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# Allusive Meaning in Alison Bechdel's Fun Home: Digital Humanities as Curricular Enhancement

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# Allusive Meaning in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*: Digital Humanities as Curricular Enhancement

Lynne Stahl, PhD

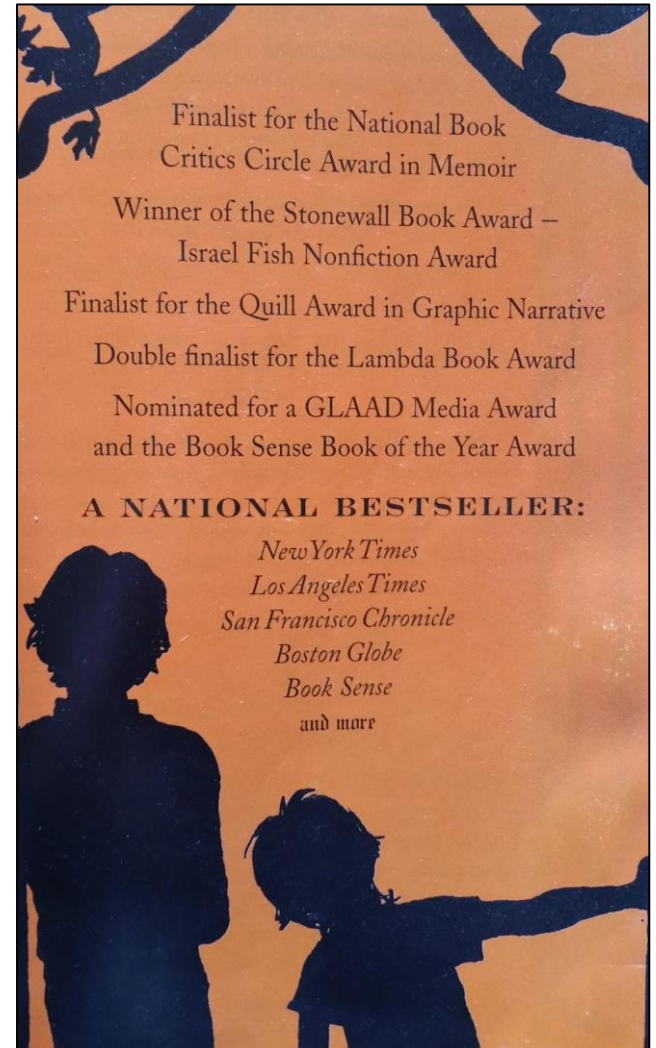
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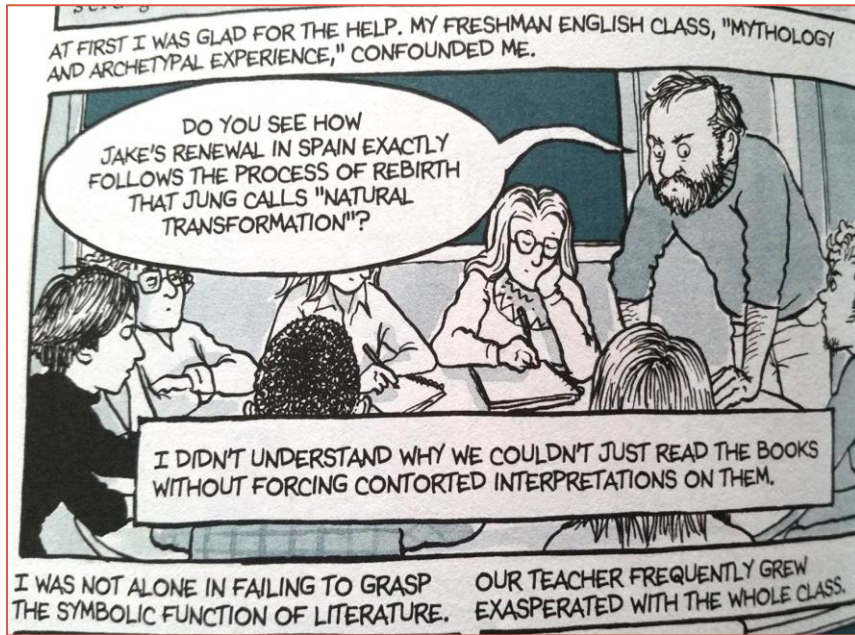
# *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*

Alison Bechdel, 2006

- Brought graphic texts wider academic recognition and use
- Troubled conventional conceptions of literary form and genre; high art and mass culture
- Has drawn protest for “immoral” and “pornographic” content

