

Are You My Mother? Study Guide

Are You My Mother? by Alison Bechdel

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Summary

The nonfiction graphic novel, *Are You My Mother*, by Alison Bechdel, is a work of experimental nonfiction, which utilizes the vehicle of the graphic novel to tell the story. In many ways, it is a memoir of the author's relationship with her mother.

Each chapter opens with a dream sequence. The first dream the reader experiences is Bechdel trying to cross a body of water, but she is struggling to get across. Then, later, as she is rehearsing how she will break the news to her mother that she is writing a book about their lives, she nearly misses being hit by a bread truck; a bread truck from the same company who killed her father years before (when he committed suicide).

Later, Bechdel has the conversation with her mother and her mother is less than thrilled. It is evident that her mother has some sort of professional jealousy toward her daughter and is not supportive of her creative endeavors. Bechdel references Virginia Woolf who kept a journal just as Bechdel and Helen do. She also discusses a noted psychoanalyst, named Donald Woods Winnicott. Woolf's poem, "To the Lighthouse" Bechdel notes, was written so that the poet might purge herself of her mother's influence. It is clear that Bechdel would love to do that for herself, but she doesn't know how.

Another dream involves Bechdel's then girlfriend, Amy. They find a quilt that has a dew-covered spiderweb on it. There are eleven sections, and they debate about the logic of the spider web's architecture. Later, in therapy sessions, Bechdel tells her therapist that she and Amy had a fight and had decided to take a tour of a church just to avoid talking about their problems. It is clear that Bechdel is very dedicated, nearly obsessed really, with therapy and her therapist.

The reader learns that Bechdel's mother used to be an actress but gave it up to become a wife and a mother. It is also clear that Bechdel's mother has resented her children ever since, for ruining her career. Bechdel does not verbalize her problems or her emotions and as a result, her therapist suggests, is having difficulty in relating to other people, or in maintaining a job. In essence, she is not being true to who she really is.

In some respects that is so, but in other respects, the author argues, it is not. Against her mother's wishes, and to her horror, Bechdel had declared that she was gay and came out. Her own father had hidden his homosexual tendencies and eventually had killed himself rather than live a lie any longer.

Another dream sequence features the prominence of holes. Holes in walls, ceilings, clothing, tiles, just about everything and anything. Alison also recalls that in the dream, any hole that belonged to her brothers were fixed immediately, but her holes were left unmended and unpatched. She quotes some reading that she's been doing in regards to Winnicott. He states that the false self hiding the true self leads to the conflict that most people feel in their lives, that feeling of dissatisfaction, of restlessness.

The reader learns that Bechdel's newest therapist, Jocelyn, is a type of mother figure to Bechdel. Jocelyn is trying to get Bechdel to stop trying to change her own mother, and to, instead, nurture herself in a way her mother never could.

There is another dream sequence, and in this dream someone is making a frantic phone call to the police. Someone has died, but since she is in her dorm room, her roommates don't seem to care. When Bechdel mentions this dream to her therapist, they deduce that this was a memory from when her father died and her mother had called the police. Later, however, when talking to her mother about the dream, her mother tells her that it was she who had been calling, trying to get Bechdel on the phone at school. She'd called to tell her that she and Bechdel's father were getting a divorce. But, he'd died before it had become known.

Bechdel is shocked when her mother gives her a box full of old love letters that her father had written her mother during their early days. She is hopeful that this has turned a page on their relationship, but later has that hope snuffed out when her mother lashes out at her for finishing the work. Bechdel begins to view her mother, not as a family member, but as a person. For the first time, she feels pity for her mother, whose dreams were never realized, and whose talents were never recognized.

Bechdel dreams of mirrors. Her mother is there, too, in a period costume. Later, Bechdel shares this dream with her therapist who suggests that mirrors are a way in which children begin to see who they really are. In many respects, initially, parents are the mirror. Bechdel realizes that she's rejecting that initial image that she was shown, that of her own mother, because despite her yearning to connect with her mother, they just aren't able. Bechdel experiences an epiphany about her mother and their relationship and understands that her mother was just a very frustrated person trying to do the best with the situation she was given.

The last dream sequence has Bechdel finding a pimple on her face, as she is viewing herself in a mirror. As she picks at it, she removes it from her face and is horrified to see that it is a tumor. She tells her mother, but her mother won't talk to her. She analyzes the dream herself, determining that her mother is the one that is holding her back from her own happiness and success.

With this understanding, Bechdel begins to view her mother through a slightly different lens. She understands that if she can 'destroy' her mother, or the image that she has of who her mother should be, and her mother survives this reimaging process, then they will be better with one another. When the book is complete, Bechdel feels that she has done this and that their shared history no longer holds any influence over her. They are merely two grown women who have the same genetic makeup, and once in a while, enjoy a Broadway show together.

Chapter 1

Summary

"Are You My Mother?" is a nonfiction graphic novel memoir by Alison Bechdel. Bechdel begins her book, as she begins every chapter in this book, by sharing a dream she has had. In this dream, she is trying to cross a body of water, but is unable. Then she wakes up.

The action cuts abruptly to Bechdel in her car where she is having an imaginary conversation while driving. She is practicing how to tell her mother that she will be writing a book about her father. This book is "Fun Home," a book previously written and illustrated by Bechdel. This might be painful for her mother, since Bechdel wants it to be truthful. She will include her father's bisexuality and suicide.

As she's practicing this conversation, a Stroehmann's bread truck cuts her off. She takes this as a sign of some kind of cosmic influence. It was a Stroehmann's truck that killed her father, when he flung himself in its path.

Later, she finally has the planned conversation with her mother. Her mother is not unhelpful, but not exactly supportive, either. Her mother basically tells her that she can't help her with any of it, that Bechdel is on her own. Partly, her mother realizes that the book will be a lot about the mother-daughter relationship, so she is a little guarded. Even as Bechdel is describing this book in narration to the reader, her father is rarely mentioned.

Bechdel shares that she and her mother share a lot in common. They both have the compulsion to record their lives in journals. Even her mother's daily phone calls to Bechdel are a kind of daily journal, but it's spoken, not written. Little does she know that Bechdel is actually transcribing them onto her computer so that she can get her mother's voice just right when writing about her.

She segues into some historical narrative involving Virginia Woolf, who also cataloged her days extensively. Bechdel imagines an outing in which Woolf crosses paths with Donald Woods Winnicott, a doctor who will eventually have his works published by Woolf's company. He is a pediatrician and a patient of Sigmund Freud's. Woolf, she explains, wrote "To the Lighthouse" in an effort to purge her mother's control from her mind. Winnicott, a pediatrician, spoke about how a baby's health is derived partly from the love of the mother.

Bechdel ends the chapter deliberating over a series of photographs of herself as a child of about three months old. She is being held by her mother, and the camera only catches some of her mother's face, but all of the baby's. Every time her mother makes a face, Bechdel imitates it. This goes on for a few panels until baby Bechdel sees her father taking the pictures and she freezes in fear.

Analysis

The dream regarding trying to pass through water is given some enlightenment by her mother's boyfriend. He's a therapist who explains that water, in dreams, is often associated with creativity. He judges that the dream simply means that Bechdel is having trouble with her current book. The artwork presented is in black and white, but Bechdel makes a distinction between the dream sequence artwork and when she is awake and in the present. The dream sequence characters, images, and perspectives are skewed, much as they would be in a dream. This lack of grounding, of feeling as if the images may float off of the page, capture the unsettled feeling that Bechdel is having when she has these dreams.

The facts of the story are curious and called into question by the author. Bechdel is striving so hard to get everything correct, that she worries if it's even possible. She is worried that she is manipulating the truth too much, because she does not have an objective viewpoint.

