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"Fun Home: Intertextuality and Literature as an Equipment for Living to Understand the Figure of a Father"

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Abstract:

Fun Home is an autobiographical comic written by Alison Bechdel, which focuses on her father, Bruce, a high school teacher who works at the family funeral parlour who is unable to come to terms with his own homosexuality. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explore, through the use of intertextuality, how the author attempts to understand the true identity of her father and possible suicide, while at the same time trying to purify the relationship between them. To this end, *Fun Home* is divided into four different stories, of which only two of them will be analysed: the one in which the daughter discovers the father and the one in which the author atones for the father-daughter relationship. For the development of this study, a literary theory of Kenneth Burke will be used and applied to the three different diegetic levels in the comic.

Key Words: *Fun Home*, Alison Bechdel, intertextuality, homosexuality, sexual repression, father-daughter relationships.

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Fun Home: Intertextuality and Literature as an Equipment for Living to Understand the Figure of a Father

0. Introduction

Autobiography is a genre that is proliferating in the field of graphic novels. As Kunka says, "in recent years, autobiographical comics have drawn an enormous amount of critical attention. Many comics scholars identify autobiography as a central genre in contemporary comics" (1). Based on critical attention, scholarship and pedagogical value, models or paradigms of this genre have already been chosen, Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* have achieved this position (17). Autobiographical comics that receive the most attention are often about trauma (the Holocaust, the Iran-Iraq war, a parent's suicide), so "scholars have theorised about how comics can be an effective medium for communicating traumatic experiences" (2).

In 2006, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomedy*, written by Alison Bechdel, was published. For several reasons, it soon became a landmark text: for its contribution to introducing the graphic format into higher education curricula; for its push for new approaches to gender and mass culture; and for winning a number of awards, including the Lambda Literary Award for lesbian memoirs and biographies, the GLAAD Media Award for Best Comic Book, and the Eisner Award for Best Reality-Based Work. A musical based on *Fun Home* was produced on Broadway and was nominated for 12 Tony Awards, winning five, including Best Musical (Stahl 2).

The impact of *Fun Home* has been so great that its study has reached schools, where teachers teach Alison Bechdel's comic from different perspectives at both secondary and university levels. In her book *Approaches to Teaching Fun Home*, Judith Kegan Gardiner collects numerous essays in which teachers explain their experiences of using the work in the classroom. For example, Ariela Freedman in her book *Teaching Fun Home, Teaching Modernism* discusses how she introduces the modernist movement to her students and shows them that Alison also struggles to understand the complexities of modernist works such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* (Gardiner 66).

Of all the perspectives mentioned above, the analysis of literary elements is the least studied. *Fun Home* uses numerous narrative devices, but one of them stands out over the rest: intertextuality. The comic is filled with explicit and implicit references to great works of literature. In the words of Izabela Sobczak: "the literary search is realised in the graphic and textual layer of the comic book" (29). Thus, Alison discovers her sexual orientation through the books she reads and comes to know her father because he uses literature as his main means of communication (29). In short, literary references shape the framework in which the story unfolds, and without them it would be very difficult to understand what the Bechdel family is like and how they live.

Understanding the function of intertextuality in *Fun Home* will be the main objective of this paper. To this end, in the second part of this work, an exposition of references for the subsequent study will be made: the different diegetic levels from which the referencing of literary works will take place will be recalled; intertextuality will be defined as a resource that differentiates *Fun Home* from other autobiographies; it will be defined how literature can be considered as

“equipment for living”, that is, equipment for acting and for explaining the way of acting in life. Moreover, the internal structure of the comic will be determined, highlighting the presence of four stories that move in parallel as the work progresses: Alison in her process of formation and knowledge of the world, Alison discovers her own sexuality, Alison discovers her father and the relationship between the narrator and her father.

The third section of this paper will analyse the use of intertextuality in the three diegetic levels to explain how Alison gets to know her father and how he evolves towards suicide. Finally, the fourth part will examine how the reference to literary works provides Alison Bechdel an “equipment for living” that will help her to explain and purify the special relationship she had with her father.

1. Autobiography: Diegetic Levels, Intertextuality and the Equipment for Living

According to Hühn et al., “narrative levels or diegetic levels are an analytic notion whose purpose is to describe the relations between an act of narration and the diegesis, or spatiotemporal universe within which a story takes place” (547). If a vertical order is established, at the “outermost level” and outside the events, “the extradiegetic narrator recounts what occurred at that first level”. On an inner level where the events recounted are situated “a character in that story can, in turn, become an intradiegetic narrator” (547).

The autobiographical story presents these two main narrative levels, but it is difficult to differentiate one level from the other because the subject who has the role of narrator is at the same time the protagonist of the life story. (Warhol and Warhol-Down 3). In addition, autobiographies possess a third diegetic level as a consequence of their graphic aspect. This third level is where the images implemented by the authors come into play, intended to represent avatars of their real-life counterparts. In the case of *Fun Home*, Alison’s avatars are represented in different stages of her life, and in her relationship with her family, friends and acquaintances (3). This feature allows the author to make leaps in time, allowing her to move between childhood, adolescence and maturity.

