

## **INFORMATION TO USERS**

**The most advanced technology has been used to photograph and reproduce this manuscript from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.**

**The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.**

**In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.**

**Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book.**

**Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.**

# U·M·I

University Microfilms International  
A Bell & Howell Information Company  
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA  
313 761-4700 800 521-0600



**Order Number 9112972**

**Woody Allen: The philosophical clown**

Speck, Bobbie J., D.A.

Middle Tennessee State University, 1990

**Copyright ©1991 by Speck, Bobbie J. All rights reserved.**

**U·M·I**  
300 N. Zeeb Rd.  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106



**Woody Allen: The Philosophical Clown**

**Bobbie J. Speck**

**A dissertation presented to the  
Graduate Faculty of Middle Tennessee State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree Doctor of Arts**

**December 1990**

**Woody Allen: The Philosophical Clown**

**APPROVED:**

**Graduate Committee:**

*W. Lang Gentry*  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Major Professor

*William R. Weyer*  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Reader

*Frank G. Gianni*  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Head of the English Department

*Mary Martin*  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Dean of the Graduate School

## ABSTRACT

### Woody Allen: The Philosophical Clown

by

Bobbie J. Speck

Woody Allen, one of the comic geniuses of the twentieth century, has stated that the primary purpose of his films and prose is to entertain his audience, and entertain them he does. However, comedy is a serious business. Scholars have pointed out the fine line between comedy and tragedy. Comedy helps man cope with the complexities of life; it is "the groan made gay." Allen's use of comedy serves a serious purpose. His satires make telling observations about contemporary men and women and issues which concern them. Many of his works express the existential sense of alienation of our times.

Much has been written about Allen's films and his role as filmmaker. Less attention has been paid to Allen's prose. This dissertation focuses on Allen's three collections of short stories, essays, and one-act plays: Getting Even (1971), Without Feathers (1975), and Side Effects (1980). Allen's development as a comedian is explored, as well as the major themes he deals with in his prose. Specific selections from each collection which illustrate Allen's use of comedy for a serious purpose are then explored.

Bobbie J. Speck

Allen's prose works, though humorous, deal with serious philosophical and sociological issues, such as the meaning of life, the existence or non-existence of God, and the possibility of an afterlife. He also deals with more mundane topics, such as man's search for happiness in his everyday life, the dehumanizing effects of technology, the pomposity of pseudo-intellectuals, and, in his later works, problems associated with a dysfunctional society. Allen explores these topics through the vehicle of satire.



## Table of Contents

	Page
Introduction . . . . .	1
<b>Chapter</b>	
<b>I. A Visit from the Bluebird of Anxiety:</b>	
Woody Allen's Development as a Comedian . . . . .	10
<b>II. "Sitting at the Children's Table":</b>	
Woody Allen's Brand of Comedy . . . . .	42
<b>III. Selections from <u>Getting Even</u></b> . . . . .	67
<b>IV. Selections from <u>Without Feathers</u></b> . . . . .	90
<b>V. Selections from <u>Side Effect</u></b> . . . . .	120
Conclusion . . . . .	140
Works Cited . . . . .	145

## Introduction

In his book Anatomy of Satire, Gilbert Highet describes the cynic Menippus (c.340--270 B.C.) as "the man who jokes about serious things" (233). This description aptly describes Woody Allen, the twentieth century comedian, writer, and filmmaker. Allen, a popular entertainer, is also a serious artist. Many academicians believe the appellations "popular" and "serious" are mutually exclusive, and indeed Allen is not a serious artist in the tradition of a Henry James or an Ernest Hemingway. However, his satires of contemporary man and contemporary issues are full of wit and insight.

Allen's works, though humorous, deal with serious philosophical and sociological issues. Allen explores such weighty themes as the meaning of life, the existence or non-existence of God, and the possibility of an afterlife. One might be tempted to classify Allen as an existentialist since many of his works indicate God is dead and life is meaningless. However, Allen never puts these questions to rest. His latest film, Crimes and Misdemeanors (1989), continues to deal with man's questions about whether or not God exists. The film's strongest point is that even if God does not exist, man is still morally responsible for his actions. Allen definitely has an existential bent, but he lacks the certainty a true existentialist exhibits.

Otherwise, he would not return to his obsessions about God so often.

Allen also explores more mundane topics such as man's search for happiness in his everyday life, the dehumanizing effects of technology, the pomposity of pseudo-intellectual inquiry, and, in his later works, the problems our society faces due to substance abuse and cult religions. Allen explores these topics through the vehicle of satire, a well-respected literary genre.

Humor and satire go hand in hand. The term "satire" is derived from the Latin word satura which means "full." The gods were presented with an offering of the first-fruits of the harvest in a salad called lanx satura. Thus, the term satire has come to mean "a mixture full of different things" (Hight 231). Northrup Frye in Anatomy of Criticism points out that humor is one of the key components of satire: "Two things . . . are essential to satire; one is wit or humor founded on fantasy or a sense of the grotesque or the absurd, the other is an object of attack" (224). Allen's works certainly exhibit these criteria. His works, occasionally fantastic, are full of absurd characters and situations; and his treatment, with the exception of a few attempts at serious film, is always humorous and witty.

Allen has expressed concern that his works are not as respected as they might be because he uses comedy instead of tragedy. Comedy, he says, just does not command the respect

awarded to more serious works (Cooper 8). However, humor is an important aspect of our existence, and humor can be used for a serious purpose. In The Language of Humor, Walter Nash points out that "humor is a serious business" (1). He describes the importance of humor and its very serious role in our culture:

Together with the power of speech, the mathematical gift, the gripping thumb, the ability to make tools, humor is a specifying characteristic of humanity. For many of us, it is more than an amiable decoration of life; it is a complex piece of equipment for living, a mode of attack and a line of defence [sic], a method of raising questions and criticizing arguments, a protest about the inequality of the struggle to live, a way of atonement and reconciliation, a treaty with all that is willful, impaired, beyond our power to control. (1)

Allen's prose works exemplify Nash's definition. Among other things, Allen's satires attack human folly and raise questions about a number of important issues in man's life. One might even argue that his satires struggle to help man understand the harsh realities of life. In short, Woody Allen employs humor to explore serious themes.

Because Woody Allen is most famous for his role in the film industry, practically everything published about him

deals with his role as a filmmaker and his films in particular. Much less has been written about his prose works. This dissertation will focus on Allen's three collections of short stories, essays, and one-act plays: Getting Even (1971), Without Feathers (1975), and Side Effects (1980). Since the guiding focus of this work will be Allen's use of comedy for a serious purpose, the approach will be basically thematic. There will, of course, be some analysis of Allen's jokes and what makes them funny, but the overall approach will be to explore the short stories, essays, and one-act plays as organic wholes which advance Allen's serious view of life.

Each of the three collections contains seventeen to eighteen prose works. To attempt a discussion of every work in all three collections would have been impractical since the end result would have been a document that would be not only unwieldy but analytically inferior. Some of the works are simply not as good as others. This is a partly subjective statement, but it is also one borne out by analysis of the stories. The works chosen for analysis in this dissertation are works that are richest in themes dealing with the thesis of Allen's use of comedy for a serious purpose. Also, there are slight shifts in Allen's choice of subject matter and his comic approach in each of these three collections. Works were chosen which

exemplified these changes while at the same time adhering to the previously described criteria.

Chapter I of this dissertation concerns Woody Allen's development as a comedian. Pertinent biographical information is given, along with information about each stage of his comic development. Allen began his career while still a teenager when he began submitting jokes to such newspaper columnists as Earl Wilson and Walter Winchell. His days as a stand-up comedian are explored along with the entertainers who influenced this stage of his career. Next, there is a discussion of Woody Allen the writer, actor, and director of films. The different comedians whom Allen admired and who shaped his development as a film star are discussed. Allen's attempts to grow as an actor and as a director of films are also discussed in chapter one. His experiments with serious film have met with resistance, and some of this negative criticism is explored. Since the bulk of Allen's work is in film, the rather lengthy discussion of his role as writer, actor, and director is necessary to give an overall picture of his development as an artist. Chapter I ends with a discussion of Allen's prose works and the writers who influenced this stage of his career.

Chapter II deals with the Woody Allen persona and the themes he explores in his works. Because Allen frequently refers to his Jewish upbringing, many critics have made the

mistake of confusing Woody Allen the man with his creation, the Woody Allen persona. Much of what Allen explores in his films and writes about in his prose undeniably deals with his heritage and his views of life, but he should not be confused with his persona based on these parallels anymore than F. Scott Fitzgerald should be confused with Nick Carraway. Walter Kerr writes, "The fierce seriousness of a gifted clown, so long a subject of romantic rumor, is not really in himself. It is in his material" (15). Allen critics would do well to remember this. This chapter also deals with a few of Allen's more serious themes. Allen has a predominantly negative view of life; he once said that as a child he "was visited by the bluebird of anxiety" (Gittelsohn 107). Some of the serious themes Allen explores through his comedy are death, religion, love, sex, and the meaning of life. This chapter provides a background on Allen's thematic concerns in his three collections of prose. The remaining three chapters of the dissertation deal with selected works from each of the collections.

Chapter III deals with specific selections from Allen's first prose collection, Getting Even (1971). Six works were chosen which best exemplify Allen's use of comedy for a serious purpose: "The Metterling Lists," "My Philosophy," Death Knocks, "Hassidic Tales, With a Guide to Their Interpretation by the Noted Scholar," "Conversations With Helmholtz," and "Mr. Big." In these selections Allen

satirizes, among other topics, pseudo-intellectual inquiry, psychoanalysis, existential philosophy, the Bible, and religion. Some of the serious topics explored in these works include man's questions about death, whether or not there is an afterlife, and whether or not God exists. Much of the humor in these works is broad, almost slapstick humor. However, no matter how farcical or burlesque these works are, there is always an underlying seriousness in Allen's satires.

Chapter IV deals with five selections from Allen's second collection of prose, Without Feathers (1975): "Selections from the Allen Notebook," "The Scrolls," "The Whore of Mensa," Death, and God. Allen again employs satire as he explores such serious topics as death, suicide, the Bible, human sexuality, and the meaning of life. Allen's comic treatment is much the same here as in his first collection, but there is a noticeable change in tone in a couple of the selections. The one-act play Death deals with the same topic covered in Death Knocks, the one-act play from Getting Even. However, the tone of Death Knocks is fairly light and humorous, whereas the tone of Death is somber. The one-act play God is the most philosophical of Allen's prose works. The message of this humorous play is that God is dead and life is meaningless.

Woody Allen's last collection of prose, Side Effects (1980), contains seventeen short stories, essays, and one-



act plays, and is the focus of Chapter V. Allen still employs satire to entertain the reader and to comment upon man and his place in the world. However, there is a definite shift in focus in these works. The old Allen themes of man's search for answers to God's existence and the meaning of life are almost absent. In place of these themes, Allen focuses more upon man's place in a superficial, materialistic, disturbed society. Some of the old humor is still present, but it is a different type of humor. Allen biographer Diane Jacobs claims that "the Side Effects stories exploit a black, rueful humor rather than the exuberant broad, parodic comedy of Getting Even and Without Feathers" (137). Jacobs is right. The broad farce of Getting Even and the more "serious" comedy of Without Feathers is, for the most part, missing from Side Effects. There are still examples of the old Allen humor in such stories as "Remembering Needleman" and "The Kugelmass Episode." Allen's satire, however, becomes almost Juvenalian in such works as "My Speech to the Graduates" and "Nefarious Times We Live In." In the last selection discussed in this chapter, "Fabrizio's: Criticism and Response," man appears ridiculous with his puffed-up ego and his pseudo-intellectual jargon.

Comedy is a serious business. Kerr discusses the fine line between comedy and tragedy. Tragedy comes first, he says; then comedy "is the groan made gay" (19). Allen is

concerned with serious issues, but his approach to these issues is through comedy. Allen helps his readers, as well as himself, to turn their groans into laughter.

## Chapter I

### A Visit from the Bluebird of Anxiety:

#### Woody Allen's Development as a Comedian

No doubt it is a sign of our complicated times that one of the true comic geniuses of the twentieth century is a man who thinks the perfect metaphor for life is a concentration camp. Woody Allen has spent almost his entire life making people laugh by lamenting over such topics as death, immortality, the existence or non-existence of God, and the meaning of life. Allen also jokes about more mundane topics, such as man's attempts to find love and happiness and the dehumanizing effects of technology in our world. Ironically, it is humor Allen chooses as his vehicle to explore these serious issues.

Woody Allen has enjoyed success in a number of artistic areas. He began making money at the age of sixteen when he started submitting jokes to newspapers columnists for publication in their columns. From there he became a comedy writer for some of the most famous television comedians of the sixties until his managers convinced him to try stand-up comedy. Allen immediately became a popular attraction in nightclubs and on college campuses across the nation. He is the author of three collections of short stories and one-act plays, most of which were first published in The New Yorker. He has recorded several comedy albums and has hosted the Johnny Carson show. Allen has also written three full-

length plays which have been performed on the stage. However, Woody Allen is most famous for his role as writer, director, and sometimes star of his many films.

Allen Stewart Konigsberg, better known today as Woody Allen, was born on December 1, 1935, to Martin and Nettie Konigsberg in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn, New York. Allen's only sibling is his younger sister Letty, who is one of his biggest fans (Pogel 26-27). Letty always adored her brother, who is eight years older than she, and often she served as his audience for the magic tricks he loved to practice. Allen says of his sister, "Letty and I are just one of those things that are luck. I liked her as soon as I met her" (Lax 31). Allen occasionally drew upon his family life as a source for his humor. In one of his earlier comedy routines, he said his parents' values in life were God and carpeting (Lax 31). Because of some of the references to his family, critics have speculated that there has been some friction with his parents (Pogel 27). Allen was asked in a 1987 interview if the autobiographical references in his acts ever bothered his family. Allen answered, "No, because the stuff that people insist is autobiographical is almost invariably not, and it's so exaggerated that it's virtually meaningless to the people upon whom these little nuances were based" (Geist 87).

Although Allen maintains that he and his family never had any major problems, he does complain about not having

enough exposure to serious culture as he grew up. He says that he was eighteen before he saw his first play, seldom visited a museum, and "never read at all" (James 22). He obviously meant he never read serious literature because he goes on to tell the interviewer that he had only comic books to read as a child. He speculates, "Probably if my parents had pushed me along more cultural lines, I might have started out being a more serious writer, because that's what interested me" (James 22). Perhaps Allen's early exposure to comic books did help develop his penchant for comedy. Or perhaps, as he goes on to say about his talent, he was just born a comic: "My guess about that kind of thing is that it's almost all genetic. It was just something I could always do--like some kids had an ear for music, I could be funny" (James 22).

Whatever the source of his talent, Allen exhibited his gift for writing early on. His teachers were reading his compositions aloud to the class in first grade, and by the fifth grade his teachers would call other teachers into the room to show his essays. Allen says, "[T]hey'd read them together and point at me" (Lax 29). Little wonder his provincial teachers were pointing at him. Allen says he had an innate sense of what was funny and was making references to Freud and sex without understanding either, but "sensing how to use them correctly" (Lax 29). Allen told one interviewer that his teachers thought what he wrote was

dirty. When asked if his essays were dirty, Allen replied, "No, they were dirty by the backward, ignorant standards of my teachers" (Geist 87). This is one of the kindest comments Allen has ever made about his teachers.

Perhaps because of such incidents, Woody Allen hated school and even today is extremely critical of educational institutions and educators. He says his teachers were "stupid," "anti-Semitic," "mean," and "unpleasant" (Geist 87). He maintains, "I never had a teacher who made the least impression on me" (Lax 38). He jokes about Midwood High School, where he barely made grades high enough to graduate: "It was a school for emotionally disturbed teachers" ("Woody Allen: Rabbit Running" 59). He briefly attended New York University and City College of New York, only to please his parents. When asked if his flunking out of both schools was traumatic (he was a motion picture major), Allen replied, "For my parents, not for me. I loathed every day and regret every day I spent in school. . . . It was a blessing to be thrown out of college" (Kelley 88). Allen is certainly not against learning, but he is bitter against an educational system which fails to stimulate a student's interest in learning. He says he knows many educated and "supereducated" people, but many of them have a problem: "Their common problem is that they have no understanding and no wisdom; without that, their education can only take them so far" (Rich, "Interview" 69).

Allen frequently satirizes education and pseudo-intellectualism in his works.

Because of his distaste for school, Allen would frequently play hooky and spend the day in Manhattan browsing through shops. He became interested in magic and spent hours each day studying magic tricks rather than studying his school subjects. Biographer Eric Lax points out that this was the perfect hobby "for the shy boy that believed the ad that said 'Learn magic; be popular at parties'" (30). Magic became Allen's salvation. He hated school; he was always the student who did not have his homework or did not know the answer. He felt magic was the answer to his problems: "It kept me isolated from the world. It was much better than school, which was boring, frightening" (Lax 30). This love of magic is reflected in several works by Allen. His short story "The Kugelmass Episode" deals with a bored husband who is transported to Emma Bovary's boudoir by entering a magic chest. Allen's love of magic, along with his devotion to attending movies and listening to comedy shows on the radio, contributed to his growth as a comedian.

At the tender age of sixteen, Allen was trying to decide what career he would pursue. Some of the careers he considered besides being a magician included "a bookmaker, a confidence swindler, a cowboy, a gangster, or perhaps an F.B.I. agent . . ." (Lax 28-29). Allen decided to try

putting his gift for humor to use and started submitting jokes to newspapers. By the time he was seventeen, his jokes were appearing in Earl Wilson's and Walter Winchell's newspaper columns. Allen started earning money and a year later was writing as many as fifty jokes a day for people like Bob Hope, Guy Lombardo, Arthur Murray, and Danny Kaye (Jacobs 8). In 1953 the eighteen-year-old Allen was accepted into NBC's Writer's Program as its youngest member and was sent to Hollywood, where he married his childhood sweetheart, Harlene Rosen. In Hollywood, he developed a working relationship with Neil Simon's brother, Danny Simon. When Allen returned to New York in 1954, he was a successful comedy writer. He and Harlene decided to get a divorce, and in the early 1960's Allen decided to stop writing for other comedians and perform his own material (Jacobs 8-9).

Becoming a stand-up comedian was no easy task for Woody Allen. He is and has always been a shy person. However, his managers, Jack Rollins and Charles Joffe, convinced him that he would do well as a stand-up comedian. Rollins and Joffe saw in Allen "the potential to be a triple threat, like Orson Wells--writer, director, actor" (Berger 76). Allen was so shy and nervous on stage that most of Rollins and Joffe's associates thought their project was doomed (Berger 76). However, Allen persevered and became popular with nightclub and college audiences, although he never got over his stage fright. Diane Jacobs describes his



appearance on stage: "His too-large sports jacket looks ready to swallow him up and his darting sorrowful eyes obviously hope it will--quickly. Mentally, he's chewed his fingernails to the bone, and still the feet can't stop shuffling" (1). Some of this nervousness is part of the Allen persona, but a great deal of it is the real Woody Allen.

Many performers influenced the young Woody Allen and helped him develop his onstage persona. Allen says that he always enjoyed the broad humor of Milton Berle. He told biographer Eric Lax, "I find Berle hysterically funny. He's one of the few people I've gone to see in years" (4). This is indeed high praise, for Allen goes out very seldom. Bob Hope is another performer Woody Allen admires. Allen says that he had more pleasure in watching Bob Hope's films than in any of the films he ever made. Allen goes on to say, "I think he's just a great, huge talent" (Rich, "Interview" 69). Of course, there are many differences in the styles of Bob Hope and Woody Allen. Allen says that what he likes about Hope is "that flippant, Californian, obsessed-with-golf striding through life. His not caring about the serious side at all. That's very seductive to me" (Rich, "Interview" 69). This, of course, is nothing like the neurotic Allen who is constantly obsessed with death and religion.

Although there are obvious differences between Bob Hope and Woody Allen, there are perhaps more similarities between the two comedians. Like Allen, Hope often portrays "an inveterate womanizer, a coward, a braggart, a fall guy forever getting swindled by sharpshooters and landing in scrapes, in often exotic locales, yet forever calling upon a native shrewdness to free him" (Hirsch 107). Perhaps the greatest similarity is each character's ability to survive by his intellect and wit. Hirsch points out a characteristic of Hope which is just as much a characteristic of Allen: "Though he is often duped, victimized, taken advantage of, played for a sucker, Hope gets even by the sting of his wit. He is a supreme put-down artist--a wicked man with an insult" (107). This characteristic is true not only of Allen's movie persona, but also of characters in such stories and plays as Death Knocks, God, and "Nefarious Times We Live In."

Perhaps the greatest influence on Woody Allen's early development was Mort Sahl. Sahl was a nightclub performer in the 1950's who focused on political humor. His intense political satire opened new areas of material for stand-up comics and created new audiences for them. Allen said, "He made it different for all of us who came after him. He changed comedy for all of us" (Hirsch 104). The "hipper" audience, the more urban, sophisticated, and politically aware audience, was the one Allen addressed in the clubs in

Greenwich Village. Hirsch says that Allen used Sahl as a model to perfect his timing and delivery. He emulated Sahl's irony and scorching sarcasm. Of course, there were also differences. Sahl was nervous and neurotic, which was clearly evident from his chain smoking and his "rat-tat-tat speed" of delivery on stage, but Sahl ignored these characteristics. Instead of focusing on what was wrong with himself, Sahl focused on what was wrong with the world. Allen, on the other hand, made his nervousness and his neuroticism the focus of his art (Hirsch 105-106). One article describes his stage performance: "Woody Allen is 5 ft. 6 in., but on stage or off, when he gets through talking about himself he seems two inches high" ("His Own Boswell" 78). While Sahl is basically impersonal, Allen "takes himself as his subject and is among the most personal and self-referential of comic performers" (Hirsch 106).

