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Femininity behind Masculinity, Life behind Death

Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic is a graphic memoir that traces the coming of age of the author Alison Bechdel and centers on her complicated relationship with her father, Bruce, a high school English teacher and also the director of Bechdel Funeral Home, which his children nicknames as Fun Home. Living as a closeted homosexual, Bruce stepped into the path of an oncoming Sunbeam truck and was killed. Nevertheless, Bechdel and her mother Helen believe that Bruce's death wasn't an accident, but a suicide — connected somehow to Helen's recent request for a divorce and Bechdel's decision of coming out as a lesbian. From Bechdel's perspective, this suicidal death is a mystery, which, along with Bruce's sexuality, she must explore; the work *Fun Home* is that exploration. As she examines her family's past, she highlights at multiple points in the text a fundamental paradox with respect to Bruce, one which is critical to understand his death: the tension within him between masculine and feminine principles. This self-paradox is exemplified by a snake, either real or imaginary, and Bruce's suppression of Bechdel's sexuality during her childhood also made him a "snake-like" figure to her. On the one hand, the snake symbolizes "nondifferentiation," which closely correlates with Bruce's death; on the other hand, it implies "cyclicity," which supports that the eventual demise of the father represents the new beginning for the daughter.

The empirical truth of Bruce's death, as Bechdel continually points out, is inaccessible since there is no means to ever know for certain whether it was intentional or an accident. Nevertheless, Bechdel still wonders to resolve the cause of Bruce's death because that might represent "the last, tenuous bond" she shares with her father, which Bechdel is "reluctant to let go" (86). In *Fun Home*, the author recollects the history of her family, who live as an

“autistic colony” (139) with members are psychologically distanced from each other, through the lens of hindsight, thus giving her opportunities to uncover hints about her father's hidden sexuality that young Bechdel was unable to decipher. From her view, everything about Bruce is paradoxical. While Bruce seemed like an “acceptable” father and husband in front of outsiders, he was actually a closeted homosexual who secretly developed sexual relationships with young males. Although Bruce “stuck around” his children, “his absence resonated retroactively, echoing back through all the time I [Bechdel] knew him” (23). He built walls to imprison himself psychologically and seemed alternately to be lost behind those walls or burst out in various monstrous ways. However, the central paradox within Bruce, which potentially leads to his death, is the tension between masculine and feminine principles. He treated his family with coldness and constant bouts of tyrannical, abusive rage, but in Alison’s view, Bruce was extremely feminine because of his obsession with surface-level beauty of all kinds, from clothes to the family’s Gothic revival house, and his hidden homosexuality.

The tension within Bruce, between masculine and feminine principles, is exemplified by the snake which may or may not have caused his death. The only witness for Bruce’s death is the Sunbeam truck driver, who claimed that Bruce jumped backward into the road “as if he saw a snake” before he got hit. On Page 115, Bechdel recalls her childhood memory of going to camp with her family and encountering a six-foot long black rat snake in the woods. Bechdel indicates that a serpent is an unsettling creature because of its hidden, complex meanings: although it symbolizes phallus, a representation of masculinity, it is also “a more ancient and universal symbol of the feminine principle” (116). The following panel on Page 116 portrays the last moment of Bruce’s life, crossing Route 150 to toss an armload over the bank, and that truck which hit him later is at the end of the road. This image juxtaposes with Bechdel’s question, “What if my father had seen a snake the size of that one [in the woods]?” (116), which connects Bruce’s death back to Bechdel’s experience and makes the snake a sig-

nificant factor that possibly causes Bruce's death. Representing for contradictory principles, this creature stands for "undifferentiation, nonduality" (116) between masculinity and femininity, which corresponds to Bruce's central self-paradox. Therefore, if Bruce indeed died from that snake, Bechdel speculates that her father's persistent psychological tension is very likely to connect to his mysterious death.

