired by Mrs. Ramsay ("She had borne it in her mind all these years. It seemed as if the solution had come to her: she knew now what she wanted to do" [148]), the self-doubt returns like a traumatic echo:

It would be hung in the servants' bedrooms. It would be rolled
up and stuffed under a sofa. What was the good of doing it then,
and she heard some voice saying she couldn't paint, saying she
couldn't create, as if she were caught up in one of those habitual
currents in which after a certain time experience forms in the mind,
so that one repeats words without being aware any longer who
originally spoke them. (158-159)

Yet this time she reaches a new stage and at least modest confidence, without which no conclusion could be possible:

She looked at her picture. That would have been his answer, pre-
sumably - how "you" and "I" and "she" pass and vanish; nothing
stays; all changes; but not words, not paint. Yet it would be hung

in the attics, she thought; it would be rolled up and flung under a sofa; yet even so, even of a picture like that, it was true. One might say, even of this scrawl, not of that actual picture, perhaps, but of what it attempted, that it “remained for ever.” (179)

Despite many years of self-doubt, Lily finishes her painting, in the last moments contemplating the creative process in the abstract. The passages capturing it may be read as Virginia Woolf’s self-reflexive description of her own writing:

But there was all the difference in the world between this planning airily away from the canvas, and actually taking her brush and making the first mark. [...] All that in idea seemed simple became in practice immediately complex. [...] Still the risk must be run; the mark made. (157)

Always [...] before she exchanged the fluidity of life for the concentration of painting she had a few moments of nakedness when she seemed like an unborn soul, a soul reft of body, hesitating on some windy pinnacle and exposed without protection to all the blasts of doubt. (158)

Quickly, as if she were recalled by something over there, she turned to her canvas. There it was – her picture. Yes, with all its greens and blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at something. It would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be destroyed. But what did that matter? she asked herself, taking up her brush again. [...] With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision. (208)

Importantly for the present comparative analysis, Lily Briscoe credits her art to her mother figure, who is recognised as an artist in her own right:

The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one. This, that, and the other. [...]. Mrs. Ramsay saying, “Life stand still

here"; Mrs. Ramsay making of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily herself tried to make of the moment something permanent) – this was of the nature of a revelation. In the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing (she looked at the cloud going and the leaves shaking) was struck into stability. Life stand still here, Mrs. Ramsay said. "Mrs. Ramsay! Mrs. Ramsay!" she repeated. *She owed it all to her.* (161; added emphasis)

Even though Lily Briscoe did not receive approval from her mother figure, it was against the model represented by Mrs. Ramsay that Lily shaped her identity – as a woman and an artist. Even though Mrs. Ramsay was narrow-minded about her, even condescending, Lily still loves her, misses her, and is grateful. It will be shown below how also Bechdel's second (just like the first) memoir about the second parent, again, traces an ostensibly tense relationship, nonetheless filled with unspoken love, if critical love, and ends on the same note of gratitude. It will also be demonstrated how – just like the initially mythologised Mrs. Ramsay, at one point seemingly representing "the transcendental mother" – also Bechdel's mother is demythicised, and made fully human in her daughter's art.

Alison Bechdel and Helen Fontana Bechdel

Bechdel's book concerns a biological mother-daughter relationship, considered from the beginning, and even before – before the child's conception and development in the mother's womb. It includes a child's perspective, an adult daughter's perspective, and this adult's perspective on the child's perspective; it even includes this adult's perspective on the mother as a child – and her perspective. In the drawings showing this (Bechdel 2013, 89–92), both children, mother and daughter, look identical. At the beginning of the memoir, Bechdel writes "perhaps the real problem with this memoir about my mother is that it has no beginning" (6) – and then continues in the next panel on the next page: "Sort of like how I'd understood human reproduction as a child. I was an egg inside my mother when she was still an egg inside her mother, and so forth and so on. A dizzying, infinite regress. There's a certain relief in knowing that I am a terminus" (7) (since Bechdel will not reproduce, biologically).