Woody Allen acknowledges his debt to Bob Hope and Mort Sahl. He once said that the turning point in his decision to become a stand-up comedian came about when he saw Sahl perform at the Blue Angel nightclub in New York. Sahl's dazzling performance showed Allen that comedy could be a high art in which serious work could be accomplished (Rich, "Woody Allen" 76). Allen points out the similarity of his work to that of Bob Hope and Mort Sahl:

No one ever sees this, but there is this  
similarity. I see in him [Hope], Mort Sahl, and

finally, in a derivative manner, myself. I see this tremendous similarity between Bob Hope and Mort Sahl. Think of it this way: They are two stand-up monologists who talk as themselves; they have these slick individual personalities; they're bright and sharp; they both have political jokes, although Sahl's are much deeper; they have this great monologue style, great phrasing. When people ask me who I was influenced by, it was these two more than anyone else. I was really doing them to a great degree once. Bob Hope I still do. I used to much more. (Lax 116-117)

Allen drew upon these two entertainers during this phase of his career, but he synthesized elements of their personas to develop one which was uniquely his own.

Another phase of Woody Allen's career, and the one best known to audiences, is that of Woody Allen the writer, director, and star of motion pictures. In 1964 Allen was performing his stand-up routine in New York's Blue Angel when producer Charles Feldman saw his act and was so impressed with his talent that he asked Allen to rewrite the script of What's New, Pussycat? For his involvement with this project, Allen received sixty thousand dollars and his first acting role. What's New, Pussycat? (1965) became the largest grossing comedy ever made up to that point (Lax 64),

and its tremendous financial success enabled Allen to become the successful independent filmmaker he is now (Pogel 31).

Woody Allen's phenomenal achievement in filmmaking is due in large part to his diversity and talent in so many areas of the genre. He writes his own screen plays, he directs his films, and he stars in most of them. Just as there were performers who influenced his stand-up comedy routines, there were men who influenced his comic persona in films. Bob Hope, of course, influenced Allen's movie persona as well as the stand-up routines. Another performer who is credited with influencing Allen is Buster Keaton. Allen has been called a Jewish Buster Keaton. Keaton is often faced with an environment which "keeps tricking him, changing the rules when he isn't looking, and tries to crush him . . ." (Hirsch 112). Keaton always manages to overcome these obstacles, however. Hirsch points out the similarity of Keaton's world with Allen's: "Woody's world is often equally unfriendly. He too is thrown into environments that refuse to cooperate with him and that answer his sweet reasonableness with potentially annihilating illogic" (113). Allen and Keaton both face a sometimes hostile environment but always manage to survive their encounters.

The Marx Brothers were also a big influence on Allen's comedy. Their influence can be found in Allen's early films which employ a great deal of slapstick, as well as in some of Allen's prose works. Perhaps the greatest influence is

from Groucho and concerns Allen's development of language. Maurice Yacowar points out that Groucho's voice and speech rhythms can be detected in such titles as Allen's essay "Yes, But Can the Steam Engine Do This?" (96). Like the comedies of the Marx Brothers, Allen's works are full of "puns, non sequiters, mock epigrams, verbal riffs where language sails off into surrealistic flights of fancy" (Hirsch 115). Language becomes a tool and a weapon for Allen just as it did for Groucho:

Like Groucho, Woody is an ace verbal strategist who overturns language, pummeling and kicking and stretching it in order to impede communication. Juggling language is for Woody, as for Groucho, a form of self-defense, a powerful weapon that is a way of calling attention to everyone else's stupidity. A wielder of words, Woody, like Groucho, uses language to keep the world at bay. (Hirsch 115)

The Marx Brothers even appear in one of Woody Allen's one-act plays as they chase Blanche DuBois across the stage in a segment which suggests that the world has gone mad.

Charlie Chaplin's name keeps appearing in all the articles and books which the influences of comedians on Woody Allen. As much as he likes the Marx Brothers, he gets "more emotionally involved with Chaplin" (Gittelson 107). He says as soon as he sees Chaplin walking down the street

he starts to laugh. Allen believes Chaplin portrayed the pathos of human existence more profoundly than did other artists of his day:

He presented the human condition, so that the laughter resonates on another, deeper level than it does when you watch the Marx Brothers, who always appeal to your intellectual, cerebral appreciation. You laugh, but you don't feel the pain. In Chaplin, pain has a lot to do with it: to win the girl, to feed the kid. His humor is more dimensional. (Gittelson 107)

One critic says that Allen is after the Chaplin Effect, "the point when laughter becomes a catch in the throat" (Kroll, "Woody's Bow" 69). Allen's persona, the alienated little man, is a great deal like Charlie Chaplin's Little Tramp. Both personas speak to the viewer about the human condition, "about loneliness, the fragility of innocence, the survival of the human spirit and the need for human connection in an increasingly unpredictable world" (Pogel 6).

As a director, Allen also has heroes whom he idolizes and emulates. One such man is Federico Fellini. Fellini's influence is perhaps most felt in Allen's film Stardust Memories, which is loosely based upon Fellini's 8 1/2. There are many similarities between the two films. Both deal with film directors and their attempts to impose artistic order over the disorder in their lives. But while

Fellini's film ends on a somewhat hopeful note, Allen's is darkly pessimistic. Critic Pauline Kael, who has written some rather harsh reviews of Allen's films, is particularly hard on Stardust Memories. She writes, "Woody Allen the moralist has restated his imponderable questions about man's destiny so often that in "Stardust Memories" even he sounds tired of them; . . . If Woody Allen finds success very upsetting and wishes the public could go away, this picture should help him stop worrying" ("Frog" 190). Other critics have been kinder. Nancy Pogel calls the final moments of Stardust Memories "a poignant comment on the artist's relationship to his work and his world" (149). She continues, "[I]n this film there is no conclusive triumph of the artistic imagination over disorder; there is only the artist who continues, perhaps always futilely, trying to make some sense of things" (149).

The filmmaker Allen most admires is Ingmar Bergman. Eric Lax writes that Bergman made Allen feel that "there was magic other than what he studied in books" (33). Allen tells Lax, "I watch his films and I wonder what I am doing" (167). Allen expresses his admiration for Bergman in a 1987 interview: "You take some of those Bergman films that are enormously complex, enormously complex. . . . They're the best films in the world I think" (Geist 87). Perhaps the reason Allen ranks Bergman as the best filmmaker is because



"Bergman's gloom is, spiritually, Allen's gloom" (Gittelsohn 107).

Allen has paid tribute to Bergman by emulating and sometimes parodying his films. As early as his years of writing for other comedians, Allen made use of Bergman material. In 1960 Allen collaborated with writer Larry Gelbart on a sketch for the Art Carney television show. The sketch was a parody of Bergman's film Wild Strawberries. The Allen touch was evident in the titles which introduced the sketch ("An Ingmar Birdman Film--Strange Strawberries--Written, directed, produced, and understood only by Ingmar Birdman"). Allen's particular brand of offbeat humor is also seen in the dialogue. Carney speaks "Swedish": "Skatt lara gara om storm talt prov," with subtitles that read, "I work hard at my profession. I cut holes in cheese. I get 2 cents a hole" (Lax 188-191). This parody was the last Allen wrote for television, for he began his stand-up routine shortly thereafter (Lax 197).

Bergman's influence is also present in several of Allen's films and prose works. He made reference to Bergman's film Face to Face in Annie Hall. Alvy refuses to go into the theater when Annie arrives late and the movie has already started (Yacowar 182). Allen seems particularly fond of Bergman's 1956 film The Seventh Seal. His one-act play Death Knocks is a parody of The Seventh Seal, as is his film Love and Death. In both works, the protagonist is

faced with his own death and attempts to make a deal with Death for more time. Nancy Pogel points out specific examples of Bergman's influence. Love and Death opens with "portentous clouds" floating across the screen just as Bergman's film does (72). Boris, the protagonist of Love and Death, comes face to face with the white-sheeted Death on three different occasions, paralleling the three meetings between Death and the protagonist in The Seventh Seal. In both movies, two dances with Death precede the final dance, and in both films, Death never gives satisfactory answers to the protagonists' questions (Pogel 76-77). Bergman's influence is also evident in Allen's 1978 attempt at a completely serious film, Interiors. In Allen's Interiors, three sisters attempt to come to some sort of understanding about their lives individually and collectively. Bergman's Face to Face also deals with three sisters in turmoil. In both films, a death in the family causes introspection in the remaining family members. Both films are intensely serious and explore "the schism between spirit and body as an essential modern malady . . ." (Pogel 101).

Bergman had a tremendous influence on Allen, not only in early comic parodies he wrote for television, but also in his prose and film work. Allen's admiration for Bergman gave him the courage he needed to experiment in his films, although to do so was risky for him. Allen's Interiors met with mixed reviews, but even those who did not appreciate

the outcome understood Allen's attempt to try something new in his filmmaking.

Although Allen is most famous for his comedies, he does not like the idea that his audiences will not accept anything but comedy from him. In a 1987 interview, Allen expressed his concern about the limits he felt were placed on him: "It's a very safe thing to get into that relationship with an audience where they depend on you for something and you fulfill it all the time. If you get into a situation where you're turning out hits, you're on a bad treadmill, I feel" (Shales 94). Allen knows that for an artist to grow, he must try new things. This is not a recent concern of his. As early as 1979 Allen was conscious of the need to experiment. In an interview that same year, he refers to Chaplin's willingness to try new things: "He was preoccupied with developing. He was willing to take many chances and he often failed. Some of his movies were quite terrible. But he was always trying to grow. And whatever he did, you felt in contact with an interesting artist" (Gittelsohn 105). Although he realizes that such attempts are bound to bring about failures, Allen wants to experiment as Chaplin did. He talks about wanting to make films that will one day be classics, but he keeps his expectations realistic. He discusses what will happen if his film is not an artistic success: "[The moviegoers] will pay their six dollars and it'll stink and they'll go home.

It's not the end of the world" (Shales 94). Allen is willing to risk an artistic failure in his pursuit of artistic growth.

When asked what kind of serious films he would like to make, Allen responded, "Serious, serious, dead serious. Not middle serious, . . . not bittersweet, but very heavy stuff, really heavy" (Rich, "Woody Allen" 75). And his attempts at serious drama have indeed been "heavy stuff." In Stardust Memories, the main character Sandy Bates, who is a writer, director and star of films, says, "I don't want to make funny films anymore. They can't make me" (Dir. Allen, United Artists 1980). Later in the film in one of the fantasy scenes, Sandy is killed by a deranged fan. One critic says this is Allen's way of saying he does not intend to make more comedies because they are no longer any fun and they are not serious art anyway (Hirsch 195). Obviously, Allen meant no such thing because he has made several comedies since this 1980 movie. Allen was simply attempting to try a new genre, not telling the world he was giving up writing comedy.

For the most part, Allen's serious films have not been well received by the critics. His first completely serious work, Interiors (1978), met with some harsh criticism. Joan Didion writes that the characters in Interiors, as well as in some of Allen's other movies, are morose, bad mannered, and exhibit a snobbish superiority (qtd. in Schapiro 47).

In a discussion which includes Interiors as well as some of Allen's other films, critic Barbara Schapiro comments upon Allen's penchant for delving into the psychological problems of his characters. Like other critics, she assumes that Allen's persona is Allen. She makes the following observation:

Unlike psychotic art, successful works of art ultimately transcend their pathology in their ability to relate to an audience and to give the unconscious content communicable form.

Lately Allen's films seem to be retreating from the audience and regressing further into their own private pathology. We can only hope that Allen will recover at least some of the faith in himself and in his audience that once gave him the strength to laugh. (61)

Schapiro makes some valid observations, but she fails to realize that Allen is working in a new, more serious genre and that this work will not provoke laughter, and indeed, should not be expected to do so. Allen once said of his hopes to write serious drama, "The drama I like is what you see in the plays of O'Neill and Strindberg and Ibsen . . . ." (Rich, "Woody Allen" 75). Interiors is indeed "heavy stuff," but so is O'Neill's Long Day's Journey into Night, and no one criticized O'Neill for not making him laugh. Unfortunately, Allen has been stereotyped as a comic, and

the public resists seeing him in any other light. The same problem has arisen with Allen's film Stardust Memories. Andrew Sarvis commented on Allen's "masochistic desire to alienate his own fans" (qtd. in Schapiro 58). In her review of Stardust Memories, critic Pauline Kael says, in effect, that Woody Allen is self-indulgent, insults his fans, is anti-Semitic, and expresses his Jewish self-hatred ("Frog" 184-189). Again, Allen is being psychoanalyzed here, and his work is not judged on its own merits as a work of art, but as a page from his diary.

Fortunately, some critics are able to see Allen's departures from comedy for what they are, attempts to develop as a filmmaker. Penelope Gilliatt, in her review of Interiors, says Woody Allen should be saluted for the risks he takes with this film. She gives high praise to Interiors: "Apparently about local frailties, this film--which Allen wrote himself--is universally recognizable. It's as true a tragedy as any that has come out of America in my memory" ("Woody Reverberant" 78). She goes on to say, "The theme its characters express is Chekhovian. It is pinned to the idea that the simplest, hardest, and most admirable thing to do is to act properly through a whole life" ("Woody Reverberant" 78).

Woody Allen's movies have received harsh criticism and high praise, but he says he does not worry about pleasing the critics. He tries to please himself first and then his

audience (Kelley 36). Allen makes an interesting observation about an artist's response to the critics. He says if any artist is unsure of what he has done, then he wants to know what the critics think. But if an artist knows he has done a good job, then the critics' views are unimportant. He says, "If you know in your heart it's good and you didn't goof it, and they say it's no good, then they're wrong and who cares? Otherwise, you make yourself crazy" (Lax 166). He does read the critics, although he does not pay much attention to them. He is also friends with some critics and occasionally participates in film and theater workshops which these critics host. By and large, Allen has enjoyed a relatively good response from the critics over the years. He acknowledges their kindness in his early years when they could have hurt his career, but he says that their value is "strictly economic." Allen maintains that if a critic says his work is good, that does not make it good. He believes that as far as helping someone develop as an artist, critics are worthless (Lax 166-167).

Allen does not worry about the reactions of the critics, but he does worry about his artistic integrity. Allen is more concerned with creating works which are artistically rewarding rather than with creating works that are successful by society's standards (Rich, "Interview" 69). Allen says he would not make films unless he had

complete control throughout the entire process. He says, "I'm only making films because I'm as free as if I were writing novels. You can't create unless you're completely free" (James 18). Allen is so concerned with artistic control that he hardly ever sells a film to television because he hates the commercials and fears any loss of control over his films. Allen has told his manager Charles Joffe that all he cares about is making one dollar profit (Schickel 65). Of course, his films do make money. Even Interiors, which Allen warned United Artists would probably be a box-office disaster, made a small profit (Gittelson 102). But money means very little to Allen as an artist or as an individual.

Ironically, Allen fears too much success. Allen is afraid that if he succeeds with everything, then he is not taking enough chances. Allen sees failure as a sign that "you're not playing it safe, that you're still experimenting, still taking creative risks. It's frightful to get into the habit of trying to make hits. Compromises and concessions begin to turn up in the work" (Gittelson 105). Allen tells about Bergman once asking him if he had ever had a picture that was a total disaster. He was chagrined that he had to answer no to Bergman's question. Allen said, "If you're succeeding too much, you're doing something wrong" (Gittelson 105). He says in another interview that there is a correlation between the kinds of



movies that are extremely popular and the kind of movie he would not want to make. Allen says the works of the people he admires, like Bergman, are rarely popular, "whereas the E.T.'s and Rambo's and things like that are hugely popular. So I see a definitive correlation between lack of popularity and high quality" (Shales 90).

Perhaps it is his wariness of popularity which contributes to Allen's apparent disdain for awards of any kind. He relies on his own judgment and does not put any confidence in awards or prizes. The Writer's Guild has nominated his works for awards, and Allen always quietly asks them to remove his name from the list (Lax 178-179). Allen plays clarinet in a jazz band every Monday night at Michael's Pub in Manhattan. This is where he was when Annie Hall and Hannah and Her Sisters were nominated for Oscars. Allen objects to the Academy Awards for two reasons. First, he says they are "political and bought and negotiated for," and second, there is no provision for special Oscars for comedy. Allen feels it is not fair for artists like Groucho Marx, Charlie Chaplin, and Buster Keaton to have to compete with serious works like Death of a Salesman. He says these performers are great artists, but they get "stepson Oscars that are voted out of largess" (Lax 179). Therefore, Allen chooses to ignore the Oscars altogether.

Perhaps Allen feels the way he does about the Academy Awards not only because he thinks they represent the wrong

kind of popularity, but also because he feels that his films do not deserve awards of any kind. Allen says he is surprised at the number of people who go to see his films, inasmuch as he considers all his films personal failures (Hirsch 12). When asked which movie was the most fun making, Allen answered, "None of them have been any fun at all. They've all been terrific anxiety and hard work. And for my own goals, I would consider all the movies that I've done failures" (Kelley 36). In another interview, Allen says, "I always think the next thing I do will be fun. Then when I do it I don't like it at all" (Gilliatt, "Guilty" 42). Perhaps Allen's harsh self-criticism makes him feel unworthy of recognition, even if that recognition does not mean anything to him. Or perhaps Allen is dissatisfied with his own work because he does not find the answers to the questions he asks. However, Allen asks questions which most often have no answers. How can one come up with a definitive answer concerning the existence of God, the meaning of life, why relationships go bad, or any of that serious "heavy stuff" he is so fond of exploring?

The public is most aware of Woody Allen as a filmmaker and star of his own brand of humor. A much smaller audience knows and enjoys Woody Allen the prose author. Allen has published three collections of short stories, essays, and one-act plays: Getting Even (1971), Without Feathers (1975), and Side Effects (1980). Allen has also written three full-

length plays, all of which have been performed on stage: Don't Drink the Water (1967), Play It Again, Sam (1969), and The Floating Lightbulb (1982). Two of these plays, Don't Drink the Water and Play It Again, Sam, have been made into motion pictures.

Allen says that he prefers, actually enjoys, writing plays and essays to filmmaking. While making films, Allen is obligated to maintain a schedule and to protect the money United Artists gives him for his films. But with writing Allen is on his own. He likes the leisure and low-stress situation of writing. He likes staying home and closing his bedroom door on the world. If he wants, he can stop to practice his clarinet or hit some tennis balls. He calls writing "a bum's life." Artistically and financially, there is also less pressure: "If you don't like what you're doing, the work never has to meet the test of reality. When I'm making a film, I can't tear it up and throw it away if I don't like it. I've already spent United Artists' \$3 million" (Gittelsohn 106). Allen points out that he plans out a play, whereas writing a screenplay is more or less simply writing an outline since he does so much revising and rewriting on the set. He works with others on a screenplay, but he says he would never write a play with someone: "The fun of a play is writing it. You've got to wallow in it. Writing a play with someone would be like calling in another director on a film" (Lax 220). Allen goes on to say, "I

like writing. I like playwriting. I like writing for The New Yorker" (Lax 220). Allen wishes someone would tell him he could not make films anymore. He admits that when someone comes to him and wants to completely finance whatever venture he chooses to do he just does not have the discipline to say no. But if someone told him his filmmaking days were over, Allen says his anxiety about and ambivalence towards movie making would come to an end. "I'd suddenly heave a huge sigh of relief," he says (Shales 95). Then he would have time to do what he really enjoys doing, writing plays, short stories, and essays.

Most of the works which appears in Allen's three collections first appeared in The New Yorker. Perhaps one reason Allen prefers writing to filmmaking is because he is writing to a more elite audience. Thus, he feels that his work will be better understood and better appreciated. Foster Hirsch points out that Allen's New Yorker audience is "a smaller, more select and culturally homogeneous audience than the one that goes to his films, and as a result his wit is more dense and literary on the page than it is on the screen" (212). Allen gives free play to his unusual sense of humor in these essays which were influenced by New Yorker writers Robert Benchley and Sidney Joseph (S.J.) Perelman. Allen says, "The more I was introduced to Perelman and Robert Benchley, I got crazy about them. I think those two are the great comedy writers. . . . Benchley and Perelman

are masters of all kinds of absurdities and non sequiters" (Lax 221-222).

Benchley's New Yorker pieces satirize a number of topics which man in a complicated society is faced with. His narrators satirize topics from modern gadgetry to psychoanalysis to pseudointellectualism. For example, Benchley complains that certain works of literature are overrated: many times these works are judged on their reputation rather than on their merit. Benchley says, "If one adopts the Missourian attitude in reading the masters, and, laying aside their reputation, puts the burden of proof on them, many times they are not so impressive" (Yates 249). Benchley parodies the way pedants dissect Shakespeare with excessive use of footnotes in "Shakespeare Explained." In a similar manner, Allen pokes fun at pedants in his short story "The Metterling Lists," where scholars draw far-fetched conclusions about the fictional literary genius Metterling by studying his laundry lists.

