

Panel 31
Word and Image

Queer Metaphor: Word and Image in Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*

Sarah Thornley
University of Nottingham

Alison Bechdel's autobiographical graphic novel *Fun Home* depicts her early life and fraught relationship with her closeted father Bruce, who later took his own life. As the young Bechdel grapples with her nascent understanding of her own homosexuality and her father's double life, she makes frequent reference to Odysseus and Telemachus, using both of these mythical figures as metaphorical touchstones for herself and her father. In doing so, Bechdel constructs what this paper will term *queer metaphor*. In terms of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, this is a metaphor that creates not only gendered similarities between the target domain and the source domain, but also gendered differences, and even draws attention to the inevitable failure of the target domain to be adequately described by the source domain. While key theorists working on multimodal metaphor (for example, Charles J. Forceville) claim that image can generate metaphor in a similar manner to verbal language, and that the sequential art of comics constitutes its own 'visual language' (see Scott McCloud and Neil Cohn), pictorial imagery lacks the semantic precision to distinguish between simile and metaphor, and therefore cannot be said to create metaphor without linguistic support. However, a close analysis of *Fun Home* reveals the contribution of image to the construction of queer metaphor. This paper will explore how image can reinforce and develop both positive and negative mappings between the target and source in queer metaphor, powerfully communicating Jack Halberstam's 'queer failure': the impossibility of attaining gender ideals that lie just out of reach.

Biography

Sarah Thornley is a MA English student at the University of Nottingham, with research interests across cognitive linguistics and English Literature. She works as an English teacher at Tanglin Trust School, and before moving to Singapore, taught in South Korea and the United Kingdom.