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Intro to Literature

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Binary Oppositions Shared and Overcome:

A Deconstruction of Sexuality Along Family Fault Lines in Bechdel's *Fun Home*

Gathering together her complex past in panels and captions, Alison Bechdel establishes a telling narrative of her early life and its interconnectedness with her father. The primary conflict of Bechdel's *Fun Home* arises in the perplexing character of her father, Bruce Bechdel, who secretly struggles with his sexual identity. His questionable sexuality is shown to be at odds with the heterosexual dominant social hierarchy, which leads him to repress his own identity in ways that have far-reaching effects on Bechdel's life. By analyzing her own life as it relates to her father's, Bechdel is able to construct an intimately vivid image of both their lives that transcends the conventional ideals governing gender and sexuality.

Bruce Bechdel stands as a pivotal influence on the author's childhood milieu with his overbearing personality and clandestine lifestyle. Even though Alison is unaware of her father's secreted sexuality at an early age, the false mask that he dons has a profound impact on her young life. The first chapter of *Fun Home* is almost completely devoted to her father's incessant obsession with filigree and ostentatious ornamentation, which leads Bechdel and her brothers to perform rigorous maintenance on their home. Eventually these chores become linked to "contempt for useless ornamentation" (Bechdel 16) that is associated with her father's eccentric interests. As a culturally defined trait of femininity,

the admiration of fine décor and flowers confuses the expected masculinity of Bechdel's father so that she associates the feminine with her father's negative traits. In response to this derogatory image of acceptable femininity, Bechdel asserts "indeed, I had become a connoisseur of masculinity at an early age" (95) by reveling in stereotypically masculine media like Westerns, admonishing her father's attempts to dress her in girl's clothing, and weighing Bruce against other men. These childhood actions were taken as a result of personal preference as well as culturally supported gender roles, which manifested in Bruce's unconventional behavior. By embracing masculinity as a young girl, Bechdel counters social patterns of gender identification revealing that gender roles are primarily a culturally defined concept of social difference that may be overcome. Masculinity is then an antithesis to femininity so that the two denominations are defined by their inherent differences rather than a stagnant, quantifiable aspect. This is what allows Bechdel to adopt a more fluid gender identity that abandons conventional social limitations. Unfortunately, her father, who incited this change in the first place, was unable to fully abandon the heterosexist, binary-based cultural context that led him to mask his own identity.

Fiction plays a prominent role in expressing aspects of Bechdel's life with direct reference to multiple literary works throughout *Fun Home*. The literary examples often run parallel to the deeper fictions embedded in the reality of the story, especially with Bruce's self-conscious sexual identity. As her father renovates their home and fills it with rich finery, Bechdel states, "he used his skillful artifice not to make things, but to make things appear to be what they were not" (16). Beneath the superfluous decorations, and seemingly typical family life, there is a turmoil founded on the introverted father figure.

However, Bruce's façade is often overturned by the various cases where he commits sexually deviant acts with teenage boys. It is these negative endeavors that categorize Bruce as a homosexual in the minds of readers as well as Bechdel herself, yet the negativity associated with homosexuality is the primary cause for Bruce's fictionalized life. The narrative of "bad" placed on the narrative of "homosexuality" causes Bruce to narrativize his own life in a mirrored-chamber sort of echoing "disappearance of the real." For her father, homosexuality is treated like an illness so that, as Bechdel writes, "an idle remark about my father's tie over breakfast could send him into a tailspin" (18), indicating that his desire for an idealized and inevitably fictional identity was magnified to the most infinitesimal characteristics. He had internalized society's ideal of a fixed identity to the point that he had become rigid, fragile. Bruce assumes this intricate fiction in an attempt to mask his true nature due to the hierarchies of diametric oppositions that dictate that heterosexuality is more socially acceptable than homosexuality. Ironically, his web of self-conscious depravity is likely more of a tragic vice than the initial desires it was meant to conceal.

The negative social context of homosexuality acts as a fundamental challenge to Bechdel's personal assertion of her gay identity. One of the earliest examples of this is when young Bechdel and her father visit a diner where they see a woman who resembles a man in dress and appearance. Immediately Bechdel's father berates her with a knowing question, hinting at the young girl's interest. Although she responds with appropriate derision to the concept of a female incorporated with male traits, later captions reveal "the vision of the truck driving bulldyke sustained me through the years...as perhaps it haunted my father" (119). The distinct implications of a woman exhibiting masculine

traits was enough to elicit admiration and possibilities for Bechdel's identity-confused childhood self, while her father may have been reminded of his own culturally implied fault. In another less obvious exertion of personal submission to social stigmas, Bechdel is reluctant to buy lesbian literature or attend the Gay Union meeting at her college. Small instances like these, where an individual's identity must be suppressed to conform to standards determining one's own status in a social system, are likely a significant motivator for Bruce's attempts to assimilate into what may be construed as a normal life. Unlike his daughter, who was eventually able to outwardly express herself, Bruce was largely incapable of acting on his desires except in a deviant manner with young boys, which only revitalized the derogatory image of himself. With his intricate fictionalized reality, Bruce sought to escape socially accepted hierarchies related to sexuality but, as Bechdel illustrates throughout *Fun Home*, this may have been the primary reason for his death. In one panel Bechdel speaks out to a mourner at her father's funeral, saying, "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). Her father's death is then a blunt ending to the apparent tragedy of his life, which was characterized by the central, destructive influence of self-deprecation founded on the tenants of a binary value system. Yet, throughout *Fun Home*, the socially unacceptable traits that limited her father form a basis for contentment and potential in Bechdel's life leading to a fundamental upheaval of the hierarchies between gender and sexuality.

The sexual freedom that Bechdel enjoyed is juxtaposed with her father's tragic oppression, indicating a positive alternative to the socially accepted roles. Her identity as a lesbian is inextricably linked to that of her confounding father, who continued to thwart

her initial culturally based ideas of what a man or woman was supposed to be. Even though Bechdel and her father may be categorized as homosexual, their actions are based on different histories and social atmospheres that set the stage for differing expressions of their identity. In a letter, Bechdel's father addresses the predominant social context that first restricted him stating, "I'll admit that I have been somewhat envious of the 'new' freedom that appears on campuses today—in the fifties it was not even considered an option—yes, my world was quite limited" (212). Both of their identities were inevitably shaped by environmental contexts with Bruce's sexuality becoming repressed by social stigma and Bechdel's enlivened at an early age by the aftermath of that same repression seen in her father. So in Bechdel's account there is an apparent reciprocal bond between the diametrically opposed conditions that have influenced her life. Her identity as a homosexual fundamentally challenges her culture's sense of "normal," but that same identity is largely dependent on her father's adherence to the social patterns, which defined him as a person. With an allusion to Proust, Bechdel establishes that binary opposites like homosexuality and heterosexuality are irrevocably combined and "the two ways are revealed to converge—to have always converged- through a vast 'network of transversal'" (102). Like the concepts of masculinity that Bechdel experimented with as a child, homosexuality is primarily defined by the differing marks of heterosexuality and it can only be applied when the opposition is kept in mind. As Bechdel reveals through the series of events by which she relates her and her father's lives, the repression of socially derived traits like homosexuality and heterosexuality can result in the destruction of one's own identity, whereas embracing the interconnectedness of binary oppositions uproots the very framework of a social system leading to positive change.

Works Cited

Bechdel, Alison. *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006.

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