

Fun home by alison
bechdel and the
scarlet letter by
nathaniel hawthorne
essay



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Fun Home by Alison Bechdel and The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne are two pieces of work in which a heroic woman is depicted.

Both the memoir and the novella portray their female protagonists as going against the patriarchal grain – within a familial home and a Puritan society respectively – and subverting the stereotype of the ‘weaker sex’ through displays of great emotional strength. As a result the protagonists of both works could be considered as female literary heroes. The Scarlet Letter is set in Puritan New England, and the first chapter of the novella immediately depicts a strict, grey society: “sad-coloured garments and grey steeple-crowned hats ..

. beetle-browed and gloomy” (Hawthorne, 1992, ch. 1). This setting is furthered with descriptions of a heavy, spiked door and general use of pathetic fallacy to convey a sense of severity (Chapman, n.

d.). When Hawthorne contrasts this colourless society with the scarlet shade of the “ignominious” letter ‘A’, that is forcibly emblazoned upon Hester Prynne’s chest due to her conviction as an ‘adulteress’, Hester is seen to instantly be placed against the grain of the patriarchal Puritan society (Hawthorne, 1992, ch. 2). Hester furthers this rebellion by staying in the town which has condemned her – she could easily have fled the oppressive society in search of a new life elsewhere, but instead chooses to live out her public humiliation and raise her daughter in the outskirts of the small town: on the edge of society, but still within its borders. Therefore, as she does not allow the Puritans to drive her from her home, she stands in direct opposition to their patriarchal society.

In Fun Home, one could argue that Alison Bechdel's realisation that she is a lesbian is the ultimate rebellion against a patriarchal society as she subverts traditional gender stereotypes by embracing her homosexuality. However, she quickly discovers that her own father has had affairs with various men and therefore, whilst Alison goes against patriarchal society in the customary view, her homosexuality is in a way conforming to her father's own beliefs. Bechdel uses an interesting mythological metaphor throughout the graphic novel whereby she compares Alison and her father Bruce's relationship to that of Icarus and Daedalus'. In some ways, both characters represent both parts of the Greek myth. We see Alison escaping Beach Creek as Icarus wishes to escape from Crete, and Bruce also longing to escape from his small home town; we see Alison's personality being shaped by her father as the prominence he places upon aesthetics influences her own distaste for the ornamental; Alison's coming out gives Bruce the 'wings' with which to admit and begin to accept his own sexuality; Bruce plays the part of the craftsman within his elaborate home, as Daedalus did. Bechdel herself describes these parallels between the four characters as "a tricky reverse narration that impels our entwined stories" (Bechdel, 2006, p.

232) and it is clearly seen here that Alison is both conforming to and rebelling against the patriarchal society within her familial home. In both Fun Home and The Scarlet Letter much emphasis is placed upon traditional feminine ideals. Both characters have their 'femininity' suppressed, the difference being that Alison chooses to shun her femininity whereas Hester's is forcibly silenced. In Fun Home Alison rebels against both the wishes of her parents and the expectations of society by shunning "girly" clothing in

favour of masculine styles. Her hair is cut short, she refuses to wear pearls, and instead admires masculine tailoring – but where her father admires the man in a sexual sense, she admires the power and strength of masculinity (Bechdel, 2006, pp. 98-9).

Conversely, Hester's femininity is suppressed by the society she lives in: Puritan women were to dress to reflect their station, and colours were universally dark and "drab" (Bremer, 1995, p. 9). Hester conforms to this ideal and it is not until she meets Dimmesdale in the woods that she can literally let down her hair and free her femininity. The exception here, however, is of Hester's fantastically-embroidered letter 'A'. One of the female spectators in the market place remarks: 'She hath good skill at her needle ..

. but did ever a woman, before this brazen hussy, contrive such a way of showing it? ...

what is it but to laugh in the faces of our godly magistrates, and make a pride out of what they, worth gentlemen, meant for punishment?

(Hawthorne, 1992, ch. 2) It can here be seen that Hester beautifies the symbol of her sinfulness as a means of taking control over it, which directly undermines the intentions of the patriarchy. Both works feature a female character who expresses herself via a creative medium: Alison discovers illustration, and Hester uses her impressive embroidery skills. In Fun Home Bechdel describes her family unit as: "...

. like an artists' colony. We ate together, but otherwise were absorbed in our separate pursuits. This panel is illustrated with an image of her family home, <https://assignbuster.com/fun-home-by-alison-bechdel-and-the-scarlet-letter-by-nathaniel-hawthorne-essay/>

where each individual is encircled and presented as a silhouette working on his or her own creative projects.

Moreover, as the memoir is a graphic novel, the author again expresses herself through her creativity by telling her story. Hester's embroidery is also significant as not only does she adorn the scarlet letter with golden thread, but the townspeople admire her work to such an extent that they commission it. Hawthorne thus conveys a sense of hypocrisy within the Puritan society: the citizens ostracise Hester and yet are more than willing to enjoy the spoils of her creative mind. Traditionally, the concept of heroism in literature is dominated by maleness. The very word 'hero' connotes a strong man whether it be within Greco-Roman mythology or childhood comics. As a result, the study of female heroism is interesting as the reader explores this through the concept of emotional rather than physical strength.

Strength of character - that is, the ability to overcome adversity and stay true to one's own self - is given high importance in both *Fun Home* and *The Scarlet Letter* as both authors challenge the stereotype of the 'weaker sex' by presenting emotionally strong female characters. The concept of Alison as a hero is an interesting one, as one could argue that her most heroic feat is simply that of accepting herself and her sexuality and thus finding a way to be a woman on her own terms. As her father writes to her: "Taking sides is rather heroic, and I am not a hero. (Bechdel, 2006, p. 211) Alison is seen to be brought up in a fairly strict literary household, and yet the reader sees that the realisation of the self is brought about through the medium of gay and lesbian literature. So, Alison uses the tools her parents gave her to discover her own way of being.

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Also, the fact that Alison goes against the wishes of her parents in a quest to be true to her own self – wearing boys' clothes and cutting her hair short, for example – could be considered a brave and decidedly heroic thing to do.

Furthermore, Alison Bechdel had the courage to share the most intimate details of her life through *Fun Home*, which could be seen as a feat of heroism. Therefore, Alison Bechdel as a literary character, and as an author, both subvert the stereotype of the 'weaker sex'. Hester could be a considered a hero throughout the course of the novella due to the strength in her silence. As Simone de Beauvoir writes: “.

.. no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other over against itself. ” (n. d. In *The Scarlet Letter*, it is clear that the Puritans class Hester as this 'Other': a model to which they carry out their own lives in contrast.

The spectating wives in the market place scorn Hester, and her daughter Pearl is similarly treated by the children of the town: '... the little Puritans, being of the most intolerant brood that ever lived, had got a vague idea of something outlandish, unearthly or at variance with ordinary fashions, in the mother and child, and therefore scorned them in their hearts, and not unfrequently reviled them with their tongues. ' (Hawthorne, 1992, ch.

6)Hester endures this judgement in silence – normally a sign of passivity, but here a signifier of emotional strength, which clearly calls the stereotype of the 'weaker sex' into question. It can therefore be said that *Fun Home* and *The Scarlet Letter* both present heroic women who have displayed emotional strength during times of adversity. In both works the female protagonists go

against the patriarchal grain. Alison does this through the acceptance of her homosexuality and her own self, and Hester through the strength in her silence and refusal to be driven from her home. Therefore, both Alison Bechdel and Hester Prynne become heroic women.