

Alison Bechdel: Fun Home (Chapter 3: That Old Catastrophe)

"Suspension of the imaginary in the real was my father's stock in trade."

Alison's lesbianism is an important theme in chapter 3. She recalls how she learned about homosexuality through reading at college and admits that coming out as gay was terrifying for her. During her formative years, she did not understand much about her sexuality, something she reflects upon now she is older. In fact, many things that were confusing to her as a child now become clear when she looks back on her life through adult eyes. For example, she now understands her father's preference for floral patterns was a symptom of his own repressed homosexuality.

Chapter 3 also gives readers the backstory of Bruce and Helen's marriage. Inspired by the life of F. Scott Fitzgerald, when they first met Bruce wrote passionate letters to Helen, a side of him that vanished in their marriage. Interestingly, when Alison does come out as gay it is her mother who is less supportive than her father. This owes much to her father's hidden sexuality and her mother's weariness with his years of deception, something that Alison will return to later in the novel.

Knowledge Check

How well do you know this chapter?

1. The title of Chapter 3 is an allusion to which poem by Wallace Stevens?

- (a) *Odysseus*.
- (b) *A Nail in the Coffin*.
- (c) *Sunday Morning*.
- (d) *Two Roads Diverged*.

2. To which company did the truck that hit Alison's father belong?

- (a) Coca Cola.
- (b) Sunbeam Bread.
- (c) Getty Gas.
- (d) Duncan Hines.

3. What does the word 'qualmish' mean? What about 'qualm'?

- (a) Insistent.
- (b) Nauseated.
- (c) Worried.
- (d) Friendly.

4. Where did Bruce and Helen get married?

- (a) Italy.
- (b) Spain.
- (c) Germany.
- (d) France.

5. How did Alison tell her parents she is gay?

- (a) By letter.
- (b) By phone call.
- (c) By email.
- (d) In person.

6. What gift did Alison reward herself with after coming out as gay?

- (a) A new book.
- (b) A new suit.
- (c) A Swiss Army knife.
- (d) A pair of earrings.

7. Who is the babysitter who Bruce had an affair with?

- (a) James.
- (b) Roger.
- (c) Lynn.
- (d) Roy.

8. What is the name of the author's youngest brother?

- (a) Christian.
- (b) Paul.
- (c) Peter.
- (d) John.

9. How many gestures of affection does the author recall seeing between her parents?

- (a) Countless.
- (b) Few.
- (c) 10.
- (d) 2.

10. What play were Bruce and Helen performing when they met?

- (a) *The Merchant of Venice*.
- (b) *All's Well That Ends Well*.
- (c) *The Taming of the Shrew*.
- (d) *The Tragedy of Macbeth*.

Understanding and Interpretation

1. How does Alison coming out as gay and her father's secret being revealed intertwine in this chapter?
2. What is the significance of the library setting in this chapter?
3. How did Bruce and Helen meet? How would you describe their early relationship? How has their relationship changed over time?
4. How does this chapter develop the theme of 'fantasy and reality', particularly in relation to Bruce's life?
5. An 'epistle' is a letter. The word 'epistolary' describes a story that unfolds through writing and reading letters. How significant is the act of reading and writing in this chapter? What kinds of things are conveyed through letters (or diaries and so on)?
6. What visual elements of chapter 3 stood out for you? Can you comment on an aspect of the artwork or the graphic style of a page or panel in this chapter?

Literary Study: *Foil*

'I had imagined my confession as an emancipation from my parents, but instead I was pulled back into their orbit.'

Contrast is an essential part of the tension in a literary work. In literary works, a **foil** is a character who is placed alongside and juxtaposed with another character, often the protagonist, and whose character traits contrast with their own. In the same way that black seems darker when placed next to white (and vice versa) the **foil** draws out or highlights an essential quality in the protagonist that may otherwise be less clear.