Benchley's influence can be detected in other areas of Allen's work. Benchley is not a nature lover. He talks about being thwarted by "Old Step-Mother Nature" (Yates 245). Woody Allen jokes that he is two with nature (Yacowar 20). Benchley is not fond of modern gadgetry. He says, "Frankly I am not much of a hand at machinery of any sort. . . . [T]he pencil sharpener in our office is about as far as I, personally, have ever got in the line of operating a

complicated piece of mechanism with any degree of success" (Yates 245). The Allen persona complains about a clock that runs counterclockwise, a tape recorder that keeps saying, "I know, I know," and a sunlamp that rains on him (Yacowar 20).

Benchley's works often point out the problems of an increasingly mechanized, impersonal society. His narrator is "the normal man with the ordinary degree of neurosis slightly exaggerated" (Yates 246). Allen's narrators build upon Benchley's models, but go even further. If his narrators seem more neurotic than Benchley's, perhaps it is because the society which he satirizes is even more mechanized and impersonal. But like Benchley's narrator, who "speaks wisdom despite symptoms of not being 'right' in the head" (Yates 258), Allen's neurotic narrators often see more clearly than the "normal" ones around them.

In acknowledging influences on his writing, S. J. Perelman said, "[A]bout Benchley I am practically idolatrous" (qtd. in Yates 334). Allen says almost the same thing about Perelman when he tells an interviewer he "adores" Perelman's work. He says he likes Benchley, too, but Allen clearly thinks Perelman's work is superior: "Perelman was just a knockdown, drag-out hilarious writer, and still is to this day, relentlessly hilarious" (Kelley 40).

Several parallels can be detected between the Perelman persona and the Allen persona. The narrators of Perelman's

essays are very often on the verge of a nervous breakdown (Yates 333). This is most often true of the Allen persona as well. Metterling of "The Metterling Lists" actually suffers a nervous breakdown. Phidipides, a character in Allen's one-act play God, is a bundle of nerves. Kugelmass of "The Kugelmass Episode" almost goes into hysterics when his magician friend can't get Emma Boverly out of New York and back into Flaubert's novel. Perelman's persona does not like to travel and refuses to see anything exciting or different in a foreign country. Allen's characters are often homebodies who prefer the safety of home to the dangers of travel.

Perhaps more than subject matter, Perelman has had the greatest influence upon Allen in matters of style. Eric Lax points out that Perelman's style is the most distinctive and most often imitated style of any humorous writer. Lax writes that Perelman's prose is so dense that "there are jokes on the way to jokes on the way to sentences on the way to paragraphs that are funny" (222). Lax maintains that Perelman has made an art of names, such as Frank Fulkivsky, the Jewish prowler and Downey Couch, the Irish tenor. Allen employs such names for his characters as mobster Thomas (The Butcher) Covello, Albert (The Logical Positivist) Corillo, and a Bogart-style detective named Kaiser Lupowitz. Lax maintains that these characters could have been named by Perelman (222-223). Allen says of Perelman's style,

"Perelman is so utterly unique and complex. You can't be influenced a little by him. You have to go so deeply that it shows all over the place" (Lax 222).

Perelman's style often contains a blend of incongruities. Yates calls the composite picture in some of Perelman's works "an incongruous blend of the relevant with the irrelevant and of precise detail with worn-out phrases . . ." (342). Many of Allen's essays emulate this style. In "Mr. Big" detective Kaiser Lupowitz is employed to locate a missing person, God. The story is a blend of serious inquiry juxtaposed with vaudevillian slapstick. In his prose Allen constantly juxtaposes the relevant and the irrelevant, the serious and the silly. One author writes that some of Perelman's stories "may seem like free-for-alls, charged by improvisatory fits" (Hirsch 129). This atmosphere is often present in Allen's works. In his one-act play Death, the characters run around like a scene out of a Marx Brothers movie, trying to capture Death. Death, meanwhile, goes about his merry way, dispatching the characters one by one. The final scene of God is completely chaotic. Characters step out of their roles, people in the audience join the cast, and Groucho Marx chases Blanche DuBois across a Greek stage.

Hirsch goes on to say that although lunacy seems to be the outstanding characteristic of Perelman's prose, he always has a firm command over what he is trying to present



to the reader (129). The same is true of Allen. His prose illustrates one man's attempts to come to grips with the complexities of his world. Allen's characters want to understand the problems they are faced with in everyday life, why people must die, and if there is a God, why He is not more compassionate toward His children. Allen's characters are often psychotic because their environment has driven them to psychosis. Yates writes of Perelman's technique, "His normal quota of foolishness is exaggerated into psychosis for the purpose of satirizing the madness of this man's environment" (349-350). Allen and Perelman share this characteristic in their writing.

Perelman's persona, as well as Allen's, appears psychotic, but if studied closely, they both reveal to the reader that they are perhaps more sane than the world about them. One author calls Perelman's persona a "Sane Psychotic" and suggests that behind the mask of this insane clown are really some very valuable and sane characteristics, such as "integrity, sincerity, skepticism, taste, a respect for competence, a striving after the golden mean, and a longing for better communication and understanding among men" (Yates 337). Readers need to be careful not to lose sight of these guiding values and not to focus only on the despair and insanity which is a part of Perelman's humor (Yates 335-336). The same is true of Allen's persona. His characters are involved in crazy

antics and strange situations which are amusing to the reader. However, a close examination of these situations reveals not only the humor, but also Allen's concern with the serious problems these situations explore.

Woody Allen's comedy is an amalgam of many influences. He grew up in an age when comedy as an entertainment field was coming into its own. As a child he watched the silent movies of Keaton and Chaplin and listened to the comedy routines of Milton Berle and other vaudeville greats. As a young student of comedy, he absorbed the farcical humor of Bob Hope and the political sarcasm of Mort Sahl. His talent brought him to the attention of movie producers, and because of his talent, Allen has been fortunate enough to have the luxury to experiment in the art form for which he is most famous, often emulating such film greats as Fellini and Bergman. His satirical prose works are not as well known as his films, but they are comic masterpieces which are sometimes silly, sometimes serious, occasionally both, and always hilariously entertaining. Woody Allen is a comic genius who has learned from the masters and who has developed a brand of humor which is uniquely his own.

## Chapter II

### "Sitting at the Children's Table":

#### Woody Allen's Brand of Comedy

Who or what exactly is the Woody Allen persona? One critic writes that Allen "has been making people laugh by playing a single character--the archetypal urban Jewish neurotic, the vulnerable schlemiel doing constant battle against a mad, surrealistic universe" (Rich, "Woody Allen" 72). The schlemiel is a character who, with the best of intentions, has a gift for always doing and saying the wrong thing, for constantly getting into trouble. In his essay "The Nature of Jewish Laughter," Irving Howe writes of the schlemiel, "He is the eternal innocent, and yet one is never sure if he is merely a good-natured fool or if there is a reservoir of hidden wisdom beneath his foolishness" (23). Allen biographer Foster Hirsch makes an interesting observation about the Jewish schlemiel stereotype. He writes the following:

The schlemiels of modern Jewish letters are wonderful performers who treat their lives as theater. . . . They are intellectuals and philosophers whose minds are ablaze with lofty ideas, theories, and convictions while their bodies itch for women, and who are as victimized by their powerful emotions as they are by their abstract thoughts. (134)

This description certainly fits Woody Allen. He even calls himself a schlemiel as he points out that he is afraid of the dark and is suspicious of the light. He says, "I have an intense desire to return to the womb--anybody's" ("Woody Allen: Rabbit Running" 58).

Michael Dempsey points out that Allen's character is a man of intelligence, but one who feels less of a man because he does not possess the "beefcake equipment" which our society often equates with masculinity (10). Allen's appearance helps him develop this element of his persona. He is not large, only five feet, six inches tall, and his horn-rimmed glasses invite jokes. Hirsch writes about Allen's face, "A face to launch a thousand quips, it positively invites wit and insult, it requires a response, a rejoinder or comment, providing a field day for bullies and punsters" (1). Allen says of his face, "I have by nature an enormously sad face. I'm not a smiler. If you didn't know I was a comic, I would be a study in sadness" (Hirsch 3). According to Hirsch, Allen's face reflects the anxieties and insecurities that modern man faces, and this sadness points up an important connection between sadness and comedy: "Woody's face 'tells' us that wit issues from sadness, that humor is a response to being morose, that making jokes about yourself comes from feeling bad about yourself" (3). There is some truth to this observation. Some of the writers the young Woody Allen wrote with when he

was just beginning to write gags for television were sad, depressed men. Allen wrote with Larry Gelbart, Danny Simon, and Mel Brooks, men "whose funniness was in direct proportion to their anxieties and depressions" (Kroll, "Woody" 65). According to Allen, there was a "high suffering quotient" among these men. When he saw Mel Brooks twenty years after they wrote together for television, he asked Brooks if his depression was better. Allen said, "We talked about the same things we talked about twenty years ago--aging, women, death" (Kroll, "Woody" 65). Allen's works, though comic, certainly do reflect the sadness of the human condition.

Perhaps this similarity between the character Allen plays and writes about and the person Woody Allen apparently is has caused the debate about whether or not Woody Allen is his persona. Several critics maintain Allen's films and essays are about Allen himself. One critic writes, "Today, Allen's humor probes the deeper vein of character--basically his own. No other American moviemaker working today uses himself as his source of material more consistently or to better use" (Gittelsohn 104). In a review of Stardust Memories, Pauline Kael writes, "Woody Allen calls himself Sandy Bates this time, but there's only the merest wisp of a pretext that he is playing a character; this is the most undisguised of his dodgy mock-autobiographical fantasies" ("Frog" 184). And an observation that can be applied to

many of the protagonists of his essays and plays comes from Gerald Mast: "The Allen persona's psychological and emotional difficulties come almost from within himself. He is the one who feels frightened, insecure, unsure of himself, suspicious of his own competence, aware of his physical inadequacies" (Comic Mind 314). Mast goes on to discuss the Allen character as unheroic. With the exception of detective Kaiser Lupowitz, Allen's prose characters are for the most part cowards in one way or another. Mast makes the following observation:

Allen is such a spectacular combination of post-Freudian complexes and insecurities that the very notion of heroism and its opposite has no place in his world at all. Although the comic world is always full of pain for the central clown, in no one's comedies is the pain so much the product of self-mortification. (Comic Mind 314)

Another reason for the blurred distinction between Allen and his persona is that Allen himself has been quoted as saying he plays himself. Allen says of himself jokingly, "I'm so alienated I could hear my parents died in a flash fire and it wouldn't affect me" (Lax 44-45). He goes on more seriously to say his depression is what draws him to philosophers like Kafka, Dostoevski, and Bergman. He says he has all the obsessions these men have: "an obsession with death, an obsession with God or the lack of God, the

questions of why we are here. Answers are all that I want. Almost all my work is autobiographical--exaggerated but true" (Lax 45). Allen points out that he plays himself in films because he could not play a Romeo or a part in The Godfather. Allen says, "I can act realistically within a certain range" (Lax 215). The key word here is "act." Of course, Allen writes about ideas that concern him, but he writes most often to entertain. Allen is not a Herman Melville who uses heavy allegory to search for answers to cosmic questions. Allen is a comedian; therefore, comedy is his vehicle for exploring these ideas. He writes because he enjoys it. He likes to deal with serious topics, but his primary purpose is to entertain his readers. In one interview, he says he is looking for answers (Lax 45), and on one level perhaps he is. But he also says, "I just want to be funny. I'm not moralizing or [being] didactic in any way. And if in addition to being funny a point can be made, an inference from it, then that's all fine" (Lax 49-50). Allen here is not speaking out of both sides of his mouth; he is being honest. He does want answers, but he wants to entertain people first and foremost while he looks for answers. If this sounds like a contradiction, so be it. As Walt Whitman says, "Do I contradict myself? Very well, I contradict myself" ("Song of Myself" lines 1324--1325). Allen is reacting to a complicated world, and in a complicated world there can be more than one reality.

Other critics have been more perceptive than to fall into the easy trap of confusing Allen with his persona. One critic talks about "sly Woody" for teasing the reader or audience into thinking he is simply playing himself. Of course, he draws on his own "experiences, anxieties, beliefs, and aspirations," and he also exploits "his own natural endowments and shortcomings" (Hirsch 7). But he does this to create what Allen likes to call someone "other":

"Woody Allen is a comic mask that hides as much as it reveals about his real-life counterpart. Allen Konigsberg is playing a shrewd burlesque version of himself, a made-up character that exaggerates and distorts reality" (Hirsch 7). In recent years Allen has been quick to point out that he is "a far cry from his persona" (Pogel 17). Allen tells one interviewer how he perhaps got stuck with the little man image:

The schlemiel never did describe me. I've never been that. It's an appellation for the unimaginative to hang on me. The things I did on nightclub stages were fantasies or exaggerations from my own life--school, women, parents--which I set out in an amusing way. But you look up after a year and the press has created you: "Well, he's a small man at odds with mechanical objects who can't cope with his relationships with women."



But all I was doing was what was funny; there's no conscious design to anything. (Kroll, "Woody" 63)

And Allen's friends are tired of the public's psychoanalysis of Allen. Marshall Brickman, one of Allen's close friends and a collaborator on several of his films, has expressed his impatience with the critics' tendencies to focus on Allen's mental state (Kroll, "Woody" 71). There is, of course, some resemblance between Woody Allen the man and the Woody Allen persona, but the latter is an artistic creation of the former.

The real Woody Allen, Woody Allen the man, is a complicated human being who has dreams and goals and anxieties just as most people have; his are just on a grander scale. Allen says that early in life he "was visited by the bluebird of anxiety" (Gittelson 107). Allen has now been in psychoanalysis for thirty-four years and once said he could not conceive of living without it. But he also says it has not helped him as much as he had hoped it would (Jerome 40). The original title of Annie Hall was Anhedonia, a psychological term which means incapable of experiencing pleasure (Shales 90). Allen jokes about the cause of his depression. He says he had a traumatic childhood; when he was a baby, he was breast-fed through falsies (Kroll, "Woody" 65). Allen has always been extremely sensitive to the transience of life. He tells about watching Walt Frazier play for the Knicks in Madison

Square Gardens. In the midst of all the shouting and adoration for Frazier, Allen said he thought about the inevitability of the future:

He [Frazier] was so beautiful and young, so dazzling, but I saw the death's head looming. I thought of the inevitable deterioration, the waning away of adulation. I felt anger and rage, not at anything correctable, but at the human condition . . . . (Kroll, "Woody" 71)

Allen is often visited by such thoughts about death.

Allen realizes that it does not do much good to sit around and worry about such things if he and mankind in general cannot do anything about them. In an interview he quotes Camus's observation about the transience of life: "[I]t's not only that . . . man dies, but that you struggle to do a work of art that will last and realize that the universe itself is not going to exist after a period of time" (Rich, "Woody Allen" 76). Allen goes on to say that man must attempt to resolve these internal conflicts, either religiously or psychologically or existentially, and man must do this by thinking about what his priorities are (Rich, "Woody Allen" 76). Allen believes that man must find his own answers by making individual moral choices, based essentially on an instinctive sense of right or wrong (Schickel 65).

Allen does try to live by his own set of values. He says he tries to look at the moral side of each issue as it arises and not to make a wrong choice. He says, "For instance, I've always had a strong feeling about drugs. I don't think it's right to buy your way out of life's painful side by using drugs" (Rich, "Interview" 69). Allen is famous in his circles for being a scrupulously honest business man in an industry fraught with unethical business behavior. In one of his movies, Allen's character is accused of trying to play God, to which he replies, "I've got to model myself after someone" (Schickel 65). Allen jokes but he is sincere in his desire to do what is right and good. His friend and co-star Tony Roberts says of Allen, "He seems to strive for some kind of excellence for himself in what he does that keeps him from anything that might smell of smugness" (Schickel 65).

Allen has a real sense of responsibility and compassion for others. He has seriously considered giving away most of his possessions and living in more modest circumstances (Rich, "Interview" 69). When he sees a blind man or a paraplegic, he feels guilty about his whining. He says, "At times it's occurred to me that the only life of any consequence would be a missionary life" (Kelley 87). Allen is right when he calls himself a romantic. He says he sees himself as sentimental, although he hates cheap sentimentality unless it is his own. He quips, "The trick

is to appear Byronic without appearing Moronic. Malraux spoke about art being the last defense against death. That, to me, is romantic" (Lax 230-231).

It is through his art that Allen seeks to come to terms with himself and the world about him. Allen's plays and essays and movies are not only Allen's attempt to find answers, but they are also a means for him to develop his comic skills and to entertain audiences. Perhaps Allen has been as successful as he has been, and has as many fans as he does, because he appeals to so many people's own experiences. Allen biographer Eric Lax writes, "There are apparently millions of people who share Woody Allen's sensibilities, fears, failures--and also share his triumphs in spite of them that enable him to survive and prosper . . . ." (Lax 231-232). One critic describes Allen's popularity like this: "The basic Allen persona has always been a well-loved figure, a projection of the modern urban Everyman's privately held fantasies and terrors" (Schickel 64).

Much has been written about why Allen appeals to so many people. Gerald Mast says that the Allen persona is very much the embodiment of the expectations and values of the age in which he lives. He is a reflection of the audience's tastes, opinions, aspirations, fears, sensibilities, and attitudes (Comic Mind 313-314). There was just something about Allen the stand-up comedian that

people responded to. When he appeared on college campuses in the 1970's, he seemed to touch a nerve as J.D. Salinger had a few years earlier. People who enjoyed his work felt as though they knew him, and they wanted to meet and talk to "Woody" (Rose 94). One of Allen's fans writes about her response to Allen: "For me and my friends, sitting in the audience at the Bitter End that night, he was--in a word--us. . . . [T]housands of us drank in his anxiety like adrenalin" (Gornick 10). Barbara Schapiro says Allen's brand of comedy, his obsession with self, was part of the trademark of the decade of the seventies, and for that reason his work particularly appeals to the baby boomers (61). Because Allen appeals to that which is within us all, he seems particularly vulnerable, and this vulnerability is another reason he is so appealing. Another critic has written that there is something about Allen that makes one want to protect him, to become a part of his support system. He writes that Allen "merits protection, like a threatened rare loon, even one that gets on your nerves sometimes with its whining" (Shales 88). Everyone is not a Woody Allen fan, but those who recognize his rare talent and have a fierce sense of loyalty to him. His whining can be tedious at times, but fans often recognize the whining as their own.

One of the reasons people identify with the Allen persona is because of Allen's brand of little-man humor. Nancy Pogel discusses the history of little-man humor.

Pogel points out that this brand of humor arose because of "the decay of a unitary national mythology, the loss of a national self-confidence, and the diminished lot of the ordinary individual in modern times" (3). In an unstable modern world where rapid change threatened established values and men felt overwhelmed, man often responded to his world with anxiety and sometimes hysteria. With the rise of modernism in the early part of the twentieth century, man continually felt belittled and threatened by big business, Social Darwinism, and increased technology (Pogel 2). The little-man humorist grew as a response to these influences. Allen's little man persona remains appealing in today's technologically advanced society where individuals feel even more overwhelmed and insignificant.

Pogel makes an interesting statement about little-man humor that places Woody Allen right in the middle of the tradition: "If the sound of native American humor is the 'barbaric yawp' of a 'ring-tailed roarer,' the sound of little-man humor is a deep sigh and a whine" (3). Woody Allen has made a career out of whining.

This picture of the little man threatened into extinction by a complicated, technological world is exemplified perfectly by one of Allen's film characters. In Zelig, the main character Leonard Zelig is a man who has been so demoralized by society that he has lost all sense of self. Zelig is a human chameleon who takes on the

appearance and characteristics of whomever he is with. One critic called Zelig "the quintessential Little Man Who Wasn't There" (Shales 90). Allen's mock documentary about a human chameleon makes a comment about society's increased depersonalization and sterility which prompted movie critic Pauline Kael to predict in 1983 that the "term 'Zelig' would probably enter the language to describe all the nonpersons we meet" ("Anybody Home?" 87). Kael's prediction has come true in a sense. In a recent article in The New Yorker which dealt with Nelson Mandela's visit to the United States, the author discusses Jesse Jackson's knack for appearing at the moment pictures are taken for the media. The author writes, "Mr. Jackson is a sort of Zelig of modern politics, popping up and blending in at momentous events" (Logan 78). While the term here is not used exactly as Kael predicted, for Jesse Jackson is certainly not a "nonperson," it is interesting that Allen has coined a term which has passed into our national consciousness.

Closely akin to the idea of Allen's little-man persona is the view of Allen's persona as an outsider. Maurice Yacowar writes, "The Outsider expresses modern man's familiar sense of alienation and anomie. Involving more than just his comedy of the loser, it relates to Allen's feelings of persecution by an antipathetic society" (212). Yacowar says that as a Jew, Allen is the eternal Outsider (212). Allen has often been asked if his Jewishness has

played any role in his view of life or in his artistic consciousness. Allen says what cultural differences there are between Jews and non-Jews are largely superficial and that the characters he writes about or plays are Jewish simply because he is Jewish (Gittelsohn 106). Allen evidently believes his Jewishness has little to do with his art, but there is too much evidence to the contrary to take him at his word.

