

Alison Bechdel: Fun Home (Chapter 6: The Ideal Husband)

"The summer I was thirteen, my father's secret almost surfaced."

The sixth chapter of Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir takes place entirely in her thirteenth year, the year she considers to be her last innocent days. In this chapter, she begins to menstruate and discovers more about her sexuality, accidentally orgasming for the first time. Indeed, her own coming-of-age coincides with her father's Icarian fall from grace. During the summer, while Alison stays at a friend's house, Bruce is reported to the police by the brother of a young man he tries to seduce. Only because the brothers refuse to testify, and because Bruce consents to seeing a psychiatrist, does he escape a criminal charge.

Looking back years later, Alison now reflects on how her father's behaviour affected her mother. Helen Bechdel takes center stage in this chapter, figuratively and literally, as Alison recalls her obsessively rehearsing for her part in Oscar Wilde's *Importance of Being Earnest*. Once again, Alison notices similarities between her father and a literary figure; Wilde was also tried in court for homosexuality. Unlike her father, though, he was sent to jail for the 'crime' of being queer. All this takes place against an increasingly tumultuous backdrop: a once-every-seventeen-year cycle of locusts engulfs Beech Creek; President Nixon is embroiled in the Watergate scandal; and a huge storm fells a tree which narrowly misses the Bechdel mansion.

Knowledge Check

How well do you know this chapter?

1. The title of chapter 6 is an allusion to a play written by whom?

- (a) Radclyffe Hall.
- (b) Edward Albee.
- (c) James Joyce.
- (d) Oscar Wilde.

2. What role did Helen play in the *Importance of Being Earnest*?

- (a) Cecily.
- (b) Juliet.
- (c) Lady Bracknell.
- (d) Gertrude.

3. When did President Nixon resign as a result of the Watergate scandal?

- (a) August 9, 1974.
- (b) September 12, 1973.
- (c) March 16, 1974.
- (d) October 27, 1979.

4. How frequently do locusts appear and swarm?

- (a) Every 12 years.
- (b) Every 7 years.
- (c) Every 17 years.
- (d) Every 10 years.

5. How old was Mark Walsh when Bruce allegedly seduced him?

- (a) 17.
- (b) 19.
- (c) 21.
- (d) 15.

6. What is Helen's middle name?

- (a) Anneke.
- (b) Caitlin.
- (c) Tiffany.
- (d) Augusta.

7. What food, from Helen's play, does Alison remember eating all summer?

- (a) Roast beef.
- (b) Potato salad.
- (c) Cucumber sandwiches.
- (d) Ginger biscuits.

8. What does the word 'lacuna' mean?

- (a) Gap.
- (b) Book.
- (c) Leap.
- (d) Star.

9. The death of which author does Alison record in her diary, along with a huge AAARGH!!?

- (a) E.M. Forster
- (b) George R.R. Martin
- (c) J.R.R. Tolkien.
- (d) Anais Nin

10. On what condition was the charge against Bruce dismissed?

- (a) If he registers as a sex offender.
- (b) If he moves out of the state.
- (c) If he pays compensation.
- (d) If he completes six months of counselling.

Understanding and Interpretation

1. What is happening in the wider world throughout this chapter? How do wider events relate to the family drama, if at all?
2. How does this chapter more strongly mark Alison's coming-of-age? Why is her diary an important motif in this chapter?
3. What does the reader learn about Helen in this chapter? How does it develop her role in the story?
4. How does Bruce's situation worsen in this chapter? How does this mark a progression from what we have learned about him previously?
5. Choose a page or panel from chapter 6 – can you comment on the graphic or artistic style of your choice? What makes it a particularly effective page or panel?

Literary Study: *Pathetic Fallacy*

Related to personification, **pathetic fallacy** is a type of figurative language in which human feelings, actions or concerns are assigned symbolically to aspects of the natural world, often (but not always) the weather or the landscape. Also called the **emotional fallacy**, the term was coined by Victorian writer John Ruskin, who used the term critically as he considered this transfer of emotion to be a cheap trick of lesser writers! Nowadays, pathetic fallacy is an accepted part of the writer's toolkit, and we use the word neutrally to describe the way the natural world might reflect human attributes. It differs from personification in that pathetic fallacy must contain an **emotional** dimension whereas personification might not. Therefore, if a writer describes a 'host of golden daffodils' (as, indeed, Wordsworth once did) he is employing personification; if, however, a writer (such as Robert Browning) writes, 'the *sullen* wind was soon awake', he is creating **pathetic fallacy**.

