Alison’s Allusive Autobiography

Alison Bechdel’s graphic novel *Fun Home* tells the story of two “birds” attempting to fly in their own distinct manners. Bechdel illustrates and narrates a portion of her life in 232 pages. In this work, she uses various allusions to create a variety of exit and entry points between her world and the real world. No doubt persists in my mind that the graphic narrative has become “increasingly verbose and narratively sophisticated” (Freedman 125). By employing literary devices, Bechdel certainly helps to pull comics out of the lowbrow section of creative endeavors.

“Bechdel makes an additional play for high literary status by larding her book with the influence of canonical modernist literature, not only through frequent and explicit citation and reference but also by subtler formal, thematic and textual gestures” (Freedman 126).

For this paper, I will argue that Bechdel’s use of visual and textual allusion serve as an effective way to relate the events of her life to her audience. Bechdel uses the literary device of allusion to create connections between her life and various textual, visual, and cultural works. It is through this particular lens that Bechdel allows the audience to find their way through the graphic novel.

The main allusion presented in Bechdel’s *Fun Home* is the allusion to the Greek myth of Daedalus and Icarus. In an attempt to escape from a tower in Crete, Daedalus made two pairs of
wings out of wax and feathers for himself and his son, Icarus. Daedalus warned his son not to fly too close to the sun, because it would melt his wings, and not too close to the sea, because it would wet them and make it hard to fly.

This allusion opens and closes the graphic novel and it is used to describe the relationship between Bechdel and her father, Bruce. Alison and Bruce have an interesting father-daughter relationship and this is first depicted in the opening of the graphic novel with a scene from Bechdel’s childhood. In the first three panels, a young Allison is being balanced on by Bruce on his foot in a moment of “rare physical contact” (Bechdel 3). Bechdel calls into play the Icarus allusion and alludes that while she is the one carelessly soaring it is her father that will take on the role of Icarus and not survive the tale. “In our particular reenactment of this mythic relationship, it was not my father who was to plummet from the sky” (Bechdel 4).

Though Alison may be depicted as Icarus because she is the child flying with her father’s help the lay of events allows her and father to both play the same role speaking to things that the two have in common despite the many differences that are presented in the following chapters.

By using this allusion, Bechdel is able to immediately tell the reader what the story is going to be about. Because she shows this allusion to the reader immediately, she can introduce the main theme of the relationship between her and her father.

The imagery within these first pages is also very important to pay attention to. In the first five panels Alison’s face is never shown and she is drawn with a short haircut and wearing a striped shirt and jeans. From the eyes of the graphic novel, this look is not a gender exclusive one but it is more common for boys to have short haircuts and for girls to be dressed in more feminine manners. This is meaningful because the issue of gender identification is one that Bechdel addressed early in her life and addresses in the graphic novel. Because she is depicted
as a young boy, Bechdel could easily place herself in the position of young Icarus without readers having to make any gender based conclusions.

The scene between the two also takes place atop an ornate rug that alludes to Bruce’s obsession with restoring his family’s Victorian-style home. While Alison wants to be lifted by her father, again the cleanliness of the rug and an out of place strip of molding distracts him and stops their game.

“Fun Home invites—and requires—readers to read differently, to attend to disjunctions between the cartoon panel and the verbal text, to disrupt the seeming forward motion of the cartoon sequence and adopt a reflexive and recursive reading practice” (Watson 28).

Bechdel not only views her relationships through literary scopes she also views the people within her family as fictional characters. Bechdel writes, “I employ these allusions…not only as descript devices, but because my parents are most real to me in fictional terms” (Bechdel 67). Bechdel uses her graphic novel to show, tell, and compare her work with others that have come before her.

“To the insight that we structure our memories as fictions Bechdel adds the further Wildean revelation that frequently fiction determines the very shape of our experiences. This is, for her, an inherited perspective, a legacy of her father, who trained her not only in reading but also in the subtle masquerade of living one’s own life through fictive paradigms” (Freedman 127).

