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## "I Was Modern to His Victorian" : House as a reflection of the Father-Daughter Relationship in Alison Bechdels "Fun Home"

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Aleksandra Kamińska

**“I Was Modern  
to His Victorian”:  
*House as a Reflection  
of the Father–  
Daughter  
Relationship  
in Alison Bechdel’s  
Fun Home***

*Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*, Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir, starts with the drawing of a young man, standing shirtless in front of a house. Re-drawn photograph of Bechdel's father, posing against the house, creates a notably fitting opening for a story focused on the difficult father-daughter relationship and possibilities of reconstruction. In *Fun Home*, reconstruction is her father's biggest passion – he tries to refurbish the house and overhaul its old allure – and has more symbolic meaning, as Alison Bechdel attempts to reestablish the relationship with her deceased father through the memoir. She also aims to answer the question whether her father's death was a suicide, reimaging and redrawing his final moments. Bechdel's story is extremely personal and intimate: she describes challenging family intricacies, portrays experience of growing up with obsessive compulsive disorder, and discovers problematic aspects of her father's secret life. She also painstakingly depicts two places where she had spent majority of her childhood: the eponymous "fun home" – funeral home where her father worked, and the house where she lived with her whole family. Heavily ornamented Victorian house, located in a small town in rural Pennsylvania, constitutes the core of Bechdel's memoir.

The first part of this paper explores the ways in which the house functions as an axis of Bechdel's narrative: both on the visual layer of the memoir, and as a labyrinth resembling the structure of the story. The second part examines how Bechdel draws and writes about the house as a reflection of her family relations, focusing on the hidden homosexuality of her father. As I argue, the house is more than just the background for Bechdel's family tragedy: it becomes its symbol. It is an area where the author's father, Bruce, an English teacher and a funeral home director, finds an outlet for his constrained personality. A closeted gay man, he skillfully remodels the house, in order to create a picture of perfect background for his seemingly traditional family. However, those efforts cannot hide his queerness in the anachronous, gothic and extravagant house. I analyze the relationship between Alison Bechdel and her father, pointing out the connection between their aesthetic preferences and ways of expressing gender identity. This article examines how the main themes of *Fun Home* – isolation, queerness and gender identity – are mirrored in Bechdel's family house.

The memoir is a non-linear narrative divided into seven chapters. Even though in every chapter Bechdel writes and draws about different aspect of her life, all of them, at least partially, take place in the house. Robin Lydenberg claims that it serves the role of one of the memoir's characters: "a Victorian Gothic Revival, fixer-upper' that is the object of Bruce Bechdel's loving attention, functions as a main character in this domestic saga" (58). Numerous and detailed drawings of the house, both from the inside and the outside, seem to strengthen Lydenberg's observation. In some of the panels, the house's interior takes center stage, while its inhabitants serve as part of the setting: Bechdel draws a corridor or the foot of the stairs with a member of the family barely seen in the corner of the panel. She carefully retraces the wallpapers, redraws paintings from her father's library and sketches crystal ornamental chandeliers. Her attention to detail is not limited to depicting the house, but it is easy to connect her passionate accuracy with her father's obsessive precision in house renovation and constant redecoration. Her portrayal does not lack mockery: when illustrating the interior of her father's library, she redraws the painting of a bird, adding an arrow pointing to it with a remark: "honest to God, we had a painting of a cockatoo in the library" (83). Through text and image, she links precision with fondness and humor.

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In a different panel, also presenting Bruce's library, Bechdel again adds the pointers to highlight that the curtains were velvet, the valances gilt, and the wallpaper flocked: Bruce managed to create a truly outstanding interior. She comments the picture: "if my father liked to imagine himself as a nineteenth-century aristocrat overseeing his estate from behind the leather-topped mahogany and brass Second-Empire desk ... did that require such a leap of the imagination?" (60). The house was an object of Bruce's admiration, he was fully engaged in creating certain image of the house and the family. Bechdel's statement can be read as a remark on Bruce's taste, but also as a sign of how his desires and ambitions would be echoed in his choices considering interior design. Lydenberg points out that showing how the mentality of the house's residents is reflected in the condition of the house itself is a known practice in literature: "this trope of the house as an embodiment of the psychological and physical states of its inhabitants is particularly well developed in the nineteenth-century realistic novel" (58). It is hard to determine whether Bechdel deliberately tries to reference a popular literary trope in *Fun Home*, although considering plentiful references to literature in the memoir, it is highly possible. Bechdel clearly connects the peculiarity of the house with its renovator – her father.

