

Intertextuality and Homosexuality in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*

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Abstract—This article is an interpretative analysis of the comic book *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel with particular attention to the intertextual play with the book *In Search of Lost Time* by Marcel Proust. The author of the comic uses a modernist writer's imagery to create – both in the graphics and the text – a platform for communication with her own father, Bruce. Thus, the mediated language of metonymy, the figures of Thanatos, Eros, floral motifs, become one of the ways of representing homosexual love. Proustian insinuations remain the domain of the father, while the daughter's side contains a comics work serving a double, transgenerational emancipation.

Index Terms—Intertextuality, homosexuality, *Fun Home*, Marcel Proust.

I. INTRODUCTION

The multi-discursive character of postmodern art situated in the space of what is between: the low and the high, the comic and the serious, the realistic and the fictional values the role of comics as, in fact, similarly transmedial form of art situated between word and image, space and time. The 1980s brought a particular change, when mass culture, the mother of the marginalised art of comics-bastard, which dominates the market of postmodern artistic production, finally ceased to be ashamed of its child [1].

Despite the comics' growing popularity and recognition, the reflections of the Polish academic community on comics still remain a relatively new phenomenon. In her introduction to *Kontekstowy MIKS*, Grażyna Gajewska states that “at the current stage of development of reflection on comics art in Poland, we are rather dealing with postulates for the creation of new research methods than with concrete proposals for original methodologies” [2]. The lack of the right interpretational community results in reductionist treatment of comic, mostly in relation to visual arts, film or literature. Consequently, comic is studied by culture, film and literature experts mainly due to its intertextual contexts [2].

Following only this line, one can easily fall into thinking about comics as a medium devoid of new contents and specific issues, characterised by imitative nature and repetitiveness. It should be noted, however, that the evolution that frees comics from accusations of being “producible” does not end with the 1980s, but also continues into the beginning of the 21st century. Then the art of comics is used to discuss on a large scale with traditional aesthetics, to question existing social norms and to expose patriarchal culture, which is particularly important for feminist and

gender studies. This is where *Fun Home* by Alison Bechdel, along with such comics as *Persepolis* or *Embroideries* by Marjane Satrapi, *Dragonslippers: This is what an abusive relationship looks like* by Rosalind B. Penfold or, in the Polish context, *Totalnie nie nostalgia (Totally not Nostalgia)* by Wanda Hagedron and Jacek Frąś, are important sources for reflections on the sexuality of comics and the place of women and femininity in the space of this medium. Especially when this space is treated, both in the context of the creators and the audience, as male-dominated [3].

Against this backdrop, *Fun Home* stands out not so much for its autobiographical portrayal of a girl's coming-of-age story, but for not fitting into any distinct dual divisions: it oscillates between masculinity and femininity, between the concealed and the revealed, while placing the father-daughter relationship at the centre. Bechdel, as an author, links her own identity, including her sexual identity, to her family relationships. Her father, Bruce, like Alison afterwards, struggles with the world in which he lives, and this ill-adaptability stems from non-normative needs and behaviours. It seems that Bechdel uses a personal life enclosed within the four walls of the house to create an artistic and political voice that serves not only her own but also her father's coming-out [4].

The father's and daughter's homosexuality locates them within what is at the same time internal and external, private and public. Bechdel treats the discovery of her own identity as a “salutary” process for herself as a human being but above all as a writer and cartoonist [4]. She chooses comics as a means of artistic expression, which, precisely because it is a marginalised medium, can best represent marginalised issues: gender relations and discourses of homosexuality.

II. BECHDEL-PROUST. THE REALM OF PLANTS

The author of *Fun Home* consciously goes beyond the borders of the periphery when she takes the reader, by means of numerous intertextual references, to the very centre of Euro-American literary classics with Albert Camus, F. Scott Fitzgerald, James Joyce and Marcel Proust at the forefront (as well as Colette, who stands out in this male group). The intertextual nature of history, as Kamila Tuszynska, for example, points out, can be of course treated as a cultural cue in which we should find ourselves: “on the one hand they [intertexts] facilitate the ordering of autobiographical material, and on the other hand they make the story, by placing it in a cultural tradition, comprehensible and attractive to the largest possible audience” [5].

And yet, *In Search of Lost Time* builds, alongside the cultural code, a more important, intimate code of the Bechdels that serves mutual, generational recognition.

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Bechdel reads Proust as if she were looking for traces of her father's identity, in which she simultaneously sees a reflection of herself and her own sexuality. Intertextual references, the more overt ones as well as those intricately camouflaged, both in the text and the images, are the third type of communication channels that pass between the author and the reader.

