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Comically Serious: Trauma and Shame in Coming-of-Age Graphic Narratives

“All children have to be deceived if they are to grow up without trauma.”
-Kazuo Ishiguro

The visually arresting nature of the graphic form has appealed to youth from its international emergence in the early twentieth century. Comics of the past, from *Little Nemo* to *The Yellow Kid*, were brief and insubstantial, with “a certain naïve vitality to them, which was an accurate reflection of their age,” (Berger, 19). Graphic novels, however, deviate from these predecessors and are widely read in the current, less innocent age by its arguably less innocent youth. Therefore it is important to examine both the medium and messages of the graphic form and how it not only relates to the current young generation, but also how it re-appropriates the age-old trope of the coming-of-age story, a form of literature that has been crucial and mandatory reading in schools for decades due to the coming-of-age that inevitably follows adolescence. This paper briefly looks at the relevance of women within coming-of-age graphic novels and examines the questionable idea, posed by author Hillary Chute, that some female-authored narratives best convey ideas of trauma and public versus private spheres. It then looks at these issues in relation to a male-authored coming of age graphic narrative and in relation to the trauma of shame, and argues that this story conveys all these elements satisfactorily.

While previous comics such as *Archie* portrayed adolescents forever interacting within a perpetual state of adolescence, today’s graphic novels (which are essentially comics in a longer

format) take the time to develop characters through adolescence and onward, thus adopting the coming-of-age story into a new form. Youth have a non-textual form to look to that is growing in popularity, which is suitably emerging alongside the visually based, media-centric lives of today's teens. Graphic novels replicate "the kinds of multimedia platforms many [youth] are immersed in daily, such as MSN, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube... These sites blur the edges between real life and virtual life with conversations begun in real life continuing in the virtual world of social networks and vice versa" (Hughes, 2). Coming-of-age graphic novels closely reflect the social media that permeates the lives of both adults and adolescents, and use images to unite real life issues and visual (rather than virtual) life. They also instigate a visual and written conversation based on one life that continues into the lives of readers who are both coming-of-age or have already done so.

Like previous coming-of-age stories, these graphic novels bridge numerous gaps and span social climes. Homosexuality, sickness, family problems, social ostracization, and gender roles are all topics authors have now brought into the realm of graphic novels. By breaking out from traditional formats in regards to these youth-targeted messages, authors are achieving a certain type of "realness" to their stories different from those seen in other formats, brought together by stable words and visuals united on a page. Unlike film, readers are able to take time and analyze the text, but unlike books they have visual aid to examine as well, and the combination of the two creates a format particularly suited for coming-of-age stories due to its accessibility to youth, especially in today's culture.

Two graphic narratives¹ that examine the aforementioned issues within coming-of-age narratives are David Small's *Stitches* and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*. In *Fun Home*, Alison Bechdel tells the story of her adolescence growing up in the family funeral home, a house painstakingly and ornately decorated by her father, Bruce Bechdel. The narrative is primarily structured "by its exploration of Bechdel's relationship with her father" (Chute, *Graphic Women*, 176) and often revolves around the author's considerations of the fact that Bruce, a closeted homosexual, died (possibly by suicide) soon after Alison came out to her family as a lesbian. In her book *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*, Hillary Chute looks at female-authored graphic narratives, including *Fun Home*, and how they "reject the categories of nonfiction and fiction altogether in their self-representational storylines" (3). Bechdel does this within *Fun Home* by using novels to frame both her life and her relationship with her father, and Chute looks at these frames in *Graphic Women*. Anastasia Ulanowicz notes that Chute focuses on the fact that "whilst [graphic novels] aim to document lived experience, they also self-reflexively call attention to the discourses and texts that mediate the transmission of such experiences. Thus, for example, Bechdel's literary bildungsroman, *Fun Home*, is framed by allusions to Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*" (5). However, Chute looks at much more than the framing within *Fun Home*, and thoroughly expounds on the theme of trauma within the text, a trauma she associates with public and private spheres, which she says defines *Fun Home* as feminist.

¹ While the term "graphic novel" has historically been used in reference to such texts, comic scholar Hillary Chute says the term is a misnomer, and that "graphic narrative" is a more appropriate term to use in relation to nonfiction comics because they "deliberately place stress on official histories and traditional modes of transmitting history" (*Graphic Women*, 3). Like Chute, I will primarily use the term "graphic narrative" in this paper.

Stitches follows the author from his toddler years to young adulthood, and revolves around his strained relations with his parents. Small's mother is cold and emotionally withholding, and his father is a doctor who inadvertently gives David neck cancer from numerous x-ray treatments. Though the removal of the tumor leaves Small voiceless for years and with a glaring scar on his neck, the majority of his parental conflict occurs with his mother, who has severe mental issues.

Both *Fun Home* and *Stitches* work primarily in what comics scholar Scott McCloud refers to as the "interdependent" format (primarily seen in Western culture) in which "words and pictures go hand-in-hand to convey an idea that neither could convey alone" and often work in a word-specific format in which drawings merely compliment the written narration (though Bechdel does deviate from this format at times by using contrasting words and pictures) (153, 155). *Stitches* and *Fun Home* possess a number of similarities within their family-centric plots, mix of interdependent and word-specific formats, and nonfiction narratives, all of which qualify the novels as coming-of-age graphic narratives.

