

Alison Bechdel: Fun Home (Chapters 4 and 5)

"Not only were we inverts, we were inversions of one another."

As Alison continues to retrace her childhood memories, we find out more about how she discovered she is a lesbian as well as seeing her own father's shift from bisexuality to homosexuality. While the young Alison Bechdel was confused and did not entirely understand what was happening in her family and to herself, now when she looks back everything makes sense. For instance, Bechdel remembers how her father tried to dress her up in the most feminine clothes covered in flowers and floral designs while she wanted to wear plain sneakers and chequered shirts.

While *Fun Home* is very much about Alison's relationship with her father, her mother is also an important character in the story. In these chapters, Bechdel recalls being proud and amazed at all her mother's talents, from acting to singing to playing piano. However, she also remembers her mother devoting much of her time to these activities, often at the expense of the family. Alison explains that throughout her childhood every member of the family became artistic somehow, and withdrew into themselves.

Knowledge Check

How well do you know this chapter?

1. What animal might have caused her father to jump back into the road?

- (a) Monkey.
- (b) Snake.
- (c) Owl.
- (d) Hamster.

2. What is the name of the uptown gas station where Alison watches 'manly' men in chapter 4?

- (a) Pacific.
- (b) Shell.
- (c) Arctic.
- (d) Atlantic.

3. What boy's name does Alison try to take?

- (a) Albert.
- (b) Alfred.
- (c) Eric.
- (d) Alec.

4. On a trip to which city does Alison see a butch woman for the first time?

- (a) Boston.
- (b) New York.
- (c) Trenton.
- (d) Philadelphia.

5. How many residents does Alison describe living in her hometown in chapter 5?

- (a) 2,500.
- (b) 1,000.
- (c) 1,500.
- (d) 800.

6. Over which mountains does the sun rise at the beginning of chapter 5?

- (a) Cascade Mountains.
- (b) Scott Mountains.
- (c) White Mountains.
- (d) Bald Eagle Mountains.

7. What colour did Alison colour the gypsy caravan from *Wind in the Willows*?

- (a) Salmon pink.
- (b) Bright purple.
- (c) Canary yellow.
- (d) Midnight blue.

8. How old was Alison when her obsessive-compulsive behaviours began?

- (a) 10.
- (b) 13.
- (c) 6.
- (d) 8.

9. What calendar did Bruce give Alison to write on as a diary?

- (a) Williams Auto Repair.
- (b) Jackson Paint Company.
- (c) Ford Auto Parts.
- (d) Ray Burial Vault Company.

10. What was the author's favourite illustration from *Wind in the Willows*?

- (a) The river.
- (b) The pond.
- (c) The wild woods.
- (d) The map.