A. *The Meaning of Plants in the Intertextual Play*

The fourth chapter of the comic book entitled *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, a central reference to the modernist series, begins with a story about flowers. Bruce's love of gardening is for Alison more than just a hobby; in the world of plants her father hides his sexuality, while Bechdel brings this sexuality to light in the artistic space of *Fun Home*. The plant kingdom functions as a metonymy for the homosexual world, and this mode of artistic representation is something Bechdel borrows from Proust.

The vegetation in the pages of *In Search of Lost Time* refers primarily to ideas about female sexuality. The famous cattleyas in the first volume, with which Odette adorns her cleavage as she seduces Swann, become a symbol of female charms and sexual promise – although it is difficult to speak of a symbol when the object to which it refers is physically close at hand; the cattleyas pinned to the bodice of her dress would function in linguistic terms more as a figure *pars pro toto*. The flowers are also used by the male party in the erotic game – it is Swann, not Odette, who shyly makes them a safe prelude to amorous games. The phrase “doing a cattleya”, which enters Swann's rhetoric as a kind of periphrasis or euphemism, becomes a pretext for renewed lovemaking, even when it has already changed “into a simple verb which they would employ without thinking when they wished to refer to the act of physical possession (in which, paradoxically, the possessor possesses nothing)” [6].

For Proust, the act of sexual fulfilment is not the most essential part of lovemaking; “possessing nothing”, too fleeting, it appears like the pollen of flowers falling on Odette's dress. It is the ritual that counts, that premonition of the pleasure that is yet to come, the sequence of movements and behaviours that “will make the act something more delicate, tender, mysterious and exotic like the cattleya flower” [7].

The flower as a symbol of female sexuality obviously appears in the writings of Sigmund Freud. Everything related to vegetation most often refers to female, not male, reproductive organs: “[...] the garden a frequent symbol of the female genitals. Fruit does not stand for the child, but for the breasts. [...] Blossoms and flowers represent the female genitals, or more particularly, virginity. Do not forget that the blossoms are really the genitals of the plants” [8].

Freudian expressions of female sexuality function not only in Proust but also in Bechdel. The scene when Alison's breasts begin to grow is worth mentioning here. “Budding” is for the narrator the best word she can use to describe the “painful, itchy beginnings of [her] breasts” [9]. As the narrator talks about puberty as an unwanted process, a very inconspicuous scene unfolds in the graphic panels of the comic – little Alison eating breakfast with her dad. But if you look closely, you can see that Bruce is looking through a gardening catalogue called “Wayside Gardens”, offering rare

tree and flower seeds. Femininity is associated with the father at this point, not the daughter, though she is the one who is maturing. The girl is more interested in French cuffs, and for breakfast she browses “Custom Shirtmakers”. It is worth noting, however, that on the cover of the gardening catalogue we can see something like a fruit or flower on which a bee is sitting, and that this flower or fruit unceremoniously resembles the shape of a man's scrotum. In Bechdel's work no picture appears by chance. The flower symbolising the sex organ – or even, like an icon, resembling it in shape – here no longer refers to a woman, as Freud would have it, but to a man. It is Bruce who, with Swann-like precision, adjusts and cares for the personal “cattleyas” that are the flowers filling the garden and the house, both real and “silk flowers, glass flowers, needlepoint flowers, flower paintings” [9]. The protagonist of *Fun Home*, like the protagonist of *In Search of Lost Time*, loves flowers, surrounds himself with them because he would like to take over what they represent. This desire, however, does not necessarily refer to a desire to be feminine, but can mean a desire to rid oneself of guilt.

The admiration of nature also relates to the longing for paradise lost. The story of *In Search of Lost Time* bears traces of a religious experience, perhaps even a mystical one, and Jan Blonski, the Polish scholar of Proust, writes about it, stating that: “the protagonist, placed in the paradise of Combray, loses – as if as a result of original sin – his original virtues and abilities, [...] immersing himself in the hell of time and the sex” [10]. Biblical symbols complementing the floral context also appear in Bechdel's work: for example, the *crab apple tree*, present in the description of the Easter games, or a snake which, according to the narrator, is “a vexingly ambiguous archetype” [9]. “The hell of time and the sex” when both young Alison and young Marcel enter the world of the dichotomous division between masculinity and femininity, is a coming of age marked by difference and lack in which they are condemned to sexuality and burdened, like Adam and Eve, with the divine punishment for sin. The only world without the taint of guilt is the world of plants. And it is there that Proust, and partly the author of *Fun Home*, seeks to understand his own sexuality.

