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Graphic Meets Canon

by Samantha Vargas

“Graphic novel” was considered a dirty word in the public school classroom during my high school years. It was often brushed off as a “comic book” meant for children, with an arrogant upturned nose of academia. When I was in high school, the book list for the English curriculum strictly consisted of canon texts. Once every few weeks, I would be handed an abused secondhand copy of *Romeo and Juliet* or *The Odyssey* or *The Scarlet Letter*. Not only were these books growing mold within their spines, but the corresponding lessons were too. Wondering why we could not breathe some fresh air into the classroom, I would hastily thumb through graphic novels under my desk. Often times, I was scolded for this vigilante style reading beneath my desk top. My parents found this reprimanding comical since ultimately I was learning by reading more during class. However, I propose that graphic novels have a place in the classroom. Simply, “the new and unfamiliar are often also vigorous and enlightening” (Applebee, 231). This idea is vital as the current state of the English book curriculum lacks diversity due to its adherence to Anglo Saxon culture. Unfortunately, a lack of diversity in the literature curriculum is quite detrimental as it favors “the college-bound, primarily white, middle class students,” while excluding more diverse students in terms of race, gender, and socio-economic status (Applebee, 232). The blatant reality is that “the students who need the most help get the least attention in curriculum planning and curriculum revision (Applebee, 232). If the educational system continues not to account for the different needs, cultures, and learning styles of all of the students, then this vicious cycle shall perpetuate. The graphic memoir, *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel, offers a strong example of the merits of using a graphic novel in the curriculum because *Fun Home* offers numerous text features such as allusions, symbols, graphics, multiple perspectives, identity formation, and differentiation.

The most obvious difference between a conventional novel and a graphic novel is its inclusion of illustrations. In fact, the majority of a graphic novel is comprised of “frames” in which the comic illustrations are drawn. The text portion is minimal, and is present in speech bubbles or along the bottom of the comic frames. Simply, a graphic novel lends itself as a visual tool in the classroom. This is extremely relevant because it directly caters to students who are more visual learners. Thus, *Fun Home* would allow for differentiation regarding visual learners and low level readers, who are a much under represented group when it comes to the literary curriculum. In addition, students with learning disabilities such as ADD or ADHD may also be accounted for in terms of differentiation with the addition of a graphic novel in the classroom. This is because each page on a graphic novel offers so many different aspects; each page is chock full of multiple images, symbols, text, etc. There is always something new to observe/read in a graphic novel- some are even interactive in their format and require the reader to physically flip or turn the book upside or sideways. Thus, a visual learner, a low-level reader, or a student with learning disabilities may find *Fun Home* more engaging and easier to read and comprehend due to its visual format.

The graphic elements in *Fun Home* are not just important in terms of differentiation methods, but how well it incorporates text features. For many readers, reading comprehension is not so easily achieved, and similarly, it is not so easy for teachers to teach about the reading comprehension process. Bechdel 's utilization of the comic form externalizes the usual internal reading process; the images in the novel act as a physical representation of otherwise normally abstract literary concepts. This includes imagery, which is apparent in a myriad of traditional literature. The illustrations in *Fun Home* are a concrete example of what imagery does in the reader's mind: it draws or paints a picture. Here, the effect of imagery is obvious, especially to a low level who may not as readily be able to conceptualize and visualize the abstract text feature. Similarly, the graphic novel medium lends itself to teaching about mood in writing; light, shadows, color palettes, style of cartooning, composition of

the frames, size of the frames, etc. all work together to relay the mood of the graphic novel, externalizing the conceptualization of mood in literature. For example, Bechdel utilizes a cool color palette including blues, greys, and black to enhance the dark nature of the twisted tragi-comedy. Ironically, she pairs the somber coloring with a childlike cartoon style in which the juxtaposition of the serious versus imaginative adolescent mind create a two-tiered mood. Once again, the aesthetic text features allow for a more stimulating read in terms of visual engagement, and the reading comprehension process of language characteristics becomes clearer by externalizing it.

