

Both Graphic and Memoir: The Interaction of Image and Narrative in *Fun Home*

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Abstract

Alison Bechdel's Fun Home represents the relatively recent graphic memoir genre. This new genre, using graphic novel format to relate a literary narrative, is examined often, but rarely is the memoir studied as a graphic novel. This paper examines Fun Home as a graphic novel, focusing on how the format and history of the graphic novel impact the symbolism and interpretation of Bechdel's memoir. Ultimately, the essay finds that the interaction of image and word, and reference to mythology (a tradition of comics), create a layered complexity to the memoir which emulates Bechdel and her father's complicated relationship.

A new form is emerging in literary discourse. It is not a new form of story-telling; in fact, one could argue that this form has been in print for over one hundred years. Comic books, or graphic novels, have been printed in their modern form since 1895 (History of the Comic, 2008). The terms comic and graphic novel will both be used in this essay. Comic implies historical comic books and superhero comics; graphic novel refers to more serious/literary works. Comics have a long history and, in general, are turning towards the literary. In 2016, renowned author and journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote the script for a new "Black Panther" superhero comic (Coates). However, only recently have these novels entered directly into the literary discourse. In fact, many readers still doubt graphic novels can be literary as a genre. This perception is changing primarily through the introduction of the graphic memoir. Alison Bechdel, among a handful of others, wrote and illustrated a memoir in the form of the graphic novel.

Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir *Fun Home* is a recent addition to literary discourse. The novel follows Bechdel through childhood, her relationship with her father, her discovery of her sexuality, her father's sexuality, and more. The amount of discourse and research about *Fun Home* after only a few years testifies to the power of the novel. This amazing power derives from Bechdel's juxtaposition of classic literary techniques and the application of comic book styles and themes. In *Fun Home*, Alison Bechdel combines elements of both graphic novel and classic literature, allowing the complex interaction of these elements to act as a metaphor for Bechdel's complex relationship with her father.

The graphic nature of *Fun Home* leads to vastly different readings. Other analyses of this text have examined the use of buildings in the text, the modernist elements/comments on modernism, and the father-daughter relationship (Lydenberg, Freedman, Fantasia). Each reader treats the graphic aspect separately, ranging from accepting the style to, in some cases, outright insulting the genre as seen in Ariela Freedman's "Drawing on Modernism in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*." Freedman comments on "the relationship of the low-brow genre of the comics with the high-brow predecessor of literary modernism" (128). What very little of the existing research attempts is a reading of a graphic memoir as graphic. Analysis of structure and form are important steps in analysis of any work. To only lightly touch, or ignore, the format of the work is to do it a disservice in some sense.

Fun Home adheres closely to the themes and styles of graphic novels. However, from a background of literary analysis it can be difficult to recognize comic themes and styles as graphic novels are not a standard study in literature. There is a true story from the comic world that

illuminates one of the key themes of graphic novels. When Michael Uslan, the first person to teach comic books at a college level, wanted to teach comics he had to present his idea before the deans of the Indiana University (“The Boy Who”). One of the deans refused to acknowledge Uslan's ideas. The dean said something like, “I read all of the Superman comics when I was a child, but that is all they are, children's books.” Uslan had a point to make, though. Uslan asked the dean if he could recite the story of Moses. The dean responded, “The Hebrew people were being persecuted and their first-born were being slain. A Hebrew couple placed their infant son in a little wicker basket and sent it down the river Nile, where he's discovered by an Egyptian family who raise him as their own son. When he grows up and learns his true heritage, he becomes a hero to his people” (“The Boy Who”). Uslan accepts this and then asks, “Do you remember the origin of Superman?”

“Well, sure,” the dean responded, “Planet Krypton was about to blow up. A scientist and his wife placed their infant son in a little rocket ship and sent him to earth. There he's discovered by the Kents, who raise him as their own son....” The dean stopped, stared at Uslan, and told him his course was approved (“The Boy Who”). This story may seem off topic, but it is the quickest way to show that a core theme in comic books is reference to mythology and theology. This is a theme of which Bechdel makes use. Just as Superman references Moses as an archetype, so *Fun House* references many mythologies. This begins both in the text and in the images within the first few pages.

Almost immediately Bechdel relates her father to both Icarus and to Daedalus in text and creates a more striking comparison to a mythic figure (Bechdel 3-4). In the fourth panel of page seven a powerful image of Bechdel's father carrying a pillar for the house is presented. The image is posed in the same manner as Christ bearing his cross to the crucifixion (Warhol 13). This in and of itself represents a facet of Mr. Bechdel. The image suggests that the hard work of constructing the house may push him to his death. This particular panel is also a perfect example of the irony in which Bechdel specializes (more on irony later).

