

On Leaping into the Future: Reading *Fun Home* as a Lesbian Narrative

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Abstract

In *Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives*, feminist theorist Marilyn Farwell chronicles the decades of work fellow theorists have done to answer a question whose implications for queer literature are significant: what is a lesbian narrative? Farwell ultimately posits that such a narrative “reorders the narrative codes and values on which a system rests” and acts as a “harbinger of the future.” The purpose of this essay is to explain how Alison Bechdel’s graphic novel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, fulfills Farwell’s criteria. The novel fulfills said criteria in three ways: the revelation of the heteronormative ideal of the American family as false and constricting, Bechdel’s subversion of the patriarchal gaze vis-à-vis the illustration of the female body, and the “utopian” nature of the story’s conclusion. “Utopia” is used in the sense that scholar Drucilla Cornell phrases it, as “an ‘opening’ to the unrepresentable.” It will be argued that Bechdel extends this invitation to the audience to cross into an exploration of the “unrepresentable,” the indeterminate, in her novel. In exploring these components of Bechdel’s work, one is able to arrive at a more thoughtfully developed understanding of the abstract political impact of these authorial decisions as well as an even more deeply evocative reading of *Fun Home* and its insights about identity.

Keywords: Male Gaze, Graphic Novel, Lesbian Narrative

1. Introduction

To read Alison Bechdel’s graphic novel *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* is to reckon with the question of what constitutes a lesbian narrative. This is not for cause of its drama being concerned with Bechdel—the illustrator and protagonist of this story—discovering her attraction to women, but for cause of three unique aspects of this story. Those are the revelation of the heteronormative ideal of the American family as false and constricting, Bechdel’s subversion of the patriarchal gaze vis-à-vis the illustration of the female body, and the ‘utopian’ nature of its conclusion. In exploring these components of Bechdel’s work, one is able to arrive at a more thoughtfully developed understanding of the abstract political impact of these authorial decisions as well as an even more deeply evocative reading of *Fun Home* and its insights about identity and futurity.

2. Analyzing *Fun Home* as a Lesbian Narrative

2.1 Defining the Lesbian Narrative

In order to proceed with said analysis of this novel, we must first establish the conception of the term “lesbian novel” with which we are working. To do this, we must direct our attention to two concepts introduced in Marilyn Farwell’s *Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives*—a thorough chronicle of the changing understanding of the concept of the lesbian novel as well as her own journey in attempting to define it. In it, Farwell proposes that the ‘lesbian’ aspect of a narrative becomes so when it “reorders the narrative codes and the values on which the system rests” and acts as a “harbinger of the future.”¹ Essentially, a narrative constitutes lesbian when it is able to disrupt the hegemonic structures that shape the expected course of a narrative (in the specific case of *Fun Home*, we are concerned with the heteronormative patriarchy – more on this later), and is able to generate utopian potentiality, a space in the novel wherein an indeterminate future is left up to the individual to shape. This space – an inkling, not a promise, of a future is not bound by the limitation that is being committed to the page, but contains a limitless capacity for possibilities, thus making it a site for utopian potentiality. It is this complex definition of the lesbian narrative with which we will work while looking at *Fun Home*: a narrative that attempts to subvert the hegemonic values that typically inform its structure and presents a space—especially within its ending—where the characters and reader are able to conceive of a future that has not yet been spelled out by the author for them, of a space that could be utopian because it must be fleshed out at one’s own discretion.

2.2 Subverting Heteronormative Standards

The aforementioned disruption of heteronormative and patriarchal values within this story can be seen within its portrayal of the Bechdel’s familial dynamic – there is a stark contrast to draw between the presentation of this family versus the ones of families in the graphic novels of yore. To elaborate on this, we must stress the prevalence of the latter as well as its institutionalized nature via the Comics Code. The code, authored by the Comics Code Authority—an organization of comic book writers whose dictations carried the authority of government regulation—in 1954, sought to enhance the moral character of the United States by transforming the sexually explicit and heavily violent imagery prevalent in comics of the age. According to its preamble, the code would “make a positive contribution to contemporary life [by] developing sound, wholesome entertainment,” and would attempt to do so until the 1980’s. The suggestion of this code was that the “wholesomeness” of a work was paramount if it were to be released to the public – however, one must question what constitutes “wholesome,” for in seeking out an answer, we arrive at the first hegemonic structure with which Bechdel’s narrative must grapple: heteronormativity.