In addition, *Fun Home* is also instructive in its physical representation of perspective. The structure of the graphic memoir can be described as a circle maze of sorts that starts from the outside and spirals into the center of the story that goes over the same material, but a slightly altered perspective. This altered perspective is due largely to the addition of allusions, and what they can do to a narrative when it is placed under a specific perspective lens, in this case it being a literary/artistic perspective. Allusions to Greek myths, traditional “canon” literature, and visual arts are scattered throughout the text; the events of Bechdel's family dynamic during her childhood are portrayed through this allusive lens. The allusions are once again physical in their representation whether it be a comic frame including a specific work of art or an excerpt from a dictionary definition or a quote from another piece of literature. The inclusion of allusions allows for class discussions that call for higher level critical thinking in terms of analysis and connecting the modern literature to more conventional curriculum selections in regards to theme, narrative content, motifs, etc. Hence, the structure of the memoir allows for discussion of multiple perspectives: the personal, the child versus the adolescent, the patriarchal figure, society, the homosexual, the maternal figure, the reminiscing adult, and so forth. Additionally, larger overarching perspectives such as such as psychoanalysis, performance/visual arts, social issues, and feminism/gender theories may be applied in the discussion of *Fun Home*. Therefore, the study of the theories and perspectives that the graphic novel encompasses allow for active learning that extends to cross-curricular studies in class discussions.

Simply, “when cultural differences are recognized, legitimized, and bridged, students may participate more actively in school reading activities” (Bloome). Currently, the LGBT community is an emerging body in society, and it is still in need of representation in the academic world. Very few, if any, novels in a traditional English classroom curriculum attend to the conflicts surrounding the LGBT individual. Realistically, there will be students who identify with the LGBT community or are struggling in terms of gender identity. By providing a book that deals with these relevant social topics, the gap between reading and cultural differences like homosexuality can be bridged. Thus, students who identify with this under-represented culture will be able to connect with a piece of literature in terms of its diverse theme representation; subsequently, students will be more apt to participate in reading based activities, and find themselves engaged in this: a text that tells a version of their own personal story in the classroom. Bechdel's memoir provides a critical exploration of applicable themes and issues that arise when one is maturing into an adult from adolescence. This particular novel is an important bildungsroman in terms of the current time; it is more accurate in its depiction of the psychological and moral growth that a student of today's society will encounter from youth to adulthood, based on its more accurate cultural diversity. This is apparent in the relevant themes Bechdel includes: sexual orientation, gender roles, suicide, emotional abuse, dysfunctional familial relationships, and the role of literature in understanding one's identity are raised. All in all, Bechdel's memoir reaches out to a diverse array of individuals with her innovative presentation of the memoir genre through an aesthetically pleasing medium.

This idea “bridging” a gap is critical to ensuring the achievement of all students in the classroom, especially when it comes to the notion of literacy. Unfortunately, literacy is usually viewed through a single academic lens that only considers the types of reading that occurs in the classroom, ignoring what other reading activities and literacy may be achieved outside of the classroom, but in one's home culture. “What gets counted as 'reading' can be both situation specific and ethnocentric”

(Bloome). Basically, this stipulates that “there is a great deal of variety in reading activities” that are contingent upon the different aspects of reading as a social process. “For example, students may do a lot of reading...read notes, share comic books, read directions...read signs and labels- but the only reading that may get counted as *reading* by the teacher and students may be the oral rendition of the basal story during reading group instruction. All of the reading activities that they do may simply not get recognized as reading” (Bloome). As a result, minority students are considered less literate by classroom standards, even though they may be perfectly literate in his or her own home culture or in different reading activities that are just not being recognized as reading. This is problematic because it allows more “power” of literacy to more culturally represented students, usually those who have a similar background the roots of canon literature; this puts some students at an advantage in terms of test scores as well as having a higher social status in the classroom. *Fun Home* deconstructs this ideal in its inclusion of varied types of reading such as visual, comic, artistic, symbolic, abstract, etc.

In summation, the need for a more diverse curriculum in the classroom is incredibly important. “Whether intentional or not, schools have chosen to ignore diversity and assimilate everyone to the 'classical' culture that found its way to ensure that our programs are culturally relevant as well as culturally fair- that no group is privileged while others are marginalized by the selections we choose to teach” (Applebee, 235). The negative implications of this practice are vast: some students will fall behind, struggle, and not perform as well their culturally represented peers. This is due to their inability to connect with a text, low literacy (or what the school deems as 'literacy'), a lack of differentiation, and disinterest in the subject material. How can teachers amend this vicious cycle of establishing a social status hierarchy of readers in the classroom? The answer is fairly simple in theory: “it is an issue of finding the proper balance. . . [for the] complex and changing fabric of American society” (Applebee, 235). Thus, by providing more diverse texts that represent different cultures of students (ie. race, religion, sexual orientation, gender, divergent learning styles, etc.), differentiation is achieved in terms of reading levels as well as one's interest and connection to the literature. As a result, social statuses of reading will diminish, literacy will improve because the idea of literacy becomes more inclusive by accounting for different types of reading. *Fun Home* provides an abundant amount of differentiation to a book list due to its graphic novel format.

Works Cited

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