Fun Home 2: Gaps Erasures and Other Lacunae Script

[Slide 1]
A "lacuna," [luh-KYOO-nuh], or its plural form, "lacunae," [luh-KYOO-nee] is a gap. In biology and anatomy, these are the tiny pockets of air in the cells of plants and the "cavities in the substance of bone." But when Alison Bechdel uses the term in *Fun Home* on p. 172, she's referring to two things: (1) its use in manuscript studies, in which a lacuna is a missing part in a manuscript, and (2) the broader adoption of that term in psychology and the study of narrative. We use narrative to give order to our lives, and we tend to like stories that are whole. But we're aware, often painfully aware, that the stories of our lives possess gaps. Sometimes these cavities are the result of natural events, and sometimes they're cultivated by other people or by our own minds: secrets.

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This is the AV lecture for Fun Home 2, and I'll be focusing on Chapter 6, "The Ideal Husband," in order to talk specifically about psychoanalytical criticism, comics, and *Fun Home*. By this point you should have read the Purdue OWL page on psychoanalytical criticism, watched at least one of the posted videos, and reviewed the first six pages of Jared Gardner's essay, "Autobiography's Biography." If you haven't done those things yet, stop this recording and get those things done. Otherwise, this won't make a lot of sense!

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Chapter 6 of *Fun Home* is set in the summer of 1974, and as she writes in that passage I was referring to, "Gaps, erasures, and other lacunae had saturated the news for the past year" (172). She's referring to the Watergate scandal, which began in 1972 after President Richard Nixon, a Republican, approved the burglary and wiretapping of the Democratic National Party's offices in the Watergate Hotel complex. Despite Nixon's attempts to cover up the crime, the media and federal investigators had more or less proven his guilt, and Nixon was on the verge of being impeached when he resigned on August 8, 1974. (For reference, I was less than a month old at the time!)

As she's done throughout the memoir comic with literary sources, Bechdel uses the Watergate scandal as a counterpoint, a kind of mirror, to her father's life story—and hers. This is a chapter filled with near-misses, secrets almost-said, and both the threat and promise of escape. [Next] Like Nixon, Bruce Bechdel commits a crime: he buys beer and gives a can to an underage teen. [Next] But the real so-called crime is Bechdel's homosexuality, and as Alison Bechdel writes on p. 180, "…a whiff of the sexual aroma of the true offense could be detected in the sentence." Her father, in exchange for the charges being dismissed, has to undergo counseling. It's a way for the court to imply that he's guilty for being gay. Now, Bechdel doesn't mention it, but Nixon was pardoned for his crimes by his successor, Gerald Ford. But he was still, in the public mind, considered guilty.

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In just this piece of the chapter, we can do a quick psychoanalytical reading. On the one hand, Bruce Bechdel purchasing beer for the teenager as they look for the teen's brother happens because of repression, and we might argue that it's a form of sublimation: transferring a

repressed emotion (often seen as negative or socially unacceptable) into a more acceptable, positive act. But what about the court's decision? This, too, seems like a form of sublimation, or at the very least, a way of "coding" the unspoken into something more official and acceptable.

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Psychoanalytical criticism engages with the events and characters in a story, and this chapter in *Fun Home* is filled with examples waiting to be analyzed. In her journals, young Alison refers to her first menstrual cycle and then masturbation as "n-ing," a way of "encod[ing]…according to the practice I'd learned in algebra of denoting complex or unknown quantities with letters" (169). [Next] She discovers that she bring her fantasies alive by drawing, but even then she "codes" them as slender male athletes. There's also the scene in which she and her friend Beth playfully dress as men, a common childhood activity that has more significance for Alison.

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Then there's the way Alison's mother throws herself into her master's thesis and her role as Lady Bracknall in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* as a way of repressing her feelings about the truth about her husband. The play, with its artful codes dressed in witty onstage dialogue, returns us to the painful betrayals Wilde experienced, and the criminalization of homosexuality. Wilde, unlike Bruce Bechdel—unlike, in his own way, Nixon—was not so lucky as to escape punishment. Wilde's imprisonment is an example of how, throughout history, social institutions have encouraged and even enforced psychological repression, sublimation, displacement, and so on. (SIDE NOTE, trimmed for time: Wilde maintained his pride. He wrote while in jail, "When first I was put into prison some people advised me to try and forget who I was. It was ruinous advice. It is only by realising what I am that I have found comfort of any kind." He spent two years in jail, and after his release in 1897, he lived in exile and poverty until he died of meningitis in 1900.)