Though the Comics Code did not explicitly forbid the portrayal of lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual, and queer (LGBTQ) characters and themes by artists, it did seek to forbid the portrayal of relationships and dynamics between characters that were perceived as ‘lewd’ or ‘disruptive’. What constitutes as such becomes clear upon reading one specific regulation within the code: “sex perversion or any inference to same is strictly forbidden.” In the United States circa the early 1950’s—a setting wherein sodomy laws were enforced via police raids of gay bars, harassment of gay individuals by said officers and the public alike, and the wholesale denunciation of gay people by politicians and religious leaders—it is not difficult to determine which type of people fall within the arena of “sexually perverse” in the view of the code’s writers. As Nickie D. Phillips and Staci Strobl state in *Take Down the Bad Guys, Save the Girl*, “the Code required adherence to the heterosexual norm and forbade deviation from the norm in terms of marriage and sexual relationships; it wasn’t until 1989 that gay people were positively portrayed.”² And so, LGBTQ culture was relegated to the narrative margins—to an outright demonized position within the narrative—by an institution, heteronormativity, that sought to silence its expression. As an artistic medium, the comic book, and more broadly, the graphic novel, was shut out to LGBTQ artists.

Allow this deviation in order to introduce the main drama of *Fun Home*: Bechdel’s quest to reflect on the enigmatic nature of her gay, closeted father, Bruce, and his ultimate suicide. Bruce, born in a small Pennsylvanian town in the 1936, would come into adolescence and adulthood in this world—that is, one wherein the Code managed to serve as law for graphic novel artists, the Hays Code dictated what played on the silver screen, and the societal heteronormative paradigm that necessitated codes such as these governed the unconscious mind of queer and non-queer people alike. In the most ideal of outcomes given his rural setting, Bruce could have been an out gay man subject to the aforementioned terrors that come with being openly gay. In the least ideal, we are able to observe the psychological toll that is taken on him. As Bechdel describes him, Bruce is an “artificer”: “he used his skillful artifice not to make

things, but to make things appear to be what they were not...that is to say, impeccable” — impeccability is a revealing term here³. Bruce paints a portrait of his family and household as being the quintessential American one by dressing his home in lavish decoration, elaborate renovations of his own doing, and meticulously putting together outfits and accessories for his children to wear. Considering the façade of the pristine Pennsylvanian family and household that Bruce constructs, one can deduce that he has internalized the ostensibly homophobic principle of “wholesomeness” that is established in the Comics Code. His tendency towards artifice can be read as a measure by which he expresses contrition for the attraction that he feels towards men, as a medium through which he can right his wrong of not conforming to the heteronormative standard.

In making this brief deviation, we not only begin to contextualize Bruce’s character, but return to our main argument for *Fun Home* as a lesbian novel by underlining the heteronormative heritage of its genre, the graphic novel. To emphasize this, we recall Farwell’s conception of the lesbian narrative as “[reordering] the narrative codes and the values on which the system rests.”⁴ In this case, we have established these values upheld in part by graphic novelists as being heteronormative in nature by positing heterosexual marriages as the ‘norm’. Bechdel, however, carefully examines the validity of this standard through her portrayal of her family and parents’ relationship as being one bound by falsehoods and constructions: “our house was not a real home...but the simulacrum of one; we really were a family [but] still, something vital was missing.”⁵ That “something”, we are told, is a margin of error – a slip-up by either Bechdel’s mother or siblings (in one case, this means Bechdel not donning a dress for an outing or her brother Christian not cleaning the elaborately-decorated home sufficiently) is more than enough to incur Bruce’s wrath. One must wonder, if the heteronormative model of the family is as normal as it is posited as being, why must careful constructions such as codes and the painstaking effort on Bruce’s part be created in order to uphold it? Bechdel does not attempt to answer this question for us, but by eliciting the question from her reader, she begins to do the crucial work of the lesbian narrative by uprooting and transitively subverting the values upon which a narrative within her specific genre is typically constructed. Though one might contest that the Code and all its restrictions on content were done away with in the 1990’s, the principles it imposed upon its artists had already been weaved into the fabric of the graphic novel’s history. Undoing that fabric will be the very current work of contemporary artists like Bechdel, though this will hardly be easy. Alongside the complication of the heteronormative paradigm as it exists in the graphic novel tradition, we must also bring into focus the systemically patriarchal nature of the arena itself.