Understanding and Interpretation

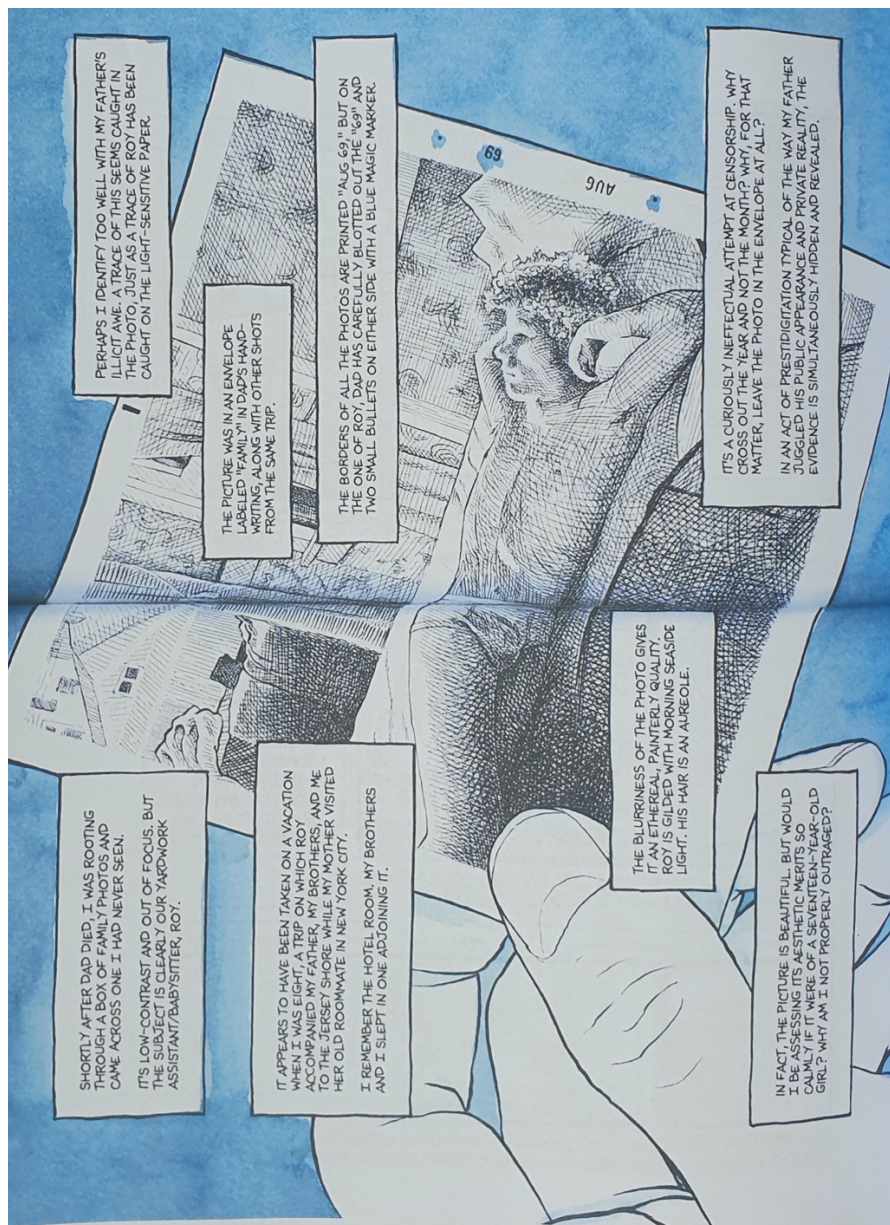
1. How is the significance of flowers developed at the beginning of chapter 4?
2. In what ways is the contrast between Bruce and Alison heightened over the course of chapter 4?
3. On page 116, Alison says, *'the snake is a vexingly ambiguous archetype.'* What role does the snake play throughout chapters 4 and 5? In what ways might it be symbolic?
4. On page 117, Alison admits that: *'I'd been lying too, for a long time.'* What does she mean?
5. During chapter 5, from the age of ten, Alison develops obsessive-compulsive behaviours. What are the symptoms of this compulsiveness?
6. Choose a page or panel from chapter 5. Present a brief analysis of the graphic style of your choice:

Graphic Novel Study: *Full-page bleed*

In comics, graphic novels and newspaper publishing, most images are confined to a panel using the technique of framing. Sometimes, though, the ink is allowed to run outside of a panel; this is known as a **bleed**. On the front covers of comics or newspapers, and occasionally inside the covers of graphic novels, the ink is printed right up to the edge of the page; this is called a **full-page bleed**.

Chapter 4 contains a conspicuous example of this technique; actually, if you discount the images inside the front and back covers, page 100 features the only full-page bleed image in the entire novel. The image is of Alison holding a photograph she found in an envelope containing other pictures of a holiday trip she once took with her father and brother – and their babysitter Roy. The image shows Roy reclining on a hotel bed in his underwear and is reprinted below.

Study this image and the captions narrating adult Alison's thoughts about this photograph. What is notable about the graphic style of this image? Why is this, of all the images in the novel, presented as a **full-page bleed**? Can you comment on the narration superimposed over this image? What ideas does this page evoke?



Literary Study: *structure, pace and tension*

'The infinite gradations of colour in a fine sunset... left him wordless.'