Allen admits that he is obsessed with religion and the philosophical questions which accompany it: "I found over the years the things that interested me most were philosophical or religious issues as opposed to social issues or topical things" (Dart 586). Since Allen is Jewish, his obsession with religion must necessarily arise, at least in part, from his Jewish upbringing. Allen critic Frank Rich says that Allen's Jewish identity with the holocaust is his philosophical touchstone. Allen told Rich that his favorite metaphor is, "Life is a concentration camp" ("Woody Allen" 75). Allen applies this Jewish metaphor to man's existence and actions in his life:

The concentration camp is the real test: There are those who chose to make terrible moral decisions and betray their best friends and do horrible things, and there are others who behave with unbelievable courage. That's exactly



what happens in life--some respond terribly and some beautifully. (Rich, "Woody Allen" 75)

While anyone can appreciate Allen's metaphor, the metaphor itself arises from a Jewish consciousness.

Further evidence of the effect his Jewishness has had upon him is his abundant use of Jewish references and stereotypes in his comedy. Yacowar writes, "Allen has so many jokes about being Jewish that his audience will respond to the faintest Jewish inflection" (8). Allen jokes about his Jewish background: "I was raised in the Jewish tradition, taught never to marry a Gentile woman, shave on Saturday, and most especially, never to shave a Gentile woman on Saturday" (Allen, "Woody Allen on Love and Death" 80). Allen frequently jokes about the stereotyped views of Jews and their love of money. Once he was asked what his biggest thrill in life was, and he answered, "Jumping naked into a vat of cold Roosevelt dimes" (Lax 25). Part of his early stand-up comedy routine describes the time he was kidnapped as a child. He said his parents jumped into action when they received the ransom note: "They rented out my room" (Lax 7). In another part of his routine he pulled out a pocketwatch and told the audience how handsome it was and how he got the watch: "My grandfather, on his deathbed, sold me this watch" (Lax 7). The audience laughed at these jokes in large part because Allen was drawing upon recognized Jewish stereotypes.

While Allen occasionally depends on the stereotype of the money-loving Jew, his comedy goes even further to encompass another area, what Gerald Mast calls Jewish intellectuality. Mast points out that much of how we think about modern life has come from Jewish thinkers such as Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Albert Einstein, and Franz Kafka, and that much of this thought can be found in the films, as well as the prose works, of Woody Allen. Of course, Allen has synthesized these ideas into his own brand of humor, but it is a brand of humor that speaks to his audience. Mast writes the following:

Woody Allen is the clown who thinks about the way we think. If there is Freud in Allen's psychocomedy and Kafka in his films' imaginative spatiotemporal leaps, the Marx in Woody Allen comes less from Karl than from Groucho--the smart-ass, big-mouth commentator on social inanities. In a world in which we have all become self-conscious of our value systems and their limitations, the Jewishness of Woody Allen seems an appropriate general emblem of self-consciousness, which all moderns--Jews and Gentiles--share. (Mast, "Neurotic Jew" 138-139).

Allen has been identified over and over as an intellectual comedian (Lax 17). He does not agree with this appellation, but it is one that fits nevertheless.

Whether or not Allen is aware of it, his comedy draws upon a rich heritage of Jewish humor. Very often, protagonists in Jewish literature are "men in the middle, wriggling painfully toward emotional freedom. Shadowed by the thrust of psychic breakdown, they naturally make uneasy comic heroes, and their stories are modern comedy poised precariously on the rim of modern tragedy" (Hirsch 138). Allen's characters are forever worried about religion or death or the meaning of life.

While Allen explores many different themes in his essays, plays, and movies, overshadowing all the themes is his obsession with death. Allen typically jokes about his own mortality. He quips, "History will dissolve me" (qtd. in Yacowar 215). Biographer Eric Lax has culled a number of one-liners from Allen's New Yorker pieces which include the following:

Death is one of the few things that be done as easily lying down.

I do not believe in an afterlife, although I am bringing a change of underwear.

Death is an acquired trait.

It's not that I'm afraid of death. I just don't want to be there when it happens. (224-225)

Lax writes that Allen views death as "an irrational hostile act on the part of the universe" (227). A quotation most interviewers and critics use when they discuss Allen's fear

of death is a statement by Tolstoy which Allen is fond of repeating: "Any man over thirty-five with whom death is not the main concern is a fool" (Lax 227). As Maurice Yacowar writes, "For Allen, the unexamined death is not worth living" (180).

A great number of Allen's prose works deal with death. His one-act play Death Knocks is a humorous look at a man coming face to face with the grim reaper. Death, a later one-act play, also has some one-liners, but it is a more serious look at man's helplessness and confusion when faced with the incomprehensible. Allen seems to agree with Ernest Becker's conclusion in The Denial of Death. Becker argues, "Society itself is a codified hero system, which means that society everywhere is a living myth of the significance of human life, a defiant creation of meaning" (qtd. in Yacowar 219). Allen, like some of his characters, attempts to find solace in work, but like his characters, he realizes his attempts to achieve immortality through art are futile (Schapiro 54). Work helps, but as Allen says, "[E]ven with all the distractions of my work and my life, I spend a lot of time face to face with my mortality" (Rich, "Interview" 68). Allen says that he really does not want to achieve immortality through his work; he wants to achieve it through not dying (qtd. in Yacowar 232).

Other themes which Allen is obsessed with are religion and the existence or non-existence of God. Allen's highly

philosophical film Love and Death implies that God does not exist and that if He does, He probably cannot be trusted. Allen jokes, "Since coming to this conclusion, I have twice been struck by lightning and once forced to engage in a long conversation with a theatrical agent" (Allen, "Woody Allen on Love and Death" 80). Allen complains that God should make His presence known: "If only God would give me some clear sign! Like making a large deposit in my name in a Swiss bank" (Allen, "Selections From the Allen Notebook" 10). Allen makes joke after joke about the existence of God, but these jokes reveal a very serious concern of Allen's.

Although Allen considers himself an atheist, or at times an agnostic, he does have respect for sincere religious feeling. He does not approve of organized religions because he thinks they are more involved with social, political, and economic concerns than with true religious concerns (Pogel 24-25). He says, "But religious beliefs and religious faith--that does interest me and I have full appreciation for the search for genuine religious faith that people go through" (Dart 586). However, Allen sees the entire concept upon which Judeo-Christian religion is based, the fall of man, as unfair. In the film Love and Death, the Allen persona laments, "To be executed for a crime I didn't commit. Of course, isn't all mankind in the same boat? Isn't all mankind ultimately executed for a

crime it never committed?" (Dir. Woody Allen, United Artists 1975).

Another theme Allen explores in his works is sex. Closely associated with this theme is the theme of love. Allen's characters constantly juxtapose lofty philosophical ideas with attempts to seduce the nearest female. This tension between the mind and the body is another characteristic of Jewish humor. Hirsch writes, "Tossed back and forth between the aspirations of the intellect and the desires of the body, Jewish antiheroes make uneasy sensualists. . . . Sex for them is distracting, unnerving, forbidden, at the same time that it is vital and exciting" (137-138). Allen's short story "The Whore of Mensa" illustrates this tension between mind and body. The protagonist pays for the services of a lovely young intellectual because his wife does not stimulate him "up there."

It is interesting how often Allen associates sex and death. In Love and Death (note the title), Boris, the protagonist, constantly associates everything with sex. When he is about to be drafted into the army he protests that he can't shower with other men. He says that Jewish women don't believe in sex after marriage. Boris thinks everyone is as obsessed with sex as he is, with the exception of some men who "don't think about sex at all. They become lawyers" (Dir. Allen, United Artists 1975).

Maurice Yacowar points out many other examples and concludes, "Boris's mind inevitably moves from logical and moral concerns toward his sexual anxiety" (165). At the end of his movie Sleeper, the main character says he doesn't believe in anything except sex and death, "Two things that happen to me only once in my life. Only after death you're not nauseous . . . (Dir. Allen, United Artists 1973).

Allen's obsession with sex is no doubt an attempt to forget his own mortality. One critic points out that Allen's work possibly reflects Ernest Becker's observations about sex in The Denial of Death. Becker says that a child's questions about sex are really more about "the meaning of the body, the terror of living with a body" rather than actually about sex itself (Yacowar 215). Another Allen biographer points out that Allen keeps returning to love and sex, not only because they are good for laughs, but because those subjects "arouse in him a tangle of contradictory feelings which have yet to be pacified. For Woody, women, at different times, represent salvation, refuge, and downfall" (Hirsch 174). Jack Kroll, who often writes about Allen's works, has said, "Woody agrees with Camus that women are all we know of paradise on earth" (qtd. in Pogel 25). Perhaps Allen hopes that love and sex will help him find answers to some of his questions about life and death. Or perhaps Allen simply hopes that love and sex will help ease the pain he feels when he contemplates his impending death.

Often Allen's works are concerned with searching for a meaning of life. His one-act plays God and Death both suggest that there is no meaning in life, that existence is accidental and there is no design to anything. In one interview, Allen was asked what he considers the meaning of life. Allen answered, "The meaning of life is that no one knows the meaning of life. We are not put here to have a good time and that's what throws most of us, that sense that we all have an inalienable right to a good time" (Kelley 88). Many of Allen's works suggest that there is no meaning in life, but others seem to be in search of a meaning. Allen told Natalie Gittelson that it is very hard for society to bear the idea that existence is meaningless. Religion, he says, has failed and disappointed many people. He offers a possible solution: "Either we've got to accept that life is not meaningless, for reasons as yet unknown, or we've got to create some sort of social structure that offers us the opportunity for real fulfillment" (Gittelson 32). Allen worries about the society we live in. Man, he says, is desensitized by drugs, television, junk food, in short, junk culture. Allen believes that if our society is to heal itself we must make some concessions:

We've got to give up the immediate, self-gratifying view. We've got to find the transition to a life style and a culture in which we make tough, honest, moral and ethical choices simply



because--on the most basic pragmatic grounds--  
they are seen to be the highest good. (Gittelson  
32)

Allen's works satirize the problems modern men and women are faced with, and while these humorous works are meant to be entertaining, they also cause readers to consider their world and their problems.

Allen also satirizes philosophy, pseudo-intellectualism, and man's reliance on technology to make life easier. Allen believes there are no easy answers to life's problems. He warns, "It's very important to realize that we're up against an evil, insidious, hostile universe, a hostile force. It'll make you ill and age you and kill you" (Dart 587). Perhaps the answer is that there are no real answers, only temporary stays against confusion as Frost says. In an interview with Gene Siskel about his movie Stardust Memories, Allen says that what he had hoped to show with Sandy Bates, the main character who searches for answers, is that "all you have in life are moments, not your artistic achievements, not your material goods, not your fame or your money--just some moments, maybe with another person, . . . those little moments that are wonderful" (qtd. in Pogel 148). And Allen does have his moments with his wonderful, deliciously wicked, sometimes profound comedy.

One biographer, Foster Hirsch, makes a statement which helps to explain why Allen chooses comedy to present his ideas: "Telling jokes on himself is therapeutic, a way of releasing his anxieties and obsessions. Like therapy, creating comedy alleviates the pressures of being neurotic" (13). Perhaps this explains why Allen does not have a high regard for comedy. Allen has said, "When you do comedy, you're not sitting at the grownups' table, you're sitting at the children's table" (qtd. in Kroll, "Inner Woody" 83). Allen has also said, "There's something secondary about comedy. Comedy teases a problem, it pokes fun at it, but it never really confronts it" (Cooper 8). This attitude no doubt partially explains why Allen is usually dissatisfied with his films. With the exception of a couple of serious films (with which he also was not happy), his other attempts have all been comedies or have had strong comedic elements.

Allen does not seem to have as many qualms about the work he does for The New Yorker. He calls his work for this magazine "sheer dessert." Allen is not putting less emphasis on this work; he is simply referring to the joy of creating a humorous piece rather quickly and not having to spend a year on each project as he must with his films (Yacowar 224).

Allen's works in his three collections, Getting Even, Without Feathers, and Side Effects, deal with a myriad of topics, but all share one characteristic. All the works

surprise and delight the reader with Allen's unusual choice of subjects and the way he manipulates language. Foster Hirsch describes Allen's genius with language:

Woody is a clever creator of verbal chaos, and the central element of all his comedy is verbal surprise. His goofy word salads, his neologisms and nonsequiters, his verbal bombshells that explode pretense and hypocrisy, often contain good sense. (156)

Allen has a tendency to make light of serious topics and to treat solemnly the most trivial of things, or as one critic says, he "mocks what he takes seriously and takes seriously what he mocks" (Gittelson 102). Allen may not have a high regard for comedy, but he uses it to good purpose. By pointing out man's foibles, weaknesses, and hypocrisies, he allows the reader not only to laugh at himself, but to recognize something of his own nature and to contemplate change.

The next three chapters will deal with selected works from Allen's three prose collections. Allen's themes and comic devices and techniques will be explored, along with his use of comedy to make serious observations.

### Chapter III

#### Selections from Getting Even

Getting Even (1971), Woody Allen's first collection of prose, contains seventeen essays, short stories, and one-act plays which satirize the mundane as well as the profound. Allen parodies everything from organized crime to "Weight Watchers" to the Bible. In these stories Allen often draws upon Jewish humor as well as little-man humor. Much of the humor in these prose pieces is a result of juxtaposing the serious and the silly, deflating large themes and inflating small themes, and his usual semantic acrobatics with non sequiters, anachronisms, distortions, and incongruities.

To attempt a discussion of all seventeen works in Getting Even would be inconsistent with the intention of this dissertation. Some of the stories are not good examples of Allen's use of comedy for a serious purpose. In addition, time and space demand selectivity. Of the seventeen works collected in Getting Even, this chapter will deal with six: "The Metterling List," "My Philosophy," Death Knocks, "Hassidic Tales, With a Guide to Their Interpretation by the Noted Scholar," "Conversations with Helmholtz," and "Mr. Big." These works best exemplify Allen's serious use of comedy. They are among the most humorous works in the collection, and they all deal with the serious themes which concern Allen. A completely arbitrary

decision was made to discuss the works in the order in which they appear in the collection.

Many of Allen's prose works are burlesques. Richmond P. Bond defines the slippery literary term "burlesque":

The essence of humor lies in incongruity, and when imitation is added, burlesque is the result.

Burlesque consists, then, in the use or imitation of serious matter or manner, made amusing by the creation of an incongruity between style and subject. (3)

Bond goes on to subdivide burlesque. Two of these subdivisions, travesty and parody, can be applied to much of Allen's prose. Bond writes, "The travesty lowers a particular work by applying a jocular, familiar undignified treatment . . ." (4). He defines parody as the following: "The parody mimics the manner of an individual author or [work] by substituting an unworthy or less worthy subject . . ." (4). Although Bond arrived at his definitions several years ago, his terminology is as close to a standard as exists today in the genre of satire. References to "burlesque," "travesty," and "parody" in this dissertation will reflect Bond's definitions.

The first work in Getting Even is the short story "The Metterling List." In this story Allen satirizes academicians who spend their lives trying to turn the most trivial details of an important historical or literary

figure into clues about that person's life. The narrator points out that although many volumes have already been written about Metterling, the new volume based on six laundry lists is destined to become the definitive work on Metterling's psychological deterioration.

Laundry list number one includes, among others items, six pairs of blue socks and the directive "No Starch." Allen writes, "Metterling's dislike of starch is typical of the period, and when this particular bundle came back too stiff Metterling became moody and depressed" (4). No doubt this depression contributed to Metterling's problem uncovered in laundry list number two, black socks instead of blue. This change prompted a scholarly article by Anna Freud, "Metterling's Socks as an Expression of the Phallic Mother" in Journal of Psychoanalysis. The problem became so severe that when Metterling's housekeeper begged him to switch back to his beloved blue socks, Metterling growled, "Slut! And why not Argyles, eh?" (5).

Metterling's personality had become so fragmented by laundry list number six that he agreed to enter analysis with Freud (presumably Sigmund). Metterling and Freud had met years before in Vienna at "a production of Oedipus, from which Freud had to be carried out in a cold sweat" (8). Freud is able to help Metterling, and they become friends, "although Freud would never let Metterling get behind him" (9). The story ends with the announcement of the

forthcoming Volume II which will contain "Lists 7--25, including the years of Metterling's 'private laundress' and the pathetic misunderstanding with the Chinese on the corner" (9).

In Introduction to Satire, Leonard Feinberg asserts that satire, if not the greatest form of literature, is a necessary form, for it serves an important function: It dramatizes and exaggerates "objectionable qualities in man and society" (17). In "The Metterling Lists," Allen exaggerates a problem which occurs in academia. The "publish or perish" atmosphere prevalent on many university campuses has generated some less than impressive research. Allen is obviously satirizing some of the pseudo-intellectual tripe which is a result of this atmosphere. He not only criticizes the pedants, but the publishers as well. Venal & Sons are the publishers of the Metterling laundry lists. Allen's point is that publishers involved with this pseudo-intellectual inquiry are corrupt or "venal" and are only about making money. This humorous parody is a satirical comment upon problems which exist in the world of academia.

Another humorous story which deals with a serious topic is "My Philosophy." Here Allen writes about a man who attempts to form some sort of codified philosophical definition of life. This serious quest, however, is burlesqued by Allen. The persona's quest soon degenerates

to the level of travesty. The narrator of the story dropped a spoonful of his wife's soufflé on his foot and broke several bones. While he is recuperating in bed, he decides to make philosophy his life's vocation. He begins this new pursuit by using this time to catch up on some existential reading he has been meaning to do. A statement from Kierkegaard leaves him awe-stricken: "Such a relation which relates itself to its own self (that is to say, a self) must either have constituted itself or have been constituted by another" (21). The narrator responds to Kierkegaard's profundity: "The concept brought tears to my eyes. My word, I thought, to be that clever! . . . True, the passage was totally incomprehensible to me, but what of it as long as Kierkegaard was having fun?" (21). He is so moved he spends the next few days recording his own philosophy, "with time out for dozing and trying to get the two little BBs into the eyes of the bear" (22).

Allen continues to play with language in the remainder of the story. The narrator's first musing is titled "Critique of Pure Dread," a parody of Jean-Paul Sartre's "Critique of Dialectical Reason." In this section Allen employs the technique of undercutting with the following quotation: "Can we really 'know' the universe? My God, it's hard enough finding your way around Chinatown" (22). Undercutting is again employed in the following quotation: "Therefore the Cartesian dictum 'I think, therefore I am'



might be better expressed 'Hey, there goes Edna with a saxophone!'" (23). This at first appears to be a non sequiter, but upon closer examination it shows how Allen takes a serious philosophical idea and uses it correctly but in a deflating manner. Language deteriorates even further with the title of section two, "Eschatological Dialectics As a Means of Coping with Shingles" to the totally nonsensical title of section three, "The Cosmos on Five Dollars a Day." Each successive title shows less of a concern with the abstract and more of a concern with the concrete. These two titles also parody the current inclination to explain every conceivable problem in psychological terms and the plethora of self-help books which promise the reader the world on a shoestring.

Maurice Yacowar writes, "Whenever Allen's characters speculate about metaphysical topics, they are brought back down to the rub of their physical existence" (85). Nowhere is this more true than in "My Philosophy." The work ends with a number of "aphorisms" which include the following: "Eternal nothingness is O.K. if you're dressed for it," "If only Dionysus were alive! Where would he eat?" and "Not only is there no God, but try getting a plumber on weekends" (25). Allen seems to be saying that while philosophical questions are certainly worthy of contemplation, what really makes us happy is an unclogged sink. Or as the Yiddish

proverb goes, "If you want to forget all your troubles, put on a shoe that's too tight" (Cohen 4-5).

Death Knocks is the first of Allen's one-act plays. Much has been written about Allen's debt for this play to Ingmar Bergman's The Seventh Seal. In both works, the protagonist is faced with a personification of death, and in both works the protagonist plays a game with Death for more time. As usual, Allen parodies his borrowed material and comes up with a comic masterpiece. Instead of Bergman's serious, somber Death, Allen's Death is a clumsy schlep. And instead of playing a dignified game of chess as is played in The Seventh Seal, Allen's twosome play a game of gin rummy. Allen here explores a serious subject--a man coming face to face with his own death--but he uses humor for his parody. Sources for humor here are the protagonist's lack of respect for Death and Death's own little-man stature. Allen's use of irony is evident in his portrayal of Death as the little man in this work.

The play opens as fifty-seven-year-old Nat Ackerman lies in bed reading tomorrow's newspaper. By having Ackerman read tomorrow's paper the night before, Allen is alerting the reader that time will soon become meaningless for Ackerman. Ackerman hears a noise outside his window just before a somber, caped figure climbs awkwardly through the window. The stage directions point out that Death looks like Ackerman. Later in the play Ackerman comments upon

Death's resemblance to himself, to which Death replies, "Who should I look like? I'm your death" (34).

Part of the humor of Death Knocks is the discrepancy between the general dread people experience when faced with thoughts of death and Nat Ackerman's reaction to Death. After Ackerman is finally convinced of Death's identity, Death tells him how he got caught in his drainpipe while trying to make a dramatic entrance. Instead of being frightened senseless that his life is about to end, Ackerman is worried about damage to his home: "You broke my drainpipe?" (33). He talks Death into playing a game of gin rummy; he tells Death if he loses he will come quietly, but if he wins he will get to live one extra day. After Ackerman beats Death, he boasts that he not only won an extra day but Death owes him twenty-eight dollars, and he wants payment immediately. When Death can't come up with the money, Ackerman suggests they play double or nothing. He taunts Death, "I'm liable to win an extra week or a month. The way you play, maybe years" (40). His final display of disrespect for Death comes when he calls his friend Moe after Death has left for the night. He tells Moe that Death or someone pretending to be Death has just visited him. He ends by saying, "But, Moe, he's such a schlep!" (41).

