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The Arts as Means of Socialization in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*

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Key words: Socialization, the arts, *Fun Home*, self-identification, identity, family, symbolic interactionism, communication

Abstract

Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* suggests that socialization through the arts, such as writing and drawing, involves a constantly changing interpretation of reality that can contribute to a process of self-identification. The arts provide a foundation for Alison to make a connection to her family, yet also to detach from her parents' influences at the same time. Emphasizing a social aspect of this process, her self-identification not only involves a reflection of her own life but also integrates her ability to navigate environments filled with the arts and others' influences in shaping her personality. As an artist, Bechdel incorporates words and pictures to repair her relationship with her father and conveys a story of how she persistently constructs her identity. Nonetheless, her work as a whole reflects a broader significance for society: the creation of self-identity is not a linear process, but rather involves points of continuity and discontinuity that are shaped by the context in which one grows up. At the same time, such context is influenced by interactions between one's self and agents of socialization mediated through important and specific means, such as the arts.

Socialization can be described as "the social process whereby people undergo development by interacting with the people around them" (Caron and Brym, 2014, p. 107). Oftentimes, this process involves certain tools that enhance identity creation (Caron and Brym, 2014, p. 107). Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* suggests that socialization through the arts, such as writing and drawing, involves a constantly changing interpretation of reality that can contribute to a process of self-identification. Early socialization that incorporates interactions between Alison and her parents within the arts helps young Alison to continually develop her own identity. This progress can be seen in her initial interest in the arts that influences her sexual identity and her later reconciliation with her father's death. As Alison grows, the arts serve as tools to help her understand her own life. They provide a foundation for Alison to make a connection to her family, yet also to detach from her parents' influences at the same time. Emphasizing a social aspect of this process, her self-identification involves not only a reflection of her own life but also others' influences in shaping her personality. Bechdel specifically incorporates words and pictures to repair her relationship with her father and conveys a story of how she persistently constructs her identity. In a larger picture, however, *Fun Home* shows how specific means of socialization such as the arts resemble battlegrounds where the process of identity creation takes place in society.

Bechdel observes that the arts, especially writing and drawing, serve as tools for her younger self (Alison) to embrace her connection with her parents. Early in *Fun Home*, Bechdel presents how her home is really filled with the arts that Bruce loves. The whole interaction between Alison and her family that takes place at her home suggests an early process of socialization. Here, the family can be seen as the first and the most crucial agent of socialization. In *Commit Sociology*, Christian O. Caron and Robert Brym (2014) argue that basically, a family is "the entire world" for the early years of a child's development (p. 118). Interestingly, in *Fun Home*,

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this process involves specific means: the arts inside Alison's house. The presence of these arts is most evident when we begin to look at their function as modes of communication. When Alison is seven, she is inspired by creek scenery and decides to make a poem (Bechdel, 2006, p. 129). In this part of the book, Alison shows her poem to her father and her father "improvise[s] a second stanza" for her (Bechdel, 2006, p. 129). The additional part provided by her father somehow serves to fill the gap within Alison's poem. By doing so, Alison can relate her own inspiration of the scenery with her father's general admiration of the arts. Although Alison does not seem to be that happy with her father's addition to her poem at first, she is totally captivated by her father's ability to create those lines: "Limp with admiration, I added his lines to my typescript..." (Bechdel, 2006, p. 129). In one way, Bruce seems to embrace Alison's initial interest in the world of the arts. We can view this example as the way the poem allows Alison and her father to communicate with each other. Alison's father also tries to encourage her to enter the world of writing by giving her a diary and even by writing the first three words on it as a "jump start" for her (Bechdel, 2006, p. 140). It is interesting to note how Bechdel (2006) portrays Bruce's hand when he gives her the diary and the way her own hands receive it (p. 140). Similarly, she uses the same method in conveying the way her father gives her literary works that he loves during her adolescence (Bechdel, 2006, p. 205). By looking at this process of giving and receiving, we can infer that Alison can communicate with her father through these arts. Thus, Alison becomes what Monica B. Pearl calls her father's "intellectual companion" (Pearl, 2008, p.287; Bechdel, 2006, p. 198).

