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

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Lynne Stahl, PhD

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

Link to resource: <http://scalar.usc.edu/works/allusive-meaning-a-reference-guide-to-alison-bechdels-fun-home/index>

Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* is a landmark text for a number of reasons: along with Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (translated to English in 2003) it helped to bring the graphic form into the fold of higher ed curricula; it prompted important reconsiderations of genre and high art vs. mass culture, winning a range of awards including the Lambda Literary Award for Lesbian Memoir and Biography, the GLAAD Media Award for Outstanding Comic Book, and the Eisner Award for Best Reality-Based Work. It also spawned a Broadway musical that was nominated for 12 Tony Awards, garnering five wins including Best Musical. It has been incorporated into countless college syllabi and generated controversy in the Carolinas when the College of Charleston and Duke included it on recommended summer reading lists for freshmen.

### **Background and Objectives**

*Fun Home* uses a graphic, nonlinear structure to relate the story of Alison growing up and coming to terms with her sexuality while also grieving her father, who was never fully able to come to terms with his and who ultimately committed suicide. Cvetkovich (2008) treats the graphic memoir as an archive unto itself--one that depicts an important and often neglected canon of feminist theory and literature, putting them into conversation with allusions to more traditionally "classic" authors including James Joyce, Oscar Wilde, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. *Fun Home* has gained major traction as a part of humanities curricula within higher education in recent years, as it draws out rich discussions of form and content, memory and family, literary history, and the politics of sexual identity. *Fun Home* is, as Cvetkovich (2008) argues, a queer archive unto itself, wrapping up a diverse and sometimes taboo repository of other queer books and poems and treatises within its pages: it opens up a world of texts for its readers, many of them texts that helped young Alison come to grips with her sexuality and her relationship with her father.

However, many undergraduates who encounter the text will not have read *Ulysses* or *Fear of Flying* or *Tender is the Night*, few graduate students or professors have likely read every text that Bechdel includes. For as much critical acclaim as *Fun Home* has received, even approving critics have described it as "a little opaque" and "staggeringly literate" (Soloway, 2006; Pachter, 2006). If literary professionals and PhDs feel in over their heads, it follows that undergraduates might flounder a bit.

This project came to fruition as an independent study in my master's of library science program, though its beginnings were conceived a few years ago when I taught *Fun Home* in several college composition classes at Cornell University. Students found the text compelling and the story thought-provoking, but, indeed, they often either reported feeling estranged by the numerous literary allusions or admitted to glossing over them completely, resulting in a limited level of engagement.

Much of my motivation, then, devolved from the fact that *Fun Home* offers an immensely rich platform through which readers can grapple with issues of sexual identity, family, aesthetics, questions of genre, form and content, the ethics of memoir, intertextuality and more--but also the fact that many readers might stall out on the constant, variegated literary allusions. I thought that a digital guidebook of sorts could prove helpful in turning the allusions into more of a vehicle than a stumbling block--but what I very much did not want it to create was any sort of answer key or exegesis or interpretation of *Fun Home* in the style of Shmoop or SparkNotes--just a tool that would empower users to extend their reading of a complex primary text. Though this project in no way claims to replace reading the texts themselves, my hope is that, as an open educational resource (OER), it can assist students and other readers to a greater understanding of *Fun Home* and its citations--as well as reducing the burden on instructors to be able to explicate so many allusions for students. As such, this reference guide aims to serve as an example of a resource that not only supports teaching and learning but also extends a primary text in itself.

### **Methodology**

To begin, I went page-by-page through *Fun Home* and systematically cataloged each book, film, myth, periodical, and television reference, recording the page number(s) of the allusion, title, author, medium, and year of publication I later came up with several thematic elements (viewable [here](#)) and assigned them to the referenced texts as appropriate. Then, for each text, I wrote up a brief description, conducting supplemental research as necessary on an individual basis. I created a “book” on Scalar, an open-source digital publishing platform run through the University of Southern California, and uploaded all of the metadata and content into individual entries for each text.

Each finished entry includes, at a minimum, the synopsis and metadata described above. Many entries also include the aforementioned key thematic elements, linked to a full list of all of the cataloged texts that share those elements. Some entries also provide external links to resources such as the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, among others. Further, to provide students with options for additional critical analysis, I located and listed a number of scholarly articles that deal with *Fun Home*.

### **Challenges/Limitations**

For all of my efforts to refrain from imposing any interpretations in my descriptions of each referenced text, strict objectivity was impossible. Anytime one engages in processes of selection and cataloging--particularly when one has created one’s own cataloging system--there is simply no way to avoid some element of editorializing. The process is analogous to that of a documentary filmmaker, perhaps: one is using pieces that are factually true and materially present, yes, but one is arranging them in a way that creates a certain narrative. Where there is no way to eliminate the subjective touch, acknowledging it overtly may need to suffice.

### **Conclusion**

Among the many illuminating presentations at *Online Northwest* this year, the humanities were not abundantly represented. While there is certainly no shortage of amazing work being done in digital humanities and OER, I also can’t help but suspect that many humanities-oriented people (myself included) can feel immensely intimidated by terms such as “OER” or “born-digital” or even the “digital” half of “digital humanities.” Having been enrolled in an English graduate program when the term “digital humanities” began surfacing in job postings,

in fact, I can tell you how much consternation and anxiety it produced, with the effect that some humanities graduate students either grew resentful of this sudden expectation or felt suddenly compelled to attempt shakily justified digital humanities projects simply for the sake of being able to make a claim to digital humanities on their CV.

Writing as a career humanist with only novice-level coding skills, I seek to reassure others that OER projects are eminently doable even at this entry level, and ultimately they can be passion projects that enhance curricular objects without watering them down or compromising the reading process. And they can also be, as I hope this project is, an accessible resource that itself makes another resource more accessible.

### **References**

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