B. *The Metonymy of Homosexuality*

The motif of the plant as a sign of innocence and a kind of undefiledness may be related here to the father's desire that, like the flowers, he can stand outside the body, outside the distinction between male and female. In this case, vegetation creates in both Proust's and Bechdel's work an asylum, a space of paradise and childhood devoid of sin. Yet it is not a space devoid of sexuality. The motif of a flower pollinated by an insect, which appears in *Fun Home* as a drawing on the cover of the catalogue read by the father, is taken from Proust's work and constitutes the most important parallel not so much of female sexuality – we are going beyond Freudian symbolism here – as of male sexuality. This parallel is particularly evident at the beginning of *Sodom and Gomorrah*, when the narrator recounts the ambiguous meeting of Charlus and Jupien: “Monsieur de Charlus had distracted me from looking to see whether the bee was bringing to the orchid the pollen it had so long been waiting to receive, and had no chance of receiving save by an accident so unlikely that one might call it a sort of miracle.

But this was a miracle also that I had just witnessed, almost of the same order and no less marvellous. [...] I found the pantomime, incomprehensible to me at first, of Jupien and M. de Charlus as curious as those seductive gestures addressed [by flowers] [...] to insects” [11].

Although Proust spares no irony in his description – he juxtaposes the behaviour of Charlus with that of the bumblebee – he describes the meeting of the inverts as a miracle, a natural phenomenon testifying to correspondence and harmony, “similar to those which precede the fertilisation of heterostyle trimorphous flowers [...]” [11].

The sexual act between the bumblebee and the orchid has a similar function to that of the cattleyas in the description of the lovemaking between Swann and Odette. The metonymy of Proustian language is also present on the perceptual plane; it concerns the perspective of the protagonist himself, showing the way he looks at the world. Marcel sees both visits – that of Charlus to Jupien and that of the bumblebee to the orchid – in a simultaneous way, and his gaze swings between one act and the other. The interference of the two situations makes the protagonist, and together with him also the reader, uncertain whether he is observing the natural world like a botanist hidden in the bushes or the human world, like a voyeur.

Metonymy as a rhetorical figure, as well as being a way of perceiving the world when the main object of observation is obscured by another – like the homosexuals' lovemaking by the world of plants – belongs to Alison Bechdel's own pictorial tools. Pictorial (perceptual) metonymy, if it can be provisionally called so, would manifest itself in the panels of a comic book with graphics associated with homosexual themes. This includes all kinds of floral motifs, the bouquets that Bruce adjusts, the lilacs that he gazes longingly at, but also a photograph, found by the protagonist already after her father's death, which depicts the naked yardwork assistant, Roy. The photograph is evidence that Bruce had affairs with men; Alison, on the other hand, who observes it, feels that she is looking at an intimate and forbidden situation. She discovers that the lovemaking took place at home and realizes that she was in the adjoining room at the time.

The photograph of the father in his bathing suit similarly replaces the homosexual world still hidden in the realms of guesswork. In another panel, young Alison is sitting in front of the television and watching a scene in which a gun-toting man – presumably the film's protagonist – is accompanied by a boy, perhaps a son. She wanders with her gaze from the film frame to her father located diagonally across the room, who is just adjusting flowers. This mode of imagery is metonymic like Proust's, the gaze circles from the voyeuristic object to the obscuring object, which also provides a plane of comparison. Alison juxtaposes male cultural practices – gunfights and cowboys – with her father's domestic practices and realises that a certain shift is taking place in her family; this scene is one of the moments of recognition for the daughter.

The already mentioned motif of the symbol appearing on the cover of the catalogue read by Bruce – an insect pollinating a flower – is also a signal of the father's inclination, which will only reveal itself when interpreted as an intertextual reference. For in Bechdel's work, every metonymic device, especially those referring to the world of

homosexuality, is simultaneously linked to the hypotext – *In Search of Lost Time*. The floral motifs, the photograph in a swimming costume, not without coincidence located above the title of the fourth chapter – *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, are direct references to Proust's work. Interpreting homosexual prose, German Ritz, treats metonymy and stylisation as having the character of a kind of transvestism, when appropriate linguistic and pictorial tricks give the possibility of camouflage [12].

III. BECHDEL-PROUST. EROS AND THANATOS

Carnality, which according to Ritz constitutes, apart from stylistic measures, also the hallmark of a homosexual text, becomes linked to decay and death. Sexual fulfilment is possible only on the verge of “sadistic destruction”, because homoerotic desire sublimates in the desire for death [12]. It comes as no surprise then that, in the final volume of Proust's cycle, Mr de Charlus appears altered, decayed, as if a carnal inclination had left its mark on him like a disease:

“One could say of him that the evolution of his disease or the revolution of his vice had reached that extreme point where the small primitive personality of the individual, his ancestral qualities, were entirely obscured by the interposition of the defect or generic evil which accompanied them. M. de Charlus had gone as far as it was possible for him to go [...] that, at first, I had taken him for one of these following the zouaves on the open boulevard; in fact, for another of their kind who was not M. de Charlus, [...] who only resembled the baron through that appearance common to them all and to him” [13].