In addition to moving away from autobiography through the use of this third diegetic level, *Fun Home* “is a multimodal form different from both written life narrative and visual or photographic self-portraiture” (Watson 28). In this context of representational variety, Bechdel uses intertextuality as a fundamental resource that will contribute to the skeleton of the whole work. As Watson explains:

At the same time it is intertextual, incorporating a wealth of Modernist literary references into comics that turns the form into a forum on the multi-textual pastiche of contemporary culture. As a result, *Fun Home* invites—and requires—readers to read differently, to attend to disjunctions between the cartoon panel and the verbal text, to disrupt the seeming forward motion of the cartoon sequence and adopt a reflexive and recursive reading practice (28).

Bechdel uses intertextuality not with the purpose of questioning cultural canons or situating the work within the modernist literary current but with the intention of narrating her own story alongside that of her father (Sobczak 29). To this end, the author uses a variety of literary references, both in the form of references presented by the narrative voice and in examples explicitly drawn in the comic panels (Freedman 129). In an interview with Hillary Chute, Bechdel states:

One whole strand of the book is my father's love of literature, and the particular novels and authors that he liked. As I worked on the book, I found this material creeping more and more into what I was writing. I was quoting Camus and Fitzgerald and eventually I realised that the book was sort of organizing itself around different books or authors; each of the chapters has a different literary focus. (Chute 1005)

Fun Home obliged Bechdel to read and reread many works he had already read. She says so in the same interview:

Like *Portrait of the Artist* or *Ulysses*; those are big sources for *Fun Home* [...]. I read a lot of biographies of the people my dad admired: Camus, both Zelda and Scott Fitzgerald, Oscar Wilde—a great biography of Oscar Wilde by Richard Ellmann—and a great biography of Proust. I never actually read all of Proust; I just skimmed and took bits that I needed. (1005)

The book is full of references to novels and authors that her father liked. Moreover, as she expresses in the third chapter of the comic, she uses some references because for her, her parents were more real in fictional terms (Bechdel 67). All these authors help to build the structure of the work: Joyce, with whom Bechdel begins and ends the comic, Camus is a reference in the second chapter, Fitzgerald in the third, Proust in the fourth, Shepard, Wilde and others, in the following chapters.

Intertextuality is used from the very first page to describe the characters, who identify psychologically or experientially with the literary characters who are constantly referenced by the three diegetic levels. This narrative tool is reflected in the actions and personalities of the characters represented in *Fun Home*.

In order to understand the function of intertextuality in *Fun Home*, Kenneth Burke's theory about the function of literature might be useful. The American literary theorist developed the theory that art in all its forms has a rhetorical function in the sense that it creates a series of strategies for the resolution of certain situations that occur in real life. Burke sees literature as having a social element in that the works hint a certain kind of worldview that goes hand in hand with certain kinds of politics, preferences, behaviours... Literature, for Burke, is described or defined as "equipment for living" because it can be used as a tool for coping with conflicting situations (Burke 304).

Burke develops this theory by beginning with an analysis of proverbs, which he defines as "strategies designed for recurrent situations" (293). The frequent situations for which proverbs have been created are "consolation, vengeance, admonition, exhortation or foretelling", among others (293). These little snippets of universal wisdom help or satisfy individuals to cope with recurring situations. In other words, proverbs have a rhetorical function in that they compel the individual to act (294).

Burke goes a step further and applies the idea of the proverb on a higher, more complex and sophisticated artistic level: literature (296). Because it encompasses many aspects of life, literature can play the same role as proverbs. Genres such as tragedy, comedy or satire would be considered as "equipments for living", thus forming useful social strategies for the evaluation and resolution of certain everyday situations (304). The main point of this idea is illustrated in an

example given by the author where he explains how the novel *Madame Bovary* becomes “the strategic naming of a situation” as “it singles out a pattern of experience that is representative of our social structure” (300). This “pattern of experience” that takes place in the selected work is the act of adultery.

Burke’s theory allows us to highlight how intertextuality expressed in the use of literary references becomes “equipments for living” in *Fun Home*. Thus, the literary works referenced in their three diegetic levels allow us to differentiate how Bruce and Alison recognise themselves psychologically or experientially with the characters in those texts, and how they direct their performances.

To better understand the development of this study, it is necessary to divide Bechdel’s comic into a series of different narratives, which move in parallel and encompass a number of important themes that are referenced in the literary works cited in the three diegetic levels in *Fun Home*. The autobiography progresses from the narrator-protagonist’s childhood to maturity, but there are continuous breaks in the temporal thread, with forwards and backwards, which give it a rather circular appearance (the circle closes with a return to the first myth of the story: Daedalus and Icarus). The work is divided into seven chapters that are not chronologically consecutive.

