

WOODY ALLEN – HERO OR ANTI-HERO?

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Abstract: By examining his collection of short stories and some of his films, Woody Allen's work can be placed within the context of American culture and history. His prose and films deal with broad social and cultural subjects, themes that comprise the core of contemporary life. In contrast to the classic myth of American manhood, Allen's hero finds love and identity by revealing rather than repressing pain, fear, and dependence. The central link among the major literary and cinematic works is the concept of the schlemiel as a hero. The purpose of the hereby paper is to present the way in which Allen uses the schlemiel figure as a metaphorical device in order to examine and criticize particular aspects of Jewish and American culture. The schlemiel's personality traits are deeply embedded in Jewish culture.

Keywords: schlemiel, humour, hero, anti-hero, American culture

Woody Allen was born Allen Stewart Koningsberg on December 1, 1935, and grew up in the lower-middle class area of Brooklyn. His background and upbringing were Jewish. As a youngster he developed an obsession with writing gag lines and humorous stories. These stories appeared regularly in the *New Yorker* and *Playboy* and were later collected in three popular books: *Without Feathers* (1971), *Getting Even* (1975), and *Side Effects* (1980). His greatest popularity came with the success of his films. To many, Allen is unquestionably better known for his highly publicized personal life than for his serious exploration of the human condition.

By using particular literary, technical, and linguistic innovations, Allen introduces the schlemiel character who reveals the complexities of modern existence, the ambiguities and anxieties of Jewish identity, and the nature and goals of comedy. The schlemiel is a comic character whose importance can be seen in terms of his socio-cultural location. The first section of this study will reflect on the historical evolution of the schlemiel character in Jewish literature and culture. Whereas the Yiddish fool "was an expression of faith in the face of material disproofs," Wisse asserts, "[t]he American schlemiel declares his humanity by loving and suffering in defiance of the forces of depersonalization" (*The Schlemiel as Modern Hero* 82).

In his book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Sigmund Freud notes, "Jewish humor points to the ability of Jewish people to engage in a thorough self-criticism, advocate a democratic way of life, emphasize the moral and social principles of the Jewish religion, and criticize the excessive requirements of it". According to him, by studying humor we find truths about people's identity that their inhibitions might conceal. One might say the same thing about Jewish language, food, or music, but

because humor reveals inner tensions and concerns, Jewish humor provides a unique tool for understanding some aspects of Jewish-American identity. According to many scholars, the uniqueness of Jewish humor lies in its self-deprecation and enormous energy. One character of Jewish folklore and fiction whose life-style is the embodiment of these characteristics is the schlemiel. In her book *The Schlemiel as Modern Hero*, Ruth R. Wisse writes, "The schlemiel is a character who stands in the old age company of fools, embodying the most outstanding folly of his culture – its weakness". According to her, the function of the schlemiel is of a wide, societal nature. The figure of a little man who is at odds with his surroundings and who consistently expresses anxieties and frustrations can be seen to be more dominant in particular periods than others. By studying the emergence of the schlemiel character, we can begin to understand some important aspects of Jewish-American culture.

Although the schlemiel as a hero, in a broader sense, achieved popular success in the early twentieth century in minstrel shows and stand-up comedy, Wisse rightly argues that the schlemiel's acceptance into serious literature came later.

As America's attitudes toward itself changed, the Jewish fool rose quickly to the forefront of its culture. Taboo subjects, including sex, race and religion, were broached. In retrospect, Allen's schlemiel seems perfectly suited to his times. The sixties was a period of enormous social and political revolution marked by forces of skepticism and cynicism on the one hand, and idealism and hope on the other. The mingling of these forces resulted in confusion and tension. In a time of cultural and political upheaval, Allen's work seemed to represent the position of an ordinary man in the midst of these societal transformations. His schlemiel allowed for a refuge into the absurd. According to Wisse, schlemiels exist where

society imposes barriers to human progression. Because the human condition in the late Twentieth Century is becoming increasingly absurd, the schlemiel is becoming a figure to aspire to rather than one that is the object of ridicule. According to Sanford Pinsker, "[s]chlemiels in the modern world have a way of turning their defeats into real victories" (*The Schlemiel as Metaphor* 160). In other words, the importance of this character is not only in identifying tensions in life but in showing how to negotiate them.

