

Fun home, a novel depicting the intricacies of family relationships using daedalu...

[Literature](#), [Mythology](#)



When Daedalus is Icarus and Icarus is Daedalus

Alison Bechdel structures her graphic novel *Fun Home* with dense layers of literary and cultural allusions in an effort to understand and contextualize her relationships with members of her family and with the world in which she was raised. She sees her world through the arts that defined characters and stages of her life. Bechdel divides her graphic novel into chapters named for various literary references to create different perspectives and narratives to her father's death as well as using well-known figures "not only as descriptive devices, but because [her] parents are most real... in fictional terms" (Bechdel 67).

On top of integrating countless allusions and references in the bulk of the graphic novel, Bechdel employs the Greek myth of Daedalus and Icarus to unite the overarching themes of the work with the characters and the relationships between the characters. Bechdel, however, does not maintain consistency in the allusion as a parallel to her relationship with her father.

In the myth of Daedalus and Icarus, the father and son are locked in a tower with hopes of escaping. Daedalus, watching the birds flying around the tower, creates wings for him and his son to escape, using only wax and feathers. The inventor warns his son to be careful of the path he chooses to fly - flying too high would cause the wax to melt and the wings to fall apart, but fly too low and the waves will dampen the wings, rendering them useless. During flight, Icarus forgets his father's warning and flies too close

to the sun, melting his wings and plummeting to his death in the waves below.

Bechdel inverts the roles in the mythical allusion constantly. Her father is often Daedalus, the great inventor who can see something and turn it into something great. However, he is also the one who falls as Icarus, not Alison. But does he fall because he did not take some advice from Alison's Daedalus? Bechdel portrays herself as Icarus flying above her father, yet allows readers to immediately know that "it was not [Alison] but [her] father who was to plummet from the sky" (4). Bruce Bechdel plays the role of Daedalus, the grand inventor, and Icarus, the one who falls, while Alison plays the same roles differently - Daedalus through the wise warning and Icarus as the child taking flight with the father.

By continuously changing who plays whom in the myth as *Fun Home* progresses, Bechdel creates a stronger complexity within the relationship between her and her father. The constant and inconsistent reversal of roles in the allusion to the myth of Icarus and Daedalus is necessary in demonstrating the complexity of the relationship between Alison and Bruce Bechdel.

Bechdel introduces her father as Daedalus and herself as Icarus, flying above him in the three illustrations opening the graphic novel. Alison flies above Bruce as Icarus flew above Daedalus. In this instance, Alison and Bruce mirror the myth's roles of child flying above father. Bruce, much like Daedalus creating Icarus's wings, allows Alison to fly and gives her the only

means of doing so - creating a balance between her stomach and his feet as he lifts her into the air.

Bechdel's opening scene establishes her father as Daedalus, but also establishes herself Icarus, the child who falls. Alison tumbles to the ground from her position above Bruce, much like Icarus falls to the ocean in the mythical tale. However, Bechdel immediately challenges the visual depiction by contradicting the roles shown with the text inside the image. Bechdel states, " In our particular reenactment of this mythic relationship, it was not me but my father who was to plummet from the sky," thus equating Bruce to Icarus rather than Daedalus (4). This contradictory juxtaposition of text and image begins Bechdel's depiction of the complexity of her relationship with her father.

The image of Bruce as Daedalus only grows stronger as Bechdel continues *Fun Home*. Alison's father becomes the great inventor and creator in the eyes of Alison. Through the decoration and modification of the family home, Alison sees Bruce as some sort of genius, a man that could " spin garbage into gold," even " a Daedalus of decor" (6). In restoring the home, Bruce performs, " as Daedalus did, dazzling displays of artfulness" (9). Bruce creates the beauty of the house out of nothing, as Daedalus creates numerous marvels in the tales of Crete.