The two stories, colored in stark two-tones of black coupled with sage (*Fun Home*), and grey (*Stitches*) primarily revolve around the development of Small and Bechdel themselves, as opposed to other characters. The pieces act not only as autobiographies, but play out as, to use a word coined by Bechdel, "tragicomics" which focus on the traumatic events surrounding the authors' coming-of-age narratives. Despite these similarities, Chute claims that they differ due to the sexes of the authors. She states that *Fun Home* is a feminist text partially due to the fact that the narrative explores the idea of trauma in relation to the Bechdel family, and also looks at "subject constitution in mutually inflected private and public spheres" (177). She takes an idea from Cathy Caruth's article "Trauma and Experience" that, "to be traumatized is precisely to be

possessed by an image or an event” which is seemingly a universal concept (4-5). However, in *Graphic Women* Chute not only ignores the masculine, but claims that these issues of trauma in regards to public and private spheres are exclusively a female concept. This essay first looks at why Chute excludes male-authored texts in her analysis and examines this decision as a reaction towards the male-dominated, female suppressing, and often overtly sexist world of comics.

I will then examine the similarities of the two texts in regards to what Chute claims are feminist concepts: public versus private spheres and trauma. *Stitches*, however, is not a feminist novel (not because it is about a man, but because it does not focus on its issues with a feminist lens) but still manages to explore these concepts in a coming-of-age format similar to that of *Fun Home*. The paper examines public and private themes within the two texts. Abiding by Chute’s previously stated definition of trauma, I will then look into its presence within graphic novels and show how *Stitches* exemplifies the concept.

Not only does *Stitches* represent experiences of trauma, but these experiences also have an element of shame to them seen in *Fun Home*. I will examine the trauma of shame the two stories possess, looking into the covert, private masculine trauma of shame in *Stitches* versus the more overt, public feminine one in *Fun Home*. I then will show how this trauma, despite its slight variants in the stories, not only unites the texts with each other, but also with the typical coming-of-age story and, by extension, the reader.

For decades, women in comics have been commonly written as less-than-inspiring characters. Despite the strip’s title, *Blondie* usually revolves around the title character’s husband, while she typically plays the dotting housewife, often complete with apron. In the *Archie* comics, Betty and Veronica are usually portrayed as no more than catty, boy-crazed girls vying for masculine attention. While these both may seem like glib examples, constant exposure to such

comics can reinforce society's ideas in regards to stereotypes, making even this apparently innocent humor serious. In his essay "The Archie Code", which looks at how the comic perpetuates sexual stereotypes in American society, Ronald Glasberg states that, "...dangerous stereotyping is not always to be found in comics featuring extreme violence or sexual excess. Some stereotypes are much more insidious because they masquerade under the guise of innocence or adolescent humor" (1). When sexual stereotyping is presented in a non-threatening, harmless, and even appealing fashion, it poses a danger to American society, in which the battle against blatantly harmful sex stereotypes is still in full swing. Female under representation is also prominent in graphic novels, with the majority or award-winning ones featuring men. Out of nineteen international awards² given to graphic novels, twelve had male protagonists, three had female ones, and four had a combination of both.

The stereotyping, sexism, and under-representation of women seen in comics and graphic novels is one of the reasons Chute focuses only on women in her book, and especially looks at women's coming-of-age graphic narratives. It is also why she almost entirely features *nonfiction* stories of women, which attest to the fact that comics can possess a sense of authenticity and, despite their cartoon-like medium, can provide a window onto the true world. In this world, as Chute shows, there are women with inspiring, and often difficult, lives that can be sympathized with, and strong voices that make assertive arguments. Chute looks at graphic women's personal stories of revolution, body image issues, rape, sexuality, and a plethora of other topics. Even though they are comic women, the characters featured in the text hardly resemble the Blondies, Bettys, and Veronicas of the past. By focusing on independent females within comics, Chute makes them stand out in a literary world where women are often depicted as one-dimensional.

² Looking at the Pulitzer Prize, Hugo Award, World Fantasy Award, Ignatz Award, and Kirby Award

Chute also claims that certain female-authored graphic novels, primarily *Fun Home*, “turn on a characteristically feminist stress on the division between the private and the public” (177). She describes *Fun Home* as being about “an icy intellectual family facing deep internal divisions that result in [Alison’s] father’s death” (177), and says that these divisions both cause and reflect trauma. However, numerous male-authored graphic narratives not only possess this stress, but also use it in a non-feminist light, and *Stitches* provides a prime example of the division within a coming-of-age text like Bechdel’s. But while *Fun Home*’s division is always seen in regards to Bechdel’s family but rarely to Bechdel herself, the public-private division in *Stitches* takes place within the narrator *and* his family.