Another humorous element of Death Knocks is the discrepancy between the solemnity one would expect of a

personification of death and Allen's Death. As Death crawls onstage through the window, he says, "Jesus Christ. I nearly broke my neck" (31). He complains that he is nauseous and shaken from his climb. Instead of making a dramatic entrance, he appears to be a bumbling fool. When he agrees to play cards, he tells his host, "Get the cards and give me a Fresca and put something out. For God's sake, a stranger drops in, you don't have potato chips or pretzels" (35). He worries about where he will spend the night, and as he leaves he says, "I couldn't just take him and go. I had to get involved with rummy" (40). As he descends the stairs, Ackerman calls out a warning about a loose rug on one of the steps. Offstage there is a terrible crash as Death makes an ignominious retreat. Allen's Death is anything but solemn and frightening. He is a whining klutz.

It is hard for the reader to consider much of Death Knocks as serious, but Allen does manage to cause the reader to pause in his laughter. During the card game while Ackerman tells Death to make up his mind and Death complains that Ackerman is holding back cards, Ackerman manages to convey some of man's curiosity about the afterlife. He asks Death over and over if there is anything after life. Death refuses to give him any real information, however. Ackerman does finally learn that this is Death's first assignment, and he is incredulous: "What are you telling me--that nobody

ever went before?" (38). Death says yes, but others took them because "[e]ach one has his own personal way of going" (38). Allen is pointing out that death is a personal thing and we must each face death all alone. When Ackerman says he did not realize that death is like this, Death says, "Why should you know? . . . You're a dress manufacturer. Where do you get your knowledge of eternal mysteries?" (38). Ackerman is indignant and tells Death what he has accomplished: two kids through college, a maid, a wife who gets anything she wants, and a Chrysler. Earlier he tells Death he can't go with him because he "just merged with Modiste Originals" (34). But such things, as everyone knows, are totally insignificant in the face of one's own death. Allen shows that no matter what our station in life, when we die it is just us and death. Significantly, Ackerman is at home alone when Death calls. The title of the play is also significant. On one level the title Death Knocks simply suggests a visit from death. On another level it refers to death always being victorious. When a player knocks in gin rummy, he is the winner of a hand. Although Ackerman is the first to knock in this game, it is inevitable that he will eventually lose to Death. Death is always victorious in the end.

Although Death Knocks deals with a serious subject, Allen uses humor to develop his ideas. Maurice Yacowar writes, "Because Ackerman does not recognize the power of

Death, Death has no power over him. Allen may very well envy this hero, whose very simplicity prevents his domination by death" (61). Perhaps. But Allen leaves the reader with the knowledge that Death is coming back the next day, and even if Ackerman wins a few extra days, it is inevitable that he will eventually lose. It's in the cards.

Allen takes on religion and the meaning of life in "Hassidic Tales, with a Guide to Their Interpretation by the Noted Scholar." This piece contains six "tales" followed by interpretations which are hilariously funny and make use of Allen's comic technique of juxtaposing the serious with the nonsensical and his use of deflating language. There are, of course, many references to the Jewish religion, and perhaps this travesty of Biblical tales is partly responsible for allegations that Allen is anti-Semitic (Kael, "Frog" 189). He denies such charges and says he has never thought of himself as anti-Semitic (Shales 94). Allen's primary purpose is to entertain the reader.

The first tale deals with a man who journeys to a far country to ask Rabbi Ben Kaddish the profound question about where he can find peace. Allen undercuts the seriousness of this question with the rabbi's response. The rabbi tells him, "Quick, look behind you!" whereupon the rabbi hits him in the back of the head with a candlestick and says, "Is that peaceful enough for you?" (48). The interpreter points out that this is a meaningless question, and besides, the

rabbi has enough trouble. He's "in over his head with gamblers, and he has also been named in a paternity case by a Mrs. Hecht" (48).

In the next tale one of the disciples of Rabbi Raditz of Poland asks him, "Who did God like better--Moses or Abraham?" (49). The rabbi answers, "Abraham," whereupon the disciple reminds him that God chose Moses to lead the Israelites. The rabbi then says, "All right, so Moses." The disciple says knowingly, "I understand, Rabbi. It was a stupid question" to which the rabbi replies, "Not only that, but you're stupid, your wife's a meeskeit, and if you don't get off my foot you're excommunicated" (49). The ironic discrepancy between how one expects a rabbi to act and talk and Allen's rabbi is largely responsible for the humor of this tale: A man asks what he thinks is a serious question and he gets a flippant answer. Allen also mixes his religions with the Catholic threat of excommunication. However, with all the burlesquing here, Allen is making a serious point. Some questions have no answers, so why waste time asking them?

Allen again uses irony in tale three about a man who tells a rabbi his heart is heavy because his daughter is ugly. When the rabbi asks, "How ugly?" the man replies, "If she were lying on a plate with a herring, you wouldn't be able to tell the difference" (50). Instead of the rabbi's reassuring the father that it is inner beauty which counts,

he asks, "What kind of herring?" The interpreter does point out that, even if she does look like a herring, "are not all creatures beautiful in God's eyes?" (50). However, he immediately undercuts this expected response with the following: "Perhaps, but if a girl looks more at home in a jar of wine sauce than an evening gown she's got big problems" (50). Allen seems to be saying, "Talk about your inner beauty all you want, but ugly is ugly."

Tale number four deals with Rabbi Zwi Chaim Yisroel who, while on his way to the synagogue "to celebrate the sacred Jewish holiday commemorating God's reneging on every promise," is stopped by a woman who asks, "Rabbi, why are we not allowed to eat pork?" The rabbi answers, "We're not? Uh-oh" (50-51). The interpreter says the rabbi knows he should not eat pork, but he likes it, so there! The interpreter adds, "Not only does he like pork; he gets a kick out of rolling Easter eggs" (51). And besides, the interpreter says, there is still some debate about just exactly why Jews should not eat pork. He points out that "some scholars believe that the Torah merely suggested not eating pork at certain restaurants" (51).

Allen satirizes fasting in tale five and mysticism in tale six. A rabbi fasts for sixteen weeks and his pupils fear for his life. A woman comes to him and asks, "Rabbi, what color hair did Esther have?" The rabbi is disgusted by her question: "Look what she picks to ask me! You know what



kind of headache I got from sixteen weeks without a bite!" (51). The interpreter concludes that "fasting is a big mistake. Particularly on an empty stomach" (51). He adds, "Man does not bring on his own unhappiness, and suffering is really God's will, although why He gets such a kick out of it is beyond me" (51-52). Tale six concerns Rabbi Yekel of Zans who dreams three nights in a row that he will find treasure if he takes a journey. He takes these dreams as a mystical telegram from God, so he sets out on his journey. However, he is caught by wild nomads who, when they find out he is a Jew, "force him to alter all their sports jackets and take in their trousers" (52). The rabbi is found two years later "wandering the Urals and emotionally involved with a panda" (52). So much for fasting and mysticism.

With his "Hassidic Tales," Allen manages to satirize just about every aspect of Jewish religion. Again Allen's purpose is primarily to entertain the reader, but at the same time these tales comment upon what Allen considers problems in the world of religion. Don't waste your time asking questions which have no answers, Allen seems to be saying. And before you buy into something, really question its value, he seems to conclude. Allen has said that he respects true religious feelings (Dart 586), but an unexamined adherence to any religion is never safe from his satirical pen.

The short story "Conversations with Helmholtz" returns to a favorite topic of Allen's, pseudo-intellectual inquiry. Dr. Helmholtz, a decrepit man of ninety and a contemporary of Sigmund Freud's, engages in a series of conversations with one of his students, "whom Helmholtz loathes beyond description but tolerates because he brings him nougat" (85). The student is the narrator of the story and is typical of the little-man humor found in much of Allen's work. On one occasion the student finds Dr. Helmholtz confined to bed not feeling well, but the doctor "sat upright and even laughed when I told him I had an abscess" (89). The doctor repeatedly insults the student, but the student never wavers in his admiration of "the master." Part of the humor is that the master at times seems little more than a rambling idiot himself.

In "Conversations with Helmholtz," Allen also satirizes modern psychotherapy and the great Freud himself. Helmholtz describes his patients. Otto is depressed because his name is spelled the same backwards and forwards. Joachim B. speaks without trouble but stutters when he writes ("If he wrote the word 'but,' for instance, it would appear in his letter 'b-b-b-b-b-but'" [88]). The notorious rapist V., whom Helmholtz cured of the urge to rape, develops the uncontrollable urge to show unsuspecting females "a large halibut" he keeps hidden under his jacket. Helmholtz describes how he made friends with Freud in a bakery:

He was attempting to buy some schnecken, but could not bear to ask for them by name. . . . "Let me have some of those little cakes," he would say pointing to them. The baker said, "You mean these schnecken, Herr Professor?" At that, Freud flushed crimson and fled out the door muttering, "Er, no--nothing--never mind." (86)

Helmholtz buys the pastries for Freud and they become friends. Here Allen is obviously satirizing the modern tendency to interpret psychological problems in sexual terms.

This short story ends with the student's recording some of Dr. Helmholtz's epigrammatic gems of wisdom. About the human condition, Dr. Helmholtz says, "If man were immortal, do you realize what his meat bills would be?"(91). Dr. Helmholtz comments on religion: "I don't believe in an afterlife, although I am bringing a change of underwear" (91). And about literature, Dr. Helmholtz says, "All literature is a footnote to Faust. I have no idea what I mean by that" (91). The humor in Dr. Helmholtz's pithy epigrams occurs as a result of Allen's juxtaposition of a serious question or observation followed by a deflating response which burlesques the serious idea. And Allen is again satirizing the pseudo-intellectual. Dr. Helmholtz spouts illogical maxims, what Hirsch describes as "goofy word salads" (156). Yet the last line of the story is the

student's observation, "I am convinced Helmholtz is a very great man" (91). Allen parodies pseudo-intellectuals who revere esoteric remarks from established figures and who have no idea what these remarks mean.

The last selection in Getting Even is Allen's short story "Mr. Big," a parody of detective fiction. The protagonist is Kaiser Lupowitz, a Bogart-type detective, who is hired to find a missing person. This missing "person" turns out to be God. Kaiser is hired by "a long-haired blond named Heather Butkiss" whose "figure described a set of parabolas that could cause cardiac arrest in a yak" (103). Butkiss pretends to be a "nudie model" but later admits that her real name is Claire Rosenweig and that she is a philosophy major at Vassar. She tells Kaiser that she wants him to find God for her: "The Creator, the Underlying Principle, the First Cause of Things, the All Encompassing" (103).

"Mr. Big" can be viewed as an existential detective story. Claire Rosenweig says she must know whether or not God exists. She tells Kaiser that she needs to know about God's existence because she is writing a paper for one of her philosophy classes, History of Western Thought. She tells Kaiser, "All the other kids will hand in speculative papers. But I want to know" (104). She goes on to say that her father has promised her a Mercedes if she makes an A in the course. Allen consistently undercuts his characters by

having them discuss lofty philosophic matters one minute and trivial matters the next.

In his search for God, Kaiser first visits Rabbi Itzhak Wiseman, "a local cleric who owed me a favor for finding out who was rubbing pork on his hat" (105). Again, the reader is reminded of Maurice Yacowar's statement that whenever Allen's characters become concerned with the metaphysical they are often "brought back down to the rub of their physical existence" (85). This is true of Rabbi Wiseman. He reassures Kaiser that there is a God, but when Kaiser asks if he has ever seen Him, the Rabbi answers, "Me? Are you kidding? I'm lucky if I get to see my grandchildren" (105). When Kaiser demands to know what proof Rabbi Wiseman has of God's existence, the Rabbi counters, "Could I get a suit like this for fourteen dollars if there was no one up there? Here, feel a gabardine--how can you doubt?" (105). Kaiser wants to know if this is all he has to go on, and Rabbi Wiseman asks, "What's the Old testament? Chopped liver?" (105). However, Kaiser is not convinced of God's existence because all Rabbi Wiseman offers is faith. Claire needs more than faith; she has to know.

Kaiser's next lead is from Chicago Phil, "forger, bank robber, strong-arm man, and avowed atheist" (106). Chicago Phil assures Kaiser that there is no Mr. Big:

Take it from me, Kaiser. There's no one out there. It's a void. I couldn't pass all those

bad checks or screw society the way I do if for one second I was able to recognize any authentic sense of Being. The universe is strictly phenomenological. Nothing's eternal. It's all meaningless. (107)

Whereas Rabbi Wiseman represents unquestioning faith, Chicago Phil represents a nihilistic view. Since there is no meaning in life, Phil lives his life the way he wishes. After all, there is no one to answer to.

Part of the humor in this scene is the discrepancy between the kind of character Chicago Phil is and the language he uses. One does not expect a gangster to discuss the universe in such lofty philosophical terms. He tells Kaiser that Claire is not a student at Vassar, but a teacher at Radcliffe who was mixed up with a philosopher for a while. He describes Claire's boyfriend to Kaiser: "Bad guy. Completely rejected Hegel or any dialectical methodology" (107). He goes on to describe how this boyfriend went from Logical Positivism to Pragmatism in search of answers about the meaning of life. Finally, the boyfriend "stole a lot of money to take a course in Schopenhauer at Columbia. The mob would like to find him-- or get their hands on his textbooks so they can resell them" (107).

Allen uses comedy to discuss the inscrutability of the universe. After his meetings with Rabbi Wiseman and Chicago

Phil, Kaiser goes to a bar to have a drink and to consider the evidence he has so far. No matter how hard he tries to understand, he says nothing makes any sense to him. He concludes, "Socrates was a suicide--or so they said. Christ was murdered. Nietzsche went nuts. If there was someone out there, He sure as hell didn't want anybody to know it" (107). Later, Kaiser asks Claire what if Kierkegaard is right, that man can never really know, but can only have faith. He asks her this question just after an Olympian sexual encounter, and Claire becomes upset by his question. As she lights a cigarette, she pleads, "Don't get ontological. Not now. I couldn't bear it if you were ontological with me" (108).

Just as Kaiser is about to kiss away Claire's anxieties, the phone rings and Sergeant Reed of Homicide asks if Kaiser is still looking for God, "an all-powerful Being? Great-Oneness, Creator of the Universe? First cause of Things?" (108). Sergeant Reed informs Kaiser that someone answering to that description just showed up at the morgue, undoubtedly killed by an existentialist. When Kaiser asks how Reed knows this, Reed answers, "Haphazard way how it was done. Doesn't seem to be any system followed. Impulse" (108). Again, Allen employs comedy to discuss the pessimistic existential tenet that God is dead. Nietzsche's dark pronouncement is parodied by Sergeant Reed's Joe-Friday tone.

Allen again uses comedy to comment upon the inscrutability of the universe when Kaiser visits His Holiness, the Pope. Even after God is found murdered, Kaiser continues to search to find out whether or not He exists. Perhaps because he has never been convinced that God exists, he is not totally convinced the remains at the morgue are God's. Therefore, he decides to visit the Pope. Between bites of fettucine, the Pope says, in essence, "Sure, God is alive, but he talks to no one except me." When Kaiser asks why this is so, the Pope says, "Because I got the red suit. . . . It's all in the suit. I mean, let's face it, if I went around in slacks and a sports jacket, I couldn't get arrested religion-wise" (109-110). The Pope inadvertently convinces Kaiser that God does not really exist; what exists is the idea of God, manifested in customs and clothes. When Kaiser concludes that it is all hype, His Holiness says, "I don't know. But what's the difference? The money's good" (110). This admission is ironic; if the Pope is not sure about God, who can be? Unlike Rabbi Wiseman who represents unquestioning faith, the Pope admits that he is just not sure. The implication here is that no one can ever know for sure whether or not God exists. Allen employs the existential belief that the universe is unknowable in this humorous scene. This story illustrates what Allen once said in an interview, the only



meaning of life is that "nobody knows the meaning of life" (Kelley 88).

Kaiser learns from the Pope that Claire Rosenweig is really Dr. Ellen Shepherd, professor of physics at Bryn Mawr. Kaiser does some checking on his own and confronts Claire with his deductions. She killed God because He stood between her and her philosophical boyfriend. Kaiser catalogues the philosophers Claire was able to discredit in her attempt to seduce her boyfriend. Kaiser tells how she overcame the obstacles presented by Socrates, Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, Leibnitz, Pascal, and finally, Shelby and Jason. Claire asks, "Who the hell are Shelby and Jason?" (111). Kaiser answers, "What's the difference? Life's absurd now anyway" (111). Kaiser says she killed God because He was the last obstacle in her affair. She pleads with Kaiser not to turn her in, but he says, "When the Supreme Being gets knocked off, somebody's got to take the rap" (111).

Claire tries to seduce Kaiser into submission, one of her hands in his hair, the other holding a forty-five behind his back. However, he shoots her first, and as she dies, she asks, "How could you, Kaiser?" (112). Following is his response:

She was fading fast, but I managed to get it  
in, in time.

"The manifestation of the universe as a complex idea unto itself as opposed to being in or outside the true Being of itself is inherently a conceptual nothingness or Nothingness in relation to any abstract form of existing or to exist or having existed in perpetuity and not subject to laws of physicality or motion or ideas relating to non-matter or the lack of objective Being or subjective otherness."

It was a subtle concept but I think she understood before she died. (112)

Here Allen uses comedy for more than simply to discuss serious philosophical questions. He uses an inflated philosophical jargon to parody the subject he is parodying.

In Getting Even Woody Allen satirizes a wide variety of topics. While some of the stories may seem rather trivial on the surface, a closer examination will reveal a serious point being made. These pieces are often farcical and sometimes sacrilegious, but they are always witty, intelligent, and hilariously funny.

## Chapter IV

### Selections from Without Feathers

Without Feathers (1975), Woody Allen's second collection of prose, contains eighteen short stories, essays, and one-act plays. Like the selections in Getting Even, these selections incorporate all of Allen's familiar themes and comic techniques. These selections, however, dwell on Allen's obsessions with death and God's existence more than the selections in his first anthology. And while the subjects are still treated humorously, there is a definite undertone of seriousness, particularly in the two one-act plays here, Death and God. Not much attention has been paid to Allen's prose works, but these two plays, especially God, have received the most attention from critics. Five works from Without Feathers will be discussed in this chapter: "Selections from the Allen Notebook," "The Scrolls," "The Whore of Mensa," Death, and God. These works, chosen because they show the wide range of Allen's humor in treating serious themes, satirize man's sexual preoccupations, his concerns about death, and his search for a meaning in life. The two one-act plays, Death and God, are among Allen's most philosophical works. For this reason, a more detailed analysis of these plays is warranted.

The title of this collection suggests Allen's bleak view of the world. Allen takes Emily Dickinson's quotation,

"Hope is the thing with feathers," and uses humor to make a serious point. He writes, "How wrong Emily Dickinson was! Hope is not 'the thing with feathers.' The thing with feathers has turned out to be my nephew. I must take him to a specialist in Zurich" (9). Maurice Yacowar observes that the title suggests syllogistically that mankind is without hope. If hope is the thing with feathers and man does not have feathers, then he is without hope (75). Allen's literal interpretation of a figurative statement is typical of his humor. His parody of Dickinson's quotation is humorous, but it also serves to illustrate his concerns about mankind's lack of hope.

The first work in Without Feathers is "Selections from the Allen Notebook." This work is a parody of the journals kept by serious authors to record their musings and reactions to the world about them. Allen parodies the journal form with such entries as the following:

Last night I had the uneasy feeling that some men were trying to break into my room to shampoo me. . . . When I finally did fall asleep, I had that same hideous nightmare in which a woodchuck is trying to claim my prize at a raffle. Despair.

(7)

The humor in such observations results from the discrepancy between a serious situation and the language Allen chooses to use.

While much of "Selections from the Allen Notebook" contains such material, the purpose of which is simply to entertain the reader, parts of it deal with serious questions concerning suicide and God's existence. Camus once said that the only truly philosophical question is whether or not to commit suicide. Allen's persona tries to commit suicide, but Allen undercuts the seriousness of the action by the method his narrator chooses and by the result of the suicide attempt: "Once again I tried committing suicide--this time by wetting my nose and inserting it into the light socket. Unfortunately, there was a short in the wiring, and I merely caromed off the icebox" (8). Later in this work he says he contemplated suicide again, "this time by inhaling next to an insurance salesman" (9). The seriousness of a suicide attempt is undercut by the methods Allen's characters employ to carry out their gruesome task.

In "Selections from the Alien Notebook," Allen expresses his doubts about whether or not God exists. Allen's persona says that he did believe in God until his mother's accident: "She fell on some meat loaf, and it penetrated her spleen" (9). How, he asks, can he believe in a loving father when bad things happen to people? Why, just last week he got his "tongue caught in the roller of an electric typewriter" (10). He worries that everything is an illusion and nothing exists, in which case he has definitely overpaid for his carpet. He adds, "If only God would give

me some clear sign! Like making a large deposit in my name at a Swiss bank" (10). Allen constantly undercuts his serious musings with deflating observations. He mixes the profound and the mundane so that when the reader thinks he has something to hold on to, Allen jerks it away with a guffaw.