Structure

Narrative structure is the literary element that creates an underlying order for the story a writer wants to tell. It can be understood metaphorically as a framework, like a skeleton, upon which the author places the events in the story, known as the plot.

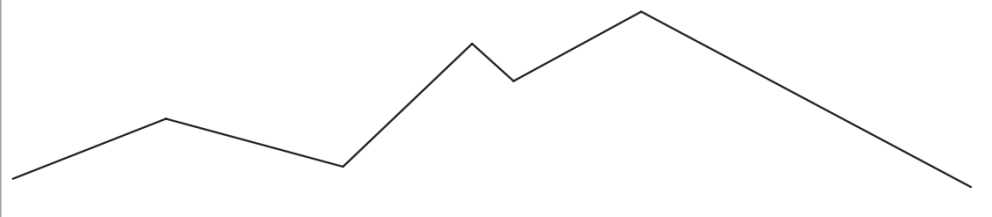
While there are many possible 'shapes' for this framework, such as the three-act structure, non-linear narrative structure, or Freytag's Pyramid, in this section you will learn a common narrative structure that applies to *Fun Home*, as well as many other works of fiction: **orientation; complication; temporary resolution; reappearing complication; resolution**. As an exercise, look at the definitions of these story phases (below) and see if you can briefly summarise how they play out in *Fun Home*. Then study the chart on the following page to see if you are right:

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| • Orientation | The reader is introduced to the setting, time, place and characters as well as the circumstances and situation. |
| • Complication | A problem arises that disturbs the characters and situation. Tension is created and there is uncertainty about what might happen. |
| • Temporary resolution | A possible solution is found that partially relieves the tension. However, the narrative is not finished and the central complication has not truly been resolved. |
| • Reappearing complication | Further events occur which reveal the problem has not yet been solved. New problems add to the tension, creating a feeling of 'out of the frying pan and into the fire.' |
| • Resolution | Finally, the narrator overcomes the complication of the narrative and resolves the central problem(s). There may be some reflection on the narrative and on any lessons learned. |




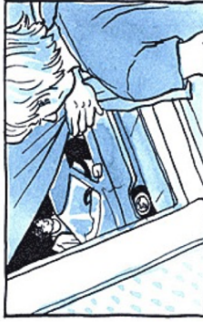

Tension

Tension is created by the disruption to the narrative; a complication arises, and the reader does not know how it will be resolved. It is this uncertainty that creates tension.

Slow development of plot with several complications that are not fully resolved until the end of the narrative



Here is a graphical representation of **tension** in a narrative, showing how tension might rise and fall depending on what thoughts and actions occur over the course of a typical narrative. Do you think this graph is an accurate representation of how tension rises and falls in *Fun Home*? Why / why not?