Much of Bechdel’s focus revolves around the idea that her family’s public life was an appealing masquerade that hid darker secrets. On one page of *Fun Home*, the Bechdels line up for a photo, primly dressed and stone faced. To the viewer they seem to be a cohesive, well-groomed clan. However, the text on the page reads, “[my father] used his skills not to make things, but make things appear to be what they were not. That is to say, impeccable” (16). Delving into the work, one sees how Mr. Bechdel forces this uniform look upon his family, which causes conflict amongst them. Throughout the novel, the reader is privy to his private blow-ups at his children regarding outward appearances, primarily at Alison for not dressing femininely enough. It is implied that the internal conflict in the house separates the family, and when they are inside they live separately. This is portrayed on a page that shows silhouettes of the family members dwelling autonomously, where Alison writes of how “we ate together but otherwise were absorbed in our separate pursuits” (134). The family may attend church and pose for photos outside of the house, but inside they are very distinct entities.

Small's novel also focuses on a battle of public and private personas. His mother, who at home lapses into "furious, silent withdrawals [that] could last for days, even weeks at a time" transforms within the public eye at the bridge club she regularly hosts (17). Small notes how, around others "on those enchanted bridge club evenings, something happened to my mother. She became someone I hardly recognized" (113-114). Accompanying the caption are illustrations of Small's mother at bridge club, her face illustrated in warm, happy expressions that go unseen throughout the rest of the novel.

Later on, Small's parents again clearly keep the private and public as separate entities, placing their worldly appearance before familial concerns. Upon learning of a lump in David's throat, one that eventually becomes cancerous, the family chooses to hide the problem rather than acknowledge it, and literally mask it with a veneer of worldly goods. Amidst near-wordless pages filled with images of car showrooms, new appliances and department stores, David writes of how, "around that time Dad must have gotten a promotion or a raise. The lump in my neck had to wait while he took mother on a shopping spree" (137). Separating private from public in a very large way, the Small parents choose to ignore the private matter of David's health and opt to instead polish their façade of a happy family.

While both the Smalls and the Bechdels focus on putting a happy veneer over a broken household, the lifestyle hidden by the Small family has a much more traumatic effect on the narrator. Even though her father is masking a dark secret and her overall family is internally disjointed, Alison takes advantage of this autonomy to develop as a person. She becomes a self-described archivist, taking advantage of her isolation at home to write in her journal. The Small's internal trauma, however, directly affects David. Not only do his parents ignore his dire medical problem, but they also cause him direct harm. His father subjects him to constant painful medical

treatments, and his mother verbally assaults him for minute reasons. While Alison finds productivity in familial disarray, David's familial disarray only harms him.

It is quite telling that David's mother first becomes aware of the lump at the end of a bridge party, where a family friend points it out to her. After Small's mother has sweetly ushered the guest to the door, she whirls to glare at David, the brief look of calm gone, and hisses, "Can't anything ever go right for me?" blatantly illustrating the public-private line that has been drawn (120). The bridge party is the first instance in the novel where the reader sees the start contrast of the Smalls' public versus private lives, and David's tumor grows alongside their social life.

Strangely, some of the biggest instances regarding public versus private revolve around the masculine in *Fun Home* and the feminine in *Stitches*. Both Bechdel and Small have parents that closet their homosexuality: Small's mother has a relationship with another housewife, and Bechdel's father has an affair with Roy, the babysitter, and neither affair is publicly revealed. Bechdel's father is a respected professor at the high school and there are whispers of his homosexuality around town, but no public acknowledgement of it until *Fun Home* itself (Bechdel's mother has even said she felt betrayed after the book came out, saying Alison had included information she had told her daughter in private) (Chute, "Interview"). In a scene at the beginning of the novel, an image of the composed Bechdel family standing in church is juxtaposed with a text box reading, "He appeared to be an ideal husband and father...but would an ideal husband and father have sex with teenage boys?" (17). Even in the text the lines between public and private are clearly drawn, and the truth exists as a separate entity, boxed off from but existing alongside the images of social projection.

Small addresses his mother's homosexuality very briefly in *Stitches*, which gives the issue a very private air. The incident is addressed for the first and last time within the span of two

pages, when a teenage Small walks into his mother's room, interrupting an intimate moment between her and the neighbor who first noticed David's tumor. Beneath Mrs. Small's public image of happy housewife lies a less public one of angry mother, and beneath that an almost completely closeted sexual nature. While Bechdel separates her father's private sexuality from public life with boxes around text, Small's portrayal of his mother's homosexuality works in an interdependent format, where the words and pictures work together. "After that awkward moment...what stayed with me for the longest time was the look mother gave me," Small writes, and the words almost fade into an exact drawing of that look. That picture then fades into more text, where Small writes of how, "I just happened to be the one who stumbled into the room at the wrong moment, a moment she must have known was coming her whole life" (273). Here the private picture joins with the public acknowledgement of the act. However, this part of David's story remains private in a very different way from Bechdel's parental revelation, for this is the only place in the story he acknowledges his mother's homosexuality. There is no foreshadowing to it, and after the fact it is never mentioned again (except for the epilogue), thus isolating the event from the rest of the story and giving it a private feeling similar to Bechdel's separation of words and pictures.