In turning her attention to the question, "Why did Bruce die?", Bechdel revisits the past, examining how Bruce expressed contradictory tyrannical masculinity and hidden femininity during her childhood and youth. Bruce's manhood is primarily demonstrated by his harshness and overt aggression, which matches the masculine part of the snake's symbolization. From Bechdel's perspective, "Dad considered us extensions of his own body, like precision robot arms" (13). Thinking his children as mindless robots, Bruce rarely cared about their emotional needs or individual wills. He, as a commander, militarized the family, thus each child became a recruit who must obey his orders; the consequences of rebellion would always be physical punishments, such as spanking (18). Take an example, when Bechdel's family were working on Christmas decorations, Bruce commanded Christian, one of Alison's brothers who could only reach halfway up the Christmas tree, to hold the tree straight. Ignoring his son's complaint, Bruce yelled at and hit the child on his head, causing Christian to rush away from the house and to break the glassware that Alison was cleaning accidentally. Bruce's harshness towards Christian reflects how he viewed his children more like tools, which were designed for specific functions, and seldom, or never, psychologically cherished them. In the next panel that Alison was looking at Bruce, her eyes were wide open, and he was drawn under shadows with the text talks about Minotaur, a half-bull, half-man monster. The juxtaposition of the image and the text implies that how Bruce's rages reminded Bechdel of a horrible, uncontrollable monster and she was afraid that he might hurt her. Furthermore, from early on, Bruce had begun displaying overwhelming dominance over Helen's behaviors. Although their

marriage can be summarized as dual indifference in most of the cases, once they had disagreements, Bruce would insult Helen ruthlessly, and she was always the side who made compromises. When Helen left her hometown for Germany to marry Bruce many years before, they had a terrible fight in the car for finding directions: Bruce blamed on Helen, shouting at her as “crazy bitch” (72). This event reflects Bruce’s disrespect to Helen and his unshakable dominance in their relationship. Furthermore, in Bechdel’s memory, Bruce never displayed his vulnerability until he confessed as a homosexual, and nobody in the family can reject, or even influence his decisions.

While Bruce appeared to establish an unshakable image of tyrant within the family, his femininity gradually unfolded as Bechdel grows up. Bruce’s attitude towards artistic furniture, aesthetic decorations, and gardening went beyond a general interest but reached a state of fascination. For Bechdel, “No man but a sissy could possibly love flowers this ardently” (90). It sounds paradoxical to describe an individual with both “tyrant” and “sissy,” or to relate aggression to beauty-appreciation, but these two qualities penetrated Bruce’s life. Moreover, it is hard to imagine that pair of hands which “painted goose eggs with twining tea roses” (90) belonged to someone who would hit his children violently when they made innocuous mistakes. Besides, Bruce’s feminine principles were magnified from his dramatic contrast with Bechdel, especially when she struggles to emphasize her masculinity. Take an instance, in the last panel of Page 95, Bruce carefully places some flowers into the vase and seems to smell that pleasing aroma, which are behaviors stereotypically approached as feminine. The wall splits this panel into two sections, thus highlighting Alison’s activity of watching a cowboy movie in front of the television. This dichotomous image stresses how Bruce appeared as a feminine presence in Bechdel’s view. Nevertheless, the most determining manifestations of Bruce’s femininity were still his homosexuality together with his longing for being a girl, “When I was little, I really wanted to be a girl. I’d dress up in girls’ clothes” (221). Perhaps it

was Bechdel's decision of coming out prompted Bruce to face his true sexuality; he made this confession in his first, also the last, frank discussion with Alison regarding his sexuality, and these two seemingly simple sentences revealed Bruce's deepest secret. His statement explained the photograph that Alison discovered, which Bruce was wearing a women's bathing suit and looks "lissome, elegant" (120). Bruce hid his femininity under the disguise of tyrannical masculinity, but these contradictory principles struggled against each other in his personality throughout his entire life and also related to his eventual death through a snake, either real or imaginary. Whether that snake indeed appeared on the roadside, causing Bruce to jump backward and being killed by the truck, might become a permanently unanswered mystery, but it indeed provides a metaphorical explanation for Bruce's death: he was killed by his self-paradox, which could be understood as a complicated form of suicide.