Although in his writing Allen cannot exploit the consistent effect of his face and voice, the reader can sense his persona behind his prose. The characters in Allen's prose exist on the fringe of an unsympathetic and absurd world. They are both teased and satisfied by improbable dreams, as presented in his three collections of short stories, *Without Feathers*, *Getting Even*, and *Side Effects*. The comic metamorphoses in *Without Feathers* show a man hopelessly trapped in his own nature. Although these stories were written and published separately, Allen's imagery has a personal consistency, man's hopelessness in an absurd world. In Allen's prose and fantasies man usually experiences defeat and humiliation. Most of his stories have in common the anti-hero who is struggling to understand the world around him. They seem to be extended monologues which show their heroes' sensibilities. Allen attacks logic, convention, and propriety. By using the schlemiel character in his short stories, he investigates death ("A Guide of Some of the Lesser Ballets," "Reminiscences," "Conversations with Helmholtz"), God ("Mr. Big"), institutionalized religion ("The Condemned"), intellectualism ("Confessions of a Burglar"), the inadequacy of culture and education ("The Gossage-Vardebedian Papers"), confusion between art and life ("The Kugelmass Episode"), and high art and popular culture ("The Whore of Mensa"). His prose has a tendency to centre on extremely unheroic figures that assume heroic stances. His metaphorical device, the schlemiel character, is used to examine and exploit cultural, social and political notions.

Many critics have tried to place Allen's prose and films within the broader context of American culture. As part of Allen's involvement in understanding and representing the American experience today, his films deal with broad social and cultural subjects that are at the core of contemporary life. The subjects that comprise the body of his work often include the ambiguities of Jewish identity, the power of love and loyalty in a corrupt society, and the examination of contemporary family relationships. The central link

among most of his films is the concept of the schlemiel as hero. Schlemiels tell their stories with irony and bitterness. In Allen's films, they are self-styled comedians whose subject is themselves.

Allen's film persona is witty, ironic, sex-obsessed, and plagued with ego problems. In creating his persona, Allen follows a traditional comic pattern of distancing himself from the norm. The comic characters in his films are extreme, obsessive, limited, and eccentric. Three examples of the schlemiel characters from his films may be: *Annie Hall*, *Zelig*, and *Crimes and Misdemeanors*.

Allen's film *Zelig* (1983) is a fantastic story of one man's metamorphoses and a condemnation of societal opinion. The narrative structure, plot, and comic action of *Zelig* rest on consistent changes that the main character is going through. Never at home anywhere, yet struggling to reinvent a home in other shapes and forms, Zelig personifies Allen's view that an emancipated Jew lives in a ghetto of illusion. A character who is under pressure to succeed in America and find some meaning in either art or life, Zelig is one of Allen's most radical schlemiels.

Another example of the schlemiel in a film is Allen's Alvy Singer of *Annie Hall*, the narrator who moves the story from the present to the past, suspends comments on various incidents, seemingly seizing control over the proceedings. Nevertheless, he is portrayed as a neurotic who expresses a genuine unhappiness with himself. All the aspects of his schlemiel character are held up as matters for analyses and regret. Allen's verbal skills confound sense and expectation. His schlemiel's wit, a means of camouflage and attack, is his main weapon against the world around him. Allen's persona attempts to maintain order by using the absurd and the surreal. His response is always surprising. A character like this holds up a mirror to the reader's own insecurities, feelings of exclusion and inadequacy. The third schlemiel examined in this section will be Cliff Stern from *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989). Allen uses Stern in order to show further development of the schlemiel character in Allen's canon, particularly the main character's moral decline and feelings of hopelessness.

Woody Allen's approach to art and life and his ultimate impact on humor have made him important to his reader's critical and cultural consciousness. Allen proposes identity as a consistent problem of being human. His metaphorical tool is the schlemiel character that he often parodies in his work. The schlemiel's unconscious sense of personal inadequacy allows Allen to use him in such a way as to examine the modern philosopher's identity problems. Allen's schlemiel triumphs through his absurd creations.

Allen suggests that if the human condition today is becoming absurd, then it is perhaps the figure of schlemiel that the reader can identify with. The function of this metaphorical device is to exploit some accepted philosophical issues and to present the reader with a contemporary hero. Through his hero's confessions Allen creates sense where there is no sense.

Allen's readers and audience are receptive to his experimentation with language and visual images. In his prose and films, Allen embodies the anxiety and anguish of urban claustrophobia, political and cultural alienation, and economic and environmental insecurity. His schlemiel deals with love and identity by revealing rather than repressing pain, fear, and dependence. For Allen's hero, emotional expression means empowerment through parody, sarcasm, and humor.