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(Also trimmed for time: One of the reasons that those of us in the field of literary criticism tread lightly when working with psychoanalytical criticism is certainly that we're not trained clinicians. It's also because Freud's theories and methods have been roundly criticized. But it's also because it can encourage the reader to make easy judgments about characters, especially those whose lives, fictional or nonfictional, are lived counter to society's norms.)

One of the reasons *Fun Home* is compelling, then, is that Bechdel herself, as an author, is highly aware of the psychoanalytical readings of her own life story. She's performing such a reading subtly, mostly in the text we read in the comic. *Fun Home*, in this sense, is an attempt to fill in the gaps of her own life.

[Go to Gardner; highlight]
But once again, we have to remember this is a comic: a visual recreation and engagement with that past drawn in the "present," or recent present. And of course, it's Bechdel's own past. So now I want to talk briefly about Jared Gardner's essay. In it, on p. 6, he writes, "The comics form necessarily and inevitably calls attention through its formal properties to its limitations as juridical evidence—to the compressions and gaps of its narrative (represented graphically by the gutterspace between the panels) and to the iconic distillations of its art" (6). First, what does he

mean by "juridical"? It means what it sounds like: judicial, legal, or pertaining to "the administration of justice."

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What I think is interesting here is that, throughout the book, Bechdel attempts to provide us with plenty of "evidence": copious amounts of letters, photographs, maps, texts, and even, in this chapter, a police report. All of them, however, are written in her own hand, drawn like the rest of the book is drawn. This is the "iconic distillation…" Gardner refers to, and if it lacks the objectivity of evidence in a court of law, it communicates the subjectivity of the author/cartoonist.

[Video]
I want to take a look at an interview Bechdel did in 2014. This was after the publication of her second book-length memoir comic, *Are You My Mother?* which is about, as you might guess, her mother. But it's also a much more explicitly psychoanalytical book, and here the interviewer, Ben Greenman, asks her about drawing essays about psychology and parenting in the way she draws her journals, etc., in *Fun Home*:

[play Video, go back to PPT]

Part of Bechdel's response is that redrawing the originals is a way of "replicat[ing] [her] own excitement at running [her] eyes across these words and discovering an idea." "Excitement" might not be the word for it in *Fun Home*, but I think we can argue that a similar sense of discovery is being replicated in the graphic memoir. In other words, *Fun Home* reproduces the journey of discovery Bechdel experienced as an adult looking back on the past—and this, Gardner is saying, is made obvious by the hand-drawn art form of comics. As both he and Ben Greenman imply, the act of drawing these artifacts of history *changes* them, puts them into the new context of the book itself.

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So what does this mean? I want to leave you with two thoughts that might be useful going forward. The first is that because this is a memoir, which means that the author is also a character, and because it's a memoir *comic*, which means the trace of the author's hand is literally on the page, we can legitimately ask psychoanalytical questions about Alison-now, the adult Alison who is authoring. What's interesting about this, perhaps, is that this Alison-now never appears on the page as a character. We know very few details about her life now. In a way, she is a missing piece, a gap. But on the other hand, the entire book reflects who she is now. She is most present in the memoir's text, but also in the compositional choices within the panels—such as the subtle metaphor for temptation and escape in this Roadrunner cartoon—and, if we think back to McCloud, in the interdependence between both text and image. Is she present enough for you, as a reader? Is there something you feel is missing?

The second thing returns us to the question of comics, and art more generally, from a psychoanalytical point of view. What if we think of *Fun Home* as an act of sublimation? In other words, what if Bechdel performs a kind of therapeutic act in making *Fun Home* by turning negative emotion—and, really, the negative of her past that is those gaps, erasures, blankness,

cavities—into a positive outcome? In psychoanalysis, the key is the unconscious, the repressed, and bringing it to the surface. Is that what all memoir comics do? Is that what motivates us to tell our life stories, consciously or unconsciously? Is that what motivates the production of all art?