2.3 Subverting the Male Gaze

A common source of criticism for graphic novelists, particularly the illustrators before and after the implementation of the Comics Code, has been the portrayals of women and their bodies. If we return to Phillips and Strobl’s *Take Down the Bad Guys, Save the Girl*, we learn that “in his analysis of comic books, author Mike Madrid finds that by the 1960s, female superheroes were drawn in a sexually suggestive manner, but it was not until the late 1980s and 1990s that female characters were portrayed as ultra-violent and hypersexual.”⁶ This demonstrates that, all throughout the age of the Code’s reign, the graphic novel genre was pervaded by not only an idealization of the heterosexual dynamic and marriage, but by illustrations of women as being gratuitously voluptuous, large-busted, and seemingly unable to select costumes for themselves that would not result in their figures being amply displayed for the audience. As a number of critics have observed, these illustrations have grown to be even more explicit in nature in the years since the death of the Code itself:

Popular culture commentators have noted the “pornification” of female heroes [and, as Strobl and Phillips go on to observe in their work, female villains and civilians within the superhero canon] as they are being drawn with more accentuated curves than in past comic book eras. These characters’ proportions are wildly exaggerated, with large, exposed breasts and skimpy costumes that would most certainly serve as a hindrance to crime fighting. The anatomical anomalies of women in comics may relate to a culture of reshaping women’s bodies (plastic surgery, etc.), connected to Michel Foucault’s notion that contemporary men and women reproduce cultural hegemony by disciplining their own bodies. In essence, women’s bodies have become “cultural plastic.”⁷

This phenomenon, though discomfiting, is ripe for examination as a manifestation of the patriarchy as it continues to inform the ostensibly misogynistic images of women that remain prevalent in the graphic novel arena. In order to approach something like a concrete reason for this “pornification” of female characters and establish precisely how that precedent acts as a roadblock over which *Fun Home* must find a way to exist, it will be clarifying to emphasize how this type of illustration perpetuates the patriarchy. To do that, one concept that must be focused on is that of the

wildly exaggerated proportions of these women serving as “a hindrance to crime fighting;”⁸ the anatomy of these women severely infringes upon the women’s ability to fight crime—one of the main sources of celebration for the average male superhero (think Superman or Captain America). As these hypersexualized images suggest, these female superheroes are rendered impotent, or at least as less able to access the avenue into which male superheroes can arrive at a place of celebration for his accomplishments, thanks in part to his physique. One may easily argue, though, that the prevalence of male musculature in these superheroes is not so much for the purpose of titillation in the way that “pornified” female superheroes are, but for the utilitarian purpose of achieving his goal of protecting his community, warding off evil, and demonstrating his strength. By contrast to the heavily sexualized and impotent woman superhero, the strong, male counterpart is able to project masculinity.

In this way, the male figure’s capacity for asserting masculinity—physical strength, in this case—hinges on the impotence or at least weakness of the female figure. The aforementioned portion of Phillips and Strobl’s work introduces Michel Foucault’s suggestion “that contemporary men and women reproduce cultural hegemony by disciplining their own bodies.”⁹ We can infer that one cultural hegemony perpetuated by this male-female dynamic of strength versus weakness is the patriarchal notion that women are subordinate to men, and must be protected by them for they are the weaker sex (hence the equal prevalence of the damsel-in-distress, Mary Jane trope of being in a perpetual state of danger). It is in this context in which “hegemonic masculinities” are performed. In *Take Down the Bad Guys, Save the Girl*, Sociologist R. W. Connell describes this imbalanced dynamic as a manifestation of “hegemonic masculinity” – a hierarchical conception of masculinity and femininity wherein the dominance of men over women is stressed so as to reaffirm the desire of men to, among other things, perpetuate their position of power.¹⁰ It is for this cause that the visual subordination of women is crucial: the hypersexualization of female figures in graphic novels both reaffirms the hegemonic notion that women are, indeed, subordinate to men and empowers the otherwise insecure male figure by asserting his utility as both the woman’s ultimate protector and sexual possessor (the images of women are as titillating as they are reaffirming, and are made for male consumption). Moreover, one can conclude that if the image of women as weakened, sexual objects is so crucial to the perpetuation of patriarchal masculinity, then the presentation of women whose bodies deviate from this ideal poses a threat to it, renders it as useless and vulnerable itself. For if there is no fragile woman to stand as subordinate to the stronger, male figure but rather a physically strong, independent one juxtaposed with him, how can the concept of men being inherently stronger not be exploded?

The potential explosion of this patriarchal notion by presenting women in a non-sexualized and strong manner invokes the words of Marilyn Farwell once more. In discussing the lesbian subject (either a character or a narrative at large), she describes it as a “powerful political tool for challenging asymmetrical gender codes in the narrative;¹¹ in a manner similar to the challenging of values mentioned earlier, the lesbian narrative, *Fun Home*, works to undo the notion of male dominance and female subordination as perpetuated by hypersexualized and vulnerable portrayals of women in the graphic novel. Bechdel attempts to do this by both presenting veristic, proportional illustrations of women and men’s bodies, and by celebrating the ‘butch’—an archetypal lesbian who tends to be bulky in her build as presents as masculine in her clothing choices and general swagger.