In "The Scrolls" Allen employs travesty to satirize the Bible and religion. This story is about a shepherd who discovers several large clay pots which contain scrolls; archaeologists have determined that the scrolls date back to 4,000 B.C. The translated fragments of the scrolls are discussed along with a few "Laws and Proverbs" at the end. Much of the humor comes from the use of anachronisms. For example, the authenticity of the scrolls is in question because the word "Oldsmobile" appears several times, and the shepherd discovers "two tickets to the ice show" along with the scrolls (25). Allen's characterizations of the holy men of the Bible and God are also humorous. God is deflated to a prankster with an offbeat sense of humor and the great men of the Bible fare little better. Scroll one deals with Job and God, scroll two tells the story of Abraham and Isaac, and scroll three deals with an unnamed clothing salesman who cannot sell his merchandise until God gives him a hot tip.

Scroll one tells the story of how God tests Job's loyalty. Job is rather patient until his kine are slaughtered, at which points he complains, "Why doth thou

slay my kine? Kine are hard to come by. Now I am short kine and I'm not even sure what kine are" (25). For his questioning God, Job is punished: "And the Lord produced two stone tablets and snapped them closed on Job's nose" (25). Job's wife is even punished. As she is weeping, "the Lord sent an angel of mercy who anointed her head with a polo mallet" (25). The tragic suffering of Job has been burlesqued into vaudeville slapstick.

Allen further travesties the story of Job by having him fight back instead of just accepting his troubles as he does in the Bible. Once while God is toying with Job, He gets too close and Job grabs Him by the collar and asks just what the heck He thinks He is doing. At first God is perturbed and begs to be released: "Er, look--that's my neck you have . . . Could you let me go?" (25). Then God remembers who He is and thunders to Job that He created the heavens and the earth and just what has Job done? Job is not impressed; he says, "That's no answer. . . . And for someone who's supposed to be omnipotent, let me tell you, 'tabernacle' has only one l" (26). Job ends by telling God He has a good job and not to blow it.

Scroll two deals with the story of Abraham's sacrifice of his son Isaac. Again, Allen takes a Biblical story which teaches a serious lesson about faith and travesties it. Abraham comes across as a spineless moron and God fares little better with His sick sense of humor. Abraham wakes

Isaac in the middle of the night and tells him to put on his pants because God has told Abraham to sacrifice his only son. Isaac wants to know just what Abraham said to this request, and Abraham answers, "What am I going to say? I'm standing there at two A.M. in my underwear with the Creator of the Universe. Should I argue?" (26). Sarah asks Abraham how he knows it was the Lord and not that friend of his who loves to play practical jokes. Abraham answers, "Because I know it was the Lord. It was a deep resonant voice, well modulated, and nobody in the desert can get a rumble in it like that" (26). Sarah cannot believe Abraham is willing to do this, but he points out that one does not question the Almighty, especially with the economy in the shape it is in.

Abraham takes Isaac and is about to slay him when the Lord stays his hand and asks, "How could thou doest such a thing?" (27). Abraham says he was only following orders, to which God asks if he does everything he is told. When God says He was only joking, Abraham complains he never knows when the Lord is kidding. God thunders, "No sense of humor. I can't believe it" (27). Abraham asks if this does not prove he loves Him, but God answers, "It proves that some men will follow any order no matter how asinine as long as it comes from a resonant, well-modulated voice" (27).

Scrolls one and two are travesties; a serious matter is treated in an undignified manner. Scroll three employs parody; a trivial idea is elevated to the serious. Scroll



three concerns an unnamed clothing salesman who cannot sell his merchandise. He prays, "Lord, why hast thou left me to suffer thus? All mine enemies sell their goods except I.

. . . Why can I not earn a living when my younger brother cleans up in children's ready-to-wear?" (27). God tells him to sew an alligator over the pocket: "Just do what I'm telling you. You won't be sorry" (27). The salesman does as he is told and "lo and behold, suddenly his merchandise moved like gangbusters, and there was much rejoicing while amongst his enemies there was wailing and gnashing of teeth"(28). Allen uses the language of the Bible to parody the Biblical tales of triumph of those faithful to God.

Included in Getting Even is "The Whore of Mensa," one of Woody Allen's best known prose works. This short story has been included in several literature anthologies. Kaiser Lupowitz, the private detective in "Mr. Big," is once again employed to help a client. This time the client is Word Babcock, "a quivering pat of butter" (34). Babcock is a prime example of the little man in Allen's humor. He is so nervous when he comes to see Kaiser that he spills his drink. His job is mechanical maintenance, which exemplifies the description of the little man alienated in an increasingly mechanized society. But Babcock's work is also ludicrous; he builds and services joy buzzers. Allen's choice of a name for this character is also humorous and applicable. Word Babcock is being blackmailed because he

visited a whorehouse which specializes in intellectual conversations, words, which turn out to be only so much babble. And, of course, as Yacowar points out, this character's name combines the intellectual and the sexual (100). Flossie, the madam of the intellectual whorehouse, wants ten thousand dollars or she will go to Babcock's wife. He tells Kaiser, "Carla would die if she knew she didn't turn me on up here" (37).

Yacowar explains what Allen is doing in "The Whore of Mensa": "Allen examines the frustrations involved in the fact that man's spiritual nature is housed in a body obsessed by physical hungers" (210). Allen is satirizing society's sexual taboos in a story with a twist. Instead of a character who seeks sexual gratification outside of marriage, Allen employs a character who needs intellectual stimulation. Yacowar writes that this reversal points to a society with inverted values: "Here the physical is respectable and the intellectual is furtive and forbidden . . ." (100). Babcock tells Kaiser, "I mean, my wife is great, don't get me wrong. But she won't discuss Pound with me. Or Eliot. I didn't know that when I married her" (36). He tells Kaiser that he needs a woman who is intellectually stimulating and he is willing to pay for it. But he says he does not want a commitment: "I want a quick intellectual experience, then I want the girl to leave. Christ, Kaiser, I'm a happily married man" (36).

Kaiser decides to take the case. He calls the telephone number Babcock gives him and makes an appointment with a young woman to discuss Melville. He is told that symbolism is extra and for a hundred dollars he can get a comparative analysis of Melville and Hawthorne. Kaiser reads the Monarch College Outline while he waits for his call girl. A young redhead arrives who is "packed into her slacks like two scoops of vanilla ice cream" (37). Even though the story is about intellectual inquiry, Allen maintains a sexual tension throughout with such references. As they discuss Billy Budd, Kaiser offers an insight and she fakes a response. He is amazed at how good she is at what she does. His description of her intellectual prowess is comparable to a description of a seasoned prostitute: "She was barely nineteen years old, but already she had developed the hardened facility of the pseudo-intellectual. She rattled off her ideas glibly, but it was all mechanical" (38). Kaiser tells her he is a detective and she is in trouble: "[D]iscussing Melville is an 802. You can do time" (39). But just as most prostitutes have a sad story to tell--a sick child or a dying parent--Kaiser's young woman has a tragedy, also. She needs the money to complete her master's degree: "I've been turned down for a grant. Twice" (39). Another "good girl gone bad" because of circumstances beyond her control.

Allen continues to use satire as he describes the arrest. Kaiser learns that the Hunter College Bookstore is the front for Flossie's operation. When he gives the password, a wall of books opens and he walks into Flossie's pleasure palace. His description fits the description of any brothel, but there is a twist: the girls are peddling their minds, not their bodies. Kaiser describes Flossie's place:

Red, flocked wallpaper and a Victorian decor set the tone. Pale, nervous girls with black-rimmed glasses and blunt-cut hair lolled around on sofas, riffling Penguin Classics provocatively. A blond with a big smile winked at me, nodded toward a room upstairs, and said, "Wallace Stevens, eh?"

(40)

Kaiser is disgusted that a customer can pay for an emotional experience as well as an intellectual one. For one hundred dollars a customer can watch a girl having an anxiety attack. Three hundred dollars will buy the works:

A thin Jewish brunette would pretend to pick you up at the Museum of Modern Art, let you read her master's, get you involved in a screaming quarrel at Elaine's over Freud's conception of women, and then fake a suicide of your choosing--the perfect evening for some guys. Nice racket. Great town, New York. (40)

Flossie turns out to be a man who was thrown out of college for low grades. He had devised a plot to take over The New York Review of Books, but he had to look like Lionel Trilling. A Mexican doctor did the plastic surgery but something went wrong. Flossie says, "I came out looking like Auden, with Mary McCarthy's voice. That's when I started working the other side of the law" (41). (Who could blame him?) Kaiser had called the police before he left for Flossie's, and Sergeant Holmes arrives just as he and Flossie start to fight. That night Kaiser purges himself with Gloria, a friend of his: "She was blond. She had graduated cum laude. The difference was she majored in physical education. It felt good" (41). Here he is parodying the Mickey Spillane character who has "therapeutic sex" to help him forget his troubles.

The humor of "The Whore of Mensa" is different from the humor found in much of Allen's other work. There is no "verbal chaos" or "goofy word salads" here as Hirsch describes (156). The source for the humor is Allen's reversal of expectations on the part of the reader. One does not expect a man to be unfaithful to his wife in any way except a sexual one. Allen is obviously pointing out that our society places too much emphasis on the sexual and not enough on the intellectual. A good relationship should be as dependent on one as the other. He is also parodying

our Victorian ideas of sexuality, as well as exposing the pseudo-intellectual--one of his favorite themes.

Two one-act plays appear in Without Feathers: Death and God. Yacowar writes that these two plays along with Death Knocks in Getting Even constitute a trilogy about man's mortality (60). Death Knocks, discussed in the previous chapter, is about a man confronting his death. The play is full of slapstick and is more humorous than horrifying. Death, on the other hand, is a more serious work, or as serious as Woody Allen ever gets in his prose. There are some humorous one-liners in the play, but for the most part it is a chilling look at man's confusion and fear when faced with the indifference and hostility of death. Allen portrays death in this play as the final illogical act in an absurd world, or as Yacowar writes, "Here death is the final absurdity in man's absurd existence" (63). God, the other one-act play in Without Feathers, deals with man's attempt to find order in a chaotic world. At the end of the play the characters are just as lost as they were at the beginning. And the final chilling message is that God is dead and life is meaningless.

The protagonist of Death is named Kleinman. Allen's choice of a name for this character is interesting for two reasons. The word "kleinman" is Yiddish for "little man" (Yacowar 61). Kleinman is a perfect example of Allen's little-man persona. He does not want to leave the safety of

his home to help search for a crazed killer, and he is afraid and confused throughout the play. Allen chooses not to give Kleinman a first name. Almost all the other characters are given names such as John, Sam, or Bill, but Kleinman is always called by his last name. Perhaps, by not giving him a first name, Allen intends for Kleinman to be a kind of Everyman. Two other unnamed characters in the play are the Doctor and the Policeman; these two characters also represent more than mere individuals. Both try to help Kleinman stop the Maniac, who represents death, but both fail. Again, perhaps Allen is suggesting that man's faith in science (as symbolized by the Doctor) and his faith in his own imposition of order on a potentially chaotic environment (as symbolized by the Policeman) are ultimately futile in the face of death.

The play opens at two a.m. Kleinman is fast asleep when he hears a loud pounding on his door and voices demanding that he join their search party. Kleinman keeps asking what is going on, but the other characters ignore his questions or accuse him of playing ignorant. They finally tell him that a maniac has been killing people all over town. After the men leave, Kleinman gets dressed and complains to his wife that no one told him about the killer. She reminds him that she tried to tell him on numerous occasions, but he refused to listen; he was always too busy with his job or his hobbies. Kleinman points out that she

picks inappropriate times to tell him: "My birthday party. So I'm having a good time, I'm opening birthday presents, so you creep up to me with that long face and say, 'Did you read in the paper? A girl got her throat cut?' . . . A man has a little fun--enter the voice of doom" (57). Kleinman represents man's refusal to think about the unpleasant. Submerging himself in his work and his pleasure is his way of coping. He thinks that if he refuses to hear about the unpleasant it will not be real for him. But he is drawn into this unpleasant situation, against his will, because this is the lot of every person. We all must face death eventually, and all the avoidance tactics in the world cannot change this hard fact of life.

As Kleinman prepares to join the vigilante party, an exchange takes place between him and his wife which illustrates man's attempts to foil death. His wife gives him a good luck charm she got from "a crippled beggar." She has just told him she intends to blow pepper in the maniac's face if he attacks her. Kleinman is not impressed with the charm, and although he has made fun of her suggestion about pepper, he tells her to give him some pepper instead of the charm. Allen points out that mankind attempts to avoid death in many ways--all of which are totally useless in the end. Anna, with her pepper and her good luck charms, appears ridiculous, but what of the people who refuse to tell their age or who have their bodies frozen for future



thawing? What about medical personnel who attempt to revive eighty-year-old patients with terminal diseases who have mercifully died? We fear death so much that we will go to any length--no matter how ridiculous, grotesque or immoral--to avoid the inevitable.

Against his better judgment, Kleinman leaves the relative security of his home (some people have been murdered in their own beds) and joins the vigilante party. He is reluctantly willing to do his part, but he never knows what his part is. He is told over and over that there is a plan, but no one will tell him what the plan is. Kleinman finally gets an answer from Al. Al says he cannot tell Kleinman the plan because he does not know what the plan is either; indeed, no one seems to know. Everyone wants to believe there is a way to conquer death, so he listens to other people when they say they know a way. But those people cannot even save themselves. Hacker is the only character who claims to know the entire plan; everyone else supposedly knows just a part of it, his own part. But Hacker is killed by a splinter group which is dissatisfied with the results Hacker has not been getting and which has a plan of its own. Not only must the men contend with the Maniac, but also with their next door neighbors.

Kleinman comes into contact with several characters who represent different approaches to finding meaning in life and, consequently, in death. The first character is the

Doctor. He says his interest in the Maniac is purely scientific. He wants to study the nature of his insanity and find out what "goads someone toward such a type of antisocial behavior" (71). Death, of course, is about as antisocial as one can get. The Doctor places his faith in scientific inquiry, but Allen points out the futility of this avenue. When the Doctor and Kleinman hear someone approaching, the Doctor runs away. Kleinman tells him he is running down a blind alley, but the Doctor refuses to listen to him. He reappears shortly, having been stabbed, and tells Kleinman he is dying. Allen makes the point that science cannot save us. Indeed, it is a blind alley.

In between the time when the Doctor runs into the alley and when he reappears, Kleinman meets Gina, another character who represents one of man's attempts to forget about death. Gina is a young, attractive woman, and Kleinman tells her she should not be on the streets at night. She tells him she is used to this; she is a prostitute. Kleinman, a very provincial middle-aged man, is at first a bit embarrassed by her confession. However, soon he and Gina admit to each other that they are frightened. They become involved in a rather philosophical discussion about life and how one can know what is real and what is not. She talks to him about the stars and points out that some of the stars are no longer there, and all they are really seeing is the light from something which has

disintegrated. This upsets Kleinman: "That's very scary, because if I see something with my own eyes, I like to think it's there. I mean, if that's true, they could all be like that--all burnt out--but we're just late getting the news" (79). Gina asks how anyone can know what is real, and Kleinman answers, "What's real is what you can touch with your hands" (80). Then he kisses her.

Kleinman and Gina seem to be communicating on a very real, personal level. He is frightened and needs reassurance, so he reaches out to another human being hoping to find solace. Many times men and women turn to sex to help them forget about their mortality. But, again, Allen points out that this is just another illusion. As soon as Kleinman kisses Gina, she says, "That'll be six dollars" (80). Kleinman is appalled, but Gina says she is a working girl. What Kleinman thought was meaningful was meaningless to Gina, at least on the level Kleinman is concerned with. Even that which Kleinman can touch with his hands is as unknowable and unreal as the non-existent stars. Allen points out that ultimately neither sex nor love can save mankind.

Another character who should be able to help Kleinman conquer the Maniac or death, but who cannot, is the Policeman. Kleinman complains that no one has been able to stop the Maniac, not even the police; the Policeman says that if the civilians would stay out of it he could do his

job. He goes on to say the department is now using a computer to help solve the case: "These babies are the best electronic brains. Incapable of error" (88). While he makes these claims, the maniac is killing more and more people. The Policeman represents man's attempts to impose order on a chaotic world. The computers represent technology, a force many believe will save us. But technology is only as good as the people who create it. Man is not infallible; neither is technology. Indeed, a look at our world today reveals that we have created more sophisticated means with which to annihilate ourselves. Allen points out that man-made laws and machines are not the answers to our ultimate problem.

The last character who claims to have the solution is Hans Spiro, the clairvoyant. The police have asked him to help solve the case. Spiro works his way across the stage sniffing everyone. When he reaches Kleinman, he sniffs harder and finally declares that Kleinman is the Maniac. Kleinman denies this, but his friends and neighbors decide to hang him. Just as he is about to be hanged, someone enters and says the Maniac has been caught. As everyone leaves to pursue the killer, Kleinman tells the mystic he needs a nose job. Mysticism, including, is another avenue man takes to find answers to the unanswerable. Allen seems to be saying that these avenues are not solutions any more than the other solutions they have tried. As Kleinman lies

dying at the end of the play, he tells the people around him to stop fighting each other. He says, "Cooperate . . . God is the only enemy" (106). Allen's uncertainty about the existence of God is well-known. If indeed there is a God, Allen concludes, we have Him to blame for the fine mess we are in.

Kleinman is one of he finally comes face to face with the Maniac, with death. Just as Death looks like Nat Ackerman in Death Knocks, this killer looks like Kleinman. But Jensen, another character who dies, tells the men that the Maniac looks like him. Again, Allen is pointing out that death is a personal, lonely experience. But whereas Ackerman's encounter with death is humorous, there is nothing humorous about Kleinman's encounter with death. The Maniac sits down and says he is exhausted. When Kleinman asks who he is, the Maniac admits to being the killer. Kleinman wonders if he is going to kill him, and the maniac responds, "Of course. That's my specialty" (101). He admits that he is crazy and tells Kleinman killing is not something he likes to do, he just does it. Kleinman tries to reason with the Maniac: "If you don't get any thrill out of killing me, why do it? It's not logical" (104). The Maniac does not even bother to answer this observation; he simply stabs Kleinman and leaves him to die.

Death is one of the grimmest of Allen's prose works. There is some humor in the play, but it is black humor. For

example, Kleinman's friends arrive as he is dying, and someone asks him if he is afraid to die. He answers, "It's not that I'm afraid to die, I just don't want to be there when it happens" (106). No matter how serious the topic, Allen cannot resist the one-liner. Kleinman's last words are a cliché: "If there is life after death and we all wind up in the same place--don't call me, I'll call you" (106). However, despite the humor, there is something chilling about this play. Kleinman wanders a dark, deserted street in the middle of the night, stalked by a maniacal killer. He wants to fight death, to be part of the plan, but he can never be sure what the plan is. Allen seems to be saying that there is no plan, no line of defense. Man attempts to elude death in a number of ways, but each way turns out to be as absurd as death itself.

Allen's one-act play God also deals with man's attempts to find answers about life and death. Allen explores the idea of whether or not God exists and, consequently, whether or not life has any order. Once again, Allen employs comedy to explore these serious topics. Allen has said that it is "through jokes that we practice denial of dread" (Schickel 64). There is something in man which craves order and dreads the idea that the universe may be chaotic. In God Allen suggests that while we can never really know whether or not God exists, probably He does not. However, we should

never give up trying to make order out of the chaos of our lives, no matter how futile our attempts are.

God is a play about a play within a play. Yacowar points out that here the stage becomes a metaphor for life: "Allen explores man's uncertainty about the existence of God through the metaphor of life as a stage on which man plays a perplexing variety of roles, with an uncertain script and no confidence that there is an audience out there" (64). The play begins with the two principal characters, the Actor and the Writer, standing in the middle of a large empty amphitheater. The time is 500 B.C. and the Writer is lamenting that he has no ending for his play, The Slave, which is to open in three days at the competition (an allusion to the Festival of Dionysus). The Actor is to appear in the play within the play, and he is worried about his reputation if the play bombs. Their discussion about the ending of the play can be interpreted as a discussion of life. The Actor's first words include "nothing," "meaningless," and "empty." These words refer to the play the Writer is trying to finish, but on another level these words refer to the meaninglessness and emptiness of life. The Writer complains, "We're always discussing the ending" (132). They are, of course, talking about the ending of the unfinished play, but essentially Allen is commenting upon the fact that man is often obsessed with death and the uncertainty of a hereafter.

Allen uses comedy to comment upon man's desire for order. The Actor points out that every play must have a beginning, middle, and end, and when the Writer asks why this must be so, the Actor replies, "Because everything in nature has a beginning, middle, and end" (132). The Writer counters this claim with "What about a circle?" (132). This humorous exchange is significant for two reasons. First, it shows man's desire for order and continuity in his life. Life should adhere to previously established expectations; if it does not, people become confused. A second reason this scene is significant is the difference in the reactions of the Actor and the Writer. The Writer is the creator of the play and, thus, on one level a type of god. He is not as concerned about order as is the actor. The Actor represents man in a created world. Perhaps Allen is saying here that although there is no real order in the world, man frantically tries to establish order to reassure himself.

Allen's treatment of order and chaos continues throughout God. Chaos and confusion reign throughout the play. The Writer and the Actor operate on several levels, sometimes simultaneously; they are characters in Woody Allen's play God, creators of the play The Slave, and performers in The Slave. Confusion occurs when people in the audience step up onto the stage and become participants in the action of the play and assume roles in the Writer's play within a play, The Slave. Doris Levine steps out of



the audience and becomes the Actor's love interest. Before the play is over, Blanche DuBois runs across the stage, having just escaped from Tennessee Williams's A Streetcar Named Desire: "He [Williams] dropped me in the center of a nightmare. The last thing I remember, I was being taken out by two strangers, one who held a straight jacket. . . . I've got to get into another play, a play where God exists . . . " (157). And then the Marx Brothers parade across the stage. Disgusted that The Slave still has no ending, the Actor decides to call the "original author," Woody Allen, for help. Allen doesn't give the Actor much help with his problem and finally tells him, "Call me back and let me know how the play ends" (145). The implication here is that nobody has any answers to the mysteries of life. Once again Allen employs comedy to express a serious idea, his belief that the only meaning of life is that "nobody knows the meaning of life" (Kelley 88).

