

Sample Analytic Essay

Which Side of Paradise?: Truth and Fiction in *Fun Home*

The passage depicting Bruce in the army (62-63) at first seems to simply be a visual accompaniment for the greater comparison of Bruce and F. Scott Fitzgerald, providing a look at a young Bruce in the time he was reading Fitzgerald. While the images do serve the purpose of illustrating this scene, they also give key insight into the way Alison Bechdel perceives her father. Bechdel's representation of her father and his apparent homosexual tendencies bring into question the distance between truth and perception as they relate to a recounting of the past. In this passage, Bechdel creates her own representation of her young father in an attempt to understand the complexities of his sexuality, choosing an imagined account in lieu of an objective narrative.

Bechdel fills panels with Bruce's written letters, concrete records of the past that ground the representation of Bruce's army days in reality. The letters as shown appear to be a recreation of Bruce's handwriting, making them the closest we get to an objective truth in this passage. We see Bruce's actual words, not a conversation Bechdel surmises may have happened. These letters also have a direct, intended audience in his future wife Helen, which broadens the scope of this passage past the people depicted, expanding the world to include characters not explicitly in this part of the story. The letters bring an authenticity to the passage, a sense of reality within the scene. This is interesting in the context of the form of this novel; *Fun Home* is a memoir, a recounting of the past, while letters are a record of present thoughts. The letters exist in the time of the story being told, while the memoir is removed by the passage of time from the events it depicts. This temporality is important in looking at the reliability of the narration. The letters

should be reliable, they are Bruce's own words written at the time he was thinking those thoughts and living those experiences.

In contrast to the letter panels, Bechdel shows her father in the army surrounded by homoerotic imagery that introduces a tension between reality and imagination. This visual scene is Bechdel's creation; being a minor interaction in Bruce's life, there is likely no concrete basis for the interactions depicted. While the scene may not be trustworthy for the facts it portrays, the scene is helpful in showing us how Bechdel imagines her father might have been perceived in the army. At the time of writing, Bechdel was well aware of her father's homosexual tendencies, so it seems this idea of homoeroticism permeated her very understanding of her father. For instance, of the three lines of dialogue in this passage, two are sexual references to a hidden "*Playboy*" (62) and Fitzgerald as Bruce's "boyfriend" (63). Visually, in the second panel (62) we see a man next to Bruce, but the position of a textbox only allows his torso to be seen, while in the fourth panel (62) there is a man in the background who appears to be removing his shirt. These erotic images bring into question Bruce's sexuality in his youth, a question Bechdel seems to be struggling with and attempting to answer in this passage and throughout the novel. Bechdel's drawing of these panels is suggestive of how she views her father's non-heteronormative behaviors as fitting in, or not, to the hyper-masculine world of the army. She understands her father as queer, so it makes sense to her to surround him with homoeroticism.

Given these two differing representations of Bruce, the letters portraying his heteronormativity and the panels portraying his homosexuality, the question of reliability is raised. Should we question Bruce's authenticity, Bechdel's credibility, or perhaps both? We must consider that it is Bechdel who curated the letters and constructed the scene. Bechdel drew those panels, not from a record of past events, but from an imagining of the past. Similarly, even

though the letters themselves are Bruce's thoughts presented as he intended, it is Bechdel who chooses which letters to present and in what context to present them; the whole scene is ultimately under Bechdel's control. Thus it is not only Bruce's motives behind his words to consider, but also Bechdel's motives behind his representation. The question of reliability is not the events in Bruce's life, but the details, the conversations, and his very character.

In this question of reliability, we must look at what Bechdel chooses to and not to present, as this shapes our ability to trust the narrative Bechdel is creating of her father. For example, Bechdel alludes to her father's past letters, the letters she decides not to show us (63). This serves as a reminder that the story presented may not be the whole truth, that there are details of Bruce's life left out of the picture. What we are left with are the letters Bechdel does show, letters in which she presents Bruce as obsessed with Fitzgerald; he and his work are referenced in every panel on these two pages. This depiction of Bruce's obsession with literature, present in the letters, is reinforced by Bechdel's imagery. She shows him with a book or a pen in his hands in every panel in which he appears in this passage. Bechdel seems to make sense of her father through literature in the same way Bruce finds parallels between himself and the books he reads. Bechdel admits to being unable to describe her parents realistically, as "[her] parents are most real to [her] in fictional terms." (67). Hence this comparison between Bruce and Fitzgerald is significant not only for the direct parallels it draws, but also in illuminating how Bechdel comes to understand her parents. She, like her father, is keen on drawing literary comparisons, though Bechdel's are retrospectively imposed. Bechdel uses fiction rather than reality to understand and explain her father, which suggests that her narration is not factually reliable.

