English 230 Worksheet for Week 8
Fun Home, by Alison Bechdel

Fun Home is a graphic memoir primarily about Alison Bechdel's relationship with her father, Bruce. It is a "coming of age" story as well as a "coming out" story, where Alison and Bruce are frequently depicted as "inversions" of each other and Bruce is unable to "guide" Alison into adulthood. The history at play in *Fun Home* is personal (Alison's autobiography and Bruce's biography), social (LGBTQ+ movements and the Stonewall uprising), geographical (the town of Beech Creek), and literary (allusions to Greek mythology, Victorian and modernist literature, and queer theory, not to mention the appearance of books in many of the novel's panels). Bechdel's characters are actual people and other people at the same time: Bruce is Bruce, Jay Gatsby, Daedalus, and Icarus; Alison is Alison, Radclyffe Hall, Daedalus, and Icarus; and Helen is Helen and Isabel Archer, for example. "[M]y parents are most real to me in fictional terms" (67), says Bechdel in Chapter 3, and Bechdel's treatment of history and fiction is particularly important when it comes to interpreting images in the book.

After all, *Fun Home* is also a comic. "Comics," Hillary Chute writes, "might be defined as a hybrid word-and-image form in which two narrative tracks, one verbal and one visual, register temporality spatially" (452). (See Chute, "Comics as Literature? Reading Graphic Narrative." *PMLA*, vol. 132, no. 2, 2008, pp. 452-465.) The visual track of *Fun Home* includes the individual panels (or boxes) of pictures on the page, and the tiers of those pictures down the page. Bechdel tends to prefer two- or three-tier layouts, with two to five panels per page. (A notable exception here is the sequence on pages 220 and 221, when Alison is in the car with Bruce.) Meanwhile, the gutter (or the space between panels) is the domain of *Fun Home*'s verbal track, filled with text and Bechdel's narration. We might add a third track to Chute's mix: the dialogue track, where characters speak within the panels in the world (diegetic) of the story.

Beyond these labels, Bechdel does not approach all images in the same way. Compare, for example, the photographs she manually copies into splash images at the start of each chapter with her more cartoonish treatments of herself and family members. Cartoons typically have far less detail than photographs, even if both are representations. (Here, see Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, where he defines cartooning as "amplification through simplification" (30).) For more on Bechdel's approaches to images, see her lecture at Cornell University in 2008, particularly minutes 23 through 34:20.

There is an incredible amount to say about *Fun Home.* It is canon, and much has already been written about it. I cannot do justice to it with what little space and time I have here, but below I develop some interpretations of it via various angles on images.

Traces and Perspectives

Images are commonly treated as traces, or documents, of moments from the past. They produce material links to space and time, which they mark and "index," like tire tracks or footprints. They are pictures that point: "I saw this" or "that happened." They often evoke memories and draw upon feelings as they ostensibly capture what happened. In *Fun Home*, Bechdel relies on traces to begin each chapter with a copy of a family photograph: the photo of her dad to begin Chapter 1, for instance.

But images are also perspectives. They measure and frame content, and they reproduce (or at least correspond with) a person and/or camera's view of the world. Bechdel makes this clear when, at the

end of Chapter 4, she describes the composition of photographs in her hands and compares a photo of her father with a photo someone took of her: "In another picture, he's sunbathing on the tarpaper roof of his frat house just after he turned twenty-two. Was the boy who took it his lover?" appears alongside, "As the girl who took this polaroid of me son a fire escape on my twenty-first birthday was mine?" Who took the photograph matters because they help frame the image and give it context, which in this case renders *Fun Home* more intimate.

Although images, especially videos and photographs, are often treated as records of what happened, they are nevertheless framed. They are traces of the past produced through a perspective. This perspective may be tacitly or overtly biased, it has a context, and it likely has a story.