In *Fun Home*, the author sees herself, her father and her family in general, as an exceptional reality. To this end, she magnifies her story by presenting it as a veritable compilation of outstanding works of world literature that appear in the three different narratives that are interspersed with passages of reflection on the relationship between the narrator and her father. These narratives are not presented in succession, but run in parallel, often communicating and intertwining with each other.

Each of these narratives is constructed from three types of elements: the events that occurred, the explanatory narratives and the operative narratives. The former refer to events that are generally recorded in no chronological order and often treated with an idealised vision. The second are those to which the narrator resorts a posteriori to explain her own life and can be identified in the first diegetic level. The latter, the operative narratives, are those that the author identifies as elements present in the lives of the characters and are mainly authors and literary works that influence their decisions and behaviour. Father and daughter may come to identify with mythical characters and books and, perhaps unconsciously, following a pattern. These elements can be identified on the second and third diegetic levels.

The first story picks up Alison in her process of formation and knowledge of the world. This narrative is built on events such as the generational conflict expressed in the father-daughter contrast, grandmother’s stories, the discovery of death, the first notions of sexuality, the visit to the big city. All the evidence leading to the recognition of her lesbian condition are the events that form the basis for the following story in which Alison discovers her own sexuality. Finally, the oppressive environment and the desire to escape, the father’s adventures, the trial experienced by him, or his possible suicide are events that allow the construction of the narrative about the daughter who discovers her father.

The passages of reflection on the relationship between the narrator and her father allow the construction of the atonement narrative, in which Alison tries to purify the special relationship with her father. The events that help to elaborate it are the inverted sexuality, the different attitude towards homosexuality, the possible guilt for the father’s death.

Having differentiated this structure of parallel narratives, gestated from different lived events, the aim is to describe the way in which the operative narratives, from the second and third diegetic levels, lead the lives of the characters, that is to say, how they use literature as "equipment for living". In the same way, the aim is to find out how the main explanatory myths reflect the lives of the characters from the first diegetic level or narrative voice.

More specifically and focusing on the achievement of the objective set in this study, the aim is to describe how Alison Bechdel uses the narrative voice, the voice of the characters and the graphic voice to present all kinds of literary references to describe how she manages to elaborate an image of her father as well as how she explains the special relationship between the two.

2. Building Identity through Intertextuality: Bruce's Journey

From the different narrative levels of her graphic autobiography, Alison Bechdel explains how she comes to know her father through the literary works that they both, although at different times, read.

First of all, the author refers to the operative stories identified as elements present in her father's life, i.e. on the intradiegetic and graphic levels of *Fun Home: Anna Karenina, The Great Gatsby, A Happy Death, The Myth of Sisyphus, In search of Lost Time*. These literary works function as "equipment for living" for Bruce, as they direct his way of living and acting. These same texts are "equipment for living" for Alison, as reading them allows for a more precise knowledge of her father, becoming explanatory narratives used by her on the extradiegetic level. On this level, we can add *The Portrait of a Lady, The Importance of Being Earnest*. On the other hand, the reflection on the relationship between the narrator and her father that allows for the construction of the atonement story, in which Alison tries to purify the special relationship with her father, is referenced in works such as the myth of Daedalus and Icarus.

To define the initial features of the figure of her father, Alison uses the writer Francis Scott Fitzgerald and the best-known character created by him, Jay Gatsby. On the one hand, "the life, European travels, upper-class milieu and tumultuous love life of Fitzgerald provide a particularly seductive model for Bruce" as he finds in the writer "a template for the heterosexual, upperclass identity when trying to keep his homosexuality at bay" (Lydenberg 139). It is through the renovation of his Victorian-style house and its application to his role as a family man that he will attempt to create this model of the heterosexual, upperclass man (139). On the other hand, Alison associates Bruce with Jay Gatsby, a figure with whom he shares many similarities: "Gatsby's self-willed metamorphosis from farm boy to prince is in many ways identical to my father's. Like Gatsby, my father fuelled this transformation with 'the colossal vitality of his illusion'" (Bechdel 63, 64).

Furthermore, both Jay Gatsby and Bruce prefer fiction over reality as they both use certain elements to project and exhibit a false, distorted and mythologised idea of themselves (85). They both present themselves as educated and well-read individuals who are far more capable than the rest of the people around them. Bruce projects himself through his house and especially through his library in order to maintain the image of the perfect family while attracting attractive young men. Gatsby does this through the gossip about him that helps him to enhance his reputation while seducing his sweetheart.

Alison has thus created a first sketch of Bruce, a cultured man who prefers to live in a fictional world that allows him to convey to everyone a very high image of himself and of absolute family normality.



Fig. 1 (Bechdel 85)

Also from the third diegetic level, Bruce uses the work of Albert Camus as an “equipment for living” to deal with his internal struggles: his repression as a homosexual. Alison portrays her father reading the work that gives title to the second chapter, *A Happy Death*, shortly before his death. Patrice Meursault, the main character in Camus’ play, is trapped in an unhappy marriage and an unfulfilling job. Bruce is similar to Patrice in that he too has an internal struggle to find happiness as he is unable to recognise and accept his own homosexuality.