Gone from *Fun Home* is the “pornification” of the female body: the pristine hourglass figures, the pert and voluptuous busts on women, and male physiques that burst with well-worked muscles are both absent in it. Instead of utilizing the bodies of men and women as symbolic stand-ins for the sake of perpetuating a patriarchal notion, Bechdel’s illustrations of the body both remain faithful to how these people looked in real life. Crow’s feet sit firmly in the spaces below the eyes of Bechdel’s mother and father, the hairstyles of each character appear tousled and imperfect with cowlicks adorning their temples, and the built figure of Joan (Bechdel’s college girlfriend) is drawn with such care that we are able to see her protruding tummy and folds of skin at the tops of her thighs. The women and girls of *Fun Home* do not exist for the sake of perpetuating hegemony by being presented as objects of the male gaze (or male consumption) or affirmations of male dominance over them. Instead, Bechdel actively repudiates the notion of the graphic novel as a tool for perpetuating this harmful system, and reclaims this medium for the sake of telling the nuanced story of her development of her and her family’s identity.

Consequently, the distinguishing line between the male and female body is blurred—presuming that there was one to begin with; Bechdel and her brothers have the same lithe physique for much of their adolescence, and her father and mother mirror one another in their delicate and seemingly haggard frames. In the same way that she contests the notion of heteronormativity as being an ideal model for a family and reveals it to be an ideal that requires artifice in order to be achieved, she contests the highly artificial constructions necessary in order to perpetuate the concept of men as presenting the strength and dominance to women’s innate weakness and subordination. As Farwell states, the illustrations in *Fun Home* do the work of the lesbian narrative that is the “performative interrogation of the naturalness of the gender categories embedded in the narrative.”¹² There is no better demonstration of this performative interrogation in *Fun Home* than the scene in which Bechdel sees her very first butch lesbian at the age of five.

A burly, stern-faced butch donning short hair and a flannel shirt—a costume that signifies as masculine to the world—saunters into a diner Bechdel and her father are sitting in, and the former is struck by her appearance, then inexplicably enraptured. Long before knowing that “there were women who wore men’s clothes and had men’s haircuts,”¹³ Bechdel was filled with a sense of kinship with this woman. Bruce was filled with an apparent “haunting” sense – perhaps as a result of his simultaneous realization of the bond between him, his daughter, and the butch by way of their shared homosexuality, and the understanding that he was failing to uphold the harsh gender binary which he had internalized as being “natural.” In interrupting Bechdel’s conception of gender as rigidly binary up to that point, the butch was able to spark her suddenly acknowledgment of some other-ness in herself that the butch also possessed: queerness. And so, Bechdel’s adolescent anxiety over the emergence of her breasts, but not an overall desire to abandon her identity as a woman in place of assuming manhood, indicates her willingness to hang in a state of androgyny as not conform to the hegemonic value of masculinity and femininity as being two clearly distinct identities makes sense.

2. 4 Delving into the Utopian

This multitude of possibilities for presenting one’s gender and sexuality and willingness to exist in an ambiguous place brings us to the final aspect of *Fun Home* that constitutes a lesbian narrative: the presence of utopian potentiality in its conclusion—specifically, the way in which Bechdel frames her father’s suicide. As Farwell phrases it, one can look to Bechdel’s narrative as one that acts as a “harbinger of the future” – the content and nature of this future is by no means spelled out for the audience, but the implication is made that there is futurity to be explored following the final page of this story.¹⁴ And ‘implication’ is the operative word here: within the context of the lesbian narrative, the utopian is hardly a guaranteed state that can be reached, if it is to be reached at all, but rather a concept hinted at by a narrative, then left up to exploration by the audience and characters.

The utopian is, as scholar Drucilla Cornell phrases it (according to a paraphrased section by Greg Johnson in “The Situated Self and Utopian Thinking”), “an ‘opening’ to the beyond as a threshold we are invited to cross...utopian thinking demands the continual exploration and re-exploration of the possible and yet also unrepresentable.”¹⁵ This invitation to cross into an exploration of the “unrepresentable”, the indeterminate, is precisely the suggestion of futurity to which Farwell alludes as being characteristic of lesbian narratives.