One major way *Stitches* looks at the relation of private and public lives that *Fun Home* does not is through the use of dreams. While Bechdel relies on strict historical narration to relay her coming-of-age story, Small relays his through dreams from his adolescence. The first of these dreams comes after a confrontation a young Small has with his grandmother that ends with her forcing his hand under scalding water. When David tries to talk to his mother about the situation, she silences him, and his grandmother's cruelty goes unspoken of, at least in reality. However, the reader sees the effect of this secret event on Small within a dream he has following

the incident. Without verbally describing its effect on him to his mother or the reader, Small relates the shame and horror from the event through this dream, in which he is lying in a coffin. Family members surround his dead body, and when a crucifix on the wall cries out that “He was a darn little fool!” his grandmother responds, “That’s right! He needed to learn” (104-105). Viewing Small trapped in a coffin, surrounded by a wall of hostile family members, the reader can feel the suffocation of his private life without any narration.

Another crucial moment where dreams, portrayed in illustrations, convey private feelings that words do not is after David has surgery to remove the tumor in his neck. Left with a garish scar and no voice, he wanders his house in silence. His mother consistently berates him, and with no voice he can only glare back. However, a dream he has after one such berating conveys his emotions with only one word. In it, a small bat wanders forlornly through a storm, crying out “mama!” to the sky. He sees an umbrella and picks it up, shouting “Mama? Mama!” before opening the device and realizing it is in tatters. While in waking life David walks silently through the house glaring at his mother and wallowing in anger over losing his voice. The fact that the bat can only cry for its mother points out the one word that David both wants and needs to yell most, but cannot. Power to just say “mama!” could enable David to convey anger, sadness, love, or longing for her attention. Some of these emotions, such as anger, he consciously wants to convey, and some, like love, may be hidden. However, David is unable to verbally express any feelings towards his mother, even the vivid anger he possesses. But the most prominent emotion seen in the dream seems to be a desire for love, even if David does not acknowledge it while awake. Without words the dream shows the reader the helplessness and desire for love he feels, but may not even be consciously aware of.

Dreams are so crucial to Small's narration that he closes his coming-of-age story with the most revealing one in the novel. Using an interdependent format, Small illustrates a dream in which he sees his mother sweeping a path from his house to an asylum, where she and his grandmother reside. He realizes that she is, "sweeping the path clearing the way for me to follow" (324). Here Small publicly reveals the important inner truth that he possesses a potential for the insanity found in his relatives. By allowing public sight of this dream, Small admits that perhaps he is not as sound as he would like to believe. However, the last two words of the novel interplay with the visuals to provide a more satisfying ending than any real-life narration, and with the words, "I didn't" following the previous quote, written alone on a stark white page, Small proves to the world that he has won a crucial private battle (325). The solitude of the text on the page provides an emphasis to the reader. If the reader takes anything away from the story, Small wants it to be this idea, and places it in a void free from distracting images, where the reader is forced to solely acknowledge the singular message presented to him.

While Chute argues that issues of public and private seen in graphic novels are a feminist concept, Small's conveyance of private feelings breaks intimate boundaries in ways that even Bechdel does not, and none of these boundaries deal with femininity. While Alison's narration is consistently frank in regards to all aspects of her adolescent life, that technique itself makes her private issues rather public. Allison as character never has monumental problems acknowledging her own private issues, and neither does Allison as author. This is not to say Bechdel does not experience ambivalence throughout the novel, but she always handles the ambivalence in a collected manner, and it is always ambivalence caused by others. When Alison comes out as a lesbian she feels "exhilarated" and only encounters problems from this private announcement from her parents, who send her a "devastating" response. It is never Alison's inner life that she

presents as traumatic, even in the most soul-bearing moments, but others' influences on her life that cause problems (110).

While this does give the narrator an air of self-assurance, it also means *Fun Home*'s story provides more insight to other character's private lives, and reveals very little about any of Bechdel's own inner conflict. Any issues of public versus private within *Fun Home* belong to other people, and Alison almost never has to deal with problems in that vein. The only examples of private-public conflict that affect the narrator are seen in how her overall family is different at home than in public. Small, however, lets the reader into the meat of his psyche via his dreams, and introduces him or her to ideas so private that the character David may not even acknowledge them in any way but dreams.

While *Stitches* may provide a more invasive look into the author's psyche, both texts deal extensively with private, traumatic experiences. The trauma Chute pinpoints within *Fun Home* revolves around Bechdel's reactions to her discovery of Bruce Bechdel's sexuality and the consequences that stem from it. Chute claims trauma comes from being possessed by an event, and the repetition of certain scenes in *Fun Home* reflect how moments involving her father "possessed" Alison Chute she notes how, "the phone conversation in which Alison's mother reveals that her father slept with Roy...repeats, significantly, three times across the text, as does the phone conversation in which Alison talks to her father about her own gayness a few months before his death. And Bechdel returns, over and over, to an imagined scene of the moment with the truck before her father's death" (183). *Fun Home* relies on this repetition to convey an idea of possession (and perhaps even obsession), that is a significant sign of trauma. However it also places a strong focus on aspects of Bechdel's life that revolve around deviation from repetition, specifically involving her parents (Chute, *Graphic Women*, 184). While Alison is traumatized

and possessed by events involving both her mother and father, she also actively breaks away from them by vehemently denying their way of life, vowing to “never get married [and to] carry on the artist’s life they had each abdicated” (73) making *Fun Home* a juxtaposition of possession through trauma versus breaking new ground, though this groundbreaking is caused by the latter possession.

