

Modes of interaction between text and illustration in fun home



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It is often thought that graphic novels and comics are in some way less sophisticated or overall lesser than traditional novels, as if the use of illustrations rather than long text descriptions makes it a more simplistic medium. However, the blending of illustrations and text in graphic novels creates just as complex of an experience, I believe, and provides an interesting opportunity to analyze the modes of interaction between text and illustrations. In this paper, I will be looking closely at Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir *Fun Home* to determine some of the ways that the use of illustrations enriches the experience of reading this book. I will show, through analysis of various passages from the book, that the illustrations support the text by revealing the nature of the relationship between Alison and Bruce, using precise imagery that reflects the text, and providing further insight into the way the artist and writer of the book views her world and the people in it. The relationship between Alison and Bruce becomes easier for the reader to understand when looking at the subtleties in their interactions, for example a conversation between them in Bruce's library from page 84-86 which highlights how their relationship is often cold and strained by Bruce's disconnect with reality, and the scene between them on page 220 and 221 in the car on their way to a movie which depicts the intense struggle it is for them to communicate despite their overwhelming similarities. Precise imagery that supports the text can be found when comparing the first and last scenes in the book, which both feature Alison as a young child represented as if she is flying while she and Bruce's relationship is compared to the myth of Icarus, and page 134 which represents Alison's emotionally distant "artists' colony," (134) family in their own isolated creative bubbles in the house. Further insight into Alison's view of the world can be gained by <https://assignbuster.com/modes-of-interaction-between-text-and-illustration-in-fun-home/>

looking at examples of how she visually represents masculinity and femininity, for example the way she portrays the effeminate gay men in New York on page 190 and very masculine way she draws herself throughout the book. The multiple scenes from pages 12-21 where Alison draws Bruce as an ominous shadow like figure are also notable, as they show what an intimidating force her father was to she and her family.

When the illustrations are analyzed as well as the text in *Fun Home*, further insight into the relationship between Alison and Bruce can be gained. One instance of this is the scene between them in Bruce's library on pages 84-86. In text, Alison muses about her father's mysterious ways, describing his "preference of a fiction to reality," (85) and the eerie similarities between his death and F. Scott Fitzgerald's, as if Bruce had planned it that way. Bruce is a mystery to her – he has a complex inner world that his daughter will never understand or infiltrate, so she is left speculating after his death.

Simultaneously, the images play out a seemingly mundane scene between Alison and Bruce in which she asks him for money to buy books. They are noticeably cold to each other for a father and daughter. They say only the minimum amount to each other and never make eye contact throughout the scene. Bruce never looks up from his book (a biography of Fitzgerald's wife, Zelda) and appears completely indifferent to Alison's presence and questions. He sits surrounded by his books, reading in an armchair, looking focused and serious. Bruce is not able to break his concentration on literature for his daughter and remains in his own world despite her. Alison on the other hand has a slightly agitated facial expression, as if she dreads having to speak to her father. She is experiencing the same frustration about

being locked out of her father's world as she does when questioning his death as she writes the text portion of the book. The text is not describing literally what happens in the illustrations, however, the two components of the scene work together to build one meaning: Alison's distance from the mysterious figure that is her father. Another scene which explores their relationship is the scene in Bruce's car on pages 220 and 221, in which they guardedly attempt to discuss their sexuality for the first time. The only text in the scene is their dialogue and some of Alison's thoughts in the moment. The full spread of identical small square panels creates a feeling of suspense as if they are frozen in time. "I kept still, like he was a splendid deer I didn't want to startle." (120). The layout of the scene creates the intensity and stillness that she is feeling perfectly in that decisive moment where she almost makes a connection with her enigmatic father. Their quickly shifting facial expressions from one box to the next makes them both appear nervous. The sameness of the boxes, except only for the text and facial expressions of the characters, reflects the sameness of Alison and Bruce that is so apparent in this scene. They both have difficulty communicating but want to open up, they have struggled with many of the same problems related to their queer identities, they are both challenged by their complicated relationship. They are even drawn with similar facial features, such as their noses and jawlines, which is easy for the reader to notice when they are drawn side by side in repeating square panels for two entire pages.