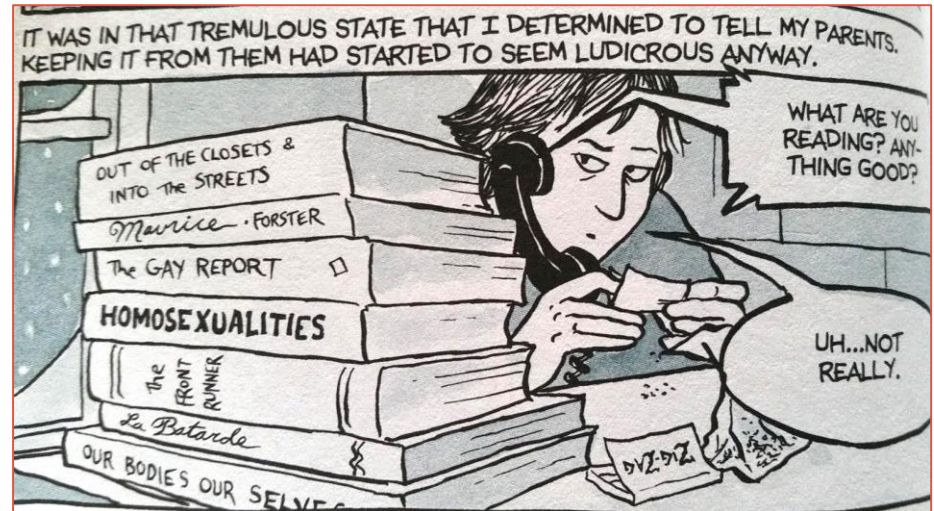
<https://bit.ly/2E3Spsi>





## Allusions in *Fun Home*

- References 100+ other texts
- Limited audience familiarity
- Likelihood of less-than-full reading



**OBJECTIVE:** Create resource to enrich reader experience without offering “answers” or imposing interpretations

# Scope and Methods

- Developed metadata framework and cataloged allusions
- Researched each text and wrote up brief synopsis

Stahl, Author

## The Picture of Dorian Gray

Oscar Wilde - 1890 - novel - p. 170

A controversial novel that may have contributed to Wilde's later conviction for indecency, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was abridged by an editor without Wilde's knowledge even before publication and still ruffled the feathers of much of British society. Basil Hallward paints a portrait of a beautiful man named Dorian Gray, who becomes obsessed with his own beauty to the exclusion of all else. Influenced by the hedonistic outlook of the aristocrat Henry Wotton, Dorian wishes that his portrait would age rather than he himself.

He realizes that his wish has come true when, after he offends an actress named Sybil, he comes home to find that the portrait has mysteriously taken on a mocking sneer--and Sybil has killed herself. Believing himself consigned to the lures of hedonism, Dorian indulges his every whim and amoral impulse, inspired in part by the influence of a prurient French novel. Finally, his misdoings catch up to him and become too much to bear.

Wilde noted that the three main characters represented various aspects of his own personality: self-perception, social perception, and aspiration. As a result of the furor the book caused, subsequent editions were published with a preface by Wilde explicating the role of art in society.

Key elements: art, crime, Europe, Gothic, homosexuality

Comment on this page

Title	Author	Genre/medium	Appearance by page	Year
The Odyssey	Homer	epic poem	202, 203, 204, 206, 207, 21	BC
Daedalus and Icarus	Greek myth	mythology	3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 11, 12, 231	BC
Taming of the Shrew	Shakespeare	play	69	1590
Merry Wives of Windsor	William Shakespeare	play	202	1597
Roget's Thesaurus	Peter Roget	reference source	77	1805
Pride and Prejudice	Jane Austen	novel	199	1813
Webster's Dictionary	Noah Webster	reference source	57, 106, 171, 186	1828
The Stones of Venice	John Ruskin	criticism	19	1851
New York Times		periodical	184	1851
Little Women	Louisa May Alcott	novel	172	1868
Anna Karenina	Leo Tolstoy	novel	3	1873
Washington Square	Henry James	novel	66	1880
Portrait of a Lady	Henry James	novel	70, 71	1880
A Child's Garden of Verses	Robert Louis Stevensc	poetry	160	1885
Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde	Robert Louis Stevensc	novel	160	1886
The Picture of Dorian Gray	Oscar Wilde	novel	170	1890
Vogue		periodical	94, 139	1892

- Created embeddable timeline of texts using [tiki-toki.com](https://tiki-toki.com)



### Text By Key Element

Listed below are a number of terms, concepts, and elements that play a prominent role in the works to which *Fun Home* alludes as well as a brief description for each entry. Though not exhaustive, this list aims to provide a helpful way to group texts along thematic lines. Click a term to a list of works referenced in *Fun Home* that are tagged with that term.

Absent Father  
Activism  
Alcoholism  
American South  
Art  
Crime  
Europe  
Fascism  
Father Figures  
Frame Narrative  
Gothic  
Greek Mythology  
Homosexuality  
Infidelity  
Juvenile Literature  
Lesbian  
Marriage  
Mental Illness  
Origin Stories  
Suicide  
Teacher

## Methods II

- Assigned texts thematic classification
- Compiled other secondary resources on *FH*
- Built out “book” in Scalar



# Challenges and Limitations

- Impossibility of full objectivity
- Assessing impact



A screenshot of a digital guide page titled "A Reference Guide to Alison Bechdel's Fun Home" on the Scalar platform. The page features a left-hand navigation menu with options like "Text By Author", "Text By Medium", and "Table of Contents". The main content area includes a welcome message, a disclaimer about the guide's purpose, and a "Comment on this page" button. At the bottom, it shows the page version (21), update date (29 August 2017), and the Scalar logo and branding.

## Next Steps

- Testing, evaluation, and refinement

# References

Bechdel, A. (2007). *Fun home: A family tragicomic*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin.

Cvetkovich, A. (2008). Drawing the archive in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 36(1/2), 111-128.

Pachter, Richard (2006, June 16). *Fun Home: Sketches of a family circus*. *Seattle Times*. Retrieved August 9, 2007. Retrieved from

<http://community.seattletimes.nwsourc.com/archive/?date=20060616&slug=funhome18>

Soloway, J. (2006, June 4). Skeletons in the closet. *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved from

<http://articles.latimes.com/2006/jun/04/books/bk-soloway4/2>

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