Alison notes that her father had been reading the novel and was leaving it around the house in a way that was quite intentional or premeditated (27). She also notes that her father had underlined an excerpt: “He [Patrice] discovered the cruel paradox by which we always deceive ourselves twice about the people we love - first to their advantage, then to their disadvantage” (28). These lines perfectly describe how Bruce, as a homosexual man, is conscious of deceiving everyone around him by hiding his sexual condition. Bruce betrays himself by marrying Helen, and this marriage allows him to form a seemingly traditional family that provides him with a tool to hide his sexuality. Eventually, although this calculated deception seemed advantageous, Bruce realises that he is unhappy in his marriage as he is not comfortable with either his wife or his children.

Bruce’s marital unhappiness is quite aptly compared by Bechdel to one of the characters in the novel *The Portrait of a Lady*, Gilbert Osmond. In this work, the protagonist, Isabel Archer, a young American woman who receives a large sum of money in an inheritance after the death of her uncle, decides to travel to Europe where she meets, among other suitors, Gilbert Osborne, an American expatriate in Florence, whom she eventually marries.

In the succession of vignettes, the two parallel stories intertwine, thus turning Helen into Isabel Archer, a young woman with “youthful hopes” who “ends up ground in the very mill of the conventional” and Bruce into Gilbert Osmond, “a cultured, dissipated and penniless art collector” (71). This relationship between characters draws out the “suppressive silence by which Gilbert Osmond and Bruce Bechdel maintain their ‘conventional’ marriages” and how both Helen and Isabel remain silent and submit unquestioningly to an oppressive and claustrophobic marriage (Hannah 15).



Fig. 2 (Bechdel 71)

But this repression that takes place in Bruce's marriage is not accidental or coincidental, as it functions as a simple artifice maintained solely to camouflage his homosexuality at a time when it would not have been socially accepted. Bechdel explains that it seemed as if his parents were ashamed of their own marriage since, for example, they never talked about how they met (67). Helen becomes complicit in Bruce's cover-up, resulting in unhappiness for both characters, although for Alison, the main culprit in this situation is her father, whom she sees as a troubled and oppressive man towards her mother, as a consequence of the sexual and identity repression he is subjected to, and which would supposedly lead him to take his own life.

The portrait of Bruce begins to be completed. An educated man who creates a fictional world in order to transmit to everyone a very high image of himself and of absolute family normality. All this fictitious normality has only one aim: to repress and hide his homosexuality.

Bechdel uses Proust to describe and understand her father and also to describe the roles that father and daughter play. The fourth chapter of *Fun Home* has the same title as the seventh book of *In search of Lost Time*. Rather than on Proust's work, Bechdel's interest is "on Proust's use of 'inversion' as a sexological term to examine her and her father's gender identities" (Fox 515). Alison acknowledges this and goes further when she states "Not only were we inverts. We were inversions of one another" (Bechdel 98).

Fox clarifies that "their antithetical approaches to gender expression and aesthetics often lend themselves to comedic expression throughout the narrative" (516). From the extradiegetic level Alison exemplifies this by saying "I was spartan to my father's Athenian. Modern to his Victorian. Butchs to his nelly. Utilitarian to his aesthete" (Bechdel 15), "while I was trying to compensate for something unmanly in him... he was attempting to express something feminine through me"(98). Again, literature has provided Alison with an "equipment for living" by helping her to understand that she and her father are inverted just as Proust's homosexual characters are inverted in character and personality.



Fig. 3 (Bechdel 98)

Like Bruce, Proust “would have intense, emotional friendships with fashionable women but it was young men with whom he fell in love” (94). Bruce’s relationship with his wife was more akin to that of a friendship, while the amorous and sexual relationships were shared with young boys, such as Roy, the nanny, or Mark Douglas, a local boy. Bruce is accused of buying alcohol from this seventeen-year-old boy with whom he is sexually involved and has to attend a court hearing (161). Alison uses a reference to Oscar Wilde’s life for going through a similar situation to her father. While Bruce is discovered and accused by one of the Douglas brothers (175), the Irish author is convicted on the testimony of his shady and suspicious company. The father of Alfred Douglas (curious coincidence of surname), Wilde’s lover, delivered his famous note accusing him of being a sodomite, and Wilde took him to court for libel and lost (166).

After being privy to all these details, Bechdel again refers to a literary work, Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Alison explains that in this play, performed by Helen when she was a teenager, “illicit desire is encoded as a character’s uncontrollable gluttony” (Bechdel 166), introducing her father in a later vignette “uncontrollably eating cucumber sandwiches” (Michael 11). In this way, Alison directs readers to understand Bruce’s behaviour in the same way they would interpret gluttony in Wilde’s work: as a metaphor for his illicit or forbidden desire (11).