Allen gives some of the characters in God names which are humorous and symbolic at the same time. The Writer's name is Hepatitis and the Actor's name is Diabetes. Two other characters are named Trichinosis and Bursitis. These names are humorous because the etymology of all these words except "bursitis" is Greek. Since these names are also names of human diseases or ailments, they function symbolically, signifying that man's existence is burdensome and painful. According to existentialism, man is aware of

the meaninglessness of existence and reacts to this nothingness with anxiety and loneliness (Holman 213). Anxiety and loneliness are two "illnesses" of the soul.

Allen uses comedy during Diabetes's and Hepatitis's discussion during the play, but the most humorous moments occur during the play within the play, The Slave. Diabetes plays Phidipides, the slave. Unlike most slaves, however, Phidipides is not interested in gaining his freedom. Indeed, when he is offered his freedom, he makes it clear he does not want it. The Chorus chants that Phidipides wants what all slaves want--his freedom; but Phidipides says, "I like it this way. I know what's expected of me. I'm taken care of. I don't have to make any choices. . . . I have no anxiety" (161-162). After his girlfriend Doris Levine tries to convince him that he should want his freedom, he asks, "What's the big deal about freedom? It's dangerous. To know one's place is safe" (162). When Jean-Paul Sartre said that man is condemned to freedom, he asserted that comfort and freedom are incompatible. The life of a slave is easier than the life of a free man because all the painful decisions for the slave are made by others. The truly free man is condemned to make the hard decisions for himself and to suffer in the process (Spanos 5-6). Phidipides, for all his humorous Angst, is aware of this.

Allen uses Phidipides's helplessness to show man's lack of control over his own life. Despite all his protests,

Phidipides is forced to perform a dangerous mission which will earn him his freedom. He says, "A dangerous mission followed by personal freedom. I'm getting nauseous" (165). The Fates, Bob and Wendy Fate, have chosen Phidipides to deliver a one-word message to King Oedipus. Phidipides says, "King Oedipus? . . . I hear he lives with his mother" (167). The problem is that Phidipides does not know what the question is; therefore, he does not want to do as he is asked. Phidipides finally agrees to deliver the message, partly because Doris informs him that she will sleep with him only when he is a free man, and partly because all the other characters want to get the play over with. Woody Allen, the "original" author, even calls on the telephone and says, "Will you take the goddamn message to the king. We'd all like to get the hell out of here" (165).

Phidipides is concerned about the king's reaction to the message, but when he learns the message is "yes" he is reassured. After all, "yes" is affirmative, and affirmative is good. His relief is short-lived, however, when Doris asks, "What if the questions is, Does the queen have the clap?" (178). The first thing Phidipides asks Oedipus when he sees him is whether or not the queen has the clap. This scene is humorous, but it also points out the "fear and trembling" which accompanies man's actions in the face of the unknowable.

Allen's depiction of the Fates as Bob and Wendy Fate is funny, but these two zany characters also illustrate the sometimes unpleasant role fate plays in one's life. Bob and Wendy Fate are loud, uncouth characters who dress like tourists and who constantly play practical jokes on poor Phidipides. After they talk Phidipides into taking the message to the king, they leave for New York. Later, as Phidipides is about to reach Oedipus's palace, they appear on stage snapping photographs and wishing Phidipides good luck because he sure is going to need it. When Phidipides says he thought they left town, Wendy Fate says, "You know how fate is" (171). "Unreliable," quips Bob. Bob then squirts Phidipides with a fake lapel flower and shocks him with a joy buzzer. Wendy tells Phidipides, "He loves to play tricks on people" (172). Allen uses these stock jokes to show that while man wants order and predictability in his life fate keeps playing tricks on him. Man is almost foolish to believe he controls his own destiny.

In the scene between Phidipides and King Oedipus, Allen again explores the existential tenet that man is condemned to freedom and therefore responsible for his own actions. Phidipides tries to avoid giving Oedipus the message until he can learn what the question is. When Oedipus tells Phidipides the question is "Is there a god," Phidipides is relieved and says, "Then I'm proud to give you the message. The word is yes" (181). Phidipides expects Oedipus to

reward him, but again Allen frustrates the reader's expectations when Oedipus condemns Phidipides to death. Oedipus laments, "If there is a god, then man is responsible and I will surely be judged for my sins. . . . I am doomed. This message you bring me dooms me for eternity" (182). Oedipus orders Phidipides to be torn apart by wild horses.

Before The Slave begins, Diabetes and Hepatitis finally decide how to end the play. Phidipides is to be saved just before his death by Trichinosis's new invention, the deux ex machina. Trichinosis tells Hepatitis, "I'm going to make a fortune with this invention. Sophocles put a deposit on one. Euripides wants two" (149). Trichinosis has Bursitis get into his "Zeus suit" and give a demonstration. Before the play, the machine works beautifully. However, all does not go well at the end of The Slave. Phidipides, just as he is about to be taken by the guard, calls out for Almighty Zeus to save him. After calling on Zeus several times, the deux ex machina is lowered and Bursitis is seen tangled in the wires of the machine; he has been strangled by man's invention. Phidipides says, "God . . . God? God? God, are you okay? Is there a doctor in the house?" (185). Allen undercuts the seriousness of God's death by calling for a doctor. When everyone realizes that Bursitis is beyond help, Phidipides says, "God is dead" (185). This, once again, echoes Nietzsche's pronouncement. Allen possibly

implies here that man, with his faith in science and technology, is responsible for God's death.

After God's death, total chaos reigns on the stage. Phidipides decides that he is going to be the hero of the play, and he grabs the guard's fake sword. He stabs Oedipus, and Oedipus cries, "Leave me alone . . . He's crazy . . . Stop! . . . That tickles" (187). Stanley Kowalski enters from the back of the theater shouting, "Stella! Stella!" (189). Groucho Marx chases Blanche DuBois across the stage, and a man in the audience rips the blouse off a woman seated next to him. Hepatitis cries out, "There is no more reality! Absolutely none" (189). Allen employs slapstick here to point out that in a world with no God man is often faced with confusion and chaos. In a meaningless world, order is no longer possible.

The play comes full circle when all the characters except Diabetes and Hepatitis have abandoned the stage. Diabetes says, "It was a good play. All it needed was an ending" (189). When Hepatitis asks what it all meant, Diabetes says, "Nothing . . . just nothing . . ." (189). The play, like life, is meaningless. The only order to be found is what order the characters impose on reality. But reality in this play is impossible to define. Most of the characters operate on at least two and sometimes three levels. Woody Allen, the "real" author, appears as a character in this play. God is full of humor, but what it

says about life is far from humorous. Its message is twofold: God does not exist and life is meaningless. And there is nothing funny about that.

Woody Allen is a very funny man, but sometimes there is a kind of desperation underlying his comedy. Allen admits that he has always had questions about God's existence; in several interviews Allen describes himself as an agnostic. Typically, however, he jokes about his confusion: "If there is a God, I reason, why are there such things as famine and daytime television?" (Allen, "Woody Allen" 80). This play questions God's existence and draws some tentative conclusions. However, Allen's uncertainties are always evident. Perhaps Allen's philosophy is best described by the words of the protagonist of his highly philosophical film Love and Death: "If it turns out there is a God, I don't think He is evil. I think the worst thing you can say about Him is that He is an underachiever" (Dir. Allen, United Artists 1975).

The selections in Without Feathers are every bit as humorous as the ones in Allen's first collection, Getting Even. However, underlying the humor in this collection is a deeper delving into the questions which obsess Woody Allen. The validity of religion in man's life, suicide as an option for man, man's attempts to avoid death, and God's existence or non-existence are Allen's serious themes for his comedy. Allen entertains the reader, but here his comedy is more of

what Walter Kerr calls "the groan made gay" (19). Kerr points out that man cries first and then laughs: "Comedy always comes second, late, after the fact and in spite of it or because of it. Comedy is really the underside of things, after the rock of our hearts has been lifted, with effort and only temporarily" (19). Man will always have questions about the meaning of life, and, according to Allen, he will always be frustrated because he will never be able to satisfactorily answer these questions. Laughter, however, can help ease the burden of these frustrations. Allen's prose helps to lift the rock, if only for a short time.



## Chapter V

### Selections from Side Effects

Side Effects (1980), the third collection of Woody Allen's prose, contains seventeen short stories, essays, and one-act plays. Although the old Allen brand of satire is still evident in this collection, the reader senses a change here. In a few of the selections, Allen shifts his focus from serious philosophical concerns to more of a concern with man's everyday existence. Several of the essays deal with problems in our society caused by drug use and abuse, religious cults, and even overcrowding. Allen still deals with his old themes of death and religion, but his treatment is different. Allen biographer Diane Jacobs points out that "the Side Effects stories exploit a black, rueful humor rather than the exuberant broad, parodic comedy of Getting Even and Without Feathers" (137). While all the selections in this third collection do not fit Jacobs' assessment, her comment is insightful. For the most part, the broad farce of Getting Even and the more "serious" comedy of Without Feathers are lacking in Side Effects.

There are still examples of the old Allen satire in Side Effects. For example, the first selection of the book, "Remembering Needleman," employs burlesque to reminisce about a departed friend. The narrator, who just can't believe Needleman is dead, says, "I was present at the cremation and at his son's request, brought the

marshmallows, but few of us could think of anything but our pain" (3). He remembers Needleman's concerns over his own death: "Needleman was constantly obsessing over his funeral plans and once told me, 'I much prefer cremation to burial in the earth, and both to a weekend with Mrs. Needleman'" (3). Needleman "donated his ashes to the University of Heidelberg, which scattered them to the four winds and got a deposit on the urn" (3). Needleman's untimely demise is also burlesqued; he was "tapped in the head by a wrecking ball" (4). Just before he died, his last words, which no one understood, were, "No thanks, I already own a penguin" (5). Allen's humor here depends on one-liners, a stock representation of the little man destroyed by technology, and an irrational statement made by a dying man.

Allen parodies a favorite theme of his in this short story: inflated philosophical jargon. Needleman was the author of such books as Non-Existence: What To Do If It Strikes You and Styles of Modes. Allen writes, "He [Needleman] differentiated between existence and Existence, and knew one was preferable, but could never remember which" (5-6). Allen continues to deflate philosophical jargon in the following observation:

Man, according to Needleman, was not a "thing" apart from nature, but was involved "in nature," and could not observe his own existence without first pretending to be indifferent and then

running around to the opposite end of the room  
quickly in hopes of glimpsing himself. (6)

"Remembering Needleman," with its wit and humor, is  
reminiscent of Allen's earlier works.

"The Kugelmass Episode" is another example of the old  
Allen humor. This short story won the O. Henry Award for  
best short story in 1977 (Yacowar 1). Kugelmass is a  
professor of humanities at City College and is unhappily  
married to the second Mrs. Kugelmass. He, like Needleman,  
is another example of the little man character. He is a  
hen-pecked husband and a second-rate professor who has been  
in analysis for years, but his treatment has done him little  
good. Although Kugelmass is "bald and as hairy as a bear"  
(61), he needs excitement and romance in his life. He tells  
his analyst the following:

I need to have an affair. I may not look the  
part, but I'm a man who needs romance. I need  
softness, I need flirtation. I'm not getting  
any younger, so before it's too late I want to  
make love in Venice, trade quips at "21," and  
exchange coy glances over red wine and  
candlelight. (62)

When the analyst tells him that his expectations are  
unrealistic, Kugelmass decides to try less orthodox means to  
solve his problems.

Allen's old love of magic surfaces in this story. Kugelmass visits The Great Persky, a magician who has a machine that will transport Kugelmass to any literary setting he wishes. Kugelmass is at first skeptical about climbing into the old, cheap-looking Chinese cabinet, but he is willing to try anything for some adventure. Persky throws a copy of Madame Bovary into the cabinet, raps the cabinet three times, and Kugelmass instantly finds himself in Emma Bovary's bedroom. Emma tells him she loves what he is wearing, and he replies, "It's called a leisure suit. It was marked down" (66-67). On his second visit, he and Emma make love. He cannot believe his good fortune: "My God, I'm doing it with Madam Bovary! . . . Me, who failed freshman English" (68).

Emma, eager for some excitement herself, convinces Kugelmass to bring her to New York for a weekend of fun. Kugelmass grants Emma's request, but a glitch in the cabinet causes her to have to stay longer than Kugelmass intends or wants. By the time Persky fixes the machine and sends Emma back to literature land, she has become as big a nag as Kugelmass's wife. Kugelmass swears to Persky he will never cheat again, but three weeks later he is back for more adventure and romance. He says, "Sex and romance. . . . What we go through for a pretty face" (77). All does not go well this time, however. Persky throws in a copy of Portnoy's Complaint, raps three times, and the box explodes.

Persky dies of a heart attack, the house burns down, and Kugelmass does not wind up where he intended:

He had been projected into an old textbook, Remedial Spanish, and was running for his life over a barren, rocky terrain as the word tener ("to have")--a large and hairy irregular verb--raced after him on its spindly legs. (78)

Like some of Allen's previous stories about love and sex, "The Kugelmass Episode" deals with man's attempts to make his life more exciting through intrigue. But Kugelmass, unlike Word Babcock in "The Whore of Mensa," will ultimately be destroyed for his weakness. On one level the image of Kugelmass being chased by the arachnid verb is humorous, but it is also a bit chilling. If Allen is teaching a lesson in this short story, it is that love and sex are not the answers to man's problems. Or perhaps he is saying that mankind should leave well enough alone. Sure life is horrible, but it can always get worse.

While Side Effects contains stories like "Remembering Needleman" and "The Kugelmass Episode" which are similar to the prose in Allen's first two collections, a number of stories are decidedly different in tone and subject matter. One such story is "My Speech to the Graduates." In this work Allen explores several of his old themes: the conflict between science and religion and the problems man faces due to dehumanizing technology. New concerns explored in this

work include violence, overpopulation, the energy crisis, and drug abuse. It is the tone of "My Speech to the Graduates," however, which represents a real departure for Allen. The tone is much more somber than anything in his previous prose. One of the charges Jacobs levels at Allen's Side Effects is that the humor here is "forced and listless" (138). No doubt this is one of the stories Jacobs has in mind when she says the humor seems forced, for in this selection Allen seems to have a hard time making his work humorous. This work is reminiscent of Mark Twain's "Advice to Youth," but while Twain's satire is humorous, Allen's is disturbing.

The narrator begins his speech to the graduates in the way these speeches typically begin. The students are told that "mankind faces a crossroads," hardly an original statement in such a speech. But rather than the "you-are-at-the-threshold-of-a-wonderful-life" speech, the narrator makes the following observation about this crossroads: "One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness. The other, to total extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly" (81). This is hardly humorous. Neither is the narrator's explanation of why he believes this:

I speak, by the way, not with any sense of futility, but with the panicky conviction of the absolute meaninglessness of existence which could easily be misinterpreted as pessimism. It is not.

It is merely a healthy concern for the predicament of modern man. (81)

The narrator goes on to catalogue the things which man relies upon and which have let him down. Science, he says, is not the answer:

True, it has conquered many diseases, broken the genetic code, and even placed human beings on the moon, and yet when a man of eighty is left in a room with two eighteen-year-old cocktail waitresses nothing happens. Because the real problems never change. (82)

What good is science, Allen asks, if it cannot stop us from growing old and dying?

The narrator tells the students religion has also let man down. He talks about Unamuno's "eternal persistence of consciousness," but he says "this is no easy feat. Particularly when reading Thackeray" (83). This zeugmatic statement is humorous, but what follows is not. He goes on to say that contemporary man does not have peace of mind because he is in the midst of a crises of faith: "He has seen the ravages of war, he has known natural catastrophes, he has been to single bars" (83). This deflating juxtaposition of the profound with the mundane is one of Allen's comic techniques, but in this story it evokes only a wry grin because of the depressing message of the speech.

Allen employs the image of the little man in this speech. The narrator says, "Feeling godless then, what we have done is made technology God" (83). He goes on to point out the futility of this avenue. He asks how technology can be the answer when a brand new Buick winds up through a plate glass window of a restaurant, "causing hundreds of customers to scatter" (83-84). And his toaster has never worked right in over four years. He complains, "I follow the instructions and push two slices of bread down in the slots and seconds later they rifle upward. Once they broke the nose of a woman I loved very dearly" (84). He complains about politicians and their lack of accessibility to the little man: "Under five-seven, it is impossible to get your Congressman on the phone" (84).

This speech goes on to address other problems in our society. The narrator discusses the problem of violence: "Violence breeds more violence and it is predicted that by 1990 kidnapping will be the dominant mode of social interaction" (85). Overpopulation is addressed: "If we do not call a halt to breeding, by the year 2000 there will be no room to serve dinner unless one is willing to set the table on the heads of strangers" (85). The narrator also comments on the energy crisis: "Of course energy will be in short supply, and each car owner will be allowed only enough gasoline to back up a few inches" (85). The narrator complains that instead of facing the challenges of the age,



people are turning to drugs and sex. He makes the following dark observation: "We are adrift alone in the cosmos wreaking monstrous violence on one another out of frustration and pain" (85). Allen attempts to lighten the tone with the last sentence of what has turned into a diatribe: "The trick will be to avoid the pitfalls, seize the opportunities, and get back home by six o'clock" (85). However, he has established that the pitfalls are too numerous to avoid altogether, and opportunities are almost nil. With its invective tone, "My Speech to the Graduates" is a clear departure from Allen's previous satires.

Another story which is a departure from the standard Allen work is "Nefarious Times We Live In." This short story deals with a narrator who confesses that he did indeed attempt to shoot the President of the United States. His explanation of how he came to be a would-be assassin is an indictment of the disturbing times in which we live. As in the previous story, there is humor here, but it is a darker humor than Allen has used in the past. Willard Pogrebin, the narrator, comments upon our governments' secret experiments in which unsuspecting citizens are used as guinea pigs. President Gerald Ford is satirized here. Allen also comments upon mindless young people who allow themselves to be used in drug communes as well as religious cults.

"Nefarious Times We Live In" begins with Willard's description of how and why he attempted to assassinate President Gerald Ford. It all began, he says, after Uncle Sam no longer required his services:

I had just been medically discharged from the army, the results of certain scientific experiments performed on me without my knowledge. More precisely, a group of us had been fed roast chicken stuffed with lysergic acid, in a research program designed to determine the quantity of LSD a man can ingest before he attempts to fly over the World Trade Center. (121-122)

Allen uses hyperbole here for humor, but the disturbing truth is that our government has placed lives in jeopardy without the victims' knowledge.

After Willard is subjected to electroshock therapy at a veterans' hospital, he hitchhikes west and is "picked up by two native Californians: a charismatic young man with a beard like Rasputin's and a charismatic young woman with a beard like Svengali's" (122). It seems Willard is just what they've been looking for since "they were in the process of transcribing the Kaballah on parchment and had run out of blood" (122). He tries to explain politely that he is not going their way, but "the combination of their hypnotic eyes and a knife the size of a sculling oar" (122) convince him otherwise. He is taken to their camp where drugged young

women force feed him organic food along with enough peyote and cocaine to cause his head "to revolve completely around like a radar dish" (123). He is not sure how he escapes, but a couple of months later he is arrested in Beverly Hills for attempting to marry an oyster.

Allen satirizes a number of elements in this section of the story. He satirizes the psychedelic characters one tends to associate with California during the drug era. Allen is also satirizing people who turn to drugs to find meaning in life. He witnesses a black mass where teenagers chant "Oh wow" in Latin. Allen's treatment is humorous, but underlying his humor is the disturbing realization that today our young people are too often turning to drugs and violence as an alternative lifestyle.

Allen also satirizes religious cults which prey upon troubled people. Willard, desperate to find some sort of inner peace, is approached by the proselytes of Reverend Chow Bok Ding. Allen is obviously parodying cults like the Moonies, as is evident with his description of Reverend Ding as "a moon-faced charismatic" (emphasis mine). Allen's technique of using deflating language is found in his description of Reverend Ding's "two modest goals": "One was to instill in his followers the values of prayer, fasting, and brotherhood and the other was to lead them in a religious war against the NATO countries" (123). People joke about Reverend Sun Myung Moon, but he actually is a

powerful man with ideas of world domination. And the frightening thing is that he is amassing the manpower and the wealth to make these goals a reality. He has spent three hundred million dollars buying political clout in the United States and has declared his aim as the "subjugation of the American government and population" (Judis 27). Whether or not he ever realizes his goals, it is a disturbing commentary on our age that he is able to manipulate so many young people.

Allen goes on to satirize less extreme cults found in our society. Willard, who by now has "developed the emotional stability of Caligula" (124), still searches for help. He volunteers for PET or Perlmutter's Ego Therapy, named after Gustave Perlmutter, another charismatic guru. Allen parodies the consciousness-raising groups in our society which attract people looking for answers:

Perlmutter had been a former bop saxophonist and had come to psychotherapy later in life but his method had attracted many famous film stars who swore that it changed them much more rapidly and in a deeper way than even the astrology column in Cosmopolitan. (124-125)

Willard tries to escape but finds he is surrounded by an electrical fence. The compound is eventually raided and he is set free once more.