As she says at one point, she has a difficulty in making things up. She can't write fiction. However, she can write fictionalized versions of real events. The result is something that feels true even if it's not verbatim from reality. She is almost asking the reader to look at her book with a bit of skepticism. Interestingly, this book is sometimes cataloged in the biography section of libraries. This touches upon the theme of Truth, as it pertains to being able to write fiction. Alison doesn't believe she can write fiction, because each time she has tried, it becomes an actual account of something that really happened.

Bechdel is extremely introspective. Whether it is going to therapy, writing journals, or writing for publication, she is constantly looking within. Even as a child, her journals were so time-consuming that her mother had to take dictation for them so she could get her whole day recorded. The journals, themselves, represent both women who are offered for examination in this novel. First, there is the mother, whose journal is more of a list of things she needs to remember to do, while Bechdel's journal is all about discovering and recording all of the details of her own inner landscape. So, in essence, while they both journal, the reasons they journal are different. This suggests that Bechdel and her mother are fundamentally wired differently, which hints at some turmoil between them.

This introspection is so paralyzing, that her entire first chapter of this book is self-analysis explaining why she's having trouble writing a book. It's five months past due at the publisher. She even tells her therapist that she's in her own way all the time. The theme of Analysis Breeds Paralysis is evident in this chapter as Bechdel continues to miss her deadline, and is even unable to have the conversation that she needs to truly have with her mother. She, in essence, over thinks many things, and even this early on in the graphic novel, it is clear that this is one of her major character flaws.

The theme of Synchronicity is demonstrated in this chapter as the bread truck, the same type that killed her father, almost slams into her just as she is rehearsing what she will

say to her mother. This is also a bit of foreshadowing, indicating that the discussion with her mother won't go well for her either.

There's a famous children's book called "Are You My Mother?" It's a picture book by P.D. Eastman. In it, a baby bird hatches when its mother is away. It leaves the nest to look for her. The bird comes across various things, like a dog or a steam shovel. The bird asks each of these "Are you my mother?" Finally, the mother finds the baby. A correlation can be drawn here. Perhaps, the author intentionally chose the same title because she is also trying to find her mother figure after leaving the nest.

Each chapter ends with black borders around the page and one central image featured. In this first chapter the featured image is that of the word CHILD slightly off center from the page. This would seem to suggest that the author believes that her childhood was not centered, was not grounded, and that her mother was also slightly askew.

Vocabulary

solipsistic, terminus, regress, sanctimonious, auspicious

Chapter 2

Summary

This chapter opens on a dream as well. Bechdel's girlfriend, Amy, is sleeping on the lawn. The blanket turns into a quilt, spanned by a dew-covered spiderweb. There are 11 equal sections in the web. Bechdel and her girlfriend debate how logical the spider's architecture is in creating a spiderweb.

She had this dream after starting to read Sigmund Freud's "Interpretation of Dreams."

During a therapy session, Bechdel recalls how she and Amy had a fight about money, and then dove into a church to get out of the fight. The two women were really there as tourists. Bechdel was a lapsed Catholic, and Amy was Jewish. During the service, they saw a bunch of children in period costumes taking part in the ceremony.

This memory makes Bechdel recall a photo of herself in a Christmas pageant when she was ten. She remembers feeling very self-conscious during the performance. Her therapist suggests that her anxiety from situations like this comes from her desire to express her emotions, forced down by the ego that wants to remain aloof.

The therapist's revelation makes her study psychoanalysis more. During her studies, Bechdel learns a theory of Freud's that states very few things are done on accident. They are subconscious thoughts made real. Bechdel reads this into her own experience. For example, she was in a hurry, and banged her head on a wooden plank right between the eyes. She had been taking herbal tablets called "Between the Eyes" for years. But the first time she took it after injuring herself, she interpreted "Between the Eyes" to mean the "third eye" in Indian belief, which people use to look inside instead of outside. She considers that the accident with the plank was an attempt by her subconscious to get her to be more introspective.

Jocelyn, her first therapist, floors her with a question during their first session together: "Do you ever feel angry at your father for committing suicide?" Bechdel says she doesn't. But it makes an impression. It leads her to become obsessed with therapy, and her therapist. She would go on late-night walks and just look at her therapist's house.

It's through reading books on psychoanalysis that she comes across Winnicott's studies. She finds that one of his contributions to the field is the concept of the "transitional object." This is something created by babies, as they start to learn that some things are separate from themselves. An object, such as a beloved toy, is learned to be separate from them physically, but still attached emotionally.

Toward the end of the chapter, Bechdel's mother is calling her for one of their many conversations. Bechdel says that her mother usually does all the talking and Bechdel does all the listening. Her mother talks about her own life. Bechdel tells her mother that

she should write a book. When her mother laughs it off, Bechdel offers to write a book about her mother. Then, interestingly, she doesn't record her mother's answer.

Analysis

Bechdel is obsessed with therapy. This becomes very evident when a friend of her's asks about her day and Bechdel tells her that she had a therapy session, then went out and bought a book on therapy. She focuses so much on therapy. She goes to therapists, but she's trying to be her own therapist, as well, by reading books about the art of psychoanalysis. It is clear that she is searching for something, but it is evident that even she doesn't know what it is that she is looking for.

The symbol of the spider web, and the number 11 offer the readers the notion that there are connections that exist between thoughts, actions, memories, and ideas for Bechdel. The fact that Bechdel is fascinated by the fact that spiders weave webs without any prior planning indicates that she is also amazed at the fact that her memories can also make connections with her subconscious mind. The number 11 is significant because it is considered, by Bechdel, to be associated with sin. It is the first number that cannot be counted on two hands. This is also the number of sections in the spiderweb which indicates that the connections her memories are trying to make have to do with perceived sin, or self recrimination. She was also eleven years old when her mother took over writing her diary for her.

This dream panel features the graphic depicting the two women having a discussion about the spiderweb. Bechdel tells Amy that if people weren't rational, then there would be no reference point for the irrational, and it is this very capacity for self-consciousness that makes a person self destructive. The page is dark, as if inside a person's mind, and the spiderweb overlays the quilt. The only image that isn't black or white, is the quilt.

The theme of Analysis Causes Paralysis is evident in this section. She is so focused on what she's thinking and feeling, that she is unable to do what needs to be done. During her studies, she comes across a quote in a Freud book that's notable. It was written from a poet to a friend with writer's block. The quote basically is the poet's observation that the writer is over intellectualizing life and this kills the imagination.

Bechdel is very much a pitcher with a tiny hole at the bottom. She continually takes things into herself, and only a little comes out. She internalizes emotions, bottles them up. She turns any of her own emotions back at herself. Any anger she feels at professional competition turns into anger focused onto herself. She will also hungrily read volumes of psychotherapy books, listen to therapists, and listen to her mother speaking nonstop on the phone. She tends to believe anything that the therapist suggests.

The symbolism of Winnicott's studies is notable in that it speaks about the attachment that a child has for an object, emotionally, even when the child realizes that the object is not a physical part of themselves. Loosely, it seems that the author is suggesting that

even though she is an adult, she still needs that familial, maternal bond with her mother. However, it is evident that her mother is not the nurturing type.

This is further galvanized by the central focusing image at the end of the chapter. It is of Bechdel's mother who is writing in her journal. The ink, itself, is red. Earlier, in another panel, Bechdel had mused that perhaps sin was what a person not only committed on their own, but it was an absorbed type of sin, much like a child in the womb absorbs nicotine from the mother.

