

Identity construction in fun home



Although Alison Bechdel tells an emotional story in her graphic memoir *Fun Home*, she also grounds various important plot points about identity construction in mythology. In this way, she is able to articulate the complex and often contradictory relationship with her father that ultimately played a major role in the creation of her own personal identity. One of the prevailing images is that of her father as Daedalus and herself as Icarus, which is set up on the opening page of the book. Bechdel's substitution of herself and her father for mythological characters allows her to deconstruct their respective identities through analytical, rather than an emotional lens.

On the first page of the book, the panels show three very distinct angles of the common childhood game "airplane." These three panels act as a microcosm for the plot of the rest of the novel, as each represents the different roles each character must play in order to appease the other. In the first panel, Bechdel at first glance may appear to be disrupting her father. However, when looked at through the lens of the Daedalus / Icarus myth, the image gives the idea that Bechdel (as Icarus) is giving her father a purpose: to lift her up. In this way, Bechdel constructs his identity as a father; she plays the role of the child in need of assistance, and he fulfills the role of the caretaker in this situation. By enacting this ritual of "airplane," which is later made clear to be one of the rare tender moments between the two, the two characters reify each other's familial roles.

The second panel establishes a moment of perfect balance between the two characters, both physically and emotionally. The image shows a floating Bechdel, while the caption reads, "As he launched me, my full weight would fall on the pivot point between his feet and my stomach" (Bechdel 3). This

panel works in a way that shows the necessity of one for the other to survive. Without her father, Alison could not float; without Alison, her father would have no one to lift up. The panel also shows a view from under Alison, which clearly delineates her father's role in raising her up. However, the delicate moment also shows the fragility of their respective identities. Besides making it difficult to separate the two, the fact that each of their identities relies so heavily on the other's furthers the idea that their relationship is also bound to fail at a certain point. Eventually, Bechdel's father must get tired of holding her up and she will tire of the discomfort of being perched on his legs and the unstable position they are in will collapse. This panel illustrates the moment before that inevitable failure—the moment in which Icarus and Daedalus are partnered in a symbiotic relationship where each motivates the other to succeed.

The third and final panel can be seen in two contradicting ways. At face value, it shows the ultimate moment of flight and even directly references “Icarian Games” (Bechdel 3). However, the bird's eye view could also be used to interpret Bechdel's position as falling from the sky, much like the end of the Icarus / Daedalus myth. In her desperation to be close with her father, Alison inadvertently ‘flies too close to the sun.’ She relies too heavily on her father in order to stabilize herself, and this results in her downfall. It is also in this frame that her father is seen letting go of her hands. Similar to the myth, Alison's father must relinquish control of his creation and see if it will succeed on its own. However, instead of being wax wings, the creation in this story is his daughter's identity. She can be seen as both flying and falling,

which also represents the role their relationship plays in her life throughout the memoir.

Thus far, this interpretation has ignored a key character in the myth: the Minotaur. In this memoir, Bechdel's father fills the role of the Minotaur because he is the one creating a situation from which his child needs to escape. By micromanaging her identity and forcing his own projections onto her, he creates a dangerous situation in which she is at a high risk of instability. He is the one who teaches her how to project and repress emotions, but he is also the one who tries to save her from experiencing the same identity crises that he did throughout his life. Because of this, he plays a major role in her story and makes it difficult for her to clearly express her feelings about their relationship. She cannot hail him as her hero without also acknowledging him as her villain, which is why the contradictory last panel perfectly illustrates the danger of the supposed 'balance' that they found in their interactions with each other.