The self-centeredness of the schlemiel heroes influences the form of the stories they star in. Allen's essays and films are picaresque, made up of a series of mostly comic sketches at the center of which is the anti-hero's struggling, witty mind. Allen's prose is fragmented and anecdotal. His contradictory hero is a compound of intellect and lust, rational skepticism and irrational, absurd fantasies. He is caught somewhere between the religious and social tradition in which he has been raised, and modern nihilism. Being outside of the ghetto, Allen's schlemiel is in search of a place of his own. In this search, the schlemiel character does not remain a static type. While in his stories Allen uses the schlemiel in order to investigate alienation in life, in his films this character becomes a vehicle for investigating feelings of alienation between the audience and his character. In her book *Woody Allen*, Nancy Pogel examines the changing nature of Allen's hero: "Although the little man had been gradually becoming a less humble, more self-conscious, and more blemished central figure, Allen drives his inquiries further. In presenting a still less appealing little man, who often feels alienated from fans, Allen threatens to cut audiences away from their familiar lines of identification with the main character and to leave viewers with additional uncertainty." (134) Allen introduces a more confrontational humor that reflects concerns about the probability for attaining meaning in the face of contemporary fragmentation and alienation.

Allen has written plays, essays and film scripts. Since 1964 he has written two plays, *Don't Drink the Water* (1967) and *Play it Again, Sam* (1969), which was made into a movie. His best known one-act plays are: *Death Knocks* (1974), *Death* (1975), *God* (1975), and *The Query* (1976). His

prose has the form of literary parody and heroic satire. Allen depicts an image of a man who exists on the outskirts of an unsympathetic and absurd world. Allen's prose tends to centre around schlemiel characters who, in their search for understanding of their worlds, experience humiliation, defeat, and misunderstanding. Allen's schlemiel characters function as metaphorical devices that serve to examine, exploit, and parody traditional philosophical and social issues. In order to create and sustain the vision of a decentered world and individuals who are searching for meaning in their lives, Allen has developed a particular style of artistic complexity. Perhaps the greatest tension within his work is in his characters' desire to ground their lives in a set of traditional moral values, of which they regretfully acknowledge the lack of an ontological foundation. In order to show the ways in which the schlemiel character is used as a metaphorical device in Allen's prose, it is necessary to examine three aspects of his literary technique: character, themes and style.

The schlemiel is a comic anti-hero whose misfortune is his **character**. Allen uses this figure to reveal rather than repress his character's anxieties and feelings of inadequacy and dependence. His schlemiels are self-centered, witty, analytical, and highly sarcastic. Though Allen's schlemiels resemble the schlemiels from Jewish literature and folklore, their evolution is influenced by their own environment. Caught between the religious and social tradition and modern alienation and nihilism, Allen's schlemiels are searching for a place of their own. Their manipulative tool is language and their way of defining themselves is a verbal reaction to different emotions and circumstances.

Identity is a constant problem in Allen's prose. His persona rarely assumes one character name. His narrators are various book reviewers, critics, scholars and authors. When names do appear, Allen uses them for the life of his short stories and then drops them. That is because he creates characters that inhabit a particular piece in order to realize the fantasy or scrutinize the reality at hand. Nor are the subjects, as opposed to the narrators of the short stories, immune to a peculiar metamorphosis.

The very titles of Allen's three anthologies express his schlemiel's paranoia. *Getting Even* implies the underdog's revenge on a world of abusive superiors. *Without Feathers* derives from Emily Dickinson's poem "Hope is the Thing with Feathers". The implication is that man is a hopeless creature, without feathers.

The characters of Allen's prose are often weak and suffer from feelings of inferiority and sexual

inadequacy. In his prose fantasies, man experiences defeat and humiliation. The comic metamorphoses in Without Feathers show man hopelessly rooted in his own nature. Allen creates characters that populate a particular story in order to realize their fantasy. For instance, in "A Guide to Some of the lesser Ballads", a character named Sigmund falls in love with the leader of a flock of swans. She is "part swan and part woman – unfortunately divided lengthwise". Because of this, he decides to wed the beautiful Justine, who "has no major drawbacks like feathers or a beak". The swan-woman runs headlong into a brick wall, because only death can lift the spell upon her. As Sigmund watches her return to beautiful but dead womanhood, he "realizes how bittersweet life can be, particularly for fowl". Resolving to join her in death, he does a delicate dance in mourning, and then swallows a barbell. Unable to acquire feathers and soar, Sigmund ingests weights and sinks.

Allen's jokes about metamorphosis are fantasy equivalents to these games in which man puts on feathers to escape his hopelessness. One character in "Lovborg's Women Considered" is bored by her husband's "habit of wearing feathers to dinner". She is also sickened by his middle-class mentality. The husband's name is Moltvick. We see that Allen creates an absurd world in which characters can escape into the strangest fantasies. Although these collected pieces were written and published separately, Allen's imagery has