A dignified and influential baron, who, despite all unfriendly rumours, finds recognition among the French elite, turns into a man with a damaged reputation who masochistically loses himself in his sexuality. According to the narrator, it is the homosexuality that is the force utterly dominant over Monsieur de Charlus, affecting even his disposition and outward appearance. In Proust's work, all the inverts share a common trait, but this time the pursuit of satisfying needs makes Palamed not so much a woman or a hermaphrodite, but a representative of the margins of the society. The baron dies symbolically – he leaves the world of salon socialites. The real death, bodily death, is suffered by the representative of Gomorrah, Albertine. At the beginning of the sixth part Marcel learns that the heroine has fallen from a horse. Interestingly, horseback riding, which in Freud is a symbol of the sexual act [8], may shed a different light on this death, which from being accidental becomes caused by unbridled sexuality. Eroticism and perversion, according to the narrator, contribute to both the girl's death and the baron de Charlus' downfall. The characters of the novel, as representatives of Sodom and Gomorrah, find it increasingly difficult to keep their inclinations secret. However they still look forward to a happy ending.

The motif of Thanatos is also important for Bechdel. The title *Fun Home* is an abbreviated form of funeral home, which ironically emphasises that in the author's work, as in her life, there is a kind of mixing of fun and death. Moreover, death as being a part of everyday life, is deprived of its metaphysical character. Bruce's death, like Albertine's, is marked by a nasty accident – the protagonist dies run over by a truck. If

we were to look at Freud again, another sexual symbol, just after horse riding, is, no matter how peculiar it might sound, “being run over” [8]. One could say that in Bechdel’s work, as in Proust’s, homosexuality and death are inextricably linked. Alison’s father dies, to follow this line, when he is gardening, and this passion, according to the narrator, is a particular manifestation of his homoerotic tendencies. Of course, death here is not a metaphysical form of punishment for sins. The protagonist, burdened with the “taint” of homosexuality, has to create an artificial life space and an artificial image which will allow him to exist in a small town and fulfil male social roles: that of a father and a teacher. This fabricated subjectivity ultimately leads, according to Alison’s own testimony, to a death which in this case is most probably suicidal. This process of self-creation of the subject, on the other hand, bears an intertextual stamp as Bruce creates himself in imitation of the modernist heroes and authors he reads.

The aestheticised space of the neo-Gothic house, which Alison’s father decorates exclusively with works of art and flowers (some of them artificial), brings to mind a novel *Against Nature (À rebours)* by Joris-Karl Huysmans, which is earlier than Proust’s work but which also strongly influenced him, and which remains in the circle of French literature. The main character, the Duke Jan des Esseintes, a dilettante and decadent cut off from the world, living alone in a house specially built and decorated for him, is modelled on the French poet Robert de Montesquiou-Fezensac, a homosexual, who is also regarded as the prototype of the Baron de Charlus. Bruce Bechdel, in his attitude, behaviour and appearance, is also linked to the type of a delicate, gay man and a connoisseur of art present in the literary tradition of French modernism. And yet, before his death, the protagonist of *Fun Home* reads novels that are not “sodomic”, that even represent a type of heteronormative masculinity, such as Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. The masculine world of the American writer coincides with the literary and personal image of another artist on Bruce’s list, Albert Camus, whose nonchalant appearance as an intellectual with a cigarette in his mouth becomes an inspiration for the protagonist of *Fun Home* especially during his youth. *A Happy Death* and *The Myth of Sisyphus* read by her father suggest that he was interested in the theme of death. However, unlike for modernist authors, for the protagonist of *Fun Home* Thanatos is tame, he does not evoke emotion or fear. As a funeral worker, Bruce spends long nights by the corpses. In the protagonist’s life, the domesticated death takes on the appearance of an artistic project which can be read about, learnt and created.

The attempts of taming and presenting the limit experience in the Western culture of the 20th century tended towards sterility (hospitals, funeral parlours), aestheticisation and commodification of death. When analysing the issue of thanatology in pop culture, especially in comics, Marek Kaźmierczak notes that it often replicates already known forms of representation. The audience of a given work find content from previous texts and thus “have the impression that they already know something, and the mystery they discover does not make them uneasy [...]. Death can be pleasing, after all man keeps finding for it some new, substitute images, not to say incarnations” [14].