First Bechdel speaks about her father and the similarities that exist between his life and that of writer F. Scott Fitzgerald and several of his characters, most notably Jake Gatsby from *The Great Gatsby*. Bechdel notes, “Gatsby’s self-willed metamorphosis from farm boy to prince is in many ways identical to my father’s. Like Gatsby, my father fueled this transformation with
“the colossal vitality of his illusion.” Unlike Gatsby, he did it on a schoolteacher’s salary” (Bechdel 63-64).

By comparing her father to Jake Gatsby Bechdel brings in a well-known literary character that many people can identify with. Jake Gatsby was a bootlegger who was in love with a woman who was “forbidden fruit” to him in a way because she was married and also because she was socially out of his reach. Bruce was also like Gatsby because he was a man who no one, especially his own daughter, seemed to know a lot about. Alison discovered who her father was by listening to stories from her mother and going through his things after his death. While he was alive, she did not seem to be very close with her father other than the two both being enamored with literature.

To further the comparison and really drive home the point to the reader Bechdel uses drawings of a photograph of her father and a depiction of Robert Redford playing Jake Gatsby in a *The Great Gatsby* adaptation asserting that it may have been arguable that her father looked like Gatsby, he certainly favored Redford (Bechdel 64).

*Fun Home* is not just about Bechdel’s relationship with her father. She also addresses her mother as an important character in her father’s life. While Bechdel’s father is away at a mental hospital seeing a psychiatrist her mother, a part-time actor, is preparing for an upcoming role in *The Importance of Being Earnest* as well as completing her thesis for a master’s degree program. Bechdel’s mother, Helen, immerses herself in the role completely learning the lines of other characters, designing her own costumes, and getting Alison to help her go through her own lines.

In the play, Helen plays the role of Lady Bracknell the mother of Gwendolyn who wishes to marry Jack who is one of two men leading false lives under the name of Ernest. Lady Bracknell is Gwendolyn’s roadblock on the road to happiness and has the position of being the
over protective mother. Like Alison’s father, Helen is mostly shown in the comic with a sullen expression especially when it comes to matters concerning her husband. There are few points where Helen has any sort of happy expression and this does well to communicate the environment that Bechdel was living in at the time. (I should also briefly mention that Bechdel compares her father to *The Importance of Being Earnest* author Oscar Wilde who was rumored to have been a homosexual).

Possibly some of the more interesting points of allusion occur when Bechdel fully uses the uniqueness of her medium to portray something that a strictly textual medium could not. Bechdel uses visual allusions to produce a few pop culture references that certainly help to add to the depth of the story. “Bechdel’s literary investment extends beyond the depth and frequency of literary reference employed from the title onwards to the denseness and sophistication of the narrative element of the text” (Freedman 125-126).

Though most of these allusions are not thoroughly addressed by Bechdel’s text, certain conclusions can be inferred about why she chose to include them in her work. Bechdel’s communication of her story is so effective because she does not allow the images to be decoration; instead, she takes full advantage of them and forces them to each say something in their own right.

The first visual allusion is to the film *It’s a Wonderful Life*. In one of many scenes where Bruce is having a grumpy moment one of Alison’s brothers is helping their father place a Christmas tree while *It’s a Wonderful Life* plays on the television in the background. Alison’s brother is unable to hold the tree straight and this angers his father. During this moment, the scene where “Jimmy Stewart comes home one night and starts yelling at everyone” is depicted on the TV (Bechdel 11). Bechdel’s father’s dialogue mimics that of Stewarts who seems to be
lashing out at people who do not deserve his anger or frustration (in both cases the victims happen to be young children).