It is characteristic for Bechdel’s artwork that many of its individual fragments encapsulate on their small scale what the whole is like, fractal-like. In the above fragment we find: self-reflexivity, metatextuality, repetition, contrast and blurring of borderlines, distinction/separation and unity – at the same time, a mise-en-abyme quality, and mirroring. This is just on the level of the narrative box, but we need to remember that there are also drawings (a car mirror, and a blocked road that stop Alison appear on page 7), and speech bubbles: Alison is talking to herself, rehearsing her telling her mother about writing the first memoir about her father (“The story begins when I began to tell another story” [4]; “I want to give him a proper funeral, I want to tell the truth” [6]), while suddenly she potentially avoids death herself: she is almost hit by the same kind of truck that killed her father. Bechdel writes in the narrative box: “You can’t live and write at the same time” (7). Let us add to the above list: paradox, irony, self-irony and subtle humour, because, of course, this is just what she does to such a remarkable effect.

Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* is a complex and difficult book; the above summary characterisation of Alison Bechdel’s *Are You My Mother?* is meant to prove that this book is even more difficult and complex, hence a longer discussion of it. Bechdel’s protracted, complicated artistic method and process have been thoroughly analysed (see e.g. Chute 2010); here let us just mention that Bechdel’s second memoir painstakingly documents how much self-doubt and anxiety they cost the author over long years,⁷ which is something she has in common with Lily Briscoe. To add to this complexity, let us mention again the book’s multiple and very clear instances of intertextuality; in fact, the intermediality of the multimodal composition, which, among other such links, constantly takes us back to the first memoir, *Fun Home*. There is one more, as yet omitted, example of Bechdel’s dialogue with another book: Bechdel’s *Are You My Mother?* takes its title from a children’s book, namely P.D. Eastman’s *Are You My Mother?*, which Bechdel knew as a child, because it was published in 1960, the year she was born.⁸ The little book (Storytime... 2019, “Are You...”) is about a little bird that hatches from its egg, falls out of its nest, and goes looking for its mother. Early on, the bird comes across the mother (looking for food, a worm for the hatchling), but the child does not see her. Then the bird encounters many animals and objects, and asks them “Are You My Mother?” – all in vain. In the end the little bird finds its mother, but only after being returned to its nest with the help of a digger, a construction excavator. The mother, unaware of the child’s entire journey, returns to the nest, and gives her child the worm. It all ends well.

The story's plot can be seen as symbolic, as a summary for the mother-daughter trajectory in Bechdel's memoir. The emotional journey unfolds similarly in the comic, albeit along a highly complex, non-linear route – in fact, routes. Already the book cover signals the predominant dynamic between the mother and the daughter. It shows the key symbol of the book: a mirror (the reader can really see one's own blurry reflection in it). The second key item is a photograph (I will return to both these symbols in Conclusions): it shows the author as a teenage girl contrasted with her mother. Alison is awkward-looking and she is looking at her mother – not looking at her. The mother is comfortable and confident, self-contained, under what Alison calls her "plexiglass dome" (Bechdel 2013, 129), borrowing the term from Dr. Seuss's *Sleep Book* (131–3; Storytime... 2019, "Sleepbook..."), which she read as a child, to refer to her mother's "go[ing] off duty at night": "You could see her right there in her chair, reading and smoking. But you couldn't talk to her. She was clocked out. It was like she had this invisible dome over her" (Bechdel 2013, 129). Indeed, with a cigarette in her nonchalant hand, Helen is completely absorbed in reading probably a play script. This is because, besides being a wife and a mother, Helen has her own inner life, but also a public life as an actress in several theatres,⁹ for which she also works as a costume designer and maker (later she worked as a reviewer and journalist; *The Express* 2013).

Thus, just like in the children's book, in this *Are You My Mother?* the child is forever looking at her mother, looking for her (but not really seeing her yet). The mother is not looking back; she is, apparently, busy with something else. It takes the help of a powerful tool for digging deep – psychoanalysis – for the child to come home, so to speak: back to herself, to reach an epiphany. It is here that Alison realises that through everything she has done, rather than neglecting her, her mother has been nourishing her. In an interview about the memoir, Bechdel concludes: "She has been a pretty great mother. She has given me the worm" (*Wall Street Journal* 2012).