On the other hand, Alison also uses the arts to escape from her father's inhibiting influence. In the early parts of Bechdel's work, we can see that young Alison resents the way her father treats his furniture with more respect than his family. Alison "hate[s]" her room and plans to build a house "like a submarine" (Bechdel, 2006, p. 14-5). Her resentment becomes more observable when she decides to abandon color after her father interrupts her book coloring activity (Bechdel, 2006, p. 130). This part connects directly with the preceding example about her poem (Bechdel, 2006, p. 129). Another way to interpret Alison's poem is by looking at her "sad proxy gazing on the eclipse of his creative light" (Bechdel, 2006, p. 130). Her illustration of her proxy suggests her feelings of disappointment about her own creativity. While Bruce is trying to encourage Alison's interest through this poem, she feels that her father's creativity acts as a constraint for her own invention. Similarly, Bruce's interference when she is filling the gypsy caravan with her favorite color creates a sense of detachment from her father. In summary, Bechdel (2006) says, "I never wrote another poem. And soon, I abandoned color too" (p. 130). In Hillary Chute's interview with her, Bechdel states how she was resistant to use any color in her work because her father was such a "color freak" (Chute, 2006, p. 1011). However, she later explains why she decides to use colors in *Fun Home*: "I wouldn't let my father continue to control me by making me not use color" (Chute, 2006, p. 1012). Moreover, Bechdel's decision to become an artist proposes another detachment from Bruce's influence in that he did not become an artist himself. Therefore, as Bechdel tries to become more independent, she is still carrying her father's inhibiting influence in the world of arts at the same time.

The construction of one's identity can also be achieved through a process of unconscious socialization that involves the presence of the arts within a social context. Alison constantly tries to adjust herself to an environment filled with these arts. In other words, she not only learns from a direct interaction with her parents through these arts but also from the way she looks at the interplay between her parents, the arts that they love, and her own self. By looking back at the example from her childhood, we know that Alison does not seem to show much interest in the arts. At one point, she even asks, "What's the point of making something that's so hard to dust?" (Bechdel, 2006, p. 15). This situation changes as the graphic memoir progresses and Alison starts to appreciate "beauty" by taking photographs of the creek scenery (Bechdel, 2006, p. 129). We can see the contrast between how Alison resents her home surroundings at first and how eventually the "picturesque surroundings" of the polluted creek inspire her to poetry when she is seven (Bechdel, 2006, p. 129). In the same part of the book, Alison discovers her mother's talent in acting while she is playing on the floor (Bechdel, 2006, p. 131). The next

Dyonisius: The Arts as Means of Socialization in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* panel also portrays the way Alison observes her mother's hands when she is playing the piano. However, her mother's compulsion with her own activities evokes another resentment for Alison. She clearly feels a sense of rejection from her mother although Bechdel (2006) herself admits that it is "childish" for her to resent her parents' "creative solitude" (p. 133). Despite this fact, Alison's resentment can be taken as a part of her development process. For instance, in the panel where she draws a picture on the wall, Bechdel (2006) comments, "From their example, I learned quickly to feed myself" (p. 134). In this way, *Fun Home* can be viewed as "the story of the growth of artistic consciousness" (Watson, 2008, p. 32). Similarly, this process of discovering her identity is also evident when she tries to form her sexual identity by searching information from books that she finds in bookstores and libraries later in her life. This notion of discovering oneself through different social contexts is explained in an article by Paula C. Rust. In her article, she argues that sexual identity formation needs to be reinterpreted as "a process of describing one's location within a changing social context" (Rust, 1993, p. 50). In *Fun Home*, the process is evident in the way Alison places herself within different contexts in her life, especially those that include the presence of her parents and the arts, to construct her identity.

