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Spiritual Children: Role Reversals in *Fun Home*

In *Fun Home*, the initial relationship between Bruce and Alison Bechdel is more master and apprentice than father and daughter, Daedalus and Perdix rather than Daedalus and Icarus. However, once Bruce gives Alison the freedom to discover herself through the book *Earthly Paradise*, they finally manage to connect in the spiritual paternity felt by Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus in *Ulysses*, leading to an almost complete reversal of their relationship. Because “he was there to catch” her when she “leapt” (Bechdel 232), Alison is ultimately able to take on the role of Daedalus by giving life to her father’s memory after he dies in Icarian fashion. Bruce’s fulfillment of the Daedalus role as simultaneous father and master leads him to play Icarus in turn as Alison blossoms creatively and becomes the spiritual father of her *character* Bruce.

The first two pages of *Fun Home* describe much of the early relationship between Alison and her father. She plays “airplane” in order to experience some “rare physical contact” with him (Bechdel 3), indicating the wide emotional distance between them. Unfortunately, Bruce quickly becomes distracted by the loose molding and dirty rug in the room, ceasing their game and ordering her to get the tools he needs to clean up. As we quickly learn, he has a “monomaniacal” obsession with his house that causes him to neglect the children (Bechdel 4), much as Daedalus loses himself in his innumerable inventions. Although Alison has creative ambitions and talents of her own, she clashes constantly with her father over aesthetics and is treated like his apprentice, made to fetch supplies and help clean. In this way, she is much more like Perdix than Icarus—a fellow inventor, overshadowed and repressed by her superior’s ideas.

This dynamic is subtly reinforced by the artwork of the first two pages of *Fun Home*. The book lying on the ornate carpet beside her father, *Anna Karenina*, begins with the line “All happy families are alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way” (Tolstoy 1), which *Fun Home* riffs off of by using the opening “Like many fathers...” to describe their airplane game before detailing the unique unhappiness of her family in the rest of the chapter (Bechdel 3). *Anna Karenina*’s suicide by train also foreshadows Bruce’s suicide by truck later in the story. Furthermore, *Anna Karenina* is a classic among classics, a physically massive book representing Bruce’s commitment to literature and fantasy over family matters. Both Bruce and Alison have bored, disinterested faces throughout the game, and in the first panel of page four we see Alison flailing as she starts to fall, unsupported by Bruce’s arms. The pair avoid eye contact and instead look past each other, emphasizing the disconnect between them by staring at the ceiling or floor in most panels.

By the last few pages of *Fun Home*, the relationship between Bruce and Alison has fundamentally changed. After being given Collette’s *Earthly Paradise* in order to “learn about Paris in the twenties” (Bechdel 205), Alison comes to terms with her lesbianism and is eventually able to come out to her parents. Although her conversations with her father are awkward and limited after that point, they successfully connect a few times, and a marked shift occurs in their everyday interactions. Indeed, the last time Alison and Bruce see each other, a family friend comments on how their closeness is “unnatural” (Bechdel 225), in stark contrast to the physical and emotional distance that separated them initially. Soon afterwards, her father is run over by a Sunbeam bread truck (getting too close to the sun in a morbid pun) and Alison proceeds to soar creatively and

create *Fun Home* itself. By the last page, there is an almost complete reversal of their original Daedalus-Icarus roles. Alison blossoms as an inventor and creator, while Bruce suffers an Icarian fall and becomes a mere character in her work.

This reversal is made more evident by the artwork of the final panel, in which Alison leaps off a diving board towards her father's waiting arms. Quite unlike the flailing arms and legs of her awkward fall on page four, in the last page she appears poised and graceful, almost ready to fly. Bruce, instead of gazing at the sky or behind Alison, is looking directly into her face. His expression remains somber, but all of his focus is directed at her. This shift in gaze compared to the first chapter represents a fundamental change in their relationship. Bruce is below Alison, already fallen into the water, but he is ready to catch her. He is the drowned Icarus, and she is the soaring Daedalus left behind to remember him.

What facilitates this whirlwind reversal of Bruce and Alison's roles? The answer lies in Bechdel's allusions to *Ulysses* in the last three pages of *Fun Home*. She consistently identifies paternity as a central theme of Joyce's work, and with *Ulysses* specifically emphasizes "spiritual, not consubstantial" paternity as important through the bond formed by its main characters, Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus (Bechdel 231). Bechdel also describes *Ulysses* as the spiritual child of Joyce himself, which has enjoyed a much happier fate than his consubstantial children, who went mad and became alcoholic respectively. Looking through the lens of these analogies to Joyce's work, a structure emerges for Alison and Bruce's role reversal. Alison grows into the role of Daedalian creator by crafting *Fun Home*, her spiritual child, and simultaneously Bruce becomes more Icarian by connecting to Stephen Dedalus, the son figure in *Ulysses*.

Bechdel notes this transition in her father, pointing out how he almost quotes Daedalus in one of his final letters to her, claiming he is “not a hero” (Bechdel 230).

The idea of books as spiritual children is an intriguing one and merits further analysis. Since *Fun Home* is focused on Bechdel’s relationship with her father, thinking of the work as her creative child invites us to consider her relationship with the *character* of Bruce. Bruce as written is not actually Bechdel’s father. He is her creation, a shadow crafted from her memories and his writings, and Bechdel herself frequently casts doubt on the objective truth of the story she tells. She worries that she is manipulating his memory in order to “claim him as ‘gay’ in the way I am ‘gay’” (Bechdel 230), arguing that she “shouldn’t pretend to know what [her] father’s [erotic truth] was” (Bechdel 230). Regardless of whether or not *Fun Home* tells *the* truth about her father, it certainly tells *a* truth, her truth, and this act of personal, creative truth-telling is what matters here. By constructing this representation of her father and telling her story through him, Bechdel transforms the character of Bruce into her own spiritual child, emphasizing her own metamorphosis into a Daedalus as her consubstantial father falls away.

At its core, *Fun Home* is a work attempting to unpack the complicated relationship between Alison and Bruce Bechdel as it changed over Alison’s life. This is accomplished through a staggering variety of literary references and analogies, interwoven with images, memories, and writings from Alison’s childhood. Throughout the book, one of the most consistent threads is the story of Daedalus and Icarus. Like bookends, the first and last pages display drawings of Alison suspended over Bruce, while the text compares the two of them to the mythical inventors. However, the audience’s interpretations of the opening and closing scenes could not be more different.

In the first, Alison falls as Bruce fails to connect with her, and their dynamic is one of patriarchal master and subservient apprentice. By the last page, Bruce has his arms outstretched to catch Alison, and they appear to connect even as their roles are reversed: Alison flying away and Bruce sinking into the water. This reversal occurs through Bechdel's allusions to *Ulysses*. Just as *Ulysses* was Joyce's spiritual child and Stephen Dedalus was Bloom's, the character of Bruce Bechdel becomes the spiritual child of the author Alison Bechdel, who herself grew out of the *character* of Alison Bechdel who was the consubstantial child of Bruce Bechdel. Because Bruce was ultimately able to support and free Alison, she becomes Daedalus the creator and is able to memorialize him after his final fall.

Works Cited

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