I suggest that this metaphor can be taken further – by contrasting it with "warmth." "Warmth" is the archetypal motherly quality the child in Bechdel's work keeps looking for; even a kind of simulacrum of a mythical perfect mother about whom Alison as a child "could concoct any number of fantasies," significantly on the basis of images seen on television:

I may have looked like I was spontaneously flinging myself on the lawn. But in fact, I was imagining my mother watching me like

a mother in a detergent commercial, sighing with loving exasperation
at the grass stains that would require her care. (Bechdel 2013, 142)

The existence of this “TV commercial mother” is denied by the next panel: “I could see her at the kitchen sink. But I knew she wasn’t looking at me” (ibid.). Importantly, both depictions – of the child and the mother – are only black silhouettes, which suggests the child’s *not* seeing this mythical mother, who appears only as a blank cut-out, not a person. As the adult narrator admits, “I expended so much effort on my scenarios that I failed to notice when my mother actually was watching me” (ibid.) – when the everyday exasperation may have obscured the nonetheless underlying loving.

But “warmth” is not what only the child demands; it is a much broader social pressure – for what in practice is energy-consuming emotional labour – that is put on all women. Due to the impact of social reproduction, “warmth” is the stereotypical quality expected from all women in the hegemonic cultural construct of gender in the patriarchal system. It is, thus, a mark of the child’s reaching maturity and independence in *Are You My Mother?* – including from dominant social constructs – that as an adult she can appreciate the presence of “the worm,” a kind of nourishment, in the absence of “warmth.”

Chapter five of *Are You My Mother?*, startlingly titled “Hate” (which is the only emotion in the book’s Table of Contents) opens with Bechdel’s recreation of a dream in which she is “clinging to a precipice of ice” (162), which then turns into “merely [the roof of] my childhood home, covered in ice” (163). Bechdel describes this visual as the “image of my childhood as an emotional deep-freeze” (167). Already in *Fun Home* Bechdel mentioned “the arctic climate of our family” (2007: 67).¹⁰ In “Hate” she fully explores her mother’s side of their story, and ultimately understands it.

This is also the chapter in which Bechdel devotes the most attention to feminism and its history: she refers to Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (and mentions that “even in the mid-sixties, Woolf ‘wasn’t read’ in the academy, was considered ‘a minor modernist’” [173]), Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, Adrienne Rich’s *Blood, Bread and Poetry* and *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*, as well as Winnicott’s 1949 “daring paper” on “some of the reasons why a mother hates her baby” (174), showcasing his almost supernatural capacity for empathy. Also in this chapter, Bechdel’s mother reads a biography of Sylvia Plath, and Bechdel reads her father’s correspondence enlisting the mother’s aid with his graduate

school work on the first American poet, Anne Bradstreet, while Helen worked as a secretary. Finally, in this chapter, alongside Alison's early love affair and her first literary efforts, we get a glimpse at her mother writing her own poetry (171). This image takes us back, firstly, to page 128, where this is first shown and mentioned together with the information that Helen had just found out she was pregnant with Alison; and, secondly, to page 138, where Helen is drawn sitting at a typewriter with Alison as a foetus in her womb. This prenatal "self-portrait" is enlarged and juxtaposed with (or mirrored by) Dr. Seuss's "plexiglass dome" (138). Towards the end of this chapter Helen says "I regret that I wasn't Helen Vendler" ("a professor at Harvard and a distinguished poetry critic"), and adds "I could have done that" (199). Yet, Helen Vendler's career was inaccessible to most women born like her in 1933, like e.g. Helen Fontana (*The Express* 2013).

Helen and Bruce (Alison's father) both had far greater artistic ambitions than they were able to realise in practice, about which Alison, as a full-time artist, still feels guilty, as she admitted in a 2021 interview (Stuck... 2021). In her analysis of *Fun Home*, Hilary L. Chute points to "a key moment in which Bechdel establishes her divergence from her parents" (2010, 184); commenting on her own perspective at the age of six, the narrator declares: "perhaps this was when I cemented the unspoken compact with them that I would never get married, that I would carry on the artist's life they each had abdicated" (Bechdel 2007, 73). In Chute's interpretation:

One can understand *married* – as it functions in this episode as the antithesis of "an artist's life" – to stand in for Alison's potential act of creating, through marriage or reproduction or both, her own family. [...] At six, however opaquely, Alison conceives of herself as an artist, defined in opposition to her merely "artistic" parents. This "compact" indicates the force of the child's difference, which speaks to her self-possession and also carries traces of self-erasure: the progeny is going to make good on the life her parents had each really desired for themselves by having no progeny (the progeny will be a book, not children – but a book about progeny). (2010, 184)

In this decision made by Alison in her childhood we can see an analogy to Lily Briscoe's determination to never marry and be an artist instead. Older Alison, who realised she was a lesbian, became even more, naturally, exempt

from that supposedly “universal law” ordering one to marry and biologically reproduce. Unlike Mrs. Ramsay in her attitude towards Lily Briscoe, Helen Bechdel never pressed traditional social norms on her daughter, and, as we have seen, would have wanted some “exemption from that universal law” herself. In this sense, Bechdel’s mother was much more progressive than Mrs. Ramsay. Unlike Mrs. Ramsay, she resented gender inequality and considered herself and her husband “equals” (Bechdel 2013, 256).

However, on the other hand, she did not agree with all of Alison’s feminist views (e.g. on abortion [124]), and inadvertently inculcated in her daughter the same conviction which negatively affected herself as a child: “the main thing [Helen] learned from [her own] mother” was “[t]hat boys are more important than girls” (264). Alison felt this, too: “In my family, boys were good and girls were bad. [...] I was the bad seed” (216). Even more (unintentionally) harmfully for Alison, Helen was unable to fully accept her daughter’s very public self-expression as a lesbian, and the public outing of her father, Helen’s husband. It seems that this was due to internalised, generationally determined, homophobia that she could not fully shake off (228). This caused Alison great pain, but one day, the last day her mother made her cry (233), Alison realised:

Whatever it was I wanted from my mother was simply not there to be had. It was not her fault. And it was therefore not my fault that I was unable to elicit it. I know she gave me what she could.
(228–229)

In fact, in her final words and images, Alison credits her mother with *teaching her how to write* (286). These last three pages are given a striking black background, making them suspended outside ordinary time and space, like all the dream sequences and all the other epiphanies in the book. The narration boxes contain the conclusion: “There was a certain thing I did not get from my mother. But in its place, she has given me something else. Something, I would argue, that is far more valuable. She has given me the way out” (286). The way out is artistic creation.

Thus, echoing Lily’s most enduring emotion towards Mrs. Ramsay, Alison, ultimately, feels gratitude towards her mother, and unspoken love (“My mother and I know this; there’s no need to jabber about this” [286]).¹¹ Like Mrs. Ramsay, but more literally, Helen was an artist in her own right, and despite the lack of emotional support, she did support her daughter’s art, both financially (229),

and intellectually. In Bechdel's, arguably, main epiphany quoted above, Alison, like the bird from the children's story, finds her mother, and really sees her. In one way, Bechdel sees that they are identical (e.g. they share their "compulsion for keeping track of life" [12], their OCD [13], their seeing patterns everywhere [31]), and always connected, distant but close (which can be symbolically seen in the endless telephone conversations, with the telephone cord or the later wireless technology standing for the invisible umbilical cord still linking them). In another way, the author sees that her mother is a separate individual (262): she is her own person with her own life, to which she is entitled.

Already the book cover mentioned above shows Helen as a subject rather than an object, a self – significantly captured in the act of carving out space and time for herself against the overwhelming patriarchal pressure. Her "plexiglass dome" (129) is *a room of her own* in the middle of the Bechdels' living room. As an adult, Alison realises that she had the right to have it; in fact, it must have been an achievement for a woman who was a wife and a mother of three, on top of being a high school teacher, in the 1960s and 70s. Thanks to this the mother could be an educated, well-read, culturally sophisticated person with knowledge and opinions, to whom the future full-time artist could turn for discussion on literature, art and complex abstract ideas. In fact, Helen modelled behaviour for Alison (234), who copied it already as a child, in creating her own "plexiglass dome" – her "office": "my own way of clocking out as a child, of getting away from the press of others' needs" (130), "the perfect environment" (131), where she would begin to master her craft in "a kind of ecstasy" (130). A panel on the same page shows this parallel: the mother and child are at the opposite ends of the house, one reading, the other drawing. "For nothing was simply one thing": they are separate, but united; different, but identical, like a mirror reflection.

