

# Metaphors for the closet in coming out stories



Every coming out story must deal with the characters' struggles of being in the closet. The stage of not yet being able to be open about one's identity can be the most difficult and turbulent point in dealing with their queer identity. It is a time of difficult self-reflection and dissonance from the rest of the world, which can be incredibly isolating and ominous. Every person's experience of discovering their identity is unique, and therefore so are the closets they find themselves in. The nature of the closet is contingent on the time period, society, and individual person's attitude. As well, an individual's experience in the closet inevitably shapes the way that they see their sexuality, act towards their partner, and approach the outside world. After careful analysis of three coming out stories: the novel *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin, the short story "Brokeback Mountain" by Annie Proulx, and the graphic memoir, *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel, I believe that the most central setting in each serves as a metaphor for the closet. I will discuss how Giovanni's room in *Giovanni's Room*, the mountain in "Brokeback Mountain", and Alison's childhood home in *Fun Home*, all symbolize the closet in how the settings act as very personal worlds estranged from reality for the characters, work to conceal the secret of the characters' sexualities, and reflect the characters' attitudes towards their identities. I will also work through some of the many similarities and differences between the experiences of the characters in these works.

As Baldwin describes the setting crucial to his characters, "Life in that room seemed to be occurring beneath the sea. Time flowed past indifferently above us; hours and days had no meaning" (75). For David and Giovanni, Giovanni's room is a place detached from reality, where rules of the world

they have known do not apply. Both men are in a sort of limbo in Paris, Giovanni having fled his family in Italy after the stillbirth of his child and David waiting for his fiancé Hella to return. The room, their home in Paris, is where they are safe to express their sexuality, but also where their secret must remain if they are to fit in to the mainstream world. Not only are they free to act on their desires within the walls of the room, they even begin to reflect the gender roles of a heterosexual couple with David staying in and cleaning while Giovanni works and attempts home improvement projects like building a book shelf in the room. This is a stark contrast from the way they cling to classic ideas of masculinity in their daily life, and makes them only stranger and more distant from the world of 1950s Paris outside.

Both David and Giovanni are closeted, however their experiences and attitudes towards their sexuality and relationship diverge greatly. Just as the room reflects the closet, their attitudes towards the room reflect their attitudes towards their situation. Giovanni makes an effort to renovate the room and make it into a good home where he and David can be happy together instead of a reminder of the hardships in their lives. David remarks, “ I was to destroy this room and give to Giovanni a new and better life,” (88). Giovanni feels no self-hatred as a result of his attraction to men and wants to find a way to make the best of his relationship with David even while they must remain “ in the closet.” However, David has a very different perspective. “ No matter what I was doing, another me sat in my belly, absolutely cold with terror over the question of my life” (83). He sees the room as dirty and begins to hate being there as his shame and hatred for his identity grow. He feels uncomfortable there to the extent that he often

dissociates and denies completely what is happening. David would prefer to live his life in denial than ever call the room home, because it is such a strong symbol of an identity he resists and the man who wants to lead him to embrace it. “ You want to leave Giovanni because he makes you stink. You want to despise Giovanni because he is not afraid of the stink of love.” (141). In comparison to the closet metaphors found in the other two works, Giovanni’s room is certainly the most literal image of a closet, with the two men shut in to tiny maids quarters together. This is a huge contrast from the vast natural world of the mountain in *Brokeback Mountain* and the extravagant labyrinthine house in *Fun Home*. However, Giovanni’s Room is similar to *Brokeback Mountain* in that the characters’ closet is a new place away from home where they find themselves more free and able to live out a secret relationship. Neither David and Giovanni nor Jack and Ennis are able to come out of the closet in the societies they live in and require a place secluded from the world for their relationship to begin.