Vocabulary

transitional object, psychopathology, Oedipus, callous

Chapter 3

Summary

This chapter's opening dream sequence has Bechdel's therapist, Carol, show up at her office, give her a massage, and take her pants home for mending. This makes her recall her mother's use of patches often to fix holes.

This dream sets the stage for her segue into her mother's past. She was an actress who used to pal around with Dom Deluise back in the day. She spent days creating costumes for plays, such as "The Sound of Music." She gave all that up to be a wife and mother. She had met Bechdel's father during a production of "The Taming of the Shrew." While Bechdel's mother cooed over her two younger brothers, Bechdel says her mother wasn't that nurturing to her. They were more professional with each other, speaking to each other in more sophisticated tones.

Bechdel also feels that she is taking care of her mother. She is acting as the mother figure in the relationship by being a sounding board, and nurturing her, by being the mature, sensible one. She doesn't feel like she's getting any nurturing back. She feels like this started when she was young, and her mother's father and mother died within months of each other. Carol her therapist observes that possibly Bechdel is writing a book about her father, in order to heal Bechdel's mother.

It's revealed that depression runs in Bechdel's family. Her mother describes bouts of it, and her grandmother had issues, as well. One of her mother's bouts came immediately after a friend declared their homosexuality. Bechdel wonders how her own admission of being homosexual must have struck her mother. It's during this time that Eloise, Bechdel's partner, admits to cheating on Bechdel with another woman. Bechdel gets so angry, she kicks a hole in the wall.

One of the psychological terms that dominates this chapter is the idea of the true and false self, as described by Winnicott. In essence, he says that children learn how to behave, and it might not be their instinct. Their instinct is to act a certain way – that is their true self. Learned behavior is sometimes a false self. It is the learned behavior strangling the instinct – in other words, the false self-hiding the true – that leads to the conflict that many people feel in their lives.

Analysis

Now three chapters into the book, there isn't a cohesive chronological narrative. The reader could wonder that the story of Bechdel's relationship with her mother, and indeed, all relationships, are not inherently chronological. They are formed on the fly, as life goes by, and then reorganized and re-evaluated using the benefit of hindsight. Looking at a relationship in this way, there is not really a narrative in which one thing

follows another. Yet, meaning can still be drawn from it as the reader puts scenes together in their head.

The images in the opening dream sequence feature more red than in previous chapters, indicating that perhaps in her interactions with this therapist she sees more life, more vitality. She notes that in her dream, allowing her therapist to leave with her pants to mend makes her feel very secure and happy.

Symbolically, there are a lot of holes throughout this chapter. Holes in clothing are mended by a mother figure. But holes that Bechdel creates are left unfixed. She left her teddy bear outside when she was a kid and it got chewed on by a dog. That hole remains. When she finds out that her girlfriend is cheating on her, she kicks a hole in the wall. That hole remains. Perhaps Bechdel is more likely to have holes fixed by other people, but can't have them fixed by herself. She is incapable or unwilling. She wants to be rescued because she was not nurtured or rescued when she was a child.

Part of putting her father to rest is Bechdel's need to find a psychological reason for his suicide. According to Winnicott, if the true self can't be dominant, then suicide is the only solution. One cannot continue to be false forever. It is ultimately destructive.

At one point, Bechdel tells her therapist, Jocelyn, that she wants to be her best client ever. She has a need to prove herself to Jocelyn, who is a mother figure to her. All her therapists have been mother figures. She comes to them for nurturing, even though the therapists' questions are pretty general and emotion-free. The therapists are trying to encourage Bechdel to nurture herself, to be a mother to herself. Bechdel, so far, is rejecting the job.

Bechdel's anger at being cheated on creates a physical reaction. She kicks a hole in the wall. This is a rare instance of her acting out what she really feels rather than bottling her feelings, and then holding the bottle up to the light to study what's inside. The theme of Motherhood is most prevalent in this chapter as it is observed in several ways. First, Bechdel has these assumptions about what a mother is, and what a mother should be. She sees her mother as her 'creator' in many aspects, and wonders if the way she is today, is because of her mother's influence, or lack of something. At this point in the graphic novel, Bechdel doesn't seem to be able to see the larger picture, nor to hear what her therapists are telling her. In a very child-like manner, she wants the way she has turned out to be someone's fault, and doesn't want to take responsibility for the choices or events occurring in her life.

The final image that is focused upon depicts a very worn teddy bear, still with the rip on its paw, but all of its internal stuffing still intact. Bechdel indicates with this that she identifies with the bear and that on some level she realizes that even though she might have some rips and tears that she's still intact and able to be loved.

Vocabulary

vernacular, alchemical, solicitude, alacrity, obverse

Chapter 4

Summary

The opening dream to this chapter has Bechdel in college, entering her dorm room. There is blood on the floor. Someone died, and her roommates don't seem too concerned about it. She can't figure out how to use the phone to call the police. Her present girlfriend deduces that the blood of the person who died must have belonged to her father. This dream, saddled with her publisher filing for bankruptcy, means that she has to finish her book about her father. Her life and livelihood literally depend on it.

She's jealous of a lesbian speaker her mother catches on television, Norah Vincent. She's successful, and according to her mother, so smart.

Her mother has had a dream as well. She tells Bechdel that she was looking for a book and finally found it. And as she found it, she became overwhelmed with fear. The two women realize that her mother's dream is about the book Bechdel is writing.

Her mother gives Bechdel a box of letters written by her father and her when they were courting. Bechdel warns her that they will become fodder for her book, and her mother is fine with that. She just tells her daughter that the letters represent a different person than how he really was.

This intrusion into her mother's personal life is a bit unsettling. She thinks she's "knocking on her Plexiglass dome." This is a term she uses for a safe spot, away from others, where her mother would hide away her emotions and just drown out the world.

Bechdel learned this behavior from her mother, as she has her own sanctuaries, as well. She's created clean, well-lighted places in her home where she can create her art. One childhood drawing that becomes an issue is a cartoon she drew when she was seven. It is of a doctor cleaning a little girl's genitalia. At the time, she couldn't figure out why she wanted to draw a dirty picture. Her mother found it, said they had to talk about it, but they never did. It just became a thing of shame. It was about this time that her mother stopped kissing her goodnight and tucking her in, claiming she was too old for it.

The chapter closes on a time when Bechdel's mother was ready to divorce her father. She called Bechdel at college to tell her, but couldn't get through to her. They figured out later that she was calling an old number, and the chapter ends on the image of a telephone ringing without anyone answering.

Analysis

The opening images in this chapter are done from the perspective of looking upwards from the ground. As if the reader is the dead body on the floor and Bechdel is examining

it. The fact that no one seems to be concerned or able to do anything about it suggests a feeling of perceived helplessness, like that of an infant.

The act of tucking a child into sleep is so comforting and nurturing, that when Bechdel suddenly doesn't get it anymore, it's jarring. It's like being shocked out of childhood. She shares that as a child she would imagine young student teachers from her school tucking her in instead.

The fact that her mother stopped this nurturing behavior is important, because several times throughout the book Bechdel asserts that her mother stopped being the mother, and instead became the child. She became the one who needed nurturing, who needed support, who needed unconditional love. And, as it happened, stopped giving it. Meanwhile, Bechdel, by her nature of growing up very quickly and being emotionally very similar to her mother, started taking on the motherhood role in their dynamic. Bechdel became the one who comforted, nurtured, and listened to her mother without passing judgment.

The telephone represents a lifeline in this chapter. The therapist explains this, and Bechdel accepts it. She incorporates this symbol into this chapter. A telephone that gives no assistance bookends this chapter. In the beginning, it shows up in Bechdel's dream. Here, Bechdel can't figure out how to use it so that she can call the police about the blood stain she found.

