

Critical analysis, literature

Song 1

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Residents of a DysFUNCTIONal HOME

In a recent online interview, comic artist Alison Bechdel remarked, “I love words, and I love pictures. But especially, I love them together — in a mystical way that I can’t even explain” (“Stuck”). Indeed, in her graphic novel memoir, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, text and image work together in a mystical way: text and image. But that little conjunction “and” is a deceitfully simple demonstration of the relationship between the two. Using both image and text results not in a simple summation but in a strange relationship — as strange as the relationship between Alison Bechdel and her father. These strange pairings have an alluring quality that makes Bechdel’s *Fun Home* compelling; for her, both text and image are necessary. As Bechdel tells and shows us, alone, words can fail; alone, images deceive. Yet her life story ties both concepts inextricably to her memories and revelations such that only the interplay of text and image offers the reader the rich complexity, honesty, and possibilities in Bechdel’s quest to understand and find closure for the past.

The idea that *words are insufficient* is not new — certainly we have all felt moments when language simply fails us and we are at a loss for words — moments like being “left . . . wordless” by “the infinite gradations of color in a fine sunset” (Bechdel, *Fun* 150). In those wordless moments, we strain to express just what we

Introduces author of work discussed, along with major topic

Source: Lunsford Handbooks (Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016).

This project follows the style guidelines in the *MLA Handbook*, 8th ed. (2016).

Song 2

mean. Writers are especially aware of what is lost between word and meaning; Bechdel's comment on the translation of Proust's *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* is a telling example of the troubling gap:

After Dad died, an updated translation of Proust came out. *Remembrance of Things Past* was re-titled *In Search of Lost Time*. The new title is a more literal translation of *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu*, but it still doesn't capture the full resonance of *perdu*. This means not just lost, but ruined, undone, wasted, wrecked, and spoiled. (*Fun* 119)

Bechdel says of the new Proust title, "What's lost in translation is the complexity of loss itself" — the very struggles of loss that Bechdel must also confront (*Fun* 120). But how do we express something as complex as loss, if something is always lost between what we say and what we mean? Bechdel addresses the "complexity of loss" by trying to correlate herself with her father, attempting a "translation" of their lives (*Fun* 120).

René Magritte's painting *The Treachery of Images* (fig. 1), with text that translates as "This is not a pipe," reminds us to



Fig. 1. Magritte's *The Treason of Images*.

remain skeptical of images because *images can deceive*. This is a lesson that Alison Bechdel shows us again and again within her own story and images. Bechdel's father constructs a

Includes (and cites) image that clarifies first point

Song 3

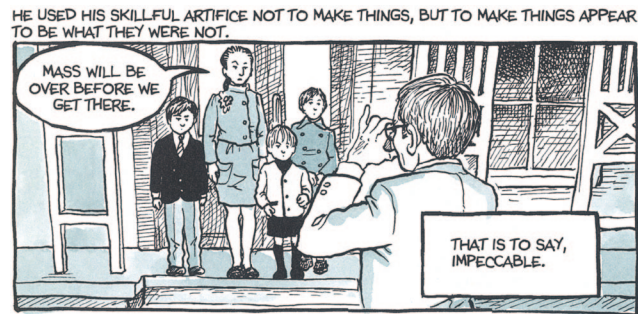


Fig. 2. Alison Bechdel's father posing a family photo (Bechdel, *Fun 16*).

false image of himself and of his home and family. The elaborately restored house is the gilded, but tense, context of young Alison's familial relationships and a metaphor for her father's deceptions. "He used his skillful artifice not to make things, but to make things appear to be what they were not," Bechdel notes alongside an image of her father taking a photo of their family, shown in fig. 2 (Fun 16). The scene represents the nature of her father's artifice; her father is *posing* a photo, an image of their family.

In that same scene, Bechdel also shows her own sleight of hand; she manipulates the scene and reverses her father's role and her own to show young Alison taking the photograph of the family and her father posing in Alison's place (fig. 3). In the image, young Alison symbolizes Bechdel in the present — looking back through the camera lens to create a portrait of her family. But unlike her father, she isn't using false

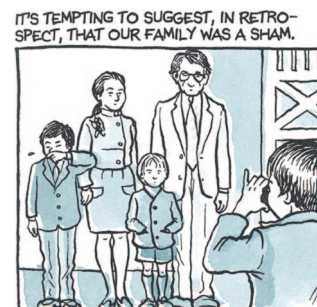


Fig. 3. Alison and her father trade places (Bechdel, *Fun 17*).

Song 4

images to deceive. Bechdel overcomes the treason of images by confessing herself as an “artificer” to her audience (*Fun* 16). For example, in her grandmother’s story about her father being stuck in the mud as a baby, Bechdel admits to depicting her father being rescued by a milkman (instead of a mailman) because of the romantic notion that the milkman, dressed all in white, was “a reverse grim reaper” (*Fun* 41). Bechdel doesn’t villainize the illusory nature of images; she repurposes their illusory power to reinterpret her memories. The nature of images allows her to illustrate the same scenes from different angles, but the angling and the new rendering of the scene hold new symbolic significance. Thus, despite the deceptive nature of images, they are still necessary to tell Bechdel’s story.

Readers must understand that in Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, neither image nor text plays a supporting role. The text does not only caption the image and the image does not always literally illustrate the text. Each is *a version of the memoir*. Both are interpretations and manipulations. In Chapter 1, “Old Father, Old Artificer,” Bechdel draws up a tableau of her family situation. Here is an excerpt with only the text narration:

Daedalus, too, was indifferent to the human cost of his projects. He blithely betrayed the king, for example, when the queen asked him to build her a cow disguise so she could seduce the white bull. Indeed the result of that scheme — a half-bull, half-man monster — inspired Daedalus’s greatest creation yet. He hid the minotaur in the labyrinth — a maze of passages and rooms opening endlessly into one another . . . and from which, as stray youths and maidens

Supports second
main point by citing
text

Source: Lunsford Handbooks (Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2016).