Again, from the third diegetic level and within the story that leads the author to discover her father and understand his possible suicide, Bruce relies on literature, using it as an “equipment for living”, in order to find a way out of the aforementioned repression. It is another work by Camus that he uses for this purpose: *The Myth of Sisyphus*. In his preface, from which Bruce underlines some lines, Camus begins by describing the main idea of this essay: “it is legitimate and necessary to wonder whether life has a meaning; therefore it is legitimate to meet the problem of suicide face to face” (Camus 7). In the first pages of the work he states that “dying voluntarily implies that you have recognized [...] the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation and the uselessness of suffering” (13). In other words, he considers that an individual’s life must have meaning for him to value it, suggesting suicide as a way out of this meaninglessness. Ultimately, however, *The Myth of Sisyphus* ends up explaining

that this way out is not the right answer. Camus believes that one can live a full and meaningful life by avoiding false solutions such as religion, by resisting surrender and moving forward with vitality and intensity (110). That is why he expresses: "all Sisyphus's silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing" (110).

Alison suspects that her father was a "haphazard scholar", and that he had misinterpreted the idea presented in Camus' work as "if he'd read carefully, he would have gotten to Camus' conclusion that suicide was illogical" (Bechdel 47). Bruce had made his decision on the basis of a misinterpretation. For Alison the explanation is simpler: "there's no mystery. He killed himself because he was a manic-depressive, closeted fag and he couldn't face living in this small-minded small town one more second" (125). Apart from his interpretative error, Bruce could find in this play a great similarity to his own life since, like Sisyphus, he too is forced to carry a heavy burden on his shoulders that he cannot easily cope with: a miserable marriage and the concealment of his identity and desires.



Fig. 4 (Bechdel 47)

Finally, we have a Bruce who lives in a world of fictitious normality created to repress and hide his homosexuality. This creation generates security but a great unhappiness that he decides to resolve by means of suicide.

3. Intertextuality and the Figure of the Spiritual Father

As mentioned above, *Fun Home* presents several parallel narratives that sometimes intertwine with each other. To the narrative of how the daughter comes to the discovery of her father is added an atonement narration that allows her to purify the dark relationship between them.

At the end of the first chapter, Bechdel presents one of the central events of the autobiography, the death of her father. Grief, understood as the natural process that Alison goes through for the loss of Bruce, is present in the text (Dean-Ruzicka par. 3). But this mourning is complicated:

The death of her father comes relatively early; she is almost twenty, he is forty-four. It is also a probable suicide, although one without a note or specifically defined reason. It is then an ambiguous loss, as the desired resolution that aids the grieving process is missing from Bruce Bechdel's death. (par. 4)

Mourning will mean a reflection on the relationship between the narrator and the father that will allow the elaboration of the aforementioned expiatory story. To this end, the author uses different resources. For example, with regard to the photos she draws at the beginning of each chapter, Bechdel, in an interview conducted in 2006, says:

These are photos that feel particularly mythic to me, that carry a lot of meaning. [...] the book is drawn in my regular cartoony style, but the photos are drawn very realistically. It's a way to keep reminding readers, these are real people. This stuff really happened. (Chute 1009)

Bechdel uses her mythical photographs to talk about grief and loss, as well as to remind readers that these are authentic, lived experiences.

Returning to the aim of this work, the resource that interests us is intertextuality, that is, how literary references help Alison Bechdel to construct the atoning narrative that will help to bring closure to the mourning for her father's death. Alison turns to mythology. Daedalus and Icarus will provide her with the equipment for living that will allow her to draw some positive conclusions to direct her own life.

The opening scene of *Fun Home* seems innocent and rather ordinary at first glance, but the sequence of these three vignettes contains the summary of the events of the whole story. Alison is presented as an Icarus held by her father, who prevents her from falling towards his destiny: death. Bruce unwittingly becomes a mentor to his daughter, demonstrating her how not to deal with her homosexuality. This is why Bruce is presented with the book *Anna Karenina* by his side, a character with whom he shares much in common, as she commits suicide after seeing her attempt at freedom cut short.

The father, lying on the living room floor, holds his daughter in the air above his feet. At first glance, they are both playing "aeroplane". The narrator refers to the game as the "Icarian Games" in allusion to the "acrobatics" of the circus "where one person lies on the floor balancing another" (Bechdel 3). Bechdel, to refer to her father, uses the image of two mythological characters: Daedalus and Icarus.

Initially, and always on the extradiegetic and graphic levels, Bruce appears as Daedalus, the great craftsman, engaged in the impressive restoration of his Victorian house and in keeping up appearances (Fox 518). Maintaining, renovating and caring for the house is an obsession intimately related to the construction of an environment, a family and a personality with which he tries to hide something that is obscure to him: his homosexuality. Alison reflects on this role and feels uncomfortable that Bruce as Daedalus "was indifferent to the human cost of his projects" (Bechdel 11).

As soon as Bechdel introduces this comparison between her father and Daedalus, she breaks this schema by associating her father with Icarus (Fox 518): "it was not me but my father who was to plummet from the sky" (Bechdel 4). The author further complicates the father-son dynamic by presenting her father as the Minotaur (Fox 518). All appearances ever break down and show the truth that lies behind them. In the case of Bruce it is the same: his secret sometimes

comes to light because of his scandals with young girls or his occasional young people or his occasional aggressive and destructive actions.