The Bechdel family lives in a Gothic Revival house built in the nineteenth century. When Alison Bechdel's parents bought it in the early 1960s, the house was in a poor condition – Bruce spends next eighteen years renovating it. Alison Bechdel stresses how her father was constantly remodeling and restoring the house. The house itself was far from ordinary, furnished and decorated in such a way that the guest, or even the household members, could feel like visitors in a truly eccentric funhouse: surprised, startled by its unpredictability. Bechdel notes that numerous mirrors and multiple doorways often made the guests lost. Throughout *Fun Home*, Bechdel plays with the myth of Icarus and Daedalus: in the memoir her father takes the role of Icarus, Daedalus or the minotaur; sometimes he is both the inventor and the monster at the same time. Bechdel recalls the myth: "He hid the minotaur in the labyrinth – a maze of passages and rooms opening endlessly into one another... and from which . . . escape was impossible" (12). Her statement is juxtaposed with a picture of her younger self, running out of the house and coming back two panels later. Ariela Freedman notes: "It is clear that the labyrinth her father has created has trapped her as well, and it is also evident that the labyrinth will bring her back to herself" (132). Bechdel's drawings reveal different portrayals of her father: when she references the minotaur, Bruce appears as a spooky shadow over his scared daughter. In the memoir Bechdel's father seems to be present in every corner of the painstakingly renovated house, and the daughter is not able to escape him. Through the queerness she shares with Bruce, she is forever connected – or even trapped – with her father.

Bechdel learns that her father is gay just after her own coming out: thus in a situation in which she could be "out" of the family, instead she creates a new connection with Bruce, not able to free herself from him. The structure of *Fun Home* resembles a labyrinth: Bechdel, herself lost in the memories and the hidden queer life of her father, arduously navigates through secrets and family's repressions. She tries to find the truth about Bruce between his favorite books, in buried photographs and forgotten letters, which serve as signposts on her attempt to get to know her dead father. These memorabilia, which she redraws in the narrative, constitute an important part of the graphic layer

of the memoir,<sup>1</sup> alongside the images of elaborately decorated interiors. The images presented in *Fun Home* construct a link to both the mysterious, tricky, hard to navigate habitat that Bechdel grew up in, and her father's obsessive attention to detail and personal aesthetics.

The family lived together, but as Bechdel explains: "Our home was like an artists' colony. We ate together, but otherwise were absorbed in our separate pursuits" (134). Her reflection accompanies a panel in which the reader can see young Alison Bechdel drawing or writing in her room, one of her brothers playing with plane models, the other brother playing the guitar, the mother playing the piano, and the father occupied with restoration – each member of the family located in a different room, alone. Through her drawings, Bechdel expresses the isolation in her family. In the memoir she explores family's tensions and secrets, using the house as an illustration and point of reference. The title of the book – *Fun Home* – is a play on the "funeral home," a nickname which young Alison Bechdel and her brothers used to call the funeral home, where their father was working. However, the title can also be read as a bitter remark on the house she lived in – this "fun home" was neither fun, not really a shelter, but an unapproachable museum, a hostile labyrinth in which each member of the family was lost, and struggled with the family's secrets alone.

Bechdel devotes the whole first chapter of *Fun Home* to point out the ways in which her home was unique, and to describe her father's relationship with it. Bruce's passion for decorating and adding numerous, often anachronistic embellishments to the interior, led to a situation in which the house resembled a museum, not inhabited by any family; in one of the panels, even the mother is complaining that she is "sick of cleaning this museum" (261). Young Alison Bechdel did not want to believe that her house was out of ordinary. In one of the first panels she states that "when other children called our house a mansion, I would demur. I resented the implication that my family was . . . unusual in any way" (5). She was afraid that her house would disclose the peculiarity of her family – or its queerness. As an adult she re-visits possible clues of her father's homosexuality. Already as a child, Bechdel realized that their house, and her father's attachment to it, is unconventional and strange, as she was looking for similarities between the household from *The Addams Family* and her own. Her associations with strange characters from *The Addams Family* can be interpreted as more symbolic than Bechdel realized as a child. An unusual, old house located far from big cities, mother joking about being a vampire, the ubiquitous theme of death, lies, secrets and mysteries – *Fun Home* can be read as a gothic story. In a gothic narrative, a weird house, in which children play under chandeliers resembling skulls, most often hides a terrifying secret; Bechdel's house does have a secret: her father's queerness. Yet *Fun Home* can be understood as gothic not only because of Bechdel's eerie and anachronistic house located unexpectedly in a small town in Pennsylvania, or even unaccustomed attitude towards death. Bechdel depicts her father in a way that invokes gothic connotations: Bruce is the monster in the labyrinth that his daughter is so afraid of. He is often more than just a cold and distant father; Bechdel portrays him as a cruel beast, who does not care about his family and focuses only on his passion, restoring the mysterious house.