As an artist, Bechdel incorporates an interaction of words and pictures to convey a story of how she understands her family and how she discovers her identity. The whole process of self-identification can be examined when we look at how socialization is internalized in the way she integrates words and pictures in her work. By incorporating drawing in her work, Bechdel apparently wants to escape from "the world of words occupied by her father" (Pearl, 2008, p. 291). Nevertheless, Bruce's influence is still evident in her own work. In fact, in Chute's (2006) interview, she admits that she writes better than she draws (p. 1010). Furthermore, the intricate details that are obvious within her words and pictures in *Fun Home* can be interpreted as how her father's compulsive behavior is reflected in Bechdel's personality. In Pearl's view, Bechdel is adopting "the practice that was her father's realm" (Bechdel, 2006, p. 291). As a whole, this process can be taken as the way Bechdel is showing her father's influence within her work. More importantly, Bechdel's drawings are also integral parts of her story as sometimes they describe more than words could. Pearl refers to this proposition by addressing how "[Alison's] words fail her constantly" throughout the book (Bechdel, 2006, p. 294). When we look back at Alison's poem, her "sad proxy" somehow represents her own thoughts (Bechdel, 2006, p. 130). On one hand, by mentioning "the untimely eclipse of his creative light," she describes how her father blocks her own creativity (Bechdel, 2006, p. 129). On the other hand, it serves as a clue to how Bechdel is trying to communicate her father's death through that picture as it connects directly with her preceding statement about her mother's favorite poem, "Death is the Mother of Beauty." Thus, at this point the interaction between words and pictures suggests how Bechdel perceives the relationship between her father and herself.

The role of the interaction between words and pictures is also exhibited in how Alison starts to discover her sexual identity. There are three significant examples that convey the way Alison negotiates this identity. First, "[Alison] encode[s] the word menstruating according to the practice [she] learned in algebra of denoting complex or unknown quantities with letters" (Bechdel, 2006, p. 169). In this respect, she somehow tries to reject the existence and hides the meaning of this particular word, as she is not fully satisfied with the condition of her physical body. Second, on the subsequent page, her drawing of a basketball player that represents her surrogate further reflects this rejection and her "increasing burden of flesh" (Bechdel, 2006, p. 170). In one way, we can interpret that she masturbates afterward in order to escape from this "burden of flesh" (Bechdel, 2006, p. 170). Furthermore, although Bechdel (2006) refers to her masturbation as a "biological event," one can argue that it is socially constructed (p. 170). It is important to note that her father socializes her through arts that involve reading and writing such as diary. Eventually, Alison uses these reading and writing skills that were introduced by her father to discover the meaning of orgasm (Bechdel, 2006, p. 171). Hence, the socialization that she received also determines how she discovers and understands this particular word. Finally, her drawing of a man who is spitting the seeds of a watermelon explains how she totally omits the word "orgasm" although she has gained an understanding of

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what the word means: "The word entered my vocabulary, but not my diary" (Bechdel, 2006, p. 171). At this point, Alison does not encode the word. Instead, she chooses not to enter the word in her diary at all. With regards to the first example discussed above, Alison describes her drawing as a process of "cancelling- out" as in algebra (Bechdel, 2006, p. 171). Therefore, her drawing does not completely reveal Alison's thought about this event, yet it implicitly illustrates the way she perceives and develops her own sexual identity. Taken together, the interaction between Alison's writings and her adolescent drawings in this part of the book signifies the degree to which she wants to hide and reveal her sexual identity: "where the words approximated, the drawings illustrate" (Pearl, 2008, p. 292). Moreover, these processes of hiding her sexual identity by encoding certain words and revealing it through pictures do not have to be taken as how she wants to expose herself to others, but rather only as tools to understand her own self better.