At the end of this chapter, which is clearly something that happened well in the past, it is her mother who has been calling the wrong number. Bechdel imagines the phone ringing in an empty room. She thinks about how horrible that must be. Her mother said she was frantic, unable to reach her daughter in her own time of need. She has just decided to divorce Bechdel's father, and Bechdel was not available.

The closing image is of the phone ringing in an empty room. That she uses this as the final image in the chapter indicates that this is a seminal event in her life, and a perceived guilt that was not hers to own. However, she is internalizing this, just as she does many of her mother's issues.

Her mother had called to inform Bechdel about the pending divorce. However, she was also likely needing her daughter as a shoulder to cry on. Another woman, an adult now in college, who understands her because Bechdel has lived with her and her father for her whole life. In this exchange, it is clear that Bechdel is being forced into a role that she is not fully equipped or mature to deal with, though Bechdel's mother does not see this. The theme of Motherhood is expanded upon in this chapter with many of the instances given when Helen, Bechdel's mother, withdrew or withheld her affection. Alison, a very bright child, keenly felt this withdrawal, and has struggled, as a result, her entire life to figure out why her mother has been rejecting her.

Vocabulary

inviolable, lapidary, impinges, rapport

Chapter 5

Summary

This chapter's opening dream sequence has Bechdel trying to climb an icy mountain surrounded by water. By the time she reaches the top, she realizes she's on the roof of her childhood home, which was icy. She tries to convince a neighbor of her life-threatening ordeal, but the neighbor just sees a house.

Back in the narrative, the author gives us a timeframe. It is in April of 2002. She has just sent her book about her father to her mother to read. Days go by without a response, and it's agonizing for her. When her mother's e-mail finally arrives, it floors Bechdel. Literally, Bechdel's girlfriend finds her lying on the floor, prone, and miserable. Her mother has written in the email that she feels violated, that their personal lives would be the fodder for a book. A follow-up e-mail actually does compliment her on some scenes and makes some jokes about the craziness in the family.

Bechdel flashes back into childhood, with her parents and little brothers. Analytical terms were pretty common with her educated parents. They talked about Oedipal and Electra complexes, and made jokes about penis envy. But when she asked her mother questions about female sexuality, the answers came back short, tense, and with an atmosphere that such things were shameful. Bechdel had to find out the answers on her own, and found herself attracted to feminist and lesbian writers in college.

A conversation between the two women just before Bechdel leaves for college is used as a backdrop for conflict between mothers and daughters in general. The two of them get in a fight over how to pronounce the word "ersatz." The author explains that sometimes people create fights in order to allow unspoken aggression an outlet. Young Bechdel was being difficult because she was trying to separate herself from her mother. Her mother was being difficult because she resented giving up so much for her family. She draws a parallel here to a story about when Winnicott took in a difficult boy during World War II. It didn't lead to an adoption. Winnicott repeatedly took the boy outside when he'd disobeyed and told him that he hated him.

Professional jealousy rears its ugly head again, as Bechdel relates sending a short, written narrative to a magazine. It is critically cut apart by its editor, Adrienne Rich, in a rejection letter. This hurts because Rich was one of the feminist authors that Bechdel had started to really enjoy.

When Bechdel's comic strip, *Dykes To Watch Out For*, is being collected, her mother wants her to use a pen name. That would completely defeat the purpose of the book, Bechdel argues. Later, she writes another piece about her childhood and sends it to her mother. Her mother sends it back with red marks all over it. At first, Bechdel cringes, bracing for the worst. But they were all notes about style, not the content, and her suggestions were actually very helpful. However, it ends with a note from her that she

remembers that when Bechdel was little she thought that if Bechdel ever became a famous musician that she, the mother, would be terribly jealous.

Analysis

Bechdel's dreams sometimes have parts of the natural world representing something internal. In previous dreams, there's been water to cross or spiderwebs to admire. This one makes the family home an impossible icy mountain. The opening graphic places the reader at the top of the ice mountain looking down on Bechdel as she struggles to climb. The ice equates to coldness and being unemotional. She is surrounded by water, cut off from any aid. Climbing a mountain could only mean trying to overcome impossible odds. The later part of the dream has her unable to convince a neighbor how difficult it was. That she reaches the top and it is her own childhood home is very indicative of how she subconsciously views her childhood and its lack of warmth.

Bechdel sent her mother the book in order to get some kind of validation. She respects her mother's opinion about arts and letters, and was hoping to impress her. Additionally, she wanted some of that nurturing she's been striving for.

The quote that Bechdel's mother writes back is very telling, in that on some level, her mother resents Bechdel's success. Her mother had been an actress, and a poet, but gave all that up to be a wife and mother. Perhaps any criticisms her mother has are ways to keep her daughter from achieving any more success than she ever did.

In a passage about why people fight, Bechdel speaks about people inventing fights in order to get things out of their system. One of the sources of anger, buried deep, is the resentment parents have for their children holding them back from their careers or achievements.

Bechdel includes Winnicott's chastising of the boy to illustrate a difference in methods. In her family, anger was hidden. It was expressed only accidentally, and through passive aggressive means. Winnicott was very honest with his feelings for the boy. It is not clear which method is the healthier one.

Several different passages in this chapter question whether honesty is the best policy. Bechdel feels the need to tell her story the way it is, although her mother is ashamed. Anne Bradstreet, an early poet, would have been sidelined to history books if she hadn't written from her heart. Female sexuality is not to be talked about, or at least this is what Bechdel has internalized due to the way it was approached in her childhood. The graphic that is depicted in this sequence is of Bechdel sharing a tub with her brothers. They are comparing genitalia, and Bechdel asks her mother what hers is called. Her mother ignores her and says she'll get back to her on that. It is evident from the postures in the tub that Bechdel is being made to feel inferior to her brothers.

There are two themes that are subtly referenced in this section, most notably that of Being Yourself, and Truth. Neither of these were nurtured or practiced in her family, and it eventually caused Bechdel's father to kill himself. Bechdel's mother is not living her

truth either, and has opted to live her false self instead of pursuing a career in show business. Her lack of success she attributes to having a family, but in the end, it is an excuse to continue to be miserable and to make everyone else around her miserable, too.

Vocabulary

Electra complex, aberration, ersatz, disavowal, dissonance

Chapter 6

Summary

This chapter's dream sequence opener is Bechdel in her childhood home, watching her mother enter in period costume for a play she's going to be performing. She has sores on her skin, an allergic reaction to the jewelry she has to wear. She stops to pose before a grand mirror before Bechdel's alarm wakes her up. The words "drive," "thwart," and "laden" are stuck in her head when she awakens.

The author takes the reader on a tour of the many plays that her mother performed throughout her career. One show in particular is called "The Miser," in which she plays an older mother figure who acts. She would become lost in plays, and the love of theater is something both women share.

Applying make-up for a role on stage is compared to applying make-up for everyday life. Her mother did both with the same amount of care. She would even choose a different perfume based on what character she would play. But at home, she would be self-conscious if Bechdel watched her apply make-up. Bechdel describes her own early attempts at using make-up, and using crayons to touch up photos of herself.

An analysis of mirrors follows. Freud describes narcissistic love as loving one's own qualities found in another. A mirror. Winnicott, meanwhile, writes that mirrors are a way that children first see who they are. Later in the chapter, there's a scene in which Bechdel as an infant topples the family's big mirror over onto herself. There's not a scratch on her. However, her mother is so sure that the crashing sound meant that her daughter was dead, that she rushes to the bathroom and won't leave right away, because she can't face that. Her father had scooped Bechdel up, saw that she didn't have a scratch on her, and handed her off to her mother. He chastised her mother for not keeping an eye on her. Jocelyn, her therapist, gives Bechdel the reassurance she needs. She tells Bechdel that she was probably a sweet kid, and she's adorable now.