<sup>1</sup> See more: Kamińska, Aleksandra. "Expressing the Uncertainty, Reflecting Memory: The Role of Memorabilia in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*." *Spaces of Expression and Repression in Post-Millennial North-American Literature and Visual Culture*. Ed. Izabella Kimak and Julia Nikiel. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2017. 93–101.

This fascination with décor and renovation may be significant on the symbolic level. Christian W. Schneider observes that Bruce's "laborious effort involves creating an elaborate façade, the perfect home for an ostensibly perfect family, which he shapes to his will. True to a Gothic sense of construction, the twists and secrets are hidden beneath this affected exterior" (np). As already mentioned, Bruce's biggest secret – his queerness – is hidden in the eerie house. At the same time, Bruce's portrayal is saturated with isolation, mystery, death – themes that are essential for gothic. As Schneider notes, Bruce's "queerness adds to his Gothic character in the eyes of his daughter. The elaborate act of suppression contributes to the inexplicability of his behavior and strengthens his deep and often frightening otherness in young Alison's childhood memories" (np). This distressing behavior, so confusing for his daughter, changes him into a monster. Therefore, the theme of death in *Fun Home* can be connected with the story's gothic character, father's queerness, and the way Alison Bechdel portrays her home.

In the opening chapter of *Fun Home*, Bechdel emphasizes that Bruce's love for decoration and renovation of the house, was for him more important than his children. She bitterly comments: "Sometimes . . . my father actually enjoyed having a family. Or at least the air of authenticity we lent to his exhibit. A sort of still life with children" (13). This remark discloses Bechdel's difficult relations with her father: her sad realization that Bruce was only preoccupied with creating a perfect background for his seemingly traditional family, and not engaged with the family itself. He treated his children like stage props or assistants, helping him to create the desired image. In her memoir, Alison Bechdel leaves no doubt that Bruce was not a caring and loving father, but an aloof person, fixated on his goal. Bechdel stresses several times her father's commitment and skills in decorating and renovating the house. She writes that "restoration wasn't his job. It was his passion. . . . Libidinal. Manic. Martyred" (7). The reader sees the picture of Bruce carrying a pillar, resembling Jesus Christ carrying the cross, with the outline of the house visible in the background. House renovation combined with interior design was Bruce's biggest project, so important to him, because, in fact, it was a different "project" – an attempt to construct the image of traditional, heteronormative family. Paradoxically, Bruce's efforts to create an impression of established, heteronormative head of a family, at the same time can be read as signs of his queerness.

Bechdel notes, not without some satisfaction, that her father "could transfigure a room with the smallest offhand flourish" (6), as he was a truly skilled and gifted interior designer. In a way, his occupation can be seen as an example of his anachronistic figure, and a good fit for the Victorian house. Deborah Cohen argues that "the Victorian interior was neither chiefly the responsibility, nor even the prerogative of women. Through the late nineteenth century . . . men played a crucial role in the fitting out of the home . . . Decorators were men" (157). She points out the shift, noting that "by the 1920s and 1930s, home decoration had become nearly exclusively a woman's domain" (157). Contemporary male interior designers are often assumed to be gay. Therefore, if Bruce by his constant renovations and decorations tries to create a picture of heteronormative family, he instantly fails, because at the same time his actions undermine his normativity. In fact, this strange relation between his goal of creating the image of a perfect family, and his ways of achieving it, can pose a question whether he does not undermine it at the same time.

In Bechdel's family, traditional gender roles are constantly challenged: the daughter, even as a small child, already preferred more masculine clothes,

rejecting everything pink, flowery and not-practical, taking pride in being called a butch. Bruce's aesthetics contrast with his daughter's taste: his admiration for ornaments, combined with focus on the interior design and his physical appearance, expose traits that are often perceived as feminine, and can be read as queer. Alison Bechdel declares: "I was Spartan to my father's Athenian. Modern to his Victorian. Butch to his nelly. Utilitarian to his aesthete" (5). She creates a direct connection between her own and Bruce's aesthetics, and their displays of gender identity. In one of the panels the reader sees Alison Bechdel as a child and her father standing in front of a mirror, preparing to go to a wedding. Bruce is dressed in a very elegant velvet suit and young Bechdel wears archaic looking dress, which she describes as the "least girly dress in the store" (98). She comments this memory: "Not only were we inverts. We were inversions of one another" (98). In that particular fragment, Bechdel shows their contrast when it comes to aesthetics, but she also introduces a key issue by saying that she was a "butch to his nelly." Her preferences are completely different from her father's: she wants everything to be austere and functional, she hates ornaments, flowers and color pink, admires men's fashion. Some kind of admiration for masculinity, although channeled differently, is one of aspects on which they can both agree. When Bruce notices his daughter's masculinity, he makes everything to restrict it: he dresses her in "girly" clothes, cares for her hair-pins, puts pink wallpaper in her room. Renata Lucerna Dalmaso points out that Bruce's: "behavior towards his daughter is repeatedly portrayed as of someone trying to re-mediate an excess of masculinity or a lack of femininity" (573), which is visible mostly prominently through his fashion selection for young Alison Bechdel, but also when he installs flowery wallpaper in her room. Bechdel portrays in *Fun Home* how her and her father's gender identities and queerness can be traced through focus on their aesthetic preferences.

