

Alison bechdel's fun
home and michel
foucault's "repressive
hypothesis"



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Michel Foucault begins his essay "We 'Other' Victorians" with a description of what he calls the "repressive hypothesis" (Foucault 10). This hypothesis holds that openly expressing sexuality at the beginning of the seventeenth century was considered shameless. Transitioning into the Victorian era and with the development of the Victorian bourgeoisie, sexuality began to take on an entirely different meaning. Any physical act or visual representation of sexuality with a purpose separate from procreation became considered "illegitimate," paving the way to a generation of repressive silence (Foucault 3). In modern American culture, it can be argued that society has "liberated [itself] from those two long centuries in which the history of sexuality [has been] seen first of all as the chronicle of an increasing repression," but to assume this position is to assume that the repressive hypothesis is accurate, and the Victorians were in fact sexually repressed (Foucault 5). Foucault challenges this stance, arguing that the Victorians were more sexually liberated than modern society generally considers them to have been. Rather, this consideration is based on a sense of sovereignty that can be gained from triumphing over a repressive force by engaging in any activity widely considered to be taboo. In Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, Alison's indulgence in lesbian literature and experience within the gay community rewards her with a sense of liberation. In considering Foucault's "repressive hypothesis," this could be based on Alison experiencing a sudden sense of freedom due to breaking away from the sexual repression of our Victorian ancestors. The intent of this essay is to investigate Alison's invigorating exploration of sexual identity through language, physical expression, and satisfaction gained from a sense of community. Foucault argues that during the Victorian period, there was a shift from considering sexuality as

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behaviour-based to identity-based, as a number of identity categories came to light. Partly due to this historical shift, Alison comes to terms with her sexual identity through discourse before actually engaging in sexual intimacy with another woman, experiencing “ a revelation not of the flesh, but of the mind” (Bechdel 74). Alison spends a great deal of time in the library researching lesbian-friendly books such as *Word is Out: Stories of Some of our Lives* by Nancy Adair, and *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hill. In this passage, Alison recalls that she “ first learned the word [lesbian] due to its alarming prominence in [her] dictionary” (Bechdel 74). Following this discovery, Alison begins to identify with the word and accepts its importance in the definition of her identity. According to author Timothy Murphy, “ some scholars ... assert that in their modern form, [gay and lesbian] identities were created in the medical and sexological discourses of the late 18th century” (Murphy 598). Therefore, the word “ lesbian” did not exist in pre-Victorian discourse, whereas it is prominent in Alison’s 21st century discourse, and plays a deciding factor in her conceptualization of personal identity. Elsa, a character in one of the books represented in this passage, was born in 1898 and “ never had that crossing-over crisis that people talk about these days – the feeling that you have to have some kind of an indoctrination or trauma, or a coming-out ritual” (Bechdel 74). This clearly shows the generation gap regarding discourse between the Victorian times and Alison’s modern day. Foucault stresses modern society’s emphasis on overcoming sexual repression in order to feel liberated and powerful. In this passage of *Fun Home*, there are examples of Alison acting in concordance with Foucault’s repressive hypothesis. Following her identification with the word “ lesbian,” Alison “ screwed up [her] courage and <https://assignbuster.com/alison-bechdels-fun-home-and-michel-foucaults-repressive-hypothesis/>

bought" a gay-friendly book, " and soon [she] was trolling even the public library, heedless of the risks" (Bechdel 75). The risks in question are undoubtedly based around societal acceptance of homosexuality. As she continues her journey of coming out, Alison attends a meeting of the " Gay Union," then proceeds to come out to her parents (Bechdel 75-76). Each of these instances represents an urge to fight the " repressive" societal forces persuading her against publically declaring her sexual orientation. Foucault challenges the idea of power being a " top-down" model in which those at the top hold the power, and those at the bottom are subject to it. Rather, Foucault theorizes power as a set of fluid, communal relations. Alison's sense of power in this passage comes from community: a community of gay authors, and a community of people at " Gay Union." Like Foucault, Bechdel is challenging the concept of a power hierarchy, proving that experience within a community of people has the ability to foster a strong sense of individual power. Following her public declarations, Alison feels " exhilarated" and in a " tremulous state" as she experiences a rewarding a sense of power and authority over her identity (Bechdel 76). Following the stress on discourse and publicity, Bechdel begins to place emphasis on the physicality of Alison's revelation regarding her sexual identity. She describes her experience in the library, stating that she " found a four-foot trove in the stacks which [she] quickly ravished," a sentence with obvious sexual connotation. This wordplay is followed by physical indulgence, as " it became clear that [she] was going to have to leave [the] academic plane and enter the human fray" (Bechdel 76). Alison's epiphany is supported by an image of her masturbating while reading *Delta of Venus* by Anais Nin. By transitioning from literature to physicality, Alison is taking the final steps in her journey to <https://assignbuster.com/alison-bechdels-fun-home-and-michel-foucaults-repressive-hypothesis/>

understanding herself and formulating her identity. From this point on, she begins experimenting physically with her partner Joan in college without worrying about the societal consequences: "Joan was a poet and a 'matriarchist.' I spent very little of the remaining semester outside her bed" (Bechdel 80). Such a strong physical revelation may not have been possible for Alison without first relating to lesbian discourse. Even during physical experience, she and Joan merge literature with sex, as the bed was "strewn with books, however, in what was for me a novel fusion of word and deed" (Bechdel 80). At this point, discourse becomes sexual, and sexuality becomes dependant on literature. Alison is acting in concordance with the repressive hypothesis on a variety of different levels. She seeks identity through discourse, publicizing her sexual orientation, and engaging in physically sexual acts. Foucault defines "the relationship between sex and power in terms of repression: something that one might call the speaker's benefit. If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression" (Foucault 6). Although Alison is living in the midst of gay revolution, homosexuality is not fully considered socially acceptable (and still is not today). Because homosexuality is still repressed, Alison is engaging in a "deliberate transgression" by acting out in a taboo fashion. This allows her to exercise power over her identity in her own right, rather than this power being possessed by an external entity. Foucault is presenting his "repressive hypothesis" by disagreeing with it. Despite this, the concept is highly applicable to Alison Bechdel's Fun Home, as Bechdel has developed her character, Alison, as a representation of those people who agree with the "repressive hypothesis" by having her behave in

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concordance with fighting the subjugation it outlines. Works Cited Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home : A Family Tragicomic*. New York: Mariner, 2006. Foucault, Michel. "We ' Other' Victorians." *History of Sexuality*. New York: Vintage Publishing, 1990. 3-13. Murphy, Timothy. *Reader's Guide to Lesbian and Gay Studies*. Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2000.