Back in chapter one, Alison introduced the idea that her and her father are contrasting characters: she described herself as *'Spartan'*, *'modern'* and *'Butch'* whereas she described her father as *'Athenian'*, *'Victorian'* and a *'Nelly'*. Throughout the work, the contrast between Alison and her father is developed until the reader understands that he is Alison's **foil** (or she is his). Nowhere is this clearer than when it comes to the theme of homosexuality. While initially terrified of her lesbianism, Alison is determined to wear her sexuality openly, for example wanting to dress in a masculine way. By contrast, her father tries to hide his sexuality, keeping it secret from his wife and family and repressing his desires.

Activity

Think about other literary works you have studied on your course (or books you have read outside the course as well). Which pairs of characters do you think function as **foils**? Complete the chart below:

(NB: a single moment of contrast is not really enough to say that characters are foils. The contrast should be developed meaningfully across time in a work. Also, heroes and villains, while they are likely to possess contrasting traits, are not necessarily foils. The characters should ideally be juxtaposed through interaction rather than through opposition.)

Literary Work	Character Pairing	Explanation
<i>Fun Home</i> by Alison Bechdel	Bruce Bechdel vs Alison Bechdel	<i>Bruce is Alison's foil, especially when it comes to their attitudes towards being homosexual. Alison wants to embrace her sexual identity and wear her gayness openly. On the other hand, Bruce tries to suppress his feelings and hide who he is from his wife and family.</i>
<i>Pygmalion</i> by George Bernard Shaw	Henry Higgins vs Colonel Pickering	<i>Henry, an incorrigible scientist, is brusque, short-tempered and entirely focused on his work. HE never considers the feelings of others and treats people as objects in a scientific experiment. By contrast, Pickering is gentlemanly, kind and considerate. He takes time to pay people compliments and make them feel good about who they are (in this way, Mrs Pearce serves as a foil for Higgins too).</i>

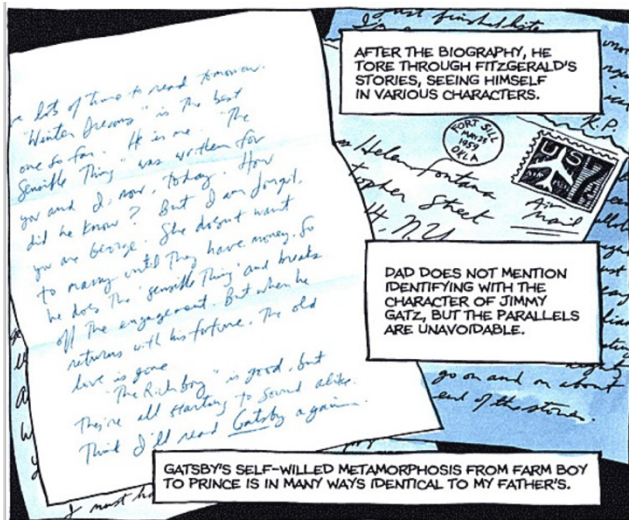
Discussion Point: *Learner Profile – Risk-taker*

In various panels throughout chapter 3, Alison takes the reader into the ‘minotaur’s lair’: the library at the center of the house. Once or twice, we see Bruce showing off his library to a student, building relationships by inviting them into the library and lending out books to read. At the same time, throughout chapter 3, we discover more about Bruce hiding his own homosexuality from his family and sleeping with some of his male students. On page 61, Alison shows us Bruce lending out a book to a young man, at which point she wryly comments; *‘The promise was very likely sexual in some cases, but whatever else might have been going on, books were being read.’* It’s interesting to contrast the older, more experienced Alison’s comment (written as exposition in captions) with the reaction of young Alison presented in speech bubbles: when her mother first told her about her father’s hidden secret, she was so shocked she could only reply, *‘What?’* and curl up into the foetal position (page 59). It seems that, over time, the shock of discovering her father’s secret has worn off; the older Alison is more phlegmatic and can even joke that, while her father’s behaviour was wrong, at least his students were getting a good education!