Alison Bechdel employs pathetic fallacy throughout chapter 6 of *Fun Home*, where the unsteady, unpredictable process of her coming-of-age is mirrored in tumultuous events in the natural world. Firstly, a veritable plague of locusts descends upon Beech Creek as a once-in-every-seventeen-years storm of cicadas emerge from their larval husks and 'cloak the town from dawn to dusk' with the noise of their mating. The pathetic fallacy of the cicadas is made clear on page 156, when Alison describes their hatching and shedding of skin in language that might just as easily describe her own coming-of-age transformations: 'they... shed the skins of their nymph-hood and emerged as winged adults.' Later, she describes witnessing President Nixon's very public downfall as 'the truth wormed its way, like a larval cicada, towards daylight' (page 172). In this way, her discovery of the truth about her father, and realisation that the wider world is a place of corruption and deceit, is mirrored in the slow life cycle of a cicada.

Secondly, a bad storm strikes Beech Creek just as her father is embroiled in a court case pertaining to his seduction of a seventeen-year-old boy. The storm is heavily symbolic of the legal troubles that Alison's father creates for himself and his family through his persistent behaviour. Just before the storm hits, Alison notices the leaves on a massive silver maple that grows outside the Gothic Revival house appear inside-out thanks to the strange weather conditions. This abnormality gives Alison an uneasy feeling that something is wrong (which is exactly the emotional dimension required by pathetic fallacy). Of course, that 'something' turns out to be Bruce's court case. When the tree topples during the storm it barely misses the house – just as Bruce narrowly escapes his brush with the law.

Activity

Consider how **pathetic fallacy** is employed in any other literary text you have studied. Practise for your Paper 2 by writing a section (one to two paragraphs) which compares and/or contrasts the use of pathetic fallacy in this text and *Fun Home*.

Write your piece as a direct continuation of the explanation above, using words suitable for compare-and-contrast such as:

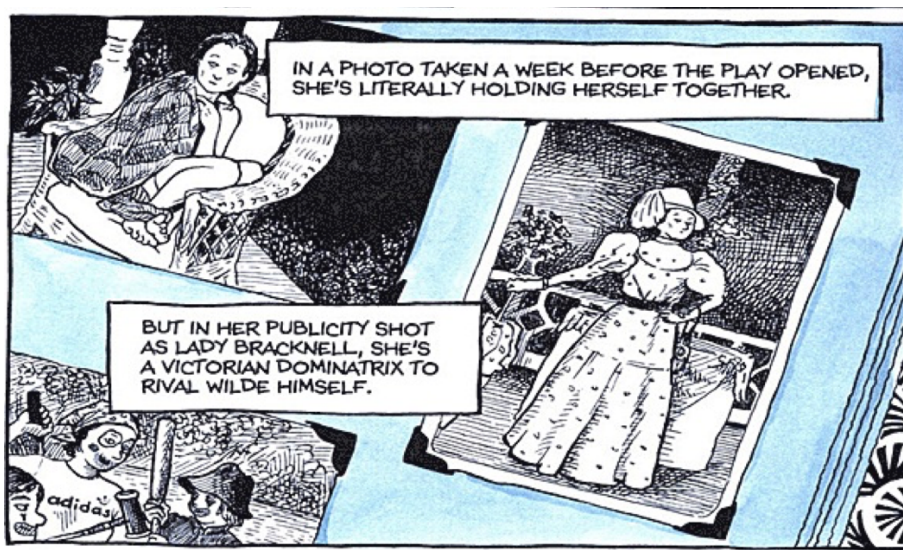
- | | |
|---------------------|---------------|
| • Meanwhile | • By contrast |
| • Similarly | • Just like |
| • Unlike | • Whereas |
| • On the other hand | • However |

Important Character: *Helen Bechdel*

'In even the most routine activities, my mother held to exacting standards.'

Helen Bechdel is the mother of Alison, John, and Christian, and is the wife of Bruce. Helen was initially an unwitting part of the elaborate ruse that Bruce has concocted to idealize his life and hide his sexuality for, when they were first together, she was not aware of his tendencies. Helen married Bruce out of the belief she would have an adventurous and exciting life with him, but the opposite ends up true. As suspicions gnaw away at her and the truth finally dawns, she fights hard to keep her marriage alive with Bruce, but ultimately, his lies and deceptions cause her to realize she is not living the life she was promised. As a result, she decides to leave Bruce.