The on-again, off-again relationship with Eloise is explored more here. In past chapters, Bechdel had narrated that they had split up when Eloise cheated on her. Here, she reveals that she was unfaithful as well. She had slept with a colleague, Donna. During this fallout, Eloise calls Bechdel out letting her know that she is aware of Bechdel's adultery.

During a phone call with her mother, Bechdel interrupts her mother's monologue to talk about her book of cartoons that is being published. Her mother doesn't want Bechdel to be associated with a book of lesbian cartoons for the rest of her life. The conversation ends in tears, with Bechdel hanging up.

Back in a relatively present time, Bechdel and her mother go to Broadway to see "A Little Night Music," a play she had once performed in. They have a wonderful time.

At the end of the chapter, Bechdel describes a place in her house where mirrors are facing each other, giving the view of reflections that go on forever. It gives the impression that she is trapping herself, thwarting her own ambitions.

Analysis

The stage is often used as a metaphor in literature. It's an easy one, showing how someone is different in one situation than another. People put on a show for others. They want to act differently for some purpose.

The graphics in this opening sequence are dark, punctuated with shades of red and pink. These draw attention to important features, such as the words: laden, thwart, drive. The sores on her mother's chest are also red. She notes that these are allergic reactions from wearing the period costume that her mother has insisted on wearing. This would suggest that on some level Bechdel is aware of her mother's long running bitterness about being made to give up her desire for a career in show business.

This metaphor furthers a recurring theme throughout this book, about Being Oneself. Bechdel can't help but search for her true self. Through her works of art and her therapy, she is constantly searching for who she is. In many respects, for so many years, she identified herself, subconsciously, as her mother. But she has rejected her mother, as much as her mother has rejected her, and hence her issues.

Midway through the chapter, there is a panel, encased entirely in black, though it is not the end images as in prior chapters. This series of images ends with Bechdel depicted as slamming the phone down, effectively hanging up on her mother. The sentence blazes in bold white across the center of the page: When I look I am seen, so I exist. She has, in essence, severed herself from her mother, both physically by hanging up on her, but also emotionally. She is declaring her own independence from her mother and her mother's issues.

Conversely, her mother comes alive when she's on stage. By Bechdel's own admission, her mother is a wonderful actress. Her mother goes into a trance when she's watching shows. On stage, she fully embodies the character.

She also overcomes diversity in her craft. Whether it is singing difficult notes or overcoming claustrophobia in the wings of the theater, her mother overcomes these obstacles to get to the art. This is also something that had been noted in previous chapters: how difficult it is for people, particularly women, to have a successful creative career in the face of obstacles. In the past, Bechdel had talked about her mother resenting the fact that motherhood had restricted her acting career.

This chapter includes a very telling passage written in narration by Bechdel. She finally comes to the realization that her mother was a flawed individual, full of her own holes and regrets. That she, Bechdel, didn't need to embrace or embody them as well. Her mother did what she was able to do to raise her, and it wasn't her fault.

This is a very mature and distant appraisal of her relationship with her mother. At one time, she acknowledges that her mother is not supportive of her lifestyle. However, she was supportive of her life. When she was young, and living in New York City, trying to make it as an artist, her mother was sending her money. So, while she was not nurturing of her lifestyle, she was, in fact, providing for her daughter to live.

Her mother just couldn't abide Bechdel's homosexuality. Nor could she abide her tendency to write about their real lives for the public to read. In this chapter Bechdel is coming to terms with that. Her mother is just never going to accept these things about her. Additionally, Bechdel should just stop trying to make her mother accept these things, or try to make her mother be the mother that she thinks she needs. They are just different people, and repeatedly asking for change won't make it happen. Bechdel also forgives herself for not being able to change her mother's point of view about her lifestyle.

The image that is depicted in the last panel of the chapter features a young Bechdel looking into a mirror, the mirror that was her mother. She states that she understands that she is trapped within herself, but that at the same time because of her mother's neediness she's thwarted Bechdel's own inner drives.

Vocabulary

narcissistically, acutely, libido, cathexis, courtesan

Chapter 7

Summary

The opening dream sequence of this final chapter has Bechdel finding a small pimple on her face while looking in the mirror. She works on trying to get rid of it. In so doing, she digs it out. It's not a pimple, however, it's a tumor. She goes to tell her mother about what happened, but her mother won't talk to her. She's too angry about the book about the father. They go to Stonehenge, and someone has built a condo complex around it.

Later in the chapter, Bechdel uses Winnicott's writings to analyze the dream. In it, Stonehenge is the "I," and it's under attack by other forces. The tumor is her mother's encampment, that controlling voice that holds her back.

In real life, Bechdel talks to her mother on the phone. Again, her mother has been trying to reach her via e-mail. When Bechdel didn't see it, her mother panicked. Her mother's appraisal is actually quite soft. She tells her that she doesn't mind the information in the book about her or Bechdel's father, but that she wants Bechdel to know that it isn't close to what the truth of the real story was. Her mother's still not happy about the book. She still doesn't think Bechdel has any idea what she went through with her husband's suicide, and everything that followed up until then.

Bechdel's therapist encourages her to be more spontaneous in her drawing, instead of pre-drawing and over-analyzing everything. Bechdel says she can't. Bechdel, with her therapist, discusses getting sick to her stomach. This is an act that is horrifying for her. She is very worried about throwing up. Bechdel interprets this as feeling guilty over being sick, and needing someone to take care of her.

During a trip to help her mother pack up their childhood home, Bechdel notes holes in the ceiling and floor where her father had thrown things. She was asked by Jocelyn to ask her mother one question, and to have her answer without thinking about it. The question she asks her mother is: "What's the main thing you learned from your mother?" Without a beat, her mother answers "That boys are more important than girls." This is interesting to Bechdel, because she always thought her own needs were put behind those of her brothers. Bechdel analyzes that in light of studies by Winnicott, who suggested that misogyny lies in the resentment that at one time, everyone was dependent upon their mothers. They grow to resent that dependence, and manifest it in hatred of women. People don't like the fact that they are dependent, so they externalize that dislike onto another person.

When she finishes "Fun Home," the book about her father, Bechdel wants to send it to Jocelyn. She reaches out via e-mail, and a colleague informs her that Jocelyn has passed away, from a quickly spreading cancer. Bechdel is devastated.

During a book tour for “Fun Home,” Bechdel talks to her mother about the impact her book has had on her mother's life. Her mother says people are coming up to her and asking her about these secrets that are now revealed. She's still not happy about it.

Her mother goes on to say, in her own distant way, that the book “coheres,” and that it's a meta-book. One of the analytical books Bechdel has read said that she would need to destroy her mother, and that her mother would need to survive the destruction. She feels that she has finally done this. By writing a book about her, she has taken her voice out of her head and put it on paper. It no longer holds as strong an influence over her. What remains are two adult women with shared history and interests, and an academic affection for each other.

Analysis

The opening dream sequence is quite graphic and revealing. Bechdel is pictured as she looks into a mirror at the pimple that comes a tumor which she removes. She observes it and the look on her face shows that she is clearly disgusted by what she's discovered. She throws it away, then calls for her mother.

Even though Bechdel was waiting on her mother's opinion of her book, her mother is just as distraught when Bechdel doesn't return an e-mail. It's another time when her mother is the child in the relationship, trying to find structure and acceptance from someone else. It is obvious, too, that her mother likes to be very much in control of everything.