Think about your own thoughts, feelings, and reactions when you first read this novel. It can be a risk for a person to move beyond the obvious human reactions such as shocked, appalled, or disgusted at Bruce’s behaviour – a bit like Alison at seventeen years old. Admitting to any other response leaves a person open to accusations and can be a risk for anybody, let alone a young person in school, to take. Although Alison is joking, is there a serious point to be made about Bruce’s students being encouraged to read? Does the fact that his students benefitted from the education he gave them offset the harm that he may have caused? Is it possible to see Bruce’s story in shades of grey, rather than in black and white? In other areas of life, do intentions always matter if the outcome is a positive one? Share your feelings with a classmate, if you are able and willing to **take a risk**, and report back to the group.

Literary Study: Allusion

'My father even looked like Gatsby.'



The number of references to texts-outside-the-text (properly called **allusions**) in *Fun Home* is bewildering. Alison Bechdel weaves into her story a blizzard of references to mythology, literature and culture, from the myth of Daedalus and Icarus in chapter 1, to *The Addams Family* television show in the second chapter, to the life and works of F. Scott Fitzgerald in chapter 3 – and many, many more. But Alison isn't just showing off the depth of her literary education. She examines the similarities and differences between the events and characters of these stories in order to come to a better understanding of her family and the world around her.

For example, Bruce was passionate about many writers, but F. Scott Fitzgerald was a particular favourite of his. In this chapter, Alison directly compares Bruce's life to that of F. Scott Fitzgerald. She notices how elements of Fitzgerald's life were re-enacted by Bruce: they both had humble, rural beginnings; they both served time in the army; they both wrote sentimental and flowery letters to court their future wives. Stories of Fitzgerald and his wife Zelda's outrageous behaviour captivated Bruce. Alison believes that what her father loved most about the stories 'was their inextricability from Fitzgerald's life' (page 65). Fitzgerald's marriage even fell apart in the same way that Helen and Bruce's marriage cannot survive – and they were of an age when they died!

However, more and more Bruce begins to resemble, not Fitzgerald the writer, but one of Fitzgerald's most famous characters: Jay Gatsby. Gatsby is the eponymous hero of *The Great Gatsby*, famous for the lavish parties he throws at his millionaire mansion. Yet no-one knows who he is or where he's from: in reality, he was a poor child who grew up in an impoverished part of the US. Like Gatsby, Bruce uses his home – especially the library – to project an image of himself that is not true. On page 61, when a visitor sees Bruce's impressive book collection, he asks, 'So Bruce, have you read all these?' Bruce replies, 'Not yet.' While Gatsby used the illusion of wealth to land the love of his life, Bruce uses his house to project the image of the ideal family man, while secretly seducing boys under the guise of being an older, mentor-figure to them. This scene is interrupted by Helen, who reminds Bruce he forgot to pick up Alison's younger brother John. Just like Fitzgerald and Gatsby's wild behaviour destroyed their respective families, so Bruce's behaviour has consequences for Alison's family.

Where Alison is different to Bruce is that she uses fictional references knowingly and does not try to cover up the truth. For example, on page 64 she says, 'Perhaps it seems like a colossal illusion on my part to compare my father to Robert Redford' (who played Jay Gatsby in a 1974 film). Therefore, Alison always tries to separate fantasy and reality, and admits to the reader when she cannot. Bruce (and Helen) on the other hand, use fiction to hide the truth. While fiction can illuminate reality and help us understand it, fiction cannot change reality. Perhaps the tragedy of Bruce's downfall is that he thought that it can.

Activity

Look at the usual Spot the Allusion feature below. This time, I haven't explained the allusion for you. You may know some of these already. If you don't – quickly research the allusion and make a note of where it is from, and how it shines a light on Alison's family or situation.

Spot the Allusions

How many of the following allusions to other texts did you spot in Chapter 3? 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?

- F. Scott Fitzgerald *American author whose life Bruce begins to copy. For example, he courted his wife Zelda through letters while he was in the army.*
- The Great Gatsby
- Don Quixote
- Mephistopheles
- The Taming of the Shrew
- Portrait of a Lady / Isabel Archer
- Anais Nin
- Adrienne Rich
- Wallace Stevens