If the snake is a symbol of the tension within Bruce between masculine and feminine principles, we can also suggest that Bruce, as a combination of masculinity and femininity, becomes a snake-like figure, especially in Bechdel's life. As young Bechdel admitted she was "a connoisseur of masculinity" (95) and took opportunities to emphasize that, Bruce struggled to prevent her from expressing herself. That was when his masculine and feminine traits interacted with each other. Bechdel's appearance was strictly managed by Bruce: he always asked her to wear traditional, girlish accessories; if she verbally opposed or physically rejected his demands, Bruce would respond aggressively and force her to comply. Take the example from Page 97, Bruce yelled at Alison when finding that she took off her barrette, "Next time I see you without it [barrette], I'll wale you." Then he violently put the barrette back to her hair. Bruce understood that barrette as an indicator of femininity and hoped that wearing it could let Bechdel commit to her traditional gender roles. Besides, in Page 99, Alison, who had grown up into a young adult, was preparing to go out for dinner. Bruce commented that Alison's clothes made her appear like a missionary and insisted on putting a pearl necklace on

her. Although Alison cried and shouted “Leave me alone!” to reject his command, Bruce’s response was “What’re you afraid of? Being beautiful? Put it [pearl necklace] on, Goddamn it!” Both incidents demonstrate how Bruce, against Bechdel’s will, aggressively imposed his obsession of being “beautiful” on his daughter. He always attempted to express something feminine through Bechdel, and the means that Bruce suppressed her sexuality were snake-like because they involved both masculine and feminine principles,

Bechdel’s fear towards that snake she encountered in the woods implies how she was afraid of Bruce’s suppression on her sexuality. On Bechdel’s way home from that place where the black rat snake showed up, she felt that she “had failed some unspoken initiation rite” (115). A reasonable interpretation for the “initiation rite” here is Bechdel hoped to overcome the fear towards that snake or even kill it to establish her masculinity, but she was too shocked at that moment and could only ask Bill, a male yard worker for Bechdel’s family, to help. She perceived “a postlapsarian melancholy” (115) for expressing her feminine vulnerability, and this emotion also constantly appeared in “the war of cross purposes” (98) between Bechdel and Bruce. Every time when she had to comply with her father’s command, dressing or behaving as a lady, Bechdel experienced the sense of failure, which might remind her of past experiences. It is reasonable to connect Bruce’s suppression to that gigantic snake since they evoked similar emotional responses in Bechdel.

Except symbolizing the tension between masculinity and femininity, the snake has another layer of meaning, which centers on “cyclicity, life from death, creation from destruction” (116), and this implication suggests that Bruce’s eventual death represents Bechdel’s beginning of new life. Bruce lived his entire life as a closeted homosexual and eventually was killed by “his snake,” which is the self-paradox. However, Bechdel, who hoped to succeed in her next initiation rite, through continuous explorations in homosexual literature and related social activities made a different choice from Bruce. She found the importance of revealing

her true sexuality to the public and overcoming the suppression Bruce imposed on her. Her decision of coming out is likely to represent that she doesn't fear that snake or Bruce's suppression anymore; she has already had the strength to defeat it and start a brand new life. Bruce's death took away the most powerful constraint on Bechdel; therefore, Bruce's "death" coincided with Bechdel's "life." Moreover, four months before Bruce passed away, Bechdel in college wrote a letter to her parents to announce her homosexuality; meanwhile, Helen told Bechdel about Bruce's hidden affairs with other men. This is how "The end of his [Bruce's] lie coincided with the beginning of my truth" (117).

Fun Home depicts two individuals' distinctly different approaches in dealing with homosexuality and queer gender identity; their decisions are somewhat influenced by different growing environments and cultural transitions, but primarily based on their personal choices. Bruce's suicidal death prompts Bechdel to explore her father's life through this memoir, while in turn coming to a more enlightened realization of the connections that she and her father shared. The implication of the snake, includes both nondifferentiation between masculine and feminine principles, and cyclicity of life and death, is a significant detail that relates to both figures and further connects them together.