Song 5

discovered to their peril . . . escape was impossible. Then there are those famous wings. Was Daedalus really stricken with grief when Icarus fell into the sea? Or just disappointed by the design failure? (*Fun* 11–12).

The text can stand alone as a story. However, a parallel story line is lost. Karim Chabani notes, “To read a graphic novel is to follow a double narrative line, one pictorial and the other textual. On closer inspection, in *Fun Home* this ‘double line’ turns out to be two independent lines that are juxtaposed, playing at times side by side and on several occasions against one another. . . . [T]ext and images actually converge up to a point where they collide” (2).

The images tell a story distinct from the text, yet the ties between image and text are not severed. In the first panel accompanying this story, Bechdel correlates her father with Daedalus (fig. 4). Her father’s household “projects” are accomplished at the “human cost” of cruelty to his children, as the father strikes Alison’s brother and causes him to flee.

In the panel labeled “Indeed, the result of that scheme . . . inspired Daedalus’s greatest creation yet,” the reader shifts between the metaphors with surprising ease; now her father is the looming minotaur whose wrath Alison fears (fig. 5). Alison’s father morphs from Daedalus into

DAEDALUS, TOO, WAS INDIFFERENT TO THE HUMAN COST OF HIS PROJECTS.



Fig. 4. Father as Daedalus (Bechdel, *Fun* 11).

INDEED, THE RESULT OF THAT SCHEME--A HALF-BULL, HALF-MAN MONSTER--INSPIRED DAEDALUS'S GREATEST CREATION YET.



Fig. 5. Father as minotaur (Bechdel, *Fun* 12).

Song 6

“Daedalus’s greatest creation,” from father to monster. The image evokes both the minotaur myth and Alison’s genuine fear of her father’s wrath.

In the next three panels (fig. 6), Alison, too, runs out of the labyrinthine house. However, the text does not mesh exactly with what is seen within the frame: “Escape was impossible,” Bechdel notes, but shows an image of young Alison escaping the house and evading the wrath of her father. Bechdel uses the Daedalus story—and Daedalus’s relationship with Icarus—to explain her relationship with her father, but she complicates their relationship by casting both father and daughter as both Daedalus and Icarus.

Analyzes complicated relationship between text and image



Fig. 6. Alison flees the labyrinthine house (Bechdel, *Fun 12*).

Song 7

In the last two panels of this section, where Alison is seen first walking, then returning to the house, her now-dead father is implied to be the fallen Icarus while Alison, alone, suggests the bereaved or disappointed Daedalus (fig. 7). At last, the strange relationship between image and text emerges; image and text support each other, but the combined effect also reveals the many complex interconnections between the two. Young Alison's escape effort holds a certain dramatic irony; she cannot escape the gravity of her father's presence or the pages of the book — we see her drawn back to the house in the last frame of the Daedalus section (Bechdel, *Fun 12*).

Finally, we can see how image and text function together. On one hand, image and text support each other in that they each highlight the subtleties of the other. But, on the other hand, the more curious interaction comes when there is some degree of distance between what is written and what is depicted. In *Fun Home*, Bechdel pushes the boundaries of the relationship between image and text. If the words and pictures matched exactly, the story would read like a children's book. However, text and image can't be so mismatched that meaning is completely

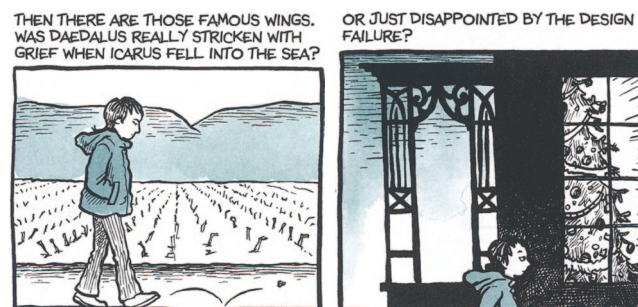


Fig. 7. Alison alone (Bechdel, *Fun 12*).

Song 8

incomprehensible. Bechdel crafts her story deliberately, leaving space for the reader to experience cognitive dissonance. The reader's need to create coherence from disparate text and image results in a more complex understanding of the story.

Through the strange but compelling pairings of image and text, the reader acquires a more thorough understanding of the strange and compelling relationship between father and daughter — what Jared Gardner calls “the story of the truth, and the truth of the story” (3). Bechdel consistently informs the reader that *Fun Home* is her interpretation of the past. She understands that “[t]he memoir is in many ways a huge violation of [her] family” (“Interview” 1009). As an artist, her effort to lay to rest her anxieties about her past comes at the cost of publicizing her family's secrets. She does not let herself or the reader forget: “We really were a family, and we really did live in those period rooms” (*Fun* 17). And perhaps this is why she dedicates *Fun Home* to “Mom, Christian, and John” (Bechdel, *Fun* copyright page). Bechdel does not ignore the impact that her act of remembering has on the present. In the end, her memoir is not about having an accurate record of events, but rather the incredible human ability for an emotional reappraisal of the past. Her stories told between the lines entwined with stories told within the frames impel our heads and hearts. And if nothing else, the painful confessions and wishful remembering of *Fun Home* provide a proper tribute for her father and allow Alison Bechdel a sense, almost, of closure.

Conclusion analyzes effect of text / image pairings

Source: Lunsford Handbooks (Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016).

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