Orientation	Complication	Temporary Resolution	Reappearing Complication	Resolution
<p>The reader is introduced to the setting of the novel: time, place, circumstances. Characters are introduced and emotional states are set.</p> <p>A problem may be foreshadowed, but not yet presented.</p>  <p>IN THE CIRCUS, ANY PERSON WHOSE NAME APPEARS IN THE CIRCUS PROGRAMME FOR ONE DAY AND ONLY ONE DAY IS CALLED A CIRCUS PERSON.</p>	<p>A problem arises which presents a disturbance to the situation, characters or setting.</p> <p>Tension is created and there is uncertainty about what may happen in the narrative.</p>  <p>BUT WOULD AN IDEAL HUSBAND AND FATHER HAVE SEX WITH TEENAGE BOYS?</p>	<p>A possible answer to the crisis is revealed, and a relief to the tension is experienced.</p> <p>However, the narrative is not yet finished, and the central complication has not yet been resolved. The relief is merely partial or temporary.</p>  <p>BUT THE IMPROPER DISCUSSION OF SEXUALITY TO CHARACTERS' TENSION HAS NOT YET BEEN RESOLVED.</p>	<p>Further events occur which reveal the complication has not yet been fully resolved.</p> <p>New problems add to the tension, creating a feeling of 'out of the frying pan and into the fire.'</p> 	<p>The narrator succeeds in overcoming the complication and solving the problem of the narrative.</p> <p>The narrator has learned a lesson or grown as a character and may reflect on this learning.</p>  <p>ALISON HAS LEARNED THAT SHE IS A LESBIAN AND THAT SHE HAS TO LIVE WITH IT. SHE HAS TO LIVE WITH IT. SHE HAS TO LIVE WITH IT.</p>
<p>The setting is the Bechdel family's Gothic Revival Mansion during the narrator's childhood.</p> <p>The reader is introduced to Bruce Bechdel and his daughter Alison as they play airplanes, suggesting a typical father-daughter bond between them.</p> <p>However, the book Anna Karenina lies next to Bruce. In this famous novel, Anna is hit by a train. Also, the narration describes their play as an 'Icarian Game,' foreshadowing Bruce's fall-from-grace in the eyes of his daughter.</p>	<p>Alison reveals Bruce's passion for his home restoration project; over many years he renovated and restored the family's Gothic Revival Mansion.</p> <p>However, the closeness and affection between family members is revealed to be a sham, a cover up for Bruce's secret life that he leads behind his family's back.</p> <p>Alison reveals that Bruce seduced and slept with teenage boys, many of whom were his male students.</p>	<p>Throughout the novel, Alison struggles to come to terms with her father's secrets and the effect it had on her family and childhood. To give two examples: on hearing of her father's death, Alison was unable to properly grieve acted inappropriately at her father's funeral; because of the discovery of her own homosexuality, she developed obsessive-compulsive disorders.</p> <p>However, by the end of chapter 5, she has overcome her obsessive compulsion and is reconciling her relationship with her father by remembering moments of happiness among the troubles of her past.</p>	<p>Bruce gets in serious trouble when the brother of a teenager he seduced saw him and called the police. Whereas the tension in the family had been personal, largely confined to the house, now it becomes public, escalating the crisis.</p> <p>Bruce attended court, where he was charged with providing alcohol to an underage boy.</p> <p>In order to avoid a criminal record, he was ordered to complete six months of psychiatric treatment.</p>	<p>Alison is finally able to come to terms with her father's death and with her knowledge of the secrets he kept from his family.</p> <p>She is also able to recount her own journey of discovery about her sexuality and realises that, for all his faults, Bruce supported her during her coming out as a lesbian.</p> <p>She understands that while he was there to catch her, nobody was there to catch him.</p>

Pace

A novel is different to a short story in terms of length and complexity because a novel often plays out over a longer time span. It may contain sub-plots, which resolves itself alongside the main narrative, or minor characters who's stories we briefly follow. A novel normally consists of several chapters, each one containing different events, locations, characters, actions, and so on. For this reason, the **pace** of a novel is often slower than the pace of a short story or drama.

When reading a novel, you might recognise the over-arching structure of the whole story being replicated from chapter to chapter. In essence, some chapters play out like mini-stories in themselves, repeating the sequence of 'orientation – complication – resolution'. You might also recognise this occurring in films or television series; each episode tells its own story, but the combination of episodes creates a larger, over-arching story as well. In cases like this, the 'orientation – complication – resolution' structure plays out again and again in a recurring shape, or repeating pattern; **spiral structure** and/or **wave structure** are the names of these slower, longer narrative patterns.

Take Chapter 5 as an example of one loop in the spiral structure of *Fun Home*. At the beginning of chapter 5, Alison recounts a dream she has of rushing to see a beautiful sunset from a vantage point at the top of a nearby hill. She knows her father will also enjoy looking at the sunset and repeatedly tells him to hurry up. But when she arrives, her father has not caught up and he misses the sunset. She calls this a 'premonitory dream' (page 124) as the dream is symbolic of Alison's feelings about her father's suicide; she feels that by choosing to die, he chose to miss all the important events of her life from that moment on. In this way, the reader is reminded of the over-arching narrative **complication**: that Bruce's secrets reduced his family to little more than artificial scenery or, at best, bit-part players in the story of his life.