The text in and around this panel maintain a different tone than the image. Repairing the house “was his passion... in every sense of the word. Libidinal. Manic. Martyred” (Bechdel 7). The idea of “martyrdom” and the use of the word “passion” connect the character with the Christ narrative, but in the context it is used, alongside libidinal and manic, indicates the negative meaning. Christ was martyred for others while it seems that Mr. Bechdel is martyring himself for the building. The juxtaposition of these separate tones creates the sense of irony. Bechdel's father is at once displayed as a suffering hero and as one bringing suffering upon himself. Even his outfit in this moment becomes a symbol of his death, continuing throughout the novel. Whenever Bechdel's father appears wearing no shirt and short jeans, the image references back to his work and his death. The outfit becomes representative of that death.

It is no coincidence that this is the outfit Bechdel's father is wearing in any scene related to his suicide. The outfit is worn in the panel which relates that her father died being hit by a truck, carrying a load on his shoulders as he walks past the street (Bechdel 28). Several other times this outfit appears as Bechdel's father works or when it refers back to the moment of his death. Like classic superhero comics, Bechdel refers to mythology which creates an understanding of what Bechdel's father represents. He is self-sacrificing in a number of ways, and the ironic, multidimensional approach to showing this represents the mixed feelings that Bechdel feels about this trait in her father. Bechdel's father at once appears to Bechdel as a figure sacrificing himself in several ways, but also as someone who she hardly connected to before his death.

Mythology is used in a variety of other ways in the novel. Bechdel refers to Ulysses, Daedalus, Icarus, Christ, obelisks and more throughout *Fun Home*. Bechdel represents her father and

herself through these characters, which again shows the complexities of their relationship. Bechdel refers to her father as both Icarus, the boy who fell, and Daedalus, the inventor who moved on afterwards, very early in the story (Bechdel 4 and 7). However, if her father is Daedalus then she logically must be Icarus, after all she is his child. Relating her father to Daedalus implies that Bechdel herself must have fallen at some point, likely because of her father. Even on the first page of the novel Bechdel's father holds her above him, balancing her on his legs (Bechdel 3). Bechdel holds out her arms, as if she is flying, while the angle at which the reader views the image shows her father's arms out slightly, as if to catch her. Bechdel is literally being lifted to the sky by her father and then he lets her fall in the next panel. Yet, her father is also Icarus. The contradiction of relating both people to the same mythological characters creates a complication, but also a bond between the characters. Bechdel herself sums up this dichotomy.

“He did hurtle into the sea, of course,” she writes, “but in the tricky inverse narration that impels our entwined stories, he was there to catch me when I leapt” (Bechdel 232). The text indicates Icarus, but the panel poignantly places it against the image of the fatal truck. She shows that the very connection between herself and her father allows him to catch her even as she falls. His fall, his death, allows him to help Bechdel through her own challenges with her sexuality. In a sense her father sacrificed himself in order to save his daughter. He acted as a martyr, whether he intended to or not. This ties back to the Christ symbolism earlier; as Christ carried his cross to save his followers, Bechdel's father carried his burdens of sexuality and labor which helped his daughter. This also relates back to comics. Just as his self-sacrifice ties into mythology it connects to superheroes. There is no more super-heroic image than that of a character allowing themselves to fall to catch someone who can not save themselves.

The use of comic book elements doesn't end with the thematic choices. Elements of style also play a role in the novel. A common stylistic choice in comics, especially story driven ones, is to end with some kind of 'to be continued' ending. Cliffhangers not only occur at the end of comic books but also most every second page to keep readers turning the page to find out what will happen. This originates in the serial nature of comics. It also affects *Fun Home* stylistically. *Fun Home* shows the serial nature of comics through the use of distinct chapters. As if the book were a monthly serial, each chapter is a self-contained story. Each could be read as a piece on its own. Yet, each chapter also connects to the others. One such connection is displayed in the recurrence of the representation of death in Bechdel's father and his cut-off jeans examined earlier. Death and labor are repeated as themes throughout the work through this symbol even in multiple chapters. The image of Bechdel's father in shorts is sometimes even altered to note a change in tone or symbolism.

In the last pages of the novel, a scene is set in which Bechdel's father wears a similar outfit. A young Bechdel and her father are in a public pool. The father is wearing a bathing suit, not the same outfit, but notably revealing a similar amount (Bechdel 230-232). This moment, like many in the novel, appears strikingly separate from the linguistic section. The image shows a more playful connection between father and child than in the rest of the novel; moments of the pair swimming together and of her father catching her as she leapt from the diving board (Bechdel 230-232). However, the context could not be more different between the two images.