Experience and Address

Images may also be something more like an experience: windows and portals into a world or fiction. They engage viewers and even manipulate or massage people's senses in the process. Someone may call an image “pleasing,” “immersive,” “haunting,” or “graphic,” for instance. Its perspective or status as a record matters less than how it is felt and perceived. Such an experience can, of course, be approached technically as a matter of optics. With *Fun Home*, we have the low-tech page image, with which people are typically familiar, partly because the page image is fundamental to primary and secondary education. Books are comprised of page images, typically presented in a logical or numerical sequence.

Images also address us. That is, they are not only portals or windows into fiction; they also reflect images back at us. Maybe we see ourselves in them, as Alison sees, and does not see, aspects of herself in her father. Consider the moment when they are dressing together in front of mirrors in Chapter 4. Bruce polices Alison’s appearance: how she dresses and what she wears. “You can't go out to dinner like that. You look like a missionary,” for instance (98). And many of their communications unfold through a mirror. They use glass to look indirectly at each other, and to address each other. This way, they can see themselves as they talk (sort of like Zoom). Such mirror moments in *Fun Home* provide readers with literal reflections that become figurative and cultural. The book may address or speak to readers who, for example, experienced similar patriarchal dynamics, or who also came out or are coming out to their families. Through her use of images, then, Bechdel demonstrates how people *learn* to look, often through mirrors, to address and communicate with other people.

Images may at once absorb and address us. The former (absorption) helps us to forget we are looking. The latter (address) draws attention to looking as a learned behaviour.

Representation and Imitation

Although not all images are photographs, they are frequently treated as representations of actual people, places, and things. Readers see cartoons of Alison in *Fun Home* and associate them with Alison Bechdel, the author. Or you might look at the desktop of your computer and associate icons with software: the trash bin, for instance. Images as representations underscore their role in *likeness* and *resemblance*. A cartoon of Bechdel is not actually Bechdel, and an icon for software is not the actual software; however, making such assumptions is often necessary for a given plot to unfold in fiction.

The likeness of images, or the status of images as representations and icons, frequently clashes with their function as imitations. I know this may sound counter-intuitive. Aren't imitations also re-presentations after all? Can’t “imitation” serve as a synonym for “representation”? Absolutely. Yet another way to define and approach imitation is through *modeling*. This version of the image is the image as distillation, if not truth. Readers know *Fun Home* is not a photo album. Even though it contains

pictures and imitations of photographs, it is also rife with cartoons, which are simplifications of actuality. Still, the novel seems at once historical and intimate, as if Bechdel is sitting next to us, guiding us through the pictures and narrating her family history (or at least her and her father's histories). *Fun Home* is modeled on the photo album without becoming one.

Since so much history is left to conjecture — was, for example, Bruce's death planned or an accident? — then Bechdel's story, may be or feel closer to truth than photo albums or other such traces of the past. Indeed, art imitates life precisely because it cannot be reduced to the messy stuff of records, documents, or deduction. (This observation corresponds in part with Aristotle's response to Plato on the topic of "mimesis." If art is a lie for Plato, then for Aristotle it is a way to communicate higher truths. That said, Aristotle was also a proponent of logic and deduction.) It gets at something bigger, modeling a forest that's more thematic and social than the trees of actuality. Bechdel's cartoons are thus intimate distillations because they are *stories* of what happened to her, her father, and her family. These distillations are part of *Fun Home*'s allure and cultural traction. Its images may rely on likeness—on icons and representation—but the more interesting question is what, as models of history, they amplify or accentuate.