Helen is very much a secondary character in *Fun Home*, which is primarily the story both of Alison's coming-of-age and her coming-to-terms with her father's lifelong deceptions. (Years later this imbalance would be redressed when Alison published her second graphic novel called *Are You My Mother?* telling, you guessed it, Helen's story). However, chapter six features Helen in a somewhat more prominent role, developing her character and backstory. We discover more about Helen's love of theatre as she throws herself into rehearsals for *The Importance of Being Earnest*, learning not just her own lines but the lines of all the parts in the play – while completing her master's thesis at the same time! Alison also provides a resolution, of sorts, to the tension between herself and her mother that has existed ever since the reader learned Helen was not supportive of her coming out as gay: the end of this chapter depicts a tender moment between them after Alison starts experiencing her first periods.



The presentation of Helen in this chapter also develops the novel's major theme of 'artifice versus reality'. Just as Bruce uses fiction as a way to cover up the truth about his sexuality, and Alison uses fiction to work out her complicated feelings about her childhood, so too does Helen use fiction – especially her theatrical roles – as a way of escaping the real life 'drama' that her family has become. This is most evident on page 164, where Alison juxtaposes two photographs of Helen: in the first picture she looks haggard and exhausted and Alison writes '*she's literally holding herself together*'; in the second she is resplendent onstage as the imperious Lady Bracknell. Clearly, when acting as someone else, Helen is able to feel confident and powerful, at least for a brief time, while in reality her husband is deceiving her and her responsibilities are running her ragged. It's up to you to decide whether her escapist fantasies are a positive force in her life – or just a way of pulling the wool over her own eyes.

Activity

Create a character profile of Helen Bechdel. Include some or all of the following information:

- Brief personal history;
- Physical description;
- Likes and dislikes;
- Values and beliefs;
- Strengths and weaknesses;
- Conflicts, challenges and goals;
- Three key quotations;
- Important moments in the text;
- Any other information you think is significant.

Discussion Point: *Bruce's worsening behaviour*

The most significant plot point in the narrative arises in Chapter 6 with the scandal surrounding Bruce Bechdel and two underage brothers with whom he engaged in sexual affairs. While Alison and her brothers stayed with her best friend's family and their mother completed her college thesis, Bruce Bechdel picked up a local boy, gave him beer, had sex with him, and was then reported by the boy's older brother.

Discuss how and why this event is worse than previous indiscretions in the novel so far. How do the stakes escalate in this chapter? What do you think about the court ruling at the end of chapter 6; proportionate or worrying, in your opinion? Also, discuss the impacts of Bruce Bechdel's indiscretions with Mark and David Walsh on the Bechdel family. Why did Helen Bechdel believe that the family might relocate? Why do you think that Helen Bechdel chose at this time not to leave her husband due to his indiscretions with underage boys?

Spot the Allusions

How many of the following allusions to other texts did you spot in Chapter 6? 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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|-----------------------|---|
| • An Ideal Husband | The title of this chapter is the name of an Oscar Wilde. Like Bruce, Wilde was also put on trial for homosexuality; unlike Bruce he was sentenced to two years in Reading Gaol. |
| • Oscar Wilde | The writer of <i>The Importance of Being Earnest</i> ; Helen is rehearsing for the famous part of Lady Bracknell, a matriarch who commands the stage with her fierce presence. |
| • Cucumber Sandwiches | An important symbol in <i>The Importance of Being Earnest</i> as they relate to the inability to resist temptation. This allusion can be transferred to Bruce in chapter 6. |
| • Watergate | A reference to the scandal involving President Nixon who was implicated in the cover-up of a break-in to the Democratic HQ. His lies would lead to his impeachment and resignation in 1974. |
| • J.R.R. Tolkien | A famous writer of fantasy fiction (<i>The Lord of the Rings</i>); his death is recorded in Alison's diary. |
| • Sonny and Cher | The Sonny and Cher comedy hour was a variety show featuring married hosts. Cher filed for divorce in 1974, and the court proceedings were ugly. |
| • The Brady Bunch | A 1969 – 1974 television sitcom about a blended family who live in a two-storey house designed by the father. Alison says this and Sonny and Cher are the 'dumbest shows in the world'. |
| • Road Runner | The Bechdel family are seen watching this animated cartoon series about a coyote chasing a bird. |