Intertextuality helps here to bring the problem of a limit experience closer to the audience, leaving them in the sphere of comfort and security. However, apart from reading about death, Bruce also aestheticizes it – preparing the dead for burial, arranging flowers by the coffin – and treats the space of the funeral home as a private artistic studio.

A. Death and Corporeality

However, this form of communing with Thanatos does not affect little Alison, who is unaware of what death is and how it manifests itself culturally. As a child, she treats the funeral home as a place to play. The most important moment of her encounter with death occurs when her father invites her into the room where he embalms corpses. She sees a naked man lying on a table: “The strange pile of his genitals was shocking, but what really got my attention was his chest, split open to a dark red cave” [9]. Alison does not know whether her father wanted her to undergo some form of initiation, whether he was testing her composure, or perhaps wanted to elicit a reaction “that he was no longer capable of” [9]. Her first experience of death – the sight of a lifeless naked body with a hole in its chest – is by no means an aesthetic experience for the protagonist, but a scientific, cognitive one, as if she were attending an anatomy lesson. The representation of death appears as a naturalistic image in which the role of a teacher, a kind of Dr Tulp, is in this case taken on by Bruce. Alison is most interested in how the human body is built and what is hidden inside it. She will use this investigative approach to life inspired by her father to explore her own sexuality.

Seeing the male corpse lying on the table is the moment of the protagonist’s double initiation: besides acknowledging the naked image of death, in its most corporeal, passionless and sterile form, Alison also sees a naked man for the first time [4]. One could therefore say that this is the moment in which the protagonist becomes aware of sex differences. The exposed genitals allow us to identify the person lying on the table biologically as a man, although it is also worth noting that this is a young and well-built man, different from the dead who usually end up at the funeral home – and thus, the appearance of his body, the abundant beard, the excessive body-hair, the breadth of his shoulders represent in the protagonist’s eyes not only what is biologically but also what is culturally associated with “masculinity” (e.g. physical strength). According to Freud, the moment of realizing the sexual difference, would of course be associated with the development of a girl’s desire to become a man – the stage defined by Freud as – penis envy. In this case, however, the moment when Alison takes her disgusted gaze away from the male penis could be treated by Freud primarily as a manifestation of the girl’s homosexual inclinations, which would include her in the ranks of the “perverse” people who delete “from their programme the difference between the sexes” [8]. And yet, one cannot help feeling that Alison’s lack of curiosity about sex differences is not primarily due to her sexuality, but is related to a second aspect of initiation, i.e. the experience of death.

The girl comes into contact with a body that is dead and therefore inherently devoid of sexuality. The dead genitals lose any connection with sex drive or fertility. Presented instrumentally, on a par with a hand or leg, they appear

simply as a part of a corpse. Biological sex, and the difference that follows it, ceases to have any meaning when confronted with death and perhaps, as Judith Butler would have it, unmasks its constructivist character. According to Butler, biological sex is not given by nature, because nature itself (and with it natural biological sex) is determined by "sets of discursive/cultural means" [15]. The experience of corporality, rather than sexuality, seems to Alison a more important form of initiation into the mysteries of life. She is interested in this "red cave", a hole in the chest, through which she sees the inside of a person, hitherto inaccessible to cognition.

IV. CONCLUSION

Both through his contact with death and, partially, through his metonymic engagement with the plant world, Bruce remains free of the homosexuality that would negate his social, but also familial, status. The motif of Thanatos linked to Eros, and of Eros as a regular visitor to the plant kingdom where no sexual prejudice applies (it is worth noting that the love between the bumblebee and the orchid is inter-species), is connected directly with the book *In Search of Lost Time*. Ritz writes that "the homosexual canon invariably suggests to the homosexual author a rich palette of examples of stylization to which they refer in intertextual dialogue" [12]. Both through graphics and words, the author of the comic imprints clear signals of reference. At the same time, Bechdel herself, like Proust, goes back to her childhood, when in the role of a voyeur she discovers the truth about her father. Reading *In Search of...* has created in Bechdel a specific vision of her own sex and sexuality. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, it was Proust that Bruce read a lot a year before his death. Intertextuality in this case is an attempt to mediate not so much Proust's or Bechdel's own reality, but rather that of her father. Understood in this way it acquires an unusually intimate character. It is also necessary, for the only form of access to the world of the father is literature, and the only form of representing this world is intertextuality, which appears as a connector.

Cultural divisions into the figures of a father and a daughter, masculinity and femininity, high (associated with the male canon of modernist literature) and low lose any right to exist in Bechdel's work: they function on the same principles, and one does not exist without the other.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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