On the other hand, readers also know that many of Bechdel's allusions to history are more literary than documentary. The book is not all photo albums and household heirlooms. "If *The Taming of the Shrew* was a harbinger of my parents' later marriage," she writes in Chapter 3, "Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* runs more than a little parallel to their early days together" (70). This literary aspect of *Fun Home* matters because, in both the plot and Bechdel's composition, life also imitates art. (This is Oscar Wilde's riposte to the philosophical history of mimesis [see above]. It is often called "anti-mimesis.") Bechdel's images do so much to distill what happened as they prolong grander narratives: those of *The Taming of the Shrew, The Portrait of a Lady, An Ideal Husband, The Great Gatsby*, and *Ulysses*, for instance. These grander narratives help Alison to interpret her family and their past, if not grasp and make sense of them. From this perspective, images in *Fun Home* may again rely on likeness—how Helen is like Isabel Archer, for instance—but the more interesting question is what they rehearse and render familiar to us. Life imitates art: people recognize and perpetuate what they see in images and what they read in fiction. And art imitates life: fiction distills actuality into something profound.

Images represent, or "stand in" for, actual people, places, and things through likeness and resemblance, and yet, as models, they not only perpetuate fictions by rendering them familiar but also distill the past through accentuation and amplification.

Composition and Language

One of the last points I want to make about images in the context of fiction is perhaps rather obvious: images are made or composed. They have centres and edges. The page images of *Fun Home* frame tiers that then frame individual panels. Shifts in the framing, such as when readers open the book's centrefold to see an image of Alison holding a photograph of Roy (100-01), or when Alison rides in the car with Bruce (220-21), are palpable. They affect the pace of reading, for one. The centrefold is a spread (an image that appears across two pages) and prompts attention to detail. The car ride contains more panels than pages elsewhere in the book and does not rely much on visual details. It speeds up the reading pace, mimicking the speed of the car in contrast with the slow awkwardness of the dynamic between Bruce and Alison. Throughout that dynamic, Bruce remains at the centre of each panel, always looking forward (at the road). Alison mostly looks forward, too, but occasionally turns to Bruce or glances away from him (though never at the reader). Most of the visual detail during this scene (the car

trip on pages 220-21) focuses on how wide Alison and Bruce's eyes get in response to what is discussed. And Bruce's eyes are repeatedly at the centre of the 24 panels on these two pages.

An image's centre draws attention to what is included, and its edges stress what is excluded from the picture. Edges generate boundaries. They also play a pivotal role in the status of images as language. Consider how Bechdel composes page images and panels in *Fun Home*. Their placement is purposeful. On page 228, she dedicates four panels to the “verbal track” (narration) of her comics. These four panels are not *outside* the visual track or in the gutter. They are on top of it, and she uses them to tell a story about how her father (mis)interprets Joyce's *Ulysses*, the last page of which is itself the visual track, or the main panel, on this page of *Fun Home*. The four panels on top of the visual track also "chunk" or structure the reading process, creating a momentary delay between this panel and the next one.

Pages do the same in *Fun Home*. What is verso (the left side; in this case, even-numbered pages) and recto (the right side; in this case, odd-numbered pages) matters. If, for example, the final page of the book (page 232) were recto, then its effect as an image would be dramatically reduced, mostly because readers would not need to turn the page to finish the book, and they would see Bechdel's concluding gesture while reading the verso (on the left).

What does all this design talk have to do with language? The placement of centres and edges shapes how people produce meaning with images—a grammar of images, if you will. Readers assemble images in comics like *Fun Home* as they interpret them; they complete the sequence or *move* with (and against) images. This movement also suggests that readers like to anticipate what will happen next, and that anticipation evokes mental images—imagining what may unfold—as it also demands memory—recalling what happened earlier. Here, images are symbolic much in the way that text is symbolic, even if the two media also differ in many ways. Alphabetic characters become words become sentences, and panels become tiers, all to help create meaning and elements of a plot or story. The spaces are significant, too. They do not indicate an “absence” of content or meaning. Spaces create suspense, or they provide temporary relief, or a writer such as Bechdel fills them with a verbal track. Whatever the case, space is a key component in the language of images.

Images are made and composed. They have centres and edges, which shape how people not only recall what happened in a fiction but also anticipate what will happen next. In this sense, images become a language as well. They help to produce meaning, and they rely on conventions of communication.