Another place reliability comes into question is in the scenes Bechdel draws that depict interactions between Bruce and others in the army. Bruce's army friends making teasing, sexual

jokes are not known facts, yet the narrator presents them as such. Bechdel shows a scene in Bruce's perspective, in which she is not present, presenting the scene as a truth outside of Bechdel's influence. She does not know that Bruce was surrounded by homoeroticism in the army, but she chooses to present him as such, laying a veil of homosexuality over her father's past actions. Despite the apparent objectivity of the scene, it is an interpretation of a past she never witnessed. The lack of trustworthy reality in this scene helps reveal how Bechdel comes to understand her father and is paralleled and further explained in a scene near the end of the novel. When Bechdel talks about the AIDS epidemic, she imagines that in an alternate scenario her father's life would be taken by AIDS, "linking [the loss of her father], however posthumously, to a more coherent narrative." (196). In this statement and in the passage at hand, we see Bechdel's tendency to alter reality in order to make sense of her father. Both scenes work to recreate a past in which Bruce's life fits a logical story. Bechdel's novel does not relay a timeline of events; she constructs her memoir by stitching together stories that illuminate her understanding of her father, however factual or not they may be.

While it has been established that Bechdel's narrative is not a trustworthy representation of an objective past, we must also consider the reliability of Bruce's portrayal of his own sexuality. In one letter, Bruce repeats the phrase, "I love you" a total of four times (63), emphasizing the sentiment, or perhaps convincing her, and himself, of its truth. This love letter accompanying the previously discussed homoerotic images strike another sense of irony. On its own, the letter is a charming look into Bruce's feelings for his future wife; within the passage, the letter is questioned for the authenticity of its message. By presenting these opposing images of homoeroticism and heteronormative love side by side in this passage, Bechdel is questioning whether Bruce's sentiments expressed in this letter can be trusted. This suggests that Bruce's

letters may not be reliable in terms of explaining the past. Knowing what we do about Bruce's sexuality and behavior in the later parts of his life, the letter seems suspect. We know to question Bechdel's intentions in representing the past in the way she does, but now Bechdel is telling us we must also question Bruce's intentions in his past.

Finally, the aforementioned comparison of Bruce to Fitzgerald is the most obvious, yet elusive element of this passage. Bechdel compares her father to literary figures throughout the novel, but in this passage focuses specifically on Fitzgerald. Some of the reasons for this are laid out quite clearly; for example, both are noted to write love letters to their future wives while in the army (63), a similarity that Bechdel believes her father would've noticed as well. Additionally there is Bruce's fascination with the author, as he is "captivated" by "tales of Scott and Zelda's drunken, outrageous behavior" (62). Still, there are reasons less apparent for Bechdel's inclusion of this comparison. Fitzgerald seems to bring out both sides of Bruce: his heteronormativity in the love letters to Helen, and his homosexuality in the joke calling Fitzgerald Bruce's boyfriend. It is this queerness that brings reliability back into question. Bechdel actively shapes her father's narrative by presenting her parent's love story with a homoerotic backdrop, a narrative that shows Bechdel's perception of her father rather than his objective past. Yet the conflicting associations of Fitzgerald with Bruce's sexuality questions whether there is any objectivity possible in recounting the past. Just as Bechdel's comparisons with Fitzgerald conflict each other, the truth behind her father's sexuality remains ambiguous. Even still, it remains possible there was no greater meaning to this comparison at all, but rather it was a clever way for Bechdel to continue her literary themes established throughout the novel and tie her narrative together under one continuous arc.

With *Fun Home*, Bechdel is searching for a truth in her father's life, and in doing so creates a version of reality that does not derive from fact. The contrast of imagined scenes and real letters in this passage brings to light the space between reality and fiction, while showing that the two may not be so different. Bechdel presents her visual scenes with truth in the fantasy she creates and illuminates the fiction present in reality of the letters. This exploration into truth and fiction brings into question whether it is even possible, or useful, to recount the past objectively. Nonetheless, by reading into this innocuous scene about young Bruce, we learn to question the novel beyond its surface level. We see the memoir not as objective truth, but as something even more meaningful: a look into Bechdel's mind, a glimpse into how she understands the life of herself and her father.