This **complication** is developed on pages 128 – 129 as Alison remembers exploring Beech Creek with her camera – but her father is mostly absent from the images on these pages. Moreover, later in the chapter, when her father is present, he is often critical of Alison. On one occasion he thoughtlessly improvises a better poem than one she composed; on another occasion he cannot accept her colouring in the canary-yellow caravan from *Wind in the Willows* the wrong colour. A particularly noticeable panel is on page 134, where all the members of the house are isolated inside their own rooms, engaged in their own solitary activities: one playing a guitar, another painting, another writing and so on.

However, just as the over-arching narrative of *Fun Home* is Alison working through her problems with her father and trying to deal with the effect he had on her and her family, so this pattern plays out in chapter 5 alone. The final panel of the chapter depicts Alison and her father standing at the garden gates watching a sunset together. It's unclear whether this is a real memory, or whether Alison is drawing an ideal version of her and Bruce's relationship. Whatever the case, the final panel can be seen as a **resolution** to the complication of Alison's feelings about being abandoned by her father. The graphical similarities between the panels on page 124 and 150 support this interpretation. Of course, in terms of the overall structure of the novel, this turns out to be a **temporary resolution**: in the next chapter, the crisis escalates when Bruce is briefly arrested and goes to court because he was caught giving alcohol to a teenage boy.

Activity

Choose another two chapters from *Fun Home*. Look at the first pages/panels and ask how the over-arching story is being developed or escalated: what, if any, new complications are introduced at the start of chapters? Then, look at the last page or panels of the chapters. How do the last panels develop or resolve the complications? Do they affect the overall tension of the narrative? Can you explain your chosen chapters to others in your class?

To complete this activity, write a three-paragraph explanation (like the one on this page) of one of the chapters you have analysed.

Discussion Point: *the region of Allegheny*

As chapter 5 continues, Alison both discusses and shows the geography of the Allegheny Plateau. She considers the isolation of the region and its impact on her father's life. Many of the images in this chapter feature illustrations of the surrounding landscape, and Alison also shows maps detailing the topographical features of the land. She makes a link between geography and the story of her father, saying on page 125: *'If only he'd been able to escape the gravitational tug of Beech Creek... my father's story might have turned out differently.'*

Discuss the presentation of **setting** in this chapter. How has Beech Creek been depicted at different times over the course of the novel: for example, in the 1970s when Alison was a child and later as she grew up. What changes to the setting are detailed by Alison? What stays the same? Do you agree that the Beech Creek setting has a role to play in the events of the story, and especially in Bruce's fall from grace, and eventual death?

Spot the Allusions

How many of the following allusions to other texts did you spot in Chapters 4 and 5? What does each allusion bring to your understanding of the characters, events, and themes of *Fun Home*? Have you spotted any that I have missed?

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| • Marcel Proust | The title of chapter 4 comes from the second volume of Proust's novel <i>In Search of Lost Time</i> . She also references Swann's Way, the first volume, who's narrator enjoyed a communion with the flowers of his garden. Alison mentions how Proust fell in love with his chauffeur, Albert, and calls Proust a 'pansy'. |
| • The Rifleman | Alison watches this American Western show from the 1950s on television. It features examples of very obviously 'masculine' men. |
| • The Nude | A study of the ideal form for the nude in sculpture, on page 99 you can see this book resting on the shelf in the library. |
| • The Village | An area of Manhattan, New York, famous as a gay refuge in the 1980s and associated with parties, hedonism, and the Aids pandemic. |
| • The Wind in the Willows | A children's book by Kenneth Grahame, Alison colours in Mr Toad's famous caravan the wrong colour. Bruce also shares similarities with Mr Toad, who Alison calls a 'charming sociopath.' There is a map of the |
| • Morning's At Four | A play by Paul Osborn, Helen is seen rehearsing the lines on page 132. |