Bruce Bechdel's Daedalus creates the mythic Minotaur's labyrinth within the walls of the Bechdel home. Bechdel occasionally depicts her father as the Minotaur within his own labyrinth of a house to add to the complexity of who

Bruce was. In doing so, Bechdel reinstates his status of Daedalus by equating the house Bruce created to the labyrinth. When fearing the wrath of her father, Alison runs through the maze of the house as the children ran through the maze fearing the Minotaur. Bechdel describes the labyrinth in text above an illustration of herself running through the house. Bechdel even notes the difficulties visitors had navigating the home, claiming “ visitors often got lost upstairs” (20). By creating a Minotaur, Bechdel can show readers that Bruce is Daedalus, the great inventor of the labyrinth.

In addition to being a creator like Daedalus, Bruce tends to show more attention and love to his craft than to his children. Bruce stops the Icarian games with Alison because he notices that the rug is dirty and a strip of molding is loose, showing that he would rather fix up the house than play with his child. Alison even has to send friends home so she can help Bruce restore the home. Bechdel compares this to Daedalus’s indifference “ to the human cost of his projects,” using the inventor’s cow disguise as an example (11). Bruce is seen scaring and beating his children over a fallen Christmas tree and a vase sitting too close to the edge of a table. Bechdel then uses this image of her father to question the mythical Daedalus’s agony upon finding out his son has died – “ was Daedalus really stricken with grief when Icarus fell into the sea? Or just disappointed by the design failure?” (12). Daedalus, who continued his flight and created a temple to the god Apollo to honor his son, still continued his flight to safety even though he led to his son’s demise. Many characters in Greek mythology would be too ridden with

guilt to even continue the flight, so Alison's critical view of Daedalus brings the view of her father into a strong critique.

Bechdel makes sure readers know of Bruce's demise at the very onset of the story. Through the introductory Icarian games, Bechdel makes it clear that "it was not [Alison] but [her] father who was to plummet from the sky" (4). Bruce dies, not Alison, effectively reversing the roles played in the mythic allusion. However, Alison's status as Daedalus in relation to Bruce's death remains unclear. One can make the argument that, if Bruce's death was a suicide, as Bechdel believes, the advice of flying in the middle of the sky is comparable to Alison coming out. Alison comes out as a lesbian and survives while Bruce stays closeted and dies soon after Alison's outing. If Bruce had followed his daughter's example, or "advice" in keeping with the Daedalus and Icarus allusion, Bechdel implies she believes he would not have jumped in front of the truck. In this instance, Bechdel paints her father as Icarus and herself as Daedalus.

The final scene of *Fun Home* depicts the confusion of the mythic allusion wonderfully. Bruce is already in the pool and each image is drawn from a higher vantage point so that the reader is looking down on Bruce. By this point, Bechdel shows readers that Bruce has already fallen, making him Icarus rather than Daedalus. Alison, then, should be Daedalus in keeping with the myth. However, Alison jumps after her father in the pool, creating a second Icarus.

This confusion creates a necessary complexity to the story and within Bechdel herself. Alison wonders, “ what if Icarus hadn’t hurtled into the sea” to wonder how her life would be different had her father survived (231). She wonders how he could have survived and how she could live her life to honor him, as if Icarus could have learned to be inventive as his father. In this pondering, Bechdel acknowledges the confusion of the myth and offers a slight explanation as to why it was employed so heavily: “ in the tricky reverse narration that impels our intertwined stories, he was there to catch me when I leapt” (232). Bechdel wants to show readers exactly what her father means to her as a character in a book and as a real man, and encompassing the story with the myth of Daedalus and Icarus, she is able to do so.

Bechdel uses this allusion to beautifully complicate her relationship with her father throughout the novel, as well as express her love for him in an understated and authentic manner. Alison and her family experienced life through art and literature, as depicted in an illustration on page 134, where each member of the family is alone, practicing their arts. By creating a Bruce Bechdel that is understood through the filter of Daedalus and Icarus, Bechdel is reanimating and complicating a father that she is trying to understand. By employing the myth of Daedalus and Icarus so heavily, Bechdel is able to view her father as more than just her father – she is able to take a step away from her own views and evaluate him critically while still creating the complexity and love that her father deserves.