In *Fun Home*, the arts can be viewed as media for Alison to recover and reconcile the way she perceives reality. In one example, Bruce gives Alison a wall calendar from his vendor that reads "Ray Burial Vault Co." for her to write a diary in it. Bechdel's remark to this event as "a curious memento mori" proposes a connection between her diary and her father's death (Bechdel, 2006, p. 140). Interestingly, the same depiction of their hands when Bruce gives her Colette's *Earthly Paradise* evokes another connection between the book and a hint of her lesbian identity (Bechdel, 2006, p. 205). By taking these two aspects into a larger context, we can see *Fun Home* as another medium for her to understand her world. This notion is noticeable when we observe her process of recovery. Bechdel portrays how her mother helps her to recover from her Obsessive Compulsive Disorder by taking dictation from her and writing in her diary. To say the least, Alison feels "a definite sense of relief" from it (Bechdel, 2006, p. 149). Bechdel closes this chapter with a beautiful scene in which Alison and her father watch the sunset that certainly evokes a bigger relief for Bechdel in term of the book's perspective. The most interesting part is when she explains how the "infinite gradations of the sunset from salmon to canary to midnight blue left [her father] wordless" (Bechdel, 2006, p. 150). Salmon is the color of the sky when Alison takes photographs in the polluted, fishless creek that implies a connection to her father's death (Bechdel, 2006, p. 129). Furthermore, her father insists on filling the caravan in Alison's coloring book with canary yellow when she is filling it with midnight blue, her favorite color (Bechdel, 2006, p. 130). In a sense, by connecting these colors together, Bechdel emphasizes an intimate bond between Alison and her father. Bechdel somehow resolves their disagreement into a unity that suggests a sense of relief. In the same way, she ends the book with "the tricky reverse narration" that implies her father's role in "enabl[ing] her to 'fly' as an artist and a woman" (Watson, 2008, p. 50). Thus, this part truly highlights her remark earlier in the book: "the end of his life coincided with the beginning of my truth" (Bechdel, 2006, p. 117).

In its overall structure, we can see Bechdel's work as a process of ongoing negotiation to construct her identity. Alison's attachment to the arts can be examined by a relatively recent sociological theory, symbolic interactionism theory, which "focuses on face-to-face communication or interaction in microlevel social settings" (Caron and Brym, 2014, p. 19). This theory states, "An adequate explanation of social behavior requires understanding the subjective meanings people attach to their social circumstances" (Caron and Brym, 2014, p. 19). In *Fun Home*, this statement is apparent when we look at how Alison lives in an environment that is surrounded by the arts. Additionally, Joanne M. Kaufman and Cathryn Johnson (2004) argue that individuals try to balance "their view of themselves (identity standard)" with "their perceptions of how others see them (reflected appraisals)" (p. 811). Their argument is evident in the way Alison interprets reality through her poems, drawings, diary, and her parents' appraisals of these works. More generally, Bechdel puts these details together and communicates them through *Fun Home*. That way, she also interprets her circumstances that deal with the discovery of her own identity and that of her father. Thus, we gain a sense of parallelism between the way Alison interprets her reality through her artistic works and the way Bechdel does the same thing through *Fun Home*. We have discovered how Alison continually changes her own perspectives of the arts and her parents. With regard to these changes, Rust

Dyonisius: The Arts as Means of Socialization in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (1993) argues: "the linear processes [of identity development] do not accurately reflect the experiences of some subjects" (p. 53). She suggests that the process of self-identification varies between individuals and does not occur in predictable stages. In addition, she also states that the process can involve "reinterpreting past events" (Rust, 1993, p. 55). This notion corresponds to Watson's view that *Fun Home* is a "reworking of lived experience" (Rust, 1993, p. 51). Bechdel herself admits that she discovered connections between her father's life and the literatures that he loved only when she began writing the book (Chute, 2006, p. 1008). Consequently, we need to view *Fun Home* as the crystallization of Bechdel's identity at only one point and realize that she might still be in the process of negotiating her own identity as identity change is "a normal outcome of the dynamic process of identity formation" (Rust, 1993, p. 74).

Taken together, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* shows how the socialization process is internalized through the specific influences of the arts. The parts of the book that show the presence of the arts in Alison's childhood and her initial interest in writing and drawing act as a starting point for her self-identification as these arts become tools for Alison to constantly negotiate her identity. By undergoing this process, Alison is able to interpret reality and make sense of her world. In parallel, *Fun Home* can be viewed as a tool for Bechdel to negotiate her identity by reinterpreting the past through the uses of words and pictures. More broadly, it shows that one's identity can be constructed through intensive engagements with the arts, specifically, graphic-life writing, which can develop our understanding of both others and ourselves.

Thus, if the analysis presented in this paper is valid, it seems appropriate to conclude that *Fun Home* denotes two larger implications for society. First, the creation of self-identity in general is not a linear process, but rather involves points of continuity and discontinuity as people actively and carefully filter information provided by the context in which they grow up to shape their personalities. Equally important, means of socialization such as the arts are crucial in that they function as sites of contention where such process of identity creation occurs.

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