Conclusions: The Postmodernist Hall of Mirrors in Bechdel's Graphic Metamemoir

It has been the purpose of this paper to analyse how Alison Bechdel's *Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama* enters into a dialogue with Virginia Woolf's fictionalised, but highly autobiographical depiction of a mother–daughter relationship in *To the Lighthouse*. It has been argued that Bechdel relied on this modernist model and subjected it to significant intensification. This happens on two levels: thematic and formal.

In terms of the mother–daughter relationship, it can be said that, in Bechdel’s words, both daughter characters were engaged in a “contest” with their mother (figure), and ultimately both could conclude: “In the ‘contest’ with my mother, I ha[ve] liberated myself” (254) by demythicising her. In both cases, despite their opposition, it is the artists’ mother (Helen Bechdel) and mother figure (Mrs. Ramsay) that help both artists *mother* their own art. In Woolf’s case, it was the autobiographical writing itself that was a substitute for therapy and led to her emotional liberation. For Bechdel the process involved not only autobiographical writing but also autobiographical writing about the psychoanalysis she underwent, which considerably intensified the model Woolf provided her.

On the formal level, Bechdel intensifies Woolf’s project thanks to a double shift: from modernism to postmodernism, and from one kind of medium to another: from prose (the novel genre) to a graphic narrative. Woolf’s modernist writing in *To the Lighthouse* anticipates some of the major postmodernist qualities, which in this later artistic mode reached extreme proportions, i.e. self-reflexivity and hybridity. Hybridity is what this autobiographical novel, as an example of “double writing,” shares with the genre of memoir, alongside further features: being “deliberately episodic, limited and segmental, [and showing] some considerable distrust towards such notions as unity, comprehensiveness, understanding, and, ultimately, truth” (Kusek 2017, 68). Even though Woolf stressed in her 1923 *Diary* that she felt the necessity of ‘clinging as tight to facts as I can’ (qtd. in Bechdel 2013, 27); ultimately, “what fiction achieves for Woolf [is] a deeper truth than facts” (29). This is also typical for memoir, where “verisimilitude [is] replaced with abstraction” (Kusek 2017, 216), “showing interest in what is beyond the self – [...] memoir often becomes the story of the other, an acknowledgement of and a tribute to somebody else’s *bios*” (68).

As Bechdel further observes, “*To the Lighthouse* may be an intricate domestic novel. But it also conquers the world – or at any rate, the problem of the outside world” (2013, 258). There is a question of Outside and Inside in the novel, whose dualism can be associated with Woolf’s famous diagram of the form of *To the Lighthouse*, even if her drawing of the two square sections (or “rooms”) connected by a narrow “corridor” has to do with time in the novel (255). As Bechdel says, “[t]he ‘break in unity’ of this design was a problem Woolf needed to solve, just as Lily Briscoe struggles throughout the book with her own design problem” (256).

The same can be said about Bechdel’s own design problem. Arguably, its own diagram can be found in the panel showing a fragment of the plan of her

childhood home (243), which can also be seen as a modification of Woolf's diagram. In this modification, the first square section represents the Outside (of the house), the second square section – the Inside (of the house), and the narrow corridor in between is the house's foyer, which has mirrors facing each other on its opposite walls. As Bechdel writes, next to a drawing of herself in this foyer, "In one way, what I saw in those mirrors was the self trapped inside the self, forever. But in another way, the self in the mirror was opening out, in an infinite unfurling" (244). In one sense, this represents what Woolf also does: "if you write minutely and rigorously enough about your own life... you can [...] transcend your particular self" (201). But in another, it represents the formal intensification of Woolf's model into a postmodernist hall of mirrors – a dizzying multiplication of formal means and meanings, where Inside does not conquer Outside, as in Woolf, but the two merge.