An invitation to engage in precisely this type of exploration is extended to us by Bechdel in the conceit of Icarus and Daedalus that she uses to frame her relationship with her father. This conceit is introduced on the first page of *Fun Home*. We see Bruce and a young Bechdel playing “airplane”: she lies with her body taut and her limbs outstretched on the support beams that are her father’s sturdy, crouched legs. She is firmly held by him in the air. The name of this balancing act in acrobatics is “Icarian games,”¹⁶ but although Bechdel is the one suspended in air and her father, the artificer, must then be the metonymic Daedalus, she informs us that “it was not me but my father who was to plummet from the sky”¹⁷ – an allusion to his eventual suicide when she reaches her early twenties. All at once, Bechdel establishes her and her father’s plots as being “inverts of one another,”¹⁸ as she says later; where her father employs aforementioned constructions in addition to a therapist to help him with his ‘sickness’ in order to thinly veil and repress his identity, Bechdel advances forward into the means by which she can explore hers. And so, when Bruce is compelled to commit suicide—when Daedalus’ begin his plummet—she does not decide to end her story on a note of eulogy for her lost father, but reintroduces us to her conceit:

What if Icarus hadn’t hurtled into the sea? What if he’d inherited his father’s inventive bent? What might he have wrought? He did hurtle into the sea, of course. But in the tricky reverse narration that impels our entwined stories, he was there to catch me when I leapt.”¹⁹

3. Conclusion

Herein lies the heart of our argument for *Fun Home* as lesbian narrative: Bechdel does not rest in the present or attempt to sketch out a clear future, but she does open the door and invite us over the “threshold” into the indeterminable space that can bring utopia. Note that for both the myth and Bechdel’s own story ending is intertwined with beginning, and beginning with ending; in keeping with utopian tradition of exploration, then re-exploration, Bechdel compels us to read her and her father’s end-beginning in as open of a manner as she processes it. Moreover, one interpretation is never the final one, but another in a series of explorations.

It is not clear whether any future ‘leap’ she will take will end in her being caught; who’s to say that she won’t inherit her father’s “inventive bent” someday and succumb to the same internalized homophobia that wracked his psyche? To attempt to answer that or any of the questions posed above would be to defeat the purpose of the utopian potentiality Bechdel has introduced. As Drucilla Cornell puts it in “The Future of Sexual Difference,” an interview of her which was conducted by Judith Butler, the mission of the utopian is to “create openings...[to reveal] that there is a beyond to whatever kind of concept of sense we have.”²⁰ Bechdel, in stepping beyond the sense she had of her father and her own identity at the beginning of *Fun Home*—and continually re-exploring that sense—one is given the impression that she has embarked on a journey that is beyond the intellectual scope of any code or hegemony. She is navigating, like other lesbian narratives do, the vast landscape of the “unrepresented,” the potential utopia.

4. Acknowledgments

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5. Notes

1. Marilyn Farwell, *Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives* (New York: NYU Press, 1996), 16.
2. Nickie D. Phillips and Staci Strobl, *Take Down the Bad Guys, Save the Girl* (New York, NYU Press, 2002), 141-142.
3. Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home A Family Tragicomic* (New York: First Marine, 2006), 16.
4. Farwell, 16.
5. Bechdel, 17-18.
6. Phillips and Strobl, 162.
7. *Ibid*, 163.
8. *Ibid*.
9. *Ibid*.
10. Phillips and Strobl, 148.
11. Farwell, 17.
12. *Ibid*, 12.
13. Bechdel, 118.
14. Farwell, 16.
15. Greg Johnson, “The Situated Self and Utopian Thinking,” *Hypatia* 17, no. 3 (2002): 24, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810793>.
16. Bechdel, 3.
17. *Ibid*, 4.
18. *Ibid*, 98.
19. *Ibid*, 231-232.
20. Cheah, Pheng, Elizabeth Grosz, Judith Butler, and Drucilla Cornell. “The Future of Sexual Difference: An Interview with Judith Butler and Drucilla Cornell.” *Diacritics* 28, no. 1 (1998): 19-42. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1566322>.

6. Endnotes

- 1 Marilyn Farwell, *Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives* (New York: NYU Press, 1996), 16.
- 2 Nickie D. Phillips and Staci Strobl, *Take Down the Bad Guys, Save the Girl* (New York, NYU Press, 2002), 141-142.
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- 4 Farwell, 16.
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- 13 Bechdel, 118.
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- 16 Bechdel, 3.
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- 19 Ibid, 231-232.
- 20 Cheah, Pheng, Elizabeth Grosz, Judith Butler, and Drucilla Cornell. "The Future of Sexual Difference: An Interview with Judith Butler and Drucilla Cornell." *Diacritics* 28, no. 1 (1998): 19-42. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1566322>.