

Katrina Hook
Literature Studies
Essay #4
May 3rd, 2024

Icarus Meets the Sun

Did Icarus intentionally disregard his father Daedalus' warnings not to fly too high?

Alison Bechdel grew up surrounded by literature. Her father boasted an extensive collection of novels, her mother was an actress constantly rehearsing for her next show, and both parents were employed as English teachers. Despite the family's many struggles to maintain relationships with each other, they often showed their love through books. Embodying this tradition, Bechdel used literary references throughout her graphic tragicomic *Fun Home* to illustrate her family's interactions with one another. Bechdel utilized the story of Icarus and Daedalus to rationalize her father's behaviors, qualifying him as both Icarus and Daedalus.

Alison Bechdel opened her novel by describing the Icarian Games of Ancient Greece, remembering an acrobatic game she'd play with her father, Bruce, where he would lay on the floor and balance Alison atop his feet, mimicking the act of flying. However, she remarked "it was not me but my father who was to plummet from the sky" (4). The story of Icarus is an Ancient Greek myth recorded by the Roman poet Ovid. Daedalus was jailed in Crete by Minos for his creation of the minotaur, a creature that was half man and half bull, which he trapped in his invention of the labyrinth. Stuck on Crete with his son Icarus, Daedalus began to invent his way out. He spent his time studying the movements and anatomy of birds, hoping to replicate their wings. While his father arranged the feathers to be used in his wings, Icarus played with them, "laughing without realizing that he was touching what would bring about his tragic end" (Chaliakopoulos 1). Just as Icarus toyed with his future wings, Bruce "played" with renovations

to the house, rearranging furniture, replacing the trim, and grooming the gardens, something he was working on when he crossed the road in front of the truck that brought about his death. Like Icarus, Bruce was also arrogant and prideful. Despite his apparent femininity, he tried his best to uphold the typical household, taking pride in his projects yet ignoring the more meaningful parts of life, such as caring for his family. Just as Bruce ignored his family's subtle requests for normal amounts of familial affection, Icarus chose to ignore his father's warnings to abide by the golden mean. Upon first escaping the island, "he felt an unconquerable urge to fly towards heaven, as close to the sun as he could," and despite his father's reminders of the fragility of his freedom, "he flew higher and higher until the wax that held the wings together melted and he began falling" (Chaliakopoulos 1). This terrible end to Icarus' first taste of freedom can be compared to Bruce's fears of expressing himself. Revealed by Alison's mother to be a queer man, Bruce originally had dreams of leaving home and being an artist. However, upon his father's death, Bruce was forced to return to the small sphere in which he was raised to take over the family business, a funeral home. Flying is often associated with freedom, and Bruce sought several forms of autonomy. Bruce aspired for freedom from himself and his past, from his identity and the role he was trapped in. Similarly, he sought freedom from societal expectations and the barriers that prohibited him from self-expression and publicly engaging in the romantic relationships he was attracted to. In attempting to fly to his freedom from his heteronormative world, Bruce also met his downfall as Icarus did. Bruce was caught and put on trial for selling alcohol to minors, also being suspected of grooming the young boys. Alison described the unusual relationships her father had with their young, male caretakers in the past, but eventually, Bruce flew too close to the sun, just narrowly missing jail time.

After relating Bruce to Icarus, Bechdel goes on to counter that ‘if my father was Icarus, he was also Daedalus,’ likening his passion to that of the “skillful artificer, that mad scientist who built the wings for his son and designed the famous labyrinth” (7). Bruce dedicated his life to restoring the family’s large Victorian-era home to its original beauty, performing, “as Daedalus did, dazzling displays of artfulness” (9). He, like Daedalus, invented within the place he was trapped. The small town he grew up in had claimed his adulthood as well, leaving Bruce imprisoned within the societal expectations laid out for him, to marry a woman, build a family, and take over the family business. He had dreams of being an artist and living as his true self, but gave in to expectations, letting them hold him captive. Alison referred to Bruce as “a Daedalus of decor,” throwing all his self-expression into the “monomaniacal” restoration of their house (6). He made it his mission to bring their Victorian-era home to its original glory, often taking garbage and scraps and sculpting them into realistic period-accurate decor. When it came to his passion for his project, he was once again compared to Daedalus, as when the ancient Greek inventor allowed for the creation of the minotaur, he, too, “was indifferent to the human cost of his projects” (11). Just as Daedalus didn’t think about the consequences of his actions, Bruce used his children to complete monotonous tasks for his mission. When they weren’t aiding his project, they were displayed like props as children of a perfect family, upholding the image Bruce was forced into by societal expectations. Alison described how her father prioritized the house first, wondering “Was Daedalus really stricken with grief when Icarus fell into the sea? Or just disappointed by the design failure?” questioning if he even cared that his son had perished at his hand, or if he was focused too fully on the outcome of his hard work (12). Bruce communicated his fatherhood by sharing his love of books, but on so many occasions, including

his affairs and grooming of young men, he placed his satisfaction over the wellbeing of his family and loved ones, just as Daedalus did.

In the end, Alison Bechdel's father Bruce met his death in the face of a Sunbeam Bread truck while working on his passion project, restoring their home to its original glory. The irony of a man compared to Icarus dying by a Sunbeam truck is not lost on the reader. Alison finds a morbid humor in his death, but wonders, "What if Icarus hadn't hurtled into the sea? What if he'd inherited his father's inventive bent? What might he have wrought? He did hurtle into the sea, of course. But in the tricky reverse narration that impels our entwined stories, he was there to catch me when I leapt" (232). In this thought process, Alison acknowledged that while her father may have had a downfall such as that of Icarus, in the end, he was also a better version of Daedalus, supporting her in his subtle ways as she aspired to accomplish everything he once hoped to, as a queer artist.