Stitches, too, is a novel about experiencing the repetitiveness of trauma while still breaking away from static forces. The most striking and prominent trauma seen within the novel is introduced in a chapter where a young David is exploring the hospital in which his father works, and where he is subjected to numerous x-rays. Adventuring around, he eventually comes upon a jar containing an embalmed fetus, which David imagines crawls out and chases him through the hospital. The fetus follows David throughout the novel, consistently resurfacing in relation to the tumor he develops. He often imagines the tumor as a womb for the fetus, and illustrates an x-ray view of it glaring menacingly out of his neck. For David, it is a representation of not just his trauma associated with seeing the jar, but the trauma surrounding the hospital itself. It is a physical representation of the fear he feels while being constantly examined and x-rayed, and this fear becomes a literal manifestation in his tumor, which he constantly obsesses over in the surreal, fetus-in-neck fashion. One of the most significant instances of closure in the novel comes with this trauma, directly after David has made peace with his dying mother. He goes back to the pathology department of the hospital, and gazes at a jarred fetus. While every other image within the novel portrays the fetus as a glaring, overtly traumatic figure, it now simply floats in the far, eyes closed. David’s tumor, his mother, and the hospital itself are no longer threats.

Trauma-as-repetition is also prominently seen within oral imagery and representation in *Stitches*. After the removal of his tumor and the loss of his voice, David starts to consistently fantasize about being an explorer within his own mouth. He examines his damaged vocal cords, cowers on the tip of his tongue, and leans against his teeth. Soon David begins to feel he is “living inside [his] own mouth” (216) at night. Unable to speak, he constantly obsesses over the idea of being trapped within his own body, and the trauma of his experiences is thusly conveyed as a consistent, imprisoning force. And while there are literal mouths that repeat themselves as symbols of trauma, there is also the repeating image of doors and hallways that serve as a metaphor for David’s mouth and his ability to speak. He has recurring dreams throughout the novel which feature him walking through a door and into a hallway. The hall itself eventually narrows to the point that David must crawl through a tiny doorway, which opens up to a cavernous, bombed cathedral. The initial doorway serves as a symbol for David’s mouth, and the narrowing hallway is the continuing damage inflicted on it, which leads to the destroyed cathedral: his tumor. However, as with the fetus, the final variation of this traumatic repetition is significant to the novel’s closure. In the last pages of the novel, he again dreams of wandering through a strange building. However, David is no longer restricted to one hallway, but is instead able to wander through a mansion’s expansive hallways that never narrow. It is at the end of this dream that David’s mother beckons him towards the mansion, and he stands up and refuses her. Here his voice no longer leads to a place of destruction, but a place of progress in which he is now able to figuratively speak for himself. The repetition and change of oral imagery within *Stitches* is the clearest symbol of character development within the novel. After his surgery, David feels trapped, and the initial oral imagery represents this. But as time goes on, the oral

symbols become more expansive, until David eventually feels comfortable within them, just as he eventually finds peace within the loss of his voice.

While both narratives show trauma via repetition, they also place an emphasis on breaking away from trauma by breaking away from the norm. As previously mentioned, Bechdel moves from the trauma of her disjointed family by trying to live a lifestyle opposite to her parents'. David, in turn, moves from the trauma of his home by attempting to establish a persona unlike his parents' and to adopt new forms of family. The entirety of *Stitches* is the story of Small's quest to deviate from his parents and the trauma that surrounds them. The most prominent examples of his attempt at emotional dissimilarity are seen in David's discussions with his psychiatrist. The entirety of David's relationship with his parents is veiled in secrecy involving sexuality, illness, and family history. When he is with a psychiatrist, David breaks from this mold, moving from "a house where silence reigned and free speech was forbidden" to a "haven" where he openly discusses his feelings (268). David also finds a familial deviation from his parents in his psychiatrist, who treats him "like a favorite son" (269) and insists David has reasons to be unhappy, is not crazy, and is a bright person. Later in life, David emotionally deviates from the trauma of his parents by openly expressing himself through art, as a painter. He also finds a new version of family where he feels "normal...and less lonely" (300). This family lives in a dilapidated house and consists of characters like a man painting a room with a two-inch brush and a pregnant couple living in the bathroom. Not only does David find alternate forms of family to distance himself from the trauma of his own, but he also finds a "family" drastically different from the one he grew up with.