Fun Home is clearly a meticulously crafted book, so it is not surprising that subtle imagery in the illustrations is always working to reinforce the text. The first example of this is the comparison between the scene on the few first

pages of the book which shows Alison as a young child playing “ airplane” with her father, and the scene on the last few pages, which shows her again as a young child jumping into a pool as Bruce prepares to catch her. In both scenes, Alison is represented with her arms outstretched, in the air above her father as if she is flying. This is a subtle way of reflecting the text as it explores the Greek myth of Icarus, the son of the inventor Daedalus who flew so close to the sun that it melted his fake wings made of wax and feathers, and it’s reflection on Alison and Bruce. “ In our particular re enactment of this mythic relationship, it was not me but my father who was to plummet from the sky.”(4). In having the ending of the book reflect the beginning, Alison brings the reader back to the central theme of the book: her relationship with her father. By illustrating these rare childhood moments when she felt close to her father, she brings the story away from the mysteries and complex analyses of him, and back to a place of love and innocence. Despite never understand Bruce, she still considers him her father and avoids depicting him as a villain in her story. A second instance of imagery that reinforces the text of the book is on page 134, which features an illustration of what life in Alison’s childhood home was like. “ Our home was like an artists’ colony. We ate together, but otherwise were absorbed in our own separate pursuits,” (134). Both of Alison’s parents were quiet and unaffectionate people who instilled the same values in their children. She describes how she felt neglected as a child due to her parents’ “ creative solitude” (133), but quickly learned to find joy the same way. On page 134, the Bechdel family members are depicted as silhouettes in isolated bubbles across different parts of the house, all engaged in some creative activity. A home is somewhere that is expected to be lively and warm, but the feeling in <https://assignbuster.com/modes-of-interaction-between-text-and-illustration-in-fun-home/>

this illustration is one of loneliness. The literal depiction of them in bubbles and the fact that they are only silhouettes without faces or expressions makes the home seem incredibly impersonal and distant. The emotional coldness of Alison's family is constantly apparent in *Fun Home*, but this is certainly the best representation of it.

The visual aspect of *Fun Home* also allows us to better grasp how its writer and illustrator views the world. The book deals heavily with the idea of gender and defying gender roles, so it is interesting to look at how stereotypes of masculinity and femininity are represented visually. One example is on page 190, when Alison and her family are on a trip to New York and she is exposed to the gay community for the first time. She is fascinated by "cosmeticized masculinity," (190) that she sees in gay men, and depicts one man walking down the street with perfect hair, thick eyelashes, pierced ears, and wearing tight pants. A male ballet dancer in a show she goes to see is also drawn in an elegant pose while dancing. These things are clearly striking as feminine to Alison, and seem unnatural or strange in men to her. Another example of gender role depiction is that throughout the book, Alison is drawn in a quite masculine way. She rebels against wearing anything girly as a child, and even in instances where she feels forced to wear a dress or skirt, such as her father's funeral, they are plain and modest. The rest of the time, Alison is drawn with short hair and either androgynous or typically male clothing. When I first began reading *Fun Home* without any prior knowledge of the book, I assumed that Alison was a boy for the first few pages until her gender was stated. Gender and gender roles are discussed at length in the text of the book, but having visual

representations reinforce this gives us as readers an even better idea of how Alison is affected by the gender roles she sees around her, and helps us question our own views of what kind characteristics we see as either masculine or feminine. Another example of how Alison's perception of the world is subtly reinforced by the illustrations is the recurring instances in which her father is depicted as an ominous silhouette from pages 12-21. On page 12, after Alison accidentally breaks a glass vase, she is depicted holding the broken piece, looking terrified, as Bruce's shadow looms over her. On page 16, he lurks behind her as she cleans a lamp. On page 21, he stands in at threshold of her bedroom after reading her a bedtime story and turning out the lights. The text explains how living with Bruce is always unpredictable and a constant source of stress for his family who are trapped, ever avoiding his wrath. "The constant tension was heightened by the fact that some encounters could be quite pleasant. His bursts of kindness were as incandescent as his tantrums were dark." (21). The metaphor of the labyrinth from Greek mythology is used as well, to equate their extravagant house with the labyrinth and Bruce's dark side with the minotaur hiding within. The portrayal of him as nothing more than a dark shadow makes him seem strange and inhuman, even monstrous, in moments when Alison sees him as threatening. Even as a child, she knows that her father has an ominous dark side which may be waiting around any corner, and she reinforces this very effectively by using creepy imagery of him as silhouette.

In the graphic memoir *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel, the text interacts with the illustrations in numerous interesting ways. Details found in the illustrations allow us to read more into the relationship between Alison and

Bruce and add to our understanding gained from the text. Precise imagery is used to reflect and reinforce what is written in the text. Finally, close analysis of Alison's drawings helps us to better grasp how she views her world and the people in it. Fun Home and the graphic novel medium overall are fascinating, although vastly different from the traditional novel. Illustrations combined with text, when they work together well, are just as effective as text alone at creating a complex and multi layered narrative of which deep understanding can be gained.