Fig. 5 (Bechdel 3)

In the final chapter, "The Anti Hero Journey", the narrative complexity of *Fun Home* increases. From the three diegetic levels, Bechdel provides literary references that help her move through the narrative of getting to know her father, the purifying narrative of their relationship, and finally the account of how she comes to define her identity and sexuality. These three narratives feed off each other, one being part of the others. Homer's *The Odyssey*, James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Colette's *Earthly Paradise*, along with other lesbian literary works, will be the tools that the author will use to maintain her the author will use to sustain her narrative.

Alison's encounter with *Ulysses*, her father's favourite book, takes place in her sophomore year of college in her second year of university, when she is forced to select a course on Joyce's work after having previously dropped out of the curriculum (Bechdel 202). From the first diegetic level or from the narrative voice, Bechdel describes this forced choice of *Ulysses* as an intervention of the gods (202). She sees herself as Telemachus who, advised by Athena, is encouraged to go in search of her late father who is slow to return from the Trojan War. Alison and Telemachus share the journey in search of their father:

This fateful encounter with Joyce is a displaced encounter with her father. As Bechdel writes, "I was begging admission to not just any English class, but one devoted to my father's

favorite book of all time”(203). Through returning to Joyce, Bechdel is returning to her father, an odyssey that will reunite her with him through literature, if not in life. (Freedman 135)

Literature is once again equipment for living for Alison, it is the reason to feel a little closer to her father. And literature does even more: on the very day she enrolls in the *Ulysses* course, she notices in the campus library, with a copy of *Word Is Out* in her hands, the truth about her sexual orientation (Bechdel 203). Relying on the graphic voice, Bechdel presents in the foreground, in the same library, some copies of the *Odyssey*, and from the external narrative voice she writes: “And indeed, that day, I embarked on an odyssey which, consisting as it did in a gradual, episodic and inevitable convergence with my father, was very nearly as epic as the original” (203). The author depicts this moment by contrasting three odysseys in three vignettes: Homer’s *Odyssey*, Joyce’s *Ulysses* and her own journey towards the affirmation of her sexual identity (Freedman 135).

When returning home for the Christmas holidays, Bechdel finds that her father is closer and more sympathetic, although their relationship is still complex. After listening to him enthusiastically talking about *Ulysses* and other works by Joyce, Alison, in a burst of tenderness, asks him for something to read during the holiday break (Bechdel 204). Bruce gives her *Earthly Paradise*, by Colette, a work that shows the lesbian ambience of Paris in the 1920s. Some time later, he reveals he recommended the work to her because he felt “some kind of identification” between her and the homosexual atmosphere depicted in the book (220). Alison continues discovering and reading many other lesbian-themed works, such as *Orlando*, *The Well of Loneliness*, *Rubyfruit Jungle* or *Desert of the Heart*, among others, so *Ulysses* is temporarily forgotten.

After returning to university, Alison is still searching for her identity, but this time outside of books. She joins Union Gay, which she describes as a “daunting test”, even comparing it to a descent into the underworld referenced in Homer’s *Odyssey* (209). Bechdel compares the fear she experienced when she entered the room at Union Gay to the fear *Ulysses* felt when she descended into Hades to seek advice on how to return to Ithaca. She adds that this fear was completely transformed after her first meeting at Union Gay, as “[her] quest shifted abruptly outward”, thus beginning to come out of the wardrobe to her college friends (210). She also tells her parents of her lesbian status in a letter.

Bruce calls his daughter the night he receives the letter, and in a “procuress-like tone”, they discuss the news (210). Alison explains that if her father had mentioned his own homosexuality would have been easier. She compares the situation to the moment when Bloom and Stephen in *Ulysses* meet in the library, as “our paths crossed but we did not really meet.” (211).

Three weeks later, another phone call from Helen fills Alison in on the big secret (211). Father and daughter are mutually aware of each other’s sexual orientation, but she is the only one who has spoken explicitly. Bechdel uses *Ulysses* as equipment for living and borrowing language from the chapter “Ithaca” of Joyce’s play, she adapts it to her relationship with her father (Freedman 136). This is expressed from the external narrative voice:

What, reduced to their simplest reciprocal form, were dad’s thoughts about my thoughts about him, and his thoughts about my thoughts about his thoughts about me? He thought that I

thought that he was a queer. Whereas he knew that I knew that he knew that I was too. (Bechdel 212)



Fig. 6 (Bechdel 210)

Joyce and his work have helped Bechdel to get closer to his father and also to describe, albeit partially, their relationship. Bruce, though distant, shows a certain understanding for his daughter and there are some signs of hope for a possible reconciliation. Literature continues doing its work.

Despite everything, the story of confirmation of her homosexuality takes over at times, leaving everything else aside. Bechdel continues adding literary references from the *Odyssey* which help her to express her new experiences: the myth of Scylla and Charybdis allows her to represent the extremes between which her life moves, her new friends in the Gay Union and her family (213); the myth of the Cyclops Polyphemus is used to describe her first sexual relations with Joan, her girlfriend from the university period (214).