While both texts feature attempts at escaping trauma caused by others, much of the trauma within these tragicomics stems from a personal sense of shame. Author Daniel Warden's

article “The Shameful Art” looks at shame within comics and graphic novels. He cites Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who says that shame is crucial to adolescent development because it “floods into being as a moment, a disruptive moment, in a circuit of identity-constituting indemnificatory communication. Blazons of shame, the 'fallen face' with eyes down and head averted—and, to a lesser extent, the blush—are semaphores of trouble and at the same time of a desire to reconstitute the interpersonal bridge” (36). Sedgwick argues that shame isolates the individual, putting them in a private sphere, but also causes a desire for social interaction within the context of the shame-causing event (37). Comics (and other art forms) that feature shame thusly satisfy the desire for relation for their readers, especially adolescents going through shameful experiences. They are bound to “a particular mode of effective immediacy” (893) Worden says mirrors the shame of getting caught with pornography. In this way comics connect with their readership through the universal theme of shame by revealing hidden, embarrassing truths. Many authors of graphic novels give themselves up to the reader by making their own private lives public. The conflict of isolation and a desire for interaction seen in graphic narratives are the same shameful elements that cause trauma within adolescents, and these relations of shame, public/private, and trauma can be clearly seen as almost essential facets to coming-of-age stories. Such elements of shame are certainly seen within *Stitches* and *Fun Home*, but while *Fun Home* focuses on the more public aspect of shame, *Stitches* focuses on the isolation of it.

Photographs are a recurring theme in *Fun Home*, and these photos often attest to the public shame of the Small family. While, as previously stated, Alison-as-author focuses very little on her own private life, one does get a glimpse into her adolescent thoughts through journal entries, and she takes full advantage of the graphic form by making direct visual copies of these entries within *Fun Home*. In an interview, Bechdel speaks of how she “Very painstakingly [put

together the material]. That was one of the crazier rabbit holes I went down into on this project—reproducing my childhood diary entries and my dad's handwritten letters. It's all very carefully traced and redrawn. Except for one very small bit of actual childhood handwriting that I just scanned in a moment of laziness” (Chute, “Interview”, 142).

By not just copying her journal entries but by also directly replicating the journal, Bechdel issues an open invitation to her trauma of shame. The act of journaling itself is also a public expression here, in the sense that putting words to a page provides concrete evidence of one's present state of mind. In *Fun Home* Alison clearly possesses an uncertainty regarding her own state of mind, and the shame of this continuously crops up in her journal. The first of her entries start out “blandly enough” with no real standout information, but then Alison undergoes an “epistemological crisis” in which she is uncertain if what she writes is completely true (141). As time progresses, the entries remain banal lists of the days' experiences, but eventually “the minutely-lettered phrase *I think* begins to crop up between [her] comments” (141). The chaos of Alison's outside life, of her family's deterioration and a developing case of obsessive-compulsive disorder, soon begins to physically manifest in her diary, and soon the “I think”s turn into a “curvy circumflex” (142) Alison draws directly over her entries to signify the term. Bechdel describes these journal entries as a “language failure” (144), and they physically represent her own failure to cope with familial problems and even to trust her own memory. There are numerous circumflexes dotting the later entries, aggressively drawn to cover words and paragraphs simultaneously, and these personal edits express a sense of shame at not being able to trust oneself.

The use of replication in Bechdel's journals finds an analogue within the photos featured throughout the piece. The beginning of each chapter features a realistic drawing of a real Bechdel

family photo, and these illustrations stand out in stark contrast to the more cartoon-like images in the rest of the novel. As with the journals, Bechdel is re-appropriating the private as public, though many of these images are not inherently shameful. But the one photo that is crucial in regards to shame is another such realistic drawing (which is not placed at the beginning of a chapter), and is the only drawing within the novel that spans two pages. As with the idea of public and private, Bechdel gives very little insight into her own issues of shame within the novel, but plenty to her family's. The most prominent source of shame within the Bechdel household is Bruce's habit of sleeping with young men, which is an open secret throughout town. Bechdel solidifies this particular shame within her family via the two-page drawing, which is a replica of a photo she found amongst Bruce's possessions after his death. In it, the Bechdel's teenage babysitter, Roy, is lounging on a bed in his underwear in an intimately lit room. Here Bechdel is publicly advertising her family's shame, especially Bruce's. When he is sentenced to therapy after being caught giving a teenage boy alcohol, Bechdel describes her father's response as "a shameful mien" in which he tells her, "I'm bad. Not good like you" (153). The shame of her family, particularly her father, is exemplified in the incredibly private photo Bechdel makes incredibly public. As with Alison's journal entries, both the illustration of the photo, which reincarnates the shameful event, and the publicizing of this shame attest to the overt nature of trauma within *Fun Home*.

By revealing her father's private shame, Bechdel also reflects the melancholy of his privatized, hidden nature: something often seen in *Stitches* in relation to David. Daniel Worden makes a note of how there is a tradition in comics that centers on "intimacy, shame, and masculine melancholia...[and] the centrality of affect and gender" (893). This theme is certainly seen within *Stitches*, and while there is only one incident directly regarding shame and gender

within the novel, it is the first example of the internal shame that carries throughout Small's narrative. In an attempt to escape family life, David often runs through the neighborhood with a scarf tied on his head, pretending he is Alice exploring Wonderland. Parents pull their children inside away from him, and he makes a desolate playground his fantasy realm. Soon, however, other children come, see the game, and drive David away. He escapes home, and internalizes this trauma through drawing, imagining that he is sucked into a world of his illustrations to play with them instead. While Alison puts her shame in physical form through diaries or photos, David's feelings of it are completely intangible outside of the graphic form, and exist solely within his psyche.