Bruce's style or taste visible in his constant redecoration of the house is at the same time a much more meaningful declaration. Deborah Cohen connects the major shift of interior design becoming women's activity with Oscar Wilde's scandal in 1895: "If a whiff of femininity lingered around aesthetes and, by extension, home decoration before Wilde's public humiliation, afterwards the link between effeminacy and homosexuality was forged solid" (158). She argues that "in the aftermath of Wilde's trials, it is possible to catch a glimpse of a homosexual identity in the making – one which would, in the twentieth century, turn the home into a place for uncloseted self-expression and allow men to transcend provincial prejudices by allying themselves with good taste" (158–159). Bruce's dandy and anachronistic persona, combined with enthusiasm for home decoration easily can be read as queer in a 1970s small town in Pennsylvania. Taking care of the house is for Bruce a chance for authentic self-expression; his actions correspond with the model characterized by Deborah Cohen.

This is not the only way in which Bruce's meticulous house renovation can be understood as a sign of his queerness. In her repeated play with the myth of Icarus and Daedalus, Bechdel writes about her father: "He was an alchemist of appearance, a savant of surface, a Daedalus of décor" (6). She later stresses that he: "used his skillful artifice not to make things, but to make things appear to be what they were not. That is to say, impeccable" (16) and illustrates her observations with a picture of the whole family standing neatly in front of the house, posing for a photograph to be taken, with her father holding the camera. By making thorough improvements and embellishments, Bruce was evidently struggling to create the image of a conventional and heteronormative family. Yet he did not fully commit to his traditional family, but was

constructing a smokescreen by creating a perfect house. Yet, this almost too perfect house was what could disclose him. Hélène Tison suggests that his obsessive and exaggerated remodeling and decorating is already a manifestation of Bruce's rejection of traditional gender roles and normativity. Tison argues that "The house in family home drag exposes the 'sham', the role-playing; it is metonymic of the impossible quest for a gender original and destabilizes the very notion of family" (28). Bechdel herself declares that her house was "not a real home at all but the simulacrum of one" (17), and since her parents failed to create a "real" home – her family also does not fulfill her hopes and needs.

Bechdel connects embellishments – using the decorations from the house as a starting point – with lies. That is why, already as a child, she rebelliously says: "when I grow up, my house is going to be all metal, like a submarine" (14), to escape from the deceit she experiences in the family. Bechdel not only rejects any adornments, but also the outdated style of the house, a figure of her father's preferences, looking for the modern to contrast his Victorian taste. From Bechdel's drawings and descriptions, it is clear that the Gothic Revival style house is anachronistic in both its exterior and interior designs. If the house is Bruce's greatest form of expression, a symbol of his style, it can be read as a drag also in reference to the definition of drag proposed by Elizabeth Freeman in *Time Binds*. Freeman states that "*Time Binds* began when I understood someone else's self-presentation as drag, if drag can be seen as the act of plastering the body with outdated rather than just cross-gendered accessories, whose resurrection seems to exceed the axis of gender and begins to talk about, indeed talk back to, history" (xxi). Bruce's outfits consist of flamboyant velvet suits and extravagant shirts with jabots, looking overstated, dandy and anachronistic. The overdressed house serves as an extension of his outdated style, and in that meaning, his drag. To broaden the link between the outdated and the drag: also Bruce's renovations can be understood as an anachronistic practice (from Victorian times), and for that reason – as another implication of his queerness. The exaggeratedly decorated house can be read as a drag, a smokescreen or a lie: yet it definitely is the ultimate symbol of Bruce's queerness and his hidden homosexual life.

Matt Cook argues that "Bechdel's *Fun Home* . . . keys into some commonly circulating ideas about the relationship between home and homosexuality and yet is also a tale of a quirky and unique home and family life" (178). Bechdel's memoir is an intense exploration of gender roles, partly on the example of how Bruce takes care of the home. The house plays a multidimensional role: drawn carefully by Bechdel it acts as the narrative's separate character, it resembles the structure of the memoir – a winding labyrinth full of secrets, it creates the basis for reading the narrative as gothic, and its seeming perfection can be understood as Bruce's drag. The house mirrors Alison Bechdel's questions about her father's queerness, isolation in the family, secrets, and therefore becomes a central element in *Fun Home*, a complex symbol of Bechdel's family struggles.

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