When Bechdel's therapist suggests that Bechdel not pre-draw and pre-plan her book so much, she's probably talking about Bechdel's real life. The therapist would like to see her give in to spontaneity and fun rather than introspection that slows her to a stop. This is a direct parallel to Bechdel's mother, who must be in control. In the same way, Bechdel feels that she needs to pre-plan and have control over every aspect of her life.

It's interesting that Jocelyn is revealed to be dead in this chapter. Earlier in the book, Bechdel longs for the nurturing that Jocelyn gives her, and sees her as a mother figure. Now that she is trying to distance herself from mother figures, this one passes away. It's also significant that she dies from cancer, given that the opening dream sequence has Bechdel removing a tumor.

One of Winnicott's last paper's is quoted in this chapter. In it, Winnicott resents simply telling a patient what is needed, rather than guiding the patient to a revelation on her own. It's another case of trying not to over-analyze a situation, because it leads to stifling. The theme of Analysis Breeds Paralysis is demonstrated in this section.

The quote her mother reads is quite a step forward into acceptance for her. The quote shows that she is willing to make sacrifices for the sake of a story. Or, as she follows it up with, “Family be damned! The story must be served!” Her mother has grown to accept that her daughter, who habitually cataloged her days growing up, would also make these days public.

Throughout this book, the choices Bechdel made in interpreting her story are sometimes hard to follow. She jumps through times constantly and without notice. There is minimal narration to ease the reader along, and let the reader know where they are heading. Instead, it is a collection of scenes. These snippets, placed next to each other, derive meaning. Through the juxtaposition, a reader can create their own narrative. The conclusion is that for a child to really mature, they have to not need their parent for anything. And, that as adult children, there will always be some innate desire for validation from whomever one perceives as their one time guardian or parent.

The final graphic panel is an overhead perspective, as if the reader is suspended over a young Bechdel, who is on the floor, and her mother, who is standing hands on hips observing the struggling toddler. Bechdel writes that she realizes her mother didn't give her everything, but that in the end, she did give her the way out. She merely had to stand up.

Vocabulary

lucidity, tenure, aesthetic, rote, encampment

Important People

Alison Bechdel

"Are You My Mother?" is autobiographical. The author, Bechdel, makes herself the main character. Given her drive to be unfailingly accurate, the reader can only assume that she acts the same way in real life as she acts in this book.

Bechdel is extremely intelligent, almost to a fault. She will analyze to the point of over-analysis. She also tends to draw connections between many things that are not immediately connected.

She suffers from anxiety attacks and tends to torpedo relationships. She is caring, and welcoming to people, but not to herself.

She makes a living as a cartoonist. She came to fame by writing and drawing a comic strip "Dykes to Watch Out For," which was based on friends in her social group. A collection was published that gave it a more mainstream audience. In the book jacket, "Fun Home" found great commercial and critical success.

Helen

Bechdel only refers to her mother's name once. However, she could arguably be the main character, if not the antagonist. She is probably more detailed than Alison.

She is a high school teacher, and mother of three. Her real love is the theater, however. She gave up writing to be a mother and wife. She continued to acting although not so often.

Bechdel's mother speaks volumes about everything around her. No bit of gossip is too small. She discusses literary theory and great books. But when it comes to their relationship, she speaks very little. When she wrote journals, she admitted that they were little more than elaborate to-do lists. Everything external, very little internal.

The way Bechdel's mother is illustrated, she appears to be an older, shorter and squatter version of Bechdel. However, when she is drawn as a young woman, she is beautiful and moves with a practiced elegance.

Alison's Father Bruce

Bechdel's father, Bruce, was a high school teacher who owned a funeral home. He was also a former actor, who also gave up a lot to be a father and a parent. He never felt like he was allowed to be himself, and resented his family for it. He was prone to anger.

Bechdel wrote the book “Fun Home,” about him, including his closet bisexuality and suicide.

Donald Winnicott

Donald Winnicott was a psychoanalyst who died in 1971. He informs much of Bechdel's introspection. His ideas about being yourself, and the conflicts that arise when is not allowed, feature heavily in this book.

Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf's work, “To the Lighthouse,” features in this book. Woolf had written that she needed to part ways with the controlling influence of her mother. “To the Lighthouse” was her catharsis. Woolf's works show up many times in “Are You My Mother?”

Jocelyn

Jocelyn is Bechdel's therapist during a period of her life. This is the woman who Bechdel attaches a strong bond. Bechdel wishes, at times that Jocelyn was her mother. Jocelyn says the things Bechdel wishes her mother would say: things like “You're adorable.” Jocelyn also breaks a rule and hugs Bechdel. The reader never sees a hug from Bechdel's mother.

Carol

Carol is Bechdel's therapist during a different period of her life. Bechdel has a dream that Carol takes care of her, massaging her, and patching her worn clothing.

Eloise

Eloise is Bechdel's girlfriend for a time. She's a mechanic, involved politically. She engages in civil disobedience, and travels to other countries to help oppressed people. She ends up cheating on Bechdel, and they break up, but become friends again later.

Amy

Amy is Bechdel's girlfriend during the later parts of the writing of this book. She doesn't show up often, but serves as a sounding board for some of Bechdel's dreams and anxieties.

Adrienne Rich

Adrienne Rich is a successful writer who writes and lectures about feminism and lesbianism. She has a level of success that Bechdel envies.

Objects/Places

Therapy

Bechdel has spent much of her adult life in therapy. She sees it as an answer to untying the knots in her mind that make her tense and unhappy. It could be argued that her constant reading and thinking about therapy could be causing some of this anxiety.

Acting

Both Bechdel and her mother took part in some kind of acting. As a child, Bechdel was in a church performance. She looked out of character and self-conscious even then. Her mother, on the other hand, could have gone professional if she didn't feel the need for creating a life for her husband and children. She gets lost in her roles, and even loses herself while watching a good performance.

Journals

Both Bechdel and her mother keep journals. Bechdel records things almost to provide a historic record of her life. Her mother writes things down as more of a to-do list. It's Bechdel's intensely detailed journaling as a child that perhaps leads to her intense self-study as an adult.

Spiderweb

The spiderweb appears in a dream. It is beautiful and mysterious. It draws connections between various things. Bechdel is mystified by the fact that spiders can do this without any planning. Later, her mother's arachnophobia is given a page.

The Number 11

This is the first number that can't be counted on two hands. It is associated with sin, in the Biblical sense. Bechdel brings this up since it's the number of sections in the spiderweb from the dream. It was also her age when her mother started taking over writing her diary.

Holes

Broken things occur throughout the book. It is some people's instinct to try to mend them. Sometimes, they can't. Some examples of things with holes: relationships, a wall, a teddy bear, memories, clothes and happy days.

Bachdel's story end/menopause

Bechdel is struggling with how to begin a story. She cannot figure out where the story of her, and the story of her mother, actually begins. Their lives have been influenced by many factors going back many, many years. However, it's easier for Bechdel to consider how her personal story is going to end. She has no children, no desire for them, and she's running out of eggs anyway. She sees that her particular branch of her family tree is ending. It will finally end with her death, the end of her own story.

Religion

Religion provides order. There are rituals to be followed. There are reasons for everything. These reasons date back hundreds of years. However, Bechdel doesn't feel the same way about this order as an adult as she did as a child.

Plexiglass Dome

This is a safe place, a place removed from others where one can just sit and focus on oneself. Bechdel invented this term when discussing the time of night when her mother would just fade out, watch TV, and not interact. It was her time, and no one could access her then. Alison, throughout her life, had constructed her own Plexiglass domes, where she could be alone with her art and her feelings. She could look out, but no one else could look in. Only later in life did she realize she subconsciously lifted the term from a Dr. Seuss book.