Returning to the atonement story that allows the full definition of the father-daughter relationship, Bechdel uses, for the first and only time, the squared box-style of the traditional comic book to depict the dialogue between Alison and Bruce as they drive in their car to the cinema to see a film. Watson states that this sequence "dramatize[s] a moment of intimate disclosure" (43). Alison is encouraged to address the subject of sexuality and asks her father if he acted with any intentionality when he offered her Colette's *Earthly Paradise*. He only states that he assumed there might be some identification, and after a silent vignette he begins to recount his homosexual experience as a teenager. The dialogue is very brief, but it represents the closest moment between the two. Bruce has opened up to his daughter for the first and only time.

Alison relates this moment to the meeting between Bloom and Stephen in chapter 17 of *Ulysses*, entitled "Ithaca", both of whom, like Bruce and Alison, long for connection, but all they get is a series of tense and incomplete encounters (Freedman 136). It was their Ithaca moment (Bechdel 222) and just as "Ithaca" puts an end to all sorts of plans between Bloom and Stephen,

the conversation between Bruce and Alison is “a beginning as well as a dead-end” (Freedman 137).

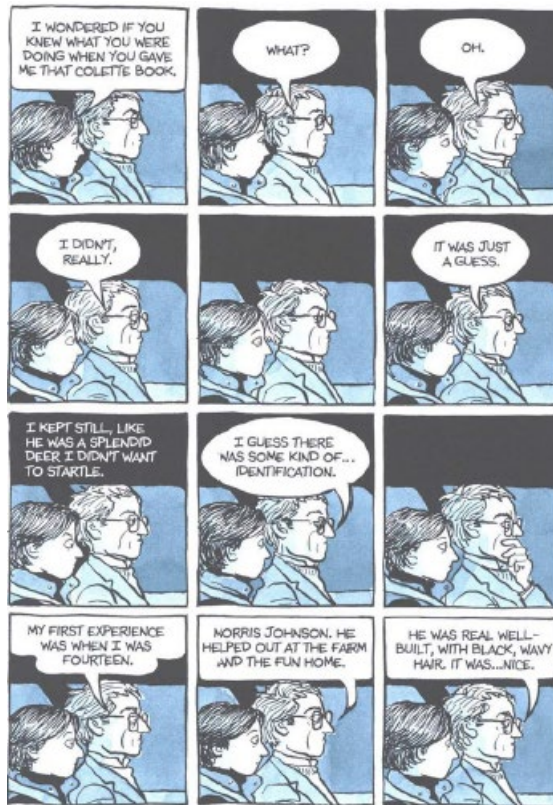


Fig. 7 (Bechdel 220)



Fig. 8 (Bechdel 221)

The references to *Ulysses* become more and more present, as if it had been written so that Alison Bechdel could use it in *Fun Home*. But the intention of this work forces us to focus our attention only on those that help the author of *Fun Home* to complete her stories. Bechdel's graphic resources are many; on a drawing the last words of Joyce's novel (Bechdel 228):

...he kissed me under the Moorish wall and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked he would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes. (Joyce 682)

On this picture, the external narrative voice provides more details about the knowledge gained about Bruce. The word “yes” appears nearly ninety times in the chapter “Penelope” and eight times in this ending of Molly's monologue which shows “reaffirmation of Molly's acceptance of and oneness with Bloom” (Lyman 194). This climactic “yes” to her father's favourite novel contrasts with the many denials of her own life (Freedman 137), and these displays of understanding help to purify the relationship between father and daughter.

In *Fun Home*, Bechdel shows readers how much of our lives are found in literature. She continues giving examples of how literature provides equipment for living because for her,

literature strengthens her life (Simon 154). In this sense, the author quotes her father and then Stephen Dedalus in their mutual rejection of heroism, both claiming "I am not a hero" (Bechdel 230). Alison seems to understand her father's ambiguous position: he declares his homosexuality and also does not declare it. All of the above literary references have provided the main defining attribute of Bruce and Alison's relationship so far: there is precarious communication between them, and meaningful connections are at best indirect, they have not been able to talk openly about what they think and feel, but there is communication.

The final defining quality of their special relationship is provided by another explicit reference to Joyce. He was brilliant as a fictional "father", as the father of *Ulysses*, but in real life he was much less successful with his children. Bruce was also not an exemplary father and Alison attempts to revive his fatherhood and places it on a spiritual level. It is the external narrative voice that states in *Fun Home* "that spiritual, not consubstantial, paternity is the important thing" (Bechdel 231).

After Bruce's death, Bechdel becomes dependent on his paternity and tries to intertextually represent their relationship with the intention of subverting it. The memory of past things can only be represented through the recollection of fragments and scattered references, only by making such intertextuality inevitable (Heeyeon par.18). Bruce is, above all, her spiritual father.