This scene shows play rather than labor and is one of the two places in the novel where Bechdel's father wears his almost-half smile (Bechdel 231, panel 3). The only other place in the piece where this semi-smile appears is in the very first page of the piece, the same panel in which he holds her up (Bechdel 3). The juxtaposition of the similar outfit which her father wears alongside this very different scene and tone serves to deepen the complexity of the relationship. A new meaning is created through the symbol, there is a bond between Bechdel and her father, despite the trouble and

abuse. The use of the similar outfit remind the reader that this helpful, fun, and connected father is the same one that labored manically on the house and who killed himself. This bond connects with the narration going on outside of the comic elements.

In a literary sense, the narration and scene in this section form a frame for the novel. The novel is framed both by the occasional happy moments between the two, but also by the metaphoric use of the Icarus myth (Bechdel 4 and 231). The text references the Icarus myth, while the graphics create images of Bechdel falling as a child and of her father happily catching her. Icarus symbolism juxtaposed with the happy moments is a repeated irony, joy alongside a tragic myth of death. Even though neither chapter requires the other to find meaning in the metaphor, they work together, yet separate to deepen the reader's understanding of Bechdel's relationship with her father. At the beginning of the book, it is the father who is represented by Icarus. Bechdel reveals this in saying, "It was not me but my father who was to plummet from the sky" (Bechdel 4). It foreshadows his death and draws connections to creativity. In the last chapter the Icarus metaphor represents the bond between father and daughter, as touched on earlier. Each has a unique literary meaning and goal, but together they draw a connection between the two chapters.

These moments draw a deep connection between Bechdel and her father. The connection reinforces each as Icarus. The first section reminds the reader that the father is the aspect of Icarus that falls. The plummet is shown through his suicide, but he does not represent the child who was destroyed because of his father's invention. The burden of that role falls to Bechdel, and the last section reminds the reader of that. The use of Icarus in either example serves a purpose on its own, but only together do they show the characters falling together and expand on how in this narrative Daedalus catches Icarus as he falls too. The serial nature of comics is shown through this. The chapters are each a story with literary details in their own rights, and yet the story, as a whole, comes together when examining the arc of each section together. Connections such as this exist throughout the novel. Moments that work on their own or together to create a story, often with an irony to them.

The serial nature of graphic novels is not the only stylistic aspect that appears in *Fun Home*. Many comic books, including the very first, are not superhero stories, but a series of comic strips, the humorous side of comics. Bechdel also uses both verbal and visual humor as a piece of her literary writing. Sometimes the humor is very simple, a moment of humor in an image or sentence. In a panel describing the smell of New York, Bechdel decides to label the variety of smells in single scene. This takes on a sense of humor. There is something funny about the list describing such a variety of smells, "Methanol, diesel, shit, pastry, urine and electricity, Brut, and putrefaction" (Bechdel 103). Small details that add a little piece of humor to the panel. However, this humor is not as simple as it appears.

When compared to the line describing the smell in the visual, the joke is expanded. Bechdel describes this horrifying combination of chemicals as "a fragrance of stunning richness and complexity" (103). Several words come to mind given the scents the reader is alerted to, but none of them should be so positive as 'rich.' Bechdel deepens the joke by creating irony or sarcasm between the narration and the image. This takes a simple joke and further creates a sense of scene, image (in the literary sense), and enhances Bechdel's voice in the narrative. Bechdel creates many moments of irony and humor to powerful effect in the novel.

Irony has a long standing tradition in literature and in comics. In literature it can create emotions in a reader or deepen the meaning of a piece. In comics, irony builds organically from the form. The possibility of creating both an image and text alongside each other allows a perfect environment for irony. Text and image each work as a layer for conveying information. giving

different or even conflicting information can create humor and irony if used with cunning. The graphic memoir format offers layers of writing and image that can interact with each other to create new meanings and deeper texts. As Sam McBean notes:

“As a form, graphic narrative incorporates multiple voices: the narrative voice, the speaking characters, and the visual representation into single frames. The interplay between image and text means graphic narratives always speak in at least two registers: sometimes connecting image and text, sometimes depicting an image that seems irrelevant to the text, and sometimes using the relationship between image and text to come to a fuller picture of a scene (128).”

Bechdel embraces this aspect of comics to create not only humorous moments, but also impactful dramatic irony and even moments of dark ironic humor.