Mirrors

Bechdel sees herself in a lot of things. Her mother, for instance. They are very similar in how they discuss their relationship, for example. Mirrors also show up when Bechdel is in therapy. Panels are drawn on the page where she is sitting in the same position facing either Jocelyn or Carol.

Themes

Analysis Breeds Paralysis

Sometimes, Bechdel is so caught up in studying herself and her relation to the world that she forgets to live her life. This is evident from the first chapter. Her obsession with therapists and the entire process of uncovering and treating issues is obsessive in and of itself.

Bechdel has panic attacks. Friends know she suffers from anxiety. There are a lot of things, like a fear of throwing up, that cause further anxiety. So, there is a fear of fear, or she is anxious about feeling anxious.

A lot of this stems from studying her life so closely under a microscope. She can see everything very clearly - a little too clearly. Others tell her to just do things spontaneously to see how it feels. But she is unable to do this, as she has a need to control everything that she can around her. Just like her mother. This discovery leads to Bechdel finally coming to an understanding of where her particular landscape was developed and to ultimately take responsibility for the map that she has created for her life.

Bechdel is acutely aware of this tendency. Like she said to a girlfriend about her day: "Had therapy. And bought a book about therapy." The fact that she makes a dry joke about this is not accidental. She is aware that she is too aware, but initially, she is unaware of how to stop this. It is also a crutch, because if she's in therapy, if she's 'psychotic' in some way, then she's not responsible for what she might do or say, or feel.

Truth

Bechdel's admitted incapability to write fiction indicates that she has a difficult time separating the truth from fiction, and in reality, she isn't aware of her own basic truth; of who she is, or who she wants to be. She can make things up about real events, but it ends up as reality.

She uses her writing/art as a way to find truth. By fictionalizing real life, she can find the truth at the heart of the matter. She finally comes to the understanding that in order to emerge from her self-imposed prison that she is going to have to cast off the image her mother has forged for her.

Bechdel's mother is afraid of this truth, though. She's been trying to hold her life together, and trying to hide some of these truths. She is an actress, after all. She is afraid that Bechdel's books will not only out her husband, but reveal that their family had its share of skeletons.

Bechdel has no choice but to embrace the truth. She's on a quest for truth in all things, even if the truth is ugly, because she now knows, inherently, that the truth is going to release her from a lifetime of guilt, shame, and anger.

Being Yourself

Therapists speak about the repressed side of the personality constantly struggling to break free. The part of a personality who understand social mores keeps this under wraps. There is a conflict that forms, and the person who is too constrained acts out in other ways.

This is why, many times, Bechdel and her mother get in small fights over nothing. They are acting out passive aggressive maneuvers rather than facing their true feelings about something.

Bechdel's father was a closeted bisexual, and was hiding this secret shame for years. The rest of the family hid it, as well, until Bechdel's book "Fun Home" was published.

Bechdel, on the other hand, can't hide who she is. She tells her mother when she's young that she's a lesbian. After her father, it was heartbreaking for her mother. However, Alison felt it had to be done in order for her to live her life and be happy.

In addition, Bechdel credits her homosexuality with becoming the person she is today. If it wasn't for being an outsider back then, and knowing it, and thinking about it, she wouldn't be able to adjust as well as an adult now.

Synchronicity

There are forces at work that connect everything, if someone looks hard enough. There are spiderweb-like strands that form connections. Spiderwebs form an important metaphor and symbol in this non-fiction work.

For example: Bechdel's mother grew up in the shadow of World War II, having to memorize airplane silhouettes so she would know which planes were safe and which were dangerous. As a young woman, she worked on the play "The Sound of Music," which took place in the World War II era. Winnicott worked as a psychiatric consultant during this time, helping children who were displaced by air raids to find homes in safe towns. There are a lot of parallels at work if one is to be open to them.

Dreams or analysis will sometimes help to draw the connections. Alison's therapists have helped her to interpret her dreams and instances in her daily life. They have helped her to find connections. Often, the connection is between something that happened in childhood and a present-day adult behavior.

Additionally, sometimes it is two things juxtaposed that give meaning. An example of this would be when Bechdel hit her head and then looked at a bottle of herbal pills a different way.

Motherhood

The role of the mother is called into question many times throughout this book. Bechdel finds many surrogate mothers: Winnicott, her therapists, and to a lesser degree, girlfriends. As her therapists would point out, the one person who should be nurturing her is herself.

Ideally, a mother is someone who nurtures, and who allows the child to grow. This is the standard idea of a mother. It is not necessarily what therapists believe. And it is certainly not what happened in Alison's case.

Analysts speak of the “good enough mother” who provides for their children's basic needs, but little else. Children growing up are aware of a conflict between what a mother should be and what their mother really is. This creates all manner of erratic behavior, and in the end boils down to the individual temerity of the child, themselves.

By the end of the book, Bechdel has learned two significant things. 1. She cannot blame herself for the shortcomings of her own mother. 2. Part of what a mother should do is to let the child go. This means that she should stop nurturing it, if it is to grow up on its own. And, failing that, the child is charged with breaking free, even if it is painful.

Styles

Structure

Are You My Mother has seven distinct chapters, or sections, each beginning with a dream sequence that the author has had. The dream is then used to set the tone for the chapter and the discussion that will follow. The book covers various details of the author's life that occurred before her birth, up until the publication of the graphic novel.

In general, as a graphic novel, this work is a therapeutic vehicle by the author to come to terms with her relationship with her mother. In her search, she includes works from others such as David Winnicott, Freud, and Virginia Woolf.

The lack of chronology in the book might be jarring for some readers. The author bounces back and forth with such fluidity that the reader might not be sure which therapist Bechdel is talking to from scene to scene. There reason for this is because the bulk of the work is brought from memory. Memories, by their nature, are not static. They don't fall along easy to define lines. And, strangely, they are not chronological. The back-and-forth of time in this book is akin to Bechdel, sitting in present day, remembering things about her childhood, and coming to terms with some long held issues concerning her mother and her relationship with her mother.

Perspective

The graphic memoir is told from the first person account of Alison Bechdel as she delves into the inner workings of her own psychology to emerge from it a better person, and at least someone more capable of being her own best advocate.

The panels that depict her own internal struggle are often shown as a wide angle lens, with the reader assuming the perspective of an outsider looking in, either from far away, extremely close up, overhead, or from the side.

Tone

The tone is often accusatory, whiny, and venomous, especially between Bechdel and her mother. Often the tone is jumbled within the span of one section, in which the author is alternatively happy, then depressed, then quietly guilt-ridden. The narration and the writing don't always match what is being depicted or stated, so that the reader is left to consider the work, not as individual sections, but taken as a whole.

The tone for the novel also corresponds to the use of, and lack of, color within the graphics depicted. Only red and pink are utilized as actual colors, while most of the work is done in black and white. In the sections which deal with heavier issues and struggles, the use of black presides, and when she's made a breakthrough with

something, or if there's something of significance, it is often indicated or suggested with the use of the color red.

Quotes

There's a certain relief in knowing that I am a terminus."
-- Bechdel (chapter 1)

Importance: Bechdel is musing about the fact that she is the end of her family's line. The end of the bad, and of some of the good things, about her family's legacy.

The thing is, I can't write this book until I get her out of my head. But the only way to get her out of my head is by writing the book."
-- Bechdel (chapter 1)

Importance: This quote is significant because it clearly illustrates Bechdel's conundrum with writing, and explains why she's been experiencing writer's block for so long.