In *Brokeback Mountain*, the metaphor for Jack and Ennis’s closet is the mountain where they meet and begin their relationship while working together on a ranch one summer. Though their relationship continues sporadically for many years until Jack’s death, the couple always remains fixated on the power of their experience on *Brokeback Mountain*. The mountain continues to be so important to them that Jack even wants his ashes scattered there, “ He use to say he wanted to be cremated, ashes scattered on *Brokeback Mountain*” (25). It is so important because for Jack and Ennis, the mountain is a fantasy world that belongs only to them. “ There were only the two of them on the mountain, flying in the euphoric,

bitter air, looking down on the hawk's back and the crawling lights of vehicles on the plain below, suspended above ordinary affairs" (7). It becomes a bubble of safety and secrecy in a society that would never tolerate them. Jack and Ennis's approach to their sexuality is reflected by Brokeback Mountain, in how their desires, just like their surroundings, are treated as natural and uncontrollable rather than rational. They are portrayed as a part of the mountain environment around them rather than the far away human civilization. Jack and Ennis are simple and animalistic in their actions, and this is perhaps best exemplified by their almost total lack of communication about their relationship. "They never talked about sex, let it happen" (7). Like nature, Jack and Ennis's relationship is something greater than them, which they cannot fight against. "There's no reins on this one. It scares the piss out a me.'" (14). The major difference between Brokeback Mountain and the closet metaphors found in the other two stories is that the setting is a part of nature rather than created by humans. The characters in Giovanni's Room and Fun Home are portrayed as having more of a choice concerning their path as well as more control over their environments and closets. It is also different in that both Jack and Ennis remember their summer on Brokeback Mountain fondly as a carefree time in their youth, whereas Alison's house and Giovanni's room are both dark places where shame festers and leaves the characters desperate to escape.

In Fun Home, it is Alison's childhood home which serves as a prison for her father's sexuality and her own. The house is her father's masterpiece, which he has spent years restoring and decorating to perfection. To Alison, it is "not a real home at all, but the simulacrum of one, a museum," (17). Her

father's obsession with crafting the ideal home and projecting the image of a flawless family to the world is a way for him to hide the truth that he has spent his life tortured by the truth of his sexuality. Alison and her father both live, incredibly repressed, inside his meticulous artificial reality during her childhood. Throughout the book, She compares her father to the inventor Daedalus in ancient Greek mythology. " He hid the minotaur in the labyrinth - a maze of passages and rooms opening endlessly into one another." (12). As Daedalus' greatest creation is a prison the monster, Alison's father's greatest creation is the house, a prison for his own monster - his shame and secrets. " His shame inhabited our house as pervasively and invisibly as the aromatic musk of aging mahogany. In fact, the meticulous period interiors were expressly designed to conceal it" (20). The house's beauty and extravagance is meant to dazzle outsiders into seeing only the shiny surface of Bruce's life. " Mirrors, distracting bronzes, multiple doorways. Visitors often got lost upstairs."(20). Ironically, the house is also a safe place for Bruce to express the condemned feminine side of his personality. He finds great fulfillment in interior design and decorating, which are often stereotyped as women's activities. The most significant contrast of Fun Home from Giovanni's Room and Brokeback Mountain is that we finally see a character that is able to come out of the closet. Though her father does not, Alison eventually escapes the house and the small town where she grew up. When she goes to college, she begins to understand her sexuality and accept it in a healthy way. She grew up wishing to express herself more authentically, but was oppressed and pulled into her father's life of secrecy, unlike the characters of the other two works who never considered a life besides that of secrecy.

Giovanni's room in Giovanni's Room, the mountain in "Brokeback Mountain", and Alison's childhood home in Fun Home, are the central settings of each respective story and can be seen as metaphors for the closet. This is exemplified in the way these settings act as very personal worlds estranged from reality, work to conceal the secret of the characters' sexualities, and reflect the characters' attitudes towards their identities. Though the characters of all three stories share the experience of struggling with their queer identities and being in the closet, their circumstances are vastly different. No person's experience of being in the closet is exactly like another's - some accept themselves and some cling to their denial, some worry about the judgment of society and some do not, some are able come out and some do not have that option. Looking at metaphors for the closet in these three coming out stories can give the reader a better understanding of the complex individual conditions of each closet and the character's response to it.