Worden's article introduces an idea of "masculine melancholy" that directly relates to the shame seen in David's narrative. The shame from masculine melancholy revolves around "a matrix of norms governing gender and sexuality [in which] certain identifications... must be disavowed yet internalized, creating a core of gender melancholy" (902). Shunned and embarrassed by his peers for breaking gender norms, David further isolates himself at home by delving into his drawings and internalizing his morose. This melancholy establishes a link between David's masculinity and trauma that causes him to possess the "taciturn, passive masculinity riddled with loss and endless longing" (902) seen throughout the novel. Even though the issue of David's gender identity is only briefly mentioned within the text, the isolation and masculine melancholy that is manifest in the incident sets the tone for the rest of the work.

The morose feel introduced at the beginning of the novel carries on throughout the rest of the book, and while there are no additional, specific incidents of shame until after David's surgery, the forced internalization created at the beginning carries through his adolescence, isolating him from his cold parents. This tone, however, is only directed towards his family, until

his surgery renders him unable to easily communicate and thus forces him into even more extensive isolation. Once in high school, having lost his voice, David encounters a new form of social, rather than familial, shame that thoroughly cuts him off from all people in his life. Small depicts his descent into this isolation within two pages: the first shows images of David gradually losing form, until he becomes a void of man-shaped white space in the hallway of his high school. On the next page the reader's attention is immediately drawn to a party scene: a couple kissing jumps off the page, and people happily mill about in the background. It is only after close examination that one notices David, despite his central position in the crowd. He is in a chair, slumped down, arms crossed. In place of facial features is a blank white mask; by losing his voice, David has lost all human identification amongst his peers.

Small writes of how "back in school, at first [I was] wildly self-conscious. I soon learned, when you have no voice, you don't exist. Among old friends I felt invisible, a shadow flickering around the edges of every event" (212-213). David's shame is at first an intensified version of the common embarrassment adolescents possess in regards to appearance. Not only is he in high school and forced to deal with the usual shame of physically growing up in front of his peers. In addition, while most adolescents do not have to deal with physical imperfections beyond acne, David now has a glaring scar on his neck that intensifies this self-consciousness beyond what is normally experienced in high school.

The next wave of embarrassment within *Stitches* stems from the fact that, despite David's glaring abnormality, he is invisible. His disfigurement leads to the loss of his voice, and, worse than being ashamed but still acknowledged as a human, David's peers now act as if he does not even exist. Again, as he previously acted when faced with social ostracization, David escapes into his imagination and soon comes the aforementioned scene in which he takes refuge in his

own mouth. In this image, the teeth are tightly closed and no light seeps in. He is privatizing his shame to the fullest extent, and even David's mental interpretations of his trauma seclude the humiliation associated with it inside his own body. Unlike Bechdel, whose examples of shame exist in a physical form, Small's experiences with the emotion are completely internal, and only publicly exist through the novel.

The final clear example of Small's private shame comes directly before he makes amends with his mother and escapes from his mental prison. Liberated from his family, David lives independently in a shoddy apartment while still in high school. However, despite his freedom, Small's silence keeps him from a normal life. This hindrance deeply affects both his social interactions and his art, which has become David's only way of expressing himself to the outside world. Small relates how "without realizing how perfectly they represented my state, I painted a brick wall and a closed door" (297). David's only form of expression has become yet another type of blockade. Instead of opening himself up back up to his peers, David surrounds himself with the aforementioned misfits, such as the couple living in the bathroom. He paints a wall against the world and, more specifically, against the friends he shamefully hides himself from. David opts to hide behind this brick wall, not letting opportunities for shame or for social redemption in. Instead he associates with outcasts much older than himself, outcasts he does not truly belong with, rather than exposing himself to potential humiliation (but also to potential re-acceptance) amongst his classmates.

This thread regarding the trauma of shame creates ostensible differences between *Fun Home* and *Stitches*, but it also unites them with not only each other, but also with coming of age stories and the reader. While *Stitches'* inner shame and *Fun Home's* more outer one may seem somewhat disparate, they are unified through the aforementioned theme of public and private

spheres that carries throughout both works and links their ideas regarding the trauma of shame. While Bechdel focuses on physical examples of shame and Small on mental, by doing so they are making the private public. Both authors give the world insight to familial truths that would have otherwise not been revealed, despite their physical presence or lack thereof. So while Small's revelations of shame would be wholly intangible if not for his novel, Bechdel's would still be only accessible to a few, and this idea makes both novels prime examples of the unification of public and private spheres.

This visual assertion of making private shame publicly accessible within coming-of-age graphic novels possesses strong parallels to the environment in which current youth are growing up. Bradford Wright notes how during World War II "comic books offered up soldiers and housewives as heroic role models for a generation coming of age in both affluence and anxiety" (110). In the same way, graphic novels offer adolescents coming of age in a digital society a form they can easily relate to. These novels bear visual similarities to social networks and are a new way to reflect the shame of today's youth, whose almost obligatory lives online can be closely scrutinized and critiqued through a computer monitor.