But I am not ultimately interested in writing fiction. I can't make things up. Or rather, I can only make things up about things that have already happened."
-- Bechdel (chapter 1)

Importance: This illustrates Bechdel's aversion to looking realistically at her own history, and facing the truth of who she really is, and wants to be.

Writers are kind of monstrous, aren't they? They don't have, like, normal human ethics.
-- Bechdel (chapter 2)

Importance: Bechdel is discussing the penchant of writers to be observers of human nature, and in writing about it, pass some sort of judgement on them. She believes that this type of intrusive dissection of the human condition is unethical. This is also another rationalization she offers as to why she hasn't written the book she was contracted to write.

I used to be a sane person! What's happening to me?"
-- Bechdel (chapter 3)

Importance: Bechdel says this to her therapist and it indicates that she's now beginning to see that her old life was a lie, and she can't go back to viewing her life in the same way. She is mourning that to some extent because now it obligates her to take the next steps toward her ultimate goal.

What I really want is to cure myself. To be my own analyst.
-- Bechdel (chapter 4)

Importance: Bechdel has realized in this chapter that she is over-reliant on therapists, that analysis is breeding her paralysis (which is one of the main themes).



I would love to see your name on a book, but not on a book of lesbian cartoons.”
-- Helen (chapter 5)

Importance: Bechdel's mother, Helen, says this to her and the quote is significant because it shows that her mother only accepts Bechdel when Bechdel fits into Helen's idea of who she should be.

I remember thinking when you were little that if you got to be a famous concert pianist I would be insanely jealous.”
-- Helen (chapter 5)

Importance: This illustrates one of the themes in the novel, which is that of motherhood. Helen, and her treatment of Bechdel, shows how mothers can often damage their children by unrealistic expectations, disparaging and destructive comments, and in this case, jealousy about their child's success. Helen obviously has many unresolved personal issues, herself.

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.”
-- Bechdel (chapter 6)

Importance: This is Bechdel's turning point in the book. She realizes that her mother did what she could do, and while that wasn't what Bechdel needed, it was all Helen could do, and Bechdel accepts that. She acknowledges that her mother has to have the freedom for being who she is, just as Bechdel wants to be accepted for who she is.

The writer's business is to find the shape in unruly life and to serve her story. Not, you may note, to serve her family, or to serve the truth, but to serve the story.
-- Helen/Dorothy Gallagher (chapter 7)

Importance: Helen quotes Dorothy Gallagher, another writer, to Bechdel in regards to how she should be writing her book. This illustrates just how controlling and passive aggressive Bechdel's mother is.

There was a certain thing I did not get from my mother. There is a lack, a gap, a void. But in its place, she has given me something else. Something, I would argue, that is far more valuable. She has given me a way out.”
-- Bechdel (chapter 7)

Importance: This is Bechdel's breakthrough thought in regards to her mother.

Mama laughed out loud, and the depression was gone, just like that.”
-- Narrator (chapter 3)

Importance: This is a revealing statement that Bechdel recalls because it shows just

how manipulative her mother could be. Additionally, it suggests that her own mother also suffered from some sort of mental trauma of her own.

Topics for Discussion

Discuss the themes of Motherhood that are so prevalent in this graphic nonfiction novel.

The theme of Motherhood is explored from several angles, both from Bechdel's viewpoint, and in some respects from Helen's. For the first half of the work, Bechdel can only view her mother from the viewpoint of a daughter, a child, longing for the loving touch of her mother. When she does not receive it, she throws a tantrum (albeit an adult one). Later, when she begins to see her mother as a person, whose dreams were never realized because of the sacrifices she was called upon to make, she is able to let go of her need for her mother's validation and support.

From Helen's standpoint, motherhood was an institution of slavery and forced ignominy. She disliked giving up the theatre, and in the end, was bitter and resentful. This colored all of her dealings with her daughter and distressed the relationship to the point where they can only be merely acquaintances or sometimes friends.

Why does the author include dream sequences to start off each chapter?

Because the author is in therapy, and is very interested in the work of Winnicott and Freud, the use of dreams is integral to her understanding herself, as well as the reader understanding her. It is through these dreams that the reader gains critical insight into Bechdel's interior landscape, and past history.

Discuss the theme of Truth.

Truth is one of the stronger themes in this graphic nonfiction novel. In fact, it is the hiding of truth, of being false to everyone around them, that has lead to both Helen and Bechdel(as well as Bechdel's father) to be completely unhappy with their lives. It is only when they embrace their personal truths that they are free.

What is the author's purpose in writing this novel?

The author wrote this novel as an experimental work of non-fiction, an almost memoir, so to speak. She did this primarily with the idea of exposing how parents and their children need to be more truthful to one another, and that the choices of the parents need not have deep repercussions on the children.

Why did Bechdel go into therapy in the first place?

Bechdel goes into therapy because she so desperately is seeking a mother figure that she latches onto these therapists that are kindly older women. It is one of these women, Jocelyn, that eventually helps her come to her conclusion about her mother.

Why did the author most likely include the various allusions to literary and scientific figures from the past?

The author used literary and science allusions and references because this added to the characterization of the character of Bechdel. This gave the reader insight into who Bechdel was/is based on the types of people she gravitated towards. From early on she was drawn to feminist writers and those who focused on the inner life of human beings. This is because for most of her life, she lived on the inside, but not on the outside. She repressed her emotions and it eventually caused her problems.

What is the symbolism of mirrors in this work?

The use of mirrors is very interesting and notable in this work. First, mirrors are offered as a way for children to obtain their first look at themselves in a physical way. Later, the author suggests that through her study she has found that children use their parents as mirrors, mimicking them, as Bechdel did with her mother when she was an infant. Children find a parent to identify with, and then throughout their lives tend to fall back on these 'molds' when they are unsure of themselves. In Bechdel's case, she imprinted on her mother, which only left her desolate and inconsolable.

Discuss the author's use of the symbolism of holes.

Bechdel uses holes in many ways throughout this work. First, they are literal holes. Holes in the walls, ceiling, in clothing. But later, she realizes that the worst holes were in her life and her psyche, where her mother loved and gave attention more to her brothers than to her. What she internalized was that boys were better than girls, something that later her mother told her that she was told was true when she (Helen) was little. The need to fill these 'holes' has led Bechdel to therapy to try and find a mother figure in her therapists.

Why did Bechdel's father eventually kill himself?

The book initially was supposed to be about her father, but Bechdel rarely mentions him in the work. She says that it is a book about her father, but in reality, it is a way to work through her issues with her mother in a passive aggressive way. Her father died

because he couldn't deal with his homosexual feelings any longer, and in the time when he lived, it was not acceptable. He believed that the only honorable thing for him to do was to die. Right before this, however, Helen had asked him for a divorce. At that point, he had truly been rejected, just as Bechdel feels that she, as a gay woman, has been rejected by Helen.

Compare Helen to Bechdel

Both women are strong, creative, and intelligent. However, Helen, due in large part to the time in which she worked, was not valued as much as a man in the same occupation. When she married Bechdel's father, she left behind her career entirely, something she resented most of her life. She continues to journal, something that both women share as a hobby, but her journals are simply a listing of what she has done from one day to the next, without any deep internal reflection.

Bechdel, on the other hand, keeps journals that are teeming with questions, answers, discourses, doodles, and wild imaginings and dreams. She is desperately trying to make sense of life, and in particular, her place in the greater world. She also perceives and identifies, somewhat, with her father, who was also gay. She subconsciously is furious with him for committing suicide and leaving her alone with Helen, but she is also as guilty as Helen in that she still refused to allow him to be who he was. Neither woman are willing to allow the other to be who they were meant to be until toward the end of the book. They also both agree that they will never understand the other, and with this realization comes a form of peace.