There are many moments of dark humor throughout the book. These moments are created by the irony of a situation, situations that maybe shouldn't be funny but are because of their presentation. When Bechdel decides that she should carry a Swiss army knife only to cut her finger when opening it is something that probably should not be funny. It is funny, though, when the reader is also informed that she buys it as “a symbol of self-reliance... something a lesbian would have” (Bechdel 78). There is irony in Bechdel seeking self-reliance and cutting herself with a knife. This creates humor, the drama of buying a knife is undercut by the humor of her hurting herself with something that represents her ability to rely on herself. The idea of undercutting drama with humor is important; humor like this serves a purpose. The scene containing the knife occurs right after the dramatic tension of her parents response to her homosexuality. The emotion runs high at this point as Bechdel finds her mother to be disapproving (Bechdel 77). Moments of humor, even dark ones, can help to relieve the tension of these moments, and dark humor can do this while maintaining the heavy tone. The scene of Bechdel cutting her finger lightens the heavy atmosphere for the reader without breaking out of the scene entirely, pulling the reader out of the novel. Irony in humor is functional in this way, but even without humor, irony functions in the novel.

Bechdel creates moments of dramatic irony as well. Bechdel sets a brief scene in the backstage of one of Bechdel's mother's performances. In this moment a truth is revealed to the reader; family friends asked her parents about group sex (Bechdel 167). Through the scene Bechdel, as a child, does not know about this, but as soon as the fact is revealed to the reader the dialog in the scene takes new meaning. The dialog immediately after this deals with Bechdel's mother excusing herself after the other couple brings flowers; Bechdel's father explains that “She gets nervous” (Bechdel 167). The reader can now understand this piece of dialog as both a response to the flowers and to the sexual offer. This double meaning conversation brings an ironic twist to the narrative. Bechdel's father displays a casual attitude to the sexual offer, pinning the resistance on his wife. Even the positioning of the characters in the panel takes on a new meaning; after the revelation of the group sex offer Bechdel's father and the family friends. smoke while the woman takes a classic alluring pose with her cigarette and the man spreads his legs wide. These poses represent sexuality and smoking has long been associated with sex. Looking back, this revelation also reveals the nature of Bechdel's mother being taken aback by the delivery of flowers. This suggests her discomfort with the friends after the offer had been made. The difference in reaction between the two parents is striking and reveals details about their relationship.

Bechdel's father is more openly sexual, he approaches sex casually and seems to place blame on his wife. Bechdel's mother is uncomfortable with open sexuality, and seems to be excluded from her husband's delves into sexual experimentation. This ironic moment reveals the sexual openness of Bechdel's parent and a serious problem in their relationship without breaking from scene or

delving into more sexual images. Moreover, it reveals Bechdel's understanding and relationship with her parents

As the reader reanalyzes the dialog, Bechdel also had to reassess her parent's life and relationship. The reader must examine the same issues that Bechdel had to examine to find the truth. This is the power Bechdel takes from the multilayered style that graphic novel offers. The nature of graphic novels allows for a scene to continue even as the narration provides details that alter the scene. This further allows the scene and text to convey different information into each other. The narration informs the reader that the characters speaking have talked about groups sex, while the image reveals dialog that communicates on multiple levels. Each section tells part of the story, but working together they convey new information to the reader.

Image and text can also convey information through their formatting. The sexual exploration of Bechdel's father creates one of the most unique moments of formatting in the novel. The panel is the only panel to take up two pages. The panel is a large image of a photograph, the picture Bechdel discovered of her father's lover and her babysitter, Roy (Bechdel 100-101). There is also far more text within this panel than the average panel. The size of the image and the amount of narration around it imply to the reader that this image is important. The size of the image allows for more realism to be taken in the image itself, which also differentiates this from the other panels. The realism and the shock value of the enormous image produce in the reader the same sort of feeling that Bechdel has. This image is the most 'real' picture we get of Bechdel's father and the importance and weight of the realization is shocking. The format of graphic novels allows for the panel itself, not the image within, to deliver messages to the reader about the impact of events and the importance of moments/images.

Graphic narrative creates new levels of depth and meaning in novels. *Fun Home* embraces this style. The traditions of comics, from irony and image within the style of comics to the mythological themes, are used by Bechdel to create a deeply complex narrative. Bechdel references mythology, both directly and through the character of her father to illustrate the bond between them despite the distance. She plays off of the serial nature of the comic genre to tell a diverse story that connects separate points. She even creates literary and humorous irony through the layers of image and narrative. The very complexity of this narrative emphasizes the complex relationship that Bechdel and her father share. Each separate chapter connects to the others through repeated themes and symbols, much like Bechdel and her father connect through themes in their life, such as sexuality, even though they connected very little in reality. Bonds are created between father and daughter, just like Daedalus and Icarus, or Ulysses and his son. Even the irony of Bechdel's father committing suicide allowing him to catch his daughter and allow her to fly. Complex interactions of literary and graphic elements create connections between father and daughter and represent the complexity of that relationship. By combining the tools of comics and of literature Bechdel created a powerful memoir with a richness and complexity that resists the ability of either style to accomplish alone, and this complexity is only fully analyzed through the application of both genres as lenses.

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