This is best illustrated by the symbol of the mirror – as said, visible already on the book cover, where it looks like a life-size object against a background mimicking a wooden dressing table from which, as it seems, it could almost be picked up. This effect from the very beginning blurs the boundary between reality and fiction, signalling the book's postmodernist ontological dominant (McHale 1987). However, it is the book's sixth chapter, following "Hate" and its lessons, and titled "Mirror," that has the most mirrors and mirroring in it. On its first page we see, again – the repetition itself a mirror reflection – Alison looking at her mother, who is reflected in a mirror, and not looking at Alison. But they are both holding play scripts, literary texts in their hands. In this visual depiction of Alison's dream, Helen is rehearsing for her role in a play. Several plays in which Helen acted and which Alison watched are reproduced – mirrored – by Bechdel's hand in this chapter. Moreover, one play scene features a daughter watching her acting mother: "I was admiring my mother's acting in a play in which a daughter admires her mother's acting – a parallel that was lost on me at the time," Bechdel writes (212). But now it is fully visible. When, years later, Bechdel and her mother both watch the same play, the narrative box contains the comment: "I suppose it only makes sense that I feel closest to my mother with not just a play between us, but a play about acting. A self-reflexive *mise-en-abyme*" (243).

What also functions as a mirror in Bechdel's art is photography, and, ultimately, her hand-writing and drawing of everything. On page 233 we see three such levels of mirroring: a drawing of Alison taking a photograph of her own

re-enactment of the last time her mother made her cry (seen earlier on page 229). In the next panel Bechdel is looking at the camera screen, and this act of looking at her photo of her re-enactment of her past is itself reflected in a mirror: “When I think about mom’s acting career,” we read in the narrative box, “it occurs to me that we’re not so different. It’s just that instead of playing a character, I’m playing myself” (234). Even more “self-reflexive mise-en-abyme.”

Perhaps Bechdel wrote the book about her mother so that the mother would finally, for a long time, look at her. After all, as Bechdel says, “I would argue that for both my mother and me, it’s by writing... by stepping back a bit from the real thing to look at it, that we are most present” (242). In the end, it seems, the mother accepted the memoir, even though she felt “betrayed” by the first one (200). Helen comes to accept that it is “the writer’s business [...] to serve the story. Not [...] to serve her family, or to serve the truth, but to serve the story” (283); and this one “coheres. It’s... It’s a metabook” (285).

But, finally, this metamemoir is a graphic narrative. As Chute states, “[t]he form of comics [particularly] lends itself to the autobiographical genre” (2020, 10). According to Art Spiegelman, comics, thanks to its handmade aspect, is “as close to getting a clear copy of one’s diary or journal as one could have. It’s more intimate than a book of prose that’s set in type” (qtd. in *ibid.*, 11). In this medium, the modernist reflection on the self and subjectivity, on the working of the mind, association and memory can be expressed much more effectively than in e.g. the stream of consciousness technique, simply because reading such writing takes much longer than what it tries to replicate. As Bechdel said in an interview, “having access to visuals gives you this wonderful shorthand for moving in time and space. I feel like I’m able to sometimes tell two or three stories at the same time in comics” (*Wall Street Journal* 2012). This is due to the most basic feature distinguishing comics from other narrative forms:

the syntactical operation of comics is to represent “time as space.”
[...] The way that time is shaped spatially on a page of comics –
through panel size, panel shape, panel placement, and the concomitant *pace* and *rhythm* the page gestures at establishing – is essential to understanding how comics works. (7)

And comics is the only form in which past, present, and future are visible simultaneously. (8)

In addition, “[o]ne of the important effects of the ‘time’ of comics [...] is slowed-down reading and looking” (9) – but, I would add, faster reader’s reception. Simply put, looking at images combined with less text is much faster than reading and constructing an idea of an image from just a long text. As a result, in *Are You My Mother?* we have not only extreme subjectivity with moments of self-reflexivity as in *To the Lighthouse*; in Bechdel’s work we find extreme subjectivity that is extremely self-reflexive throughout, including entire – subjective – research on subjectivity, not just on the actual stream of consciousness in one’s mind, but on the subconscious as well. The subconscious is also immediately stimulated by the images we see, remember, misremember, and recognise echoes of in Bechdel’s multidimensional mosaic of her entire life-writing oeuvre that is both widely non-chronological but also capable of achieving simultaneity – at the same time.

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