Willard next finds himself in San Francisco, "agitating at Berkeley and informing for the FBI" (125). Willard sells information to the FBI about "a CIA plan to test the resiliency of New York City residents by dropping potassium cyanide in the reservoir" (126). A far-fetched example, no doubt, but Allen is obviously pointing out that the FBI and CIA, two agencies which supposedly protect the American public (and who should be working together), are undoubtedly carrying on projects which are not in the best interests of many American citizens.

Allen ends "Nefarious Times We Live In" on a lighter note. After Willard is kidnapped, he is "tickled by experts" and falls prey to yet another misadventure when "two men sang country and western music to [him] until [he] agreed to do anything they wanted" (126). Willard is introduced to Gerald Ford, who asks him to follow him around the country and occasionally take potshots, being careful to miss, of course. Willard tells why President Ford wants him to do this: "He said it would give him a chance to act bravely and could serve as a distraction from genuine issues, which he felt unequipped to deal with" (126). By this time Willard will agree to anything. He tells the reader it is at this point that he attempted to assassinate the President.

"Nefarious Times We Live In" is humorous in places, but often the humor is dark humor. For example, Willard finds

work as "a dialogue coach on a porn snuff movie" (126). He overhears his unseen kidnapers say that he is "lighter than Patty but heavier than Hoffa" (126). Allen's satire of President Ford is somewhat of a departure. As a stand-up comedian he hardly ever commented upon politics or politicians (Yacowar 88). The same is true of his prose. In this short story, however, Allen satirizes not only governmental agencies, but also the bumbling head of our government. Through Willard Pogrebin, a fragmented character, Allen comments upon a fragmented society.

"My Speech to the Graduates" and "Nefarious Times We Live In" are definite departures for Allen, both in subject matter and tone. But Allen has not lost his sense of humor or turned into a bitter, disillusioned humorist, as did the aged Mark Twain. Let us end our discussion of his prose works with one of his most humorous works, "Fabrizio's: Criticism and Response."

Allen returns to one of his favorite themes in "Fabrizio's: Criticism and Response," pseudo-intellectualism. This work chronicles an "exchange in one of the more thought-provoking journals" (173) about the food at Fabrizio's Villa Nova Restaurant. Hirsch makes the following observation: "The high-toned correspondents discuss food as politics, history, literature, as everything but food" (209). Allen is, of course, parodying the language of food critics, but this work could just as easily

apply to art criticism or even, God forbid, literary criticism. Fabian Plotnick, a restaurant critic, describes the food at Fabrizio's in an inflated pseudo-sociological tone. The responses to his absurd evaluation of the food are even more absurd and far-fetched, and illustrate the pseudo-intellectual exchange sometimes found in scholarly journals, which occasionally serve as an arena for the pompous to make asses of themselves.

Plotnick begins his review by praising the chef at Fabrizio's: "Pasta as an expression of Italian Neo-Realistic starch is well understood by Mario Spinelli, the chef at Fabrizio's" (173). His "wry and puckish" fettucine "owes a lot to Barzino, whose use of fettucine as an instrument of social change is known to us all" (173). Spinelli's linguine is described as delicious and "not at all didactic" (174). Plotnick goes on to describe the antipasto. He says at first it appeared aimless, but once he focused on the anchovies he thinks he knows what Spinelli is about. Could Spinelli have been commenting on the meaning of life, with the black olives serving as a depressing reminder of man's mortality? Allen follows this absurd observation with the even more absurd non sequitur, "If so, where was the celery?" (174).

Plotnick then discusses Jacobelli, an extremist chef at another restaurant who wants to call the diner's attention to life's absurdity: "Who can forget his scampi: four

garlic-drenched shrimp arranged in a way that says more about our involvement in Vietnam than countless books on the subject?" (174). Plotnick also applauds certain items on the menu because of their influence on Stravinsky's Concerto in D for Strings. The atonality of the minestrone is a perfect example: "Cluttered as it is with odd bits and pieces of food, the customer is forced to make noises with his mouth as he drinks it" (175). The result, Plotnick points out, can sometimes be delightful: "The first night I was at Fabrizio's, two patrons, a young boy and a fat man, were drinking soup simultaneously, and the excitement was such that they received a standing ovation" (175). This is Woody Allen at his best.

Plotnick's evaluation of the food is hilarious and totally absurd, as are the responses to the editor. Dove Rapkin points out Plotnick failed to mention that Fabrizio's "does not conform to the classic Italian nuclear-family structure . . . "; the sexual mores of the help are typically Victorian, "especially the girl who runs the cash register"; and the poor waiters "are often made to serve eight to ten hours a day with napkins that do not meet current safety standards" (176). There is also a letter to the editor from Professor Word Babcocke of MIT. (Is this Kaiser's old friend? If so, did he put himself through school by selling joy buzzers, and add the final "e" to his name to sound more Middle English?) Professor Babcocke



points out that Plotnick, in his discussion of Spinelli's fettuccine, failed to take into account "the size of the portions, or, to put it more directly, the quantity of the noodles" (177). Babcocke discusses the symbolic value of the fettuccine, and by assigning a value of  $x$  to the fettuccine he finally declares the true state of the pasta: "As Godal declared over and over, 'Everything must be translated into logical calculus before being eaten'" (177). Professor Quincy Mondragon sees Plotnick's review as "yet another shocking contemporary example of revisionist history" (177). He calls Fabrizio's New Villa Restaurant "a hotbed of dyed-in-the-wool Stalinists," who not only remained open during the Stalinist purges but who "enlarged its back room to seat more customers" (178). Plotnick, of course, responds to these letters and answers each charge individually. To Professor Mondragon, he points out the result of the House Un-American Activities committee's pressuring Spinelli to change the name of his "'Prosciutto and melon' to the less politically sensitive 'Prosciutto and figs'" (180). The Supreme Court handed down the now famous ruling, "Appetizers are entitled to full protection under the First Amendment" (180).

Allen's tongue-in-cheek treatment of "serious" criticism in "Fabrizio's : Criticism and Response" is humorous and at the same time denigratory of pseudo-intellectuals. His use of the inflated jargon of the would-

be scholars adds to his parody. This work reflects more of the old Allen humor and is delightful in its wit and penetrating clarity.

The selections in Side Effects are widely varied. Some of the old Allen slapstick remains, as in "My Apology," where Allen dreams he is Socrates and must die for truth. He writes, "Don't misunderstand me. I'm all for truth. On the other hand I have a lunch date in Sparta next week and it's my turn to buy. You know those Spartans, they fight so easily" (53). Allen's old stand-up routine days are also recalled in The Query, a very short one-act play with President Lincoln pleased with himself because of his witty response to a question. He tells his press secretary to play straight man and ask him a question the next time there is a press conference so he can get another laugh. He wants Jennings to ask him how long a man's legs should be, so he can again say, "Long enough to reach the ground." Jennings does not think this is funny and an annoyed Lincoln says, "Well, I got a big laugh with it today" (161). These examples of Allen's deflating of historical figures are reminiscent of his earlier stories.

However, the reader cannot but be aware of the change evident in Side Effects. Many of the works in Allen's earlier collections were more like comedy routines than prose works--one sight gag and one laugh after the others. There are fewer selections like this in Side Effects. Allen

still satirizes many of his favorite themes: pseudo-intellectualism, love, sex, death, and religion. But there is a decided difference in his treatment. The idea of death becomes even more frightening because Allen discusses it in less abstract terms; here it becomes an immediate possibility in a technologically advanced world in which annihilation is just a push button away. Allen also deals with more contemporary issues in this collection, such as overcrowding, drug abuse, and religious cults.

Allen biographer and critic Diane Jacobs charges that some of the pieces in Side Effects are "forced and listless" and complains that "clearly Allen's ambitions are no longer here" (138). Perhaps Jacobs is right about Allen's ambitions. Except for the stage play The Floating Lightbulb published in 1982, Allen has stopped publishing. A few of the stories from his three collections have been republished in magazines in the 1980's, but there has been no new material. Allen has said in interviews that he prefers writing to filmmaking, and wishes he had the discipline to stop making films for a while (Shales 95). However, one cannot help but think if he really wanted to write he would be doing it. After all, if there has ever been a three-hundred pound canary in the entertainment industry, surely it is Woody Allen.

Jacobs is wrong on one point, however. The works in Side Effects are not "listless." Some of them are

different, and quite possibly Allen intended them to be. Side Effects was published in 1980, the same year Allen's experimental film Stardust Memories appeared in the theater. Just as Allen was experimenting with film, perhaps he was experimenting with some of his prose. Or perhaps Allen was unconsciously responding to societal changes which were not for the better. Rather than "listless," a better word to describe some of these stories is "disturbing." Allen's satires comment upon man and his weaknesses, and, quite simply, some things are difficult to make humorous.

## Conclusion

Woody Allen is recognized as one of the true comic geniuses of his time. His work in a variety of areas has struck a chord in the American psyche that causes men and women to identify with his little man persona pitted against an increasingly mechanized, indifferent, and sometimes dehumanizing society. Allen's comedy routines, films, and prose express our concerns about love, death, sex, religion, and God's existence. Much of Allen's work expresses the existential feeling of alienation of our age.

Allen is an artist who appeals to a wide audience, and this appeal testifies to his enormous talent. Through his development as a comedian, Allen watched and absorbed the talents and ideas of popular entertainers such as Bob Hope, Groucho Marx, and Mel Brooks. He was also influenced by more sophisticated artists such as Robert Benchley and S. J. Perelman. Some of his films have been enormously popular with the general public, and his New Yorker pieces appeal to a smaller, more discriminating audience. Perhaps Allen's appeal is a result of his accurately reflecting our troubled times. From the broad slapstick of his early films to the quick wit of his stand-up routines to his sophisticated satirical prose, Woody Allen is an entertainer and artist who has helped mankind cope with serious issues.

In his excellent work Tragedy and Comedy, Walter Kerr asserts that "comedy is tragedy's private diary" (26). Kerr

points out that tragedy and comedy spring from the same source, but there is, of course, a major distinction:

Tragedy's pain is productive; it comes of the abrasiveness of moving forward toward transformation. Comedy, making capital of the absurdity of seeking transformation, must forever contain its pain. . . . Tragedy uses suffering; comedy can only live with it. (339)

Kerr goes on to point out that often comedy is a result of dissatisfaction with self, and that by transforming the resultant anger into laughter, man is able to temporarily abate that anger (339-340).

Woody Allen's comedy is a result of his dissatisfaction with himself, but also with other people and with life in general. He is concerned, sometimes even angry, that man's life must be filled with uncertainty and dissatisfaction. He uses his comedy to explore the serious business of living and dying, and while he does not answer any of the mysterious questions about life and death, he does abate the emotional trauma with laughter.

While it is undeniable that Allen has pursued his most serious art through the film world, his prose is also a welcomed contribution to the world of art. Allen's vehicle in his prose is comedy, most often to entertain the reader, but often to make a serious point or to teach a serious lesson. Nothing is safe from his satirical pen. He

parodies the Bible as well as pseudo-intellectual scholarly journals. Love and sex are frequently satirized to point out man's foibles and weaknesses. Such seemingly serious subjects as death and the existence of God also are explored to the reader's delight and elucidation. Maurice Yacowar, whose excellent work Loser Take All: The Comic Art of Woody Allen is perhaps the best book about Allen's work, points out the importance of Allen's prose: "Even if Woody Allen had not written his plays and made his movies, his short prose works would entitle him to consideration as a major American humorist" (73). Very little has been written about his prose. Perhaps this dissertation will spur further scholarly inquiry into a much deserved area of the Allen canon.

Just as Allen's films have shown an artistic development, his prose works also exhibit a discernable development. His first collection, Getting Even, contains some of his funniest work. The collection is full of sight gags, slapstick, and broad farce. He deals with serious issues such as death and immortality, but the reader is hard pressed to do anything but laugh at these zany works. Without Feathers, the second collection, also contains much of the old Allen humor of juxtaposing the serious and the mundane, but there seems to be a more serious treatment of certain themes. To be sure, his light touch remains in most of the works, but the one-act plays Death and God evoke a

definite undercurrent of somber contemplation about two themes Allen is obsessed with. Despite the humor which is evident in both works, these plays raise serious philosophical questions in the reader's mind.

There is also a discernible difference in some of the works found in Side Effects, Allen's last collection of prose. Foster Hirsch did not comment upon this difference. He sees this collection as a welcome change after Allen's somber film Stardust Memories. He makes the following observation: "It's as if the essays serve as a safety valve, a repository for the old-style Allen comedy, while the new, more grown-up Woody pours his angst into comedies that he hopes will be audacious and scabrous" (207). Allen biographer Diane Jacobs did not fail to notice the difference in these works, however. She calls them "forced and listless" and makes note of the "black, rueful humor" found here (137-138). Some of the selections definitely contain black humor, much more so than the selections in the previous two collections. And perhaps one can argue that Allen does seem to have to force himself to be funny in works such as "My Speech to the Graduates" and "Nefarious Times We Live In." But if the humor is forced, it is surely more from Allen's sense of despair over the crippling problems our society faces rather than from any sense of listlessness. Allen cares about what he sees going on in the world around him. Perhaps he cares too much. But Allen



will always react to his despair with his gift--his humor. No matter how bleak the outlook, Allen will never be able to resist the one-liner. It may sometimes seem forced, but it will always be there in his prose. And it will always be funny.

Woody Allen is one of our most talented entertainers and is quite arguably the most gifted comedian of our century. Whether or not one agrees with Allen's assessment that doing comedy is "sitting at the children's table," there is no arguing with the fact that Allen is good at what he does. Foster Hirsch gives the following assessment of Allen's achievements: "[E]ven if Woody never tells another joke, his contribution to American comedy is absolutely secure, his comic films, essays, plays, and albums assured of a high and lasting place in our popular culture" (213). Woody Allen has indeed become an icon of popular culture. It is through laughter that man is able to cope with the miseries of life and his own shortcomings. Allen's comedy enables us to see our weaknesses and shortcomings, but not to take them too seriously. After all, we are only going to die in the end anyway, so what's the big deal? Allen helps the reader look at life in this light and still laugh about it. Herein lies his talent. Any artist who can help man laugh in the face of death has made a real contribution to mankind. For it is by laughing, especially at one's troubles, that life is made bearable.

## Works Cited

### Primary Sources:

- Allen, Woody. "Conversations with Helmholtz." Getting Even. 1971. New York: Vintage, 1978. 85--91.
- . Death. Without Feathers. 1975. New York: Ballantine, 1983. 43--107.
- . Death Knocks. Getting Even. 1971. New York: Vintage, 1978. 31--41.
- . God. Without Feathers. 1975. New York: Ballantine, 1983. 129--191.
- . "Hassidic Tales, with a Guide to Their Interpretation by the Noted Scholar." Getting Even. 1971. New York: Vintage, 1978. 48--53.
- . "The Kugelmass Episode." Side Effects. New York: Ballantine, 1980. 59--78.
- , dir. Love and Death. With Allen and Diane Keaton. United Artists, 1975.
- . "The Metterling Lists." Getting Even. 1971. New York: Vintage, 1978. 3--9.
- . "Mr. Big." Getting Even. 1971. New York: Vintage, 1978. 103--112.
- . "My Apology." Side Effects. New York: Ballantine, 1980. 45--57.
- . "My Philosophy." Getting Even. 1971. New York: Vintage, 1978. 21--25.

- . "My Speech to the Graduates." Side Effects. New York: Ballantine, 1980. 79--85.
- . "Nefarious Times We Live In." Side Effects. New York: Ballantine, 1980. 119--126.
- . "The Query." Side Effects. New York: Ballantine, 1980. 157--170.
- . "Remembering Needleman." Side Effects. New York: Ballantine, 1980. 1--9.
- . "The Scrolls." Without Feathers. 1975. New York: Ballantine, 1983. 24--29.
- . "Selections from the Allen Notebook." Without Feathers. 1975. New York: Ballantine, 1983. 7--11.
- , dir. Stardust Memories. With Allen and Charlotte Rampling. United Artists, 1980.
- . "The Whore of Mensa." Without Feathers. 1975. New York: Ballantine, 1983. 35--43.
- . "Woody Allen on Love and Death." Esquire July 1975: 79--83.

Secondary Sources:

- Berger, Phil. "The Business of Comedy." New York Times Magazine 9 June 1985: 55+.
- Bond, Richmond P. English Burlesque Poetry. New York: Russell & Russell, 1964.
- Cohen, Sarah Blacher. "The Varieties of Jewish Humor." Jewish Wry: Essays on Jewish Humor. Ed. Sarah Blacher Cohen. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987. 1--15.

- Cooper, Arthur. "Allen the Author." Newsweek 23 June 1975: 8.
- Dart, John. "Woody Allen, Theologian." Christian Century 22 June 1977: 585--89.
- Dempsey, Michael. "The Autobiography of Woody Allen." Film Comment May/June 1979: 9--16.
- Feinberg, Leonard. Introduction to Satire. Ames: Iowa State UP, 1967.
- Frye, Northrop. Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays. 1957. New York: Atheneum, 1965.
- Geist, William E. "The Rolling Stone Interview: Woody Allen." Rolling Stone 9 April 1987: 39--42+.
- Gilliatt, Penelope. "Guilty, With an Explanation." New Yorker 4 Feb. 1974: 39--44.
- . "Woody Reverberant." New Yorker 7 Oct. 1978: 76--78.
- Gittelsohn, Natalie. "The Maturing of Woody Allen." New York Times Magazine 22 April 1979: 30--32+.
- Gornick, Vivian. "Face It, Woody Allen, You're Not a Schlep Anymore." Village Voice 5 Jan. 1976: 9--11.
- Hight, Gilbert. The Anatomy of Satire. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1962.
- Hirsch, Foster. Love, Sex, Death, and the Meaning of Life: Woody Allen's Comedy. New York: McGraw, 1981.
- "His Own Boswell." Time 15 Feb. 1963: 78.

- Holman, C. Hugh. A Handbook to Literature. Indianapolis: Odyssey, 1972.
- Howe, Irving. "The Nature of Jewish Laughter." Jewish Wry: Essays on Jewish Humor. Ed. Sarah Blacher Cohen. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987. 16--24.
- Jacobs, Diane. But We Need the Eggs: The Magic of Woody Allen. New York: St. Martin's P, 1982.
- James, Caryn. "Auteur! Auteur!" New York Times Magazine 19 Jan. 1986: 18--30.
- Jerome, Jim. "If Life's a Joke, Then the Punchline is Woody Allen." People Weekly 4 Oct. 1976: 39--44.
- Judis, John B. "Rev. Moon's Rising Political Influence." U.S. News & World Report 27 Mar. 1989: 27--31.
- Kael, Pauline. "Anybody Home?" New Yorker 8 Aug. 1983: 84--89.
- . "The Frog Who Turned into a Prince: The Prince Who Turned into a Frog." New Yorker 27 Oct. 1980: 178--90.
- Kelley, Ken. "A Conversation with the Real Woody Allen (or Someone Just Like Him)." Rolling Stone 1 July 1976: 34--40+.
- Kerr, Walter. Tragedy and Comedy. New York: Clarion, 1968.
- Kroll, Jack. "The Inner Woody." Newsweek 7 Aug. 1978: 83--85.
- . "Woody." Newsweek 24 April 1978: 62--71.

- . "Woody's Bow to Broadway." Newsweek 30 Jan. 1984: 69.
- Lax, Eric. On Being Funny: Woody Allen and Comedy. New York: Charterhouse, 1975.
- Logan, Audy. "Around City Hall: Grand Tour." New Yorker 9 July 1990: 77--82.
- Mast, Gerald. The Comic Mind: Comedy and the Movies. 2nd ed. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1979.
- . "Woody Allen: The Neurotic Jew as American Clown." Jewish Wry: Essays on Jewish Humor. Ed. Sarah Blacher Cohen. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1987. 125--140.
- Nash, Walter. The Language of Humor. London: Longman, 1985.
- Pogel, Nancy. Woody Allen. Boston: Twayne, 1987.
- Rich, Frank. "An Interview with Woody Allen: Of Love, Death, Chicken and Bob Hope." Time 30 April 1979: 68--69.
- . "Woody Allen Wipes the Smile Off His Face." Esquire May 1977: 72--76+.
- Rose, Lloyd. "Humor and Nothingness." Atlantic May 1985: 94--96.
- Schapiro, Barbara. "Woody Allen's Search for Self." Journal of Popular Culture 19 (1986): 47--62.
- Schickel, Richard. "Woody Allen Comes of Age." Time 30 April 1979: 62--65.

- Shales, Tom. "Woody: The First Fifty Years." Esquire  
April 1987: 88--95.
- Spanos, William V. A Casebook on Existentialism. New York:  
Thomas Y. Crowell, 1966.
- Whitman, Walt. "Song of Myself." Anthology of American  
Literature. 4th ed. Ed. George McMichael. Vol. 2 New  
York: McMillan, 1989. 34--78.
- "Woody Allen: Rabbit Running." Time 3 July 1972: 58--61.
- Yacowar, Maurice. Loser Take All: The Comic Art of Woody  
Allen. New York: Frederick Unger, 1979.
- Yates, Norris W. The American Humorist: Conscience of the  
Twentieth Century. New York: Citadel P, 1964.