In graphic narratives like *Stitches* and *Fun Home*, lives are displayed upon the page for better and for worse. The visual interpretations of these lives are accompanied by either shaming or redeeming captions, much like online photos in which one can post a complementary or a stinging comment. Small and Bechdel had the choice to expose themselves and reveal private lives through their literary identities, much as teenagers have the choice to create online identities that reveal their own private lives. Eighteen-year-old Kirsten "Kiki" Ostrenga was recently featured in *Rolling Stone* solely because of the Internet fame she has garnered via social networks. Ostrenga does not cultivate just a widely embraced image for herself for online fans,

but also chooses to make private, unglamorous issues like her depression public on sites such as Myspace and Twitter. While many offer Ostrenga support, she is also very publicly shamed with comments like “Let's start a I hate Kiki club 'cause she's ugly!” (Rubin Erdely). The worst of Ostrenga’s public shaming occurred four years ago, at the height of her Internet fame, when her boyfriend killed himself. After the incident, Internet commentators incessantly hounded her as the cause of his death. While teens like Ostrenga may not be exposing their private lives and shame to a public audience in quite the scholarly way Bechdel and Small do, their willingness to do so (and to devote attention to others acting similarly) attests to an openness not seen in earlier generations, and to a desire for immersion within other’s private lives. Graphic novels, which so closely mirror the experience of social networks, are sure to become beneficial tools in guiding young people who would have once looked to Salinger or Blume for a relational experience, but now wish to experience literature in a way more attuned to their digital lifestyles.

The intertwining of shame and public/private spheres within *Stitches* and *Fun Home* do not just limit reader appreciation to the younger set. Ware writes of how in comics “doors open into rooms remembered from childhood, faces form into dead relatives, and distant loves appear, almost magically, on the page—all deceptively manageable, visceral, the combinations sometimes even revelatory” (12), and Worden notes how this form “emphasizes the importance of intimacy with the text” (896). By creating this autobiographical intimacy the author is allowing readers of any age to share in it and seek themes that relate to their own lives. One of the most vulnerable aspects of intimacy that *Stitches* and *Fun Home* reveal, shame, is also easily understood by the reader and encourages further relation with the text, as personal embarrassment is a universal and normally privatized concept. By allowing the reader a deep intrapersonal connection to his or her shame, and by delivering this connection in a visual way

that makes the text even more intimate, the authors of these graphic narratives create a sense of unity in the reader, since shame is isolating but at the same time creates a desire for belonging (Worden 894). Graphic novels provide readers with personal accounts of shame through which they can fulfill the desire to relate to others created by their own incidents of personal disgrace.

The three major ideas looked at within this paper have been Chute's idea of public/private spheres within graphic narratives, Worden's idea of comic book shame, and how trauma interacts with and unites the two. While Chute is incorrect in saying these spheres are feminist concepts like she claims, they are still incredibly crucial to the narratives, especially coming-of-age ones. Worden's idea of shame, too, is strong, and his reasoning behind why shame often unites the reader with the text is a very plausible argument. However, Chute's points within her book prove to be stronger than those within Worden's article. While Worden looks at shame within graphic narratives, Chute observes it in a larger, more relevant context that brings additional significance to the concept. In the chapter on *Fun Home* alone, Chute looks not just at the aforementioned spheres and at trauma, but also at the singular topic of Worden's article: shame. She is quick to note how this shame plays out and manifests itself in with the spheres of the Bechdel household, and quotes a line from the book in which Alison notes how her father's shame "inhabited our house as pervasively and invisibly as the aromatic musk of aged mahogany" (Bechdel 20, Chute 180). Here Chute unites shame and public/private spheres within one sentence, and then goes on to connect this shame with the trauma seen in the novel in regards to Bruce's death. Chute understands the broad extent to which subjects such as shame can be examined with other related ones, while Worden does not expand the scope of his article beyond the idea of shame.

Chute's book is also superior to Worden's article in regards to gender. While Chute does make the incorrect argument that public/private spheres of trauma are a feminist concept, she does not restrict the concept to female-authored graphic narratives. Worden, however, asserts that shame within comics is almost exclusive to men. In the part about "masculine melancholy" he says that since the male-authored pieces in the issue have less "emphasis on forming social bonds" than *one* of the female-authored pieces, the men in *McSweeney's* therefore prove that shame in comics is not often featured in women's narratives. This generalization is glaringly incorrect, as seen when looking at examples of shame not just in *Fun Home*, but also throughout *Graphic Women*.

While both Chute and Worden's works have their flaws, their scholarly unification brings about interesting and crucial insight to the forms and themes of coming-of-age graphic narratives. Together they enable a closer reading of narratives such as *Stitches* and *Fun Home*, and not only allow readers to compare and contrast the texts, but also provide valuable insight into the key elements of successful coming-of-age graphic narratives. Adolescents of the digital age are often drawn away from the written and into the visual, and it is important to discover what trends in graphic literature work so that even the most reading-adverse students may take an interest in and garner information from a new literary medium that appeals to them.

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