The second visual allusion is the quick view of Sesame Street on television while Bechdel is watching TV with her brothers (Bechdel 14). By bringing in this small piece of intertextuality, Bechdel speaks to another important theme within her book, that of sexual preference or homosexuality. When Bechdel leaves her family for college she starts to discover who she is. She believes herself to be a lesbian (before she even knew the word existed) and decides to explore homosexual literature and society. It is during this time that she creates her own identity and decides definitively that she does want to be quite the same person her parents raised her to be. She discovers that while her father may have been trying to make her into something she was not he was attempting to express something in her that he could not express in himself. “Telling the story of her father’s [his] repressed desire and associating it with her own coming out in 1980 and early experiences as a lesbian subjected to social humiliations, she bridges their generational divide and different lifestyles by asking herself, “Would I have had the guts to be one of those Eisenhower-era bitches? Or would I have married and sought succor from my high school students?” (Watson 41; Bechdel 108).

As an adult watching Bert and Ernie, “two males who share their home and care deeply about each other” it could be assumed that Bert and Ernie are representations of homosexual characters (Grieshaber and Cannella 106). However, as Sesame Street Production Company The Children’s Television Workshop (currently Sesame Workshop) said, “They’re Muppets! An inanimate object can’t be gay. Muppets have only the sexually identity awarded them by their makers” (Grieshaber and Cannella 106). Though Bechdel was not able to take on the identity her father intended to impress upon her, she was still a reflection of him. She was just a
reflection that did not appear to be anything like him, like the reflection one would get from a fun house mirror.

The third visual allusion is the presence of a smiley face trash can in Bechdel’s room. As a young girl, some of Bechdel’s main points of contention with her father came up when he was attempting to make her room fit in the gothic décor of the rest of the home and when he was attempting to make his little girl appear traditionally as such. Bechdel and her father are often seen arguing about the way in which she dresses and presents herself.

Bechdel expresses herself as being “Spartan to my father’s Athenian. Modern to his Victorian. Butch to his Nelly. Utilitarian to his aesthete” (Bechdel 15). This quote is addressed across a page split into four panels each depicting a different scene where Bechdel and her father seem to be in some sort of disagreement or opposition. In the second panel, Bechdel is tossing paper into a smiley face trashcan. This iconic image is one that is immediately recognized as one that is lighthearted and serves as a symbol for happiness. Though it does seem out place in what can be described as a depressing world, I think it makes an appearance not only to show Alison doing two things to upset her father (1) Making a mess and 2) Having a piece of furniture that does not fit into his decorative theme) but also to express and highlight the melancholy mood that Bechdel’s father seems to be in throughout most of the graphic novel. There are very few panels where Bruce has any sort of happy expression or seems to be in a good mood. He wears a grimace or look of distaste or disinterest in almost every panel and the smiley face is a perfect juxtaposition to Bruce’s chosen demeanor.

One final allusion that Bechdel addresses both visually and textually is an allusion to the famed Addams Family. The odd and morbidity enthused family is mentioned in Alison’s narrative and depicted artistically.
As a child, Bechdel found herself “puzzling over a book of Addams’ cartoons” (Bechdel 34). Bechdel continues, “The captions eluded me, as did the ironic reversal of suburban conformity. Here were the familiar dark, lofty ceilings, peeling wallpaper, and menacing horsehair furnishings of my own home” (Bechdel 34). On this particular page and the one following Bechdel reproduces those Addams family cartoons in her own style. This instance of a cartoon within a cartoon reminds the reader that they are reading a medium that is more than and has more to offer than just pictures.

Bechdel also redraws one of her old school photographs where she is wearing a black dress her father “wrestled” her into and appears to be in “mourning” just like a Addams family depiction of Wednesday Addams, the daughter of the family.

By finding her own place in literature, Bechdel entices the reader to go on a literary journey with her. Through her discovery of herself and those around her through characters that have already existed she sends the message that though her story may have been a somewhat tragic one it may not have been a completely alien one and one that is impossible to experience. By using visual and textual allusions and connecting her world to other worlds that could have existed Bechdel creates connections that cannot be ignored and must be explored by readers.
Works Cited