Bechdel concludes the book by closing the circle that was opened in the first panels. Instead of dropping Alison, Bruce appears in the final frame ready to catch his daughter as she leaps off the trampoline into his outstretched arms below (Fox 518). The myth of Daedalus and Icarus has provided an "equipment for living".

Just as Icarus soars from the labyrinth created by Daedalus, Alison emerges from the oppressive world created by Bruce. In both cases the parents facilitate the children's exit from the "labyrinth", but in *Fun Home* the roles are reversed, and as they approach the light, i.e. the truth, it is Alison who survives and who looks differently at her identity. Here is the end of her atonement narrative in which Bruce's presence determines her life. She was able to ascend where her father fell and she feels that her father facilitated her exit from her own labyrinth. The external narrative voice expresses this idea clearly: "And in a way, you could say that my father's end was my beginning" (Bechdel 117).

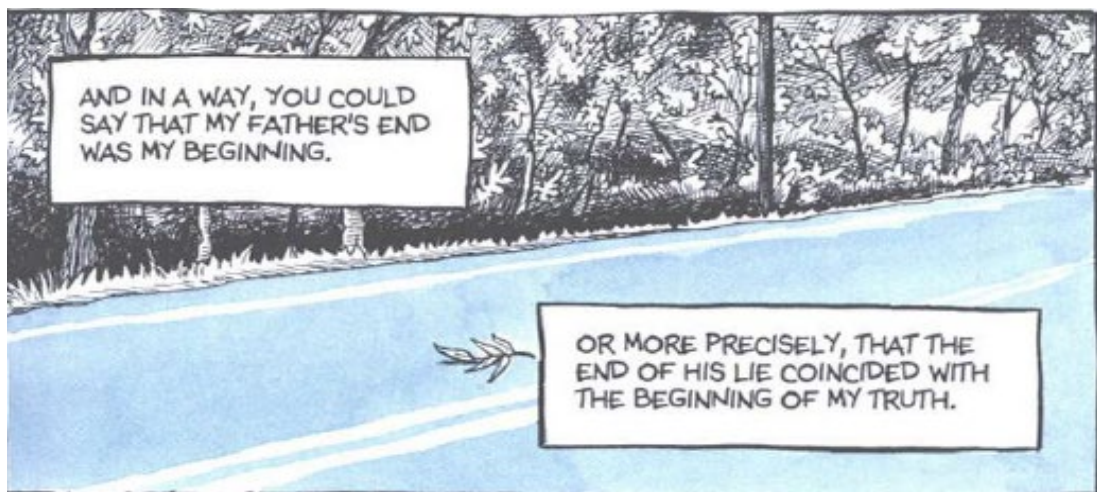


Fig. 9 (Bechdel 117)

4. Conclusions

Fun Home is an autobiography in which Alison Bechdel presents her process of formation and knowledge of the world, reveals her lesbian condition, reconstructs the figure of her father and finds an explanation for his possible suicide and, finally, redeems the complicated relationship between them. The idea defended in this study is that the reference to different literary works provides Alison Bechdel with what Kenneth Burke called "equipment for living" to interpret and cope with the different circumstances she had to live through, and it is specified in two aspects: the knowledge of her father and the purification of the relationship between them. In order to support this thesis, the literary contributions made from the different diegetic levels have been analysed and it has been studied how all of them confirm the idea put forward by Burke's theory.

First of all, it is concluded that *Fun Home* is a story in which the author exploits the full narrative potential of the different diegetic voices. Her experiences emerge with equal ease from the external voice, from the voice of the characters and from the drawings that decorate her vignettes. It is fair to say that autobiographical comics are an effective means of communicating traumatic experiences.

The study also determines how different works handled by Bruce provided the brushstrokes that allowed Bechdel to outline a clear image of him. Details of Francis Scott Fitzgerald's biography and his major work *The Great Gatsby* provided insight into a Bruce concerned with creating a fictional world in which appearances made it easier for him to give an elevated image of himself and of absolute family normality. Thanks to Albert Camus' *A Happy Death*, Alison understood how her father coped with his inner struggles, discovering that the former normality had only one aim: to repress and hide his homosexuality. Marcel Proust and his use of the word "inversion" as a sexological term, allows Alison to describe her father as inverted in character and personality to what she is. Finally, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, by Camus himself, makes Alison think that her father was unhappy and did not feel that his life had great value, and that he was forced to carry a heavy burden on his shoulders that he did not know how to deal with: a miserable marriage and the concealment of his identity and desires. It all ended in suicide.

Finally, literature is also equipped to define Alison's relationship with her father. The myth of Daedalus and Icarus helps her to describe that in the early years her father is indifferent, literally regarding his children as furniture. The reading of James Joyce's *Ulysses* and the suggestion of Colette's *Earthly Paradise* become facilitating means of communication between father and daughter, but always in a tense and incomplete way. The references to Joyce allow to define the closest expression of what there was between father and daughter: Bruce was her spiritual father. And a final return to the myth of Daedalus and Icarus facilitates Alison's idea that her father was a determining factor in her life and, conversely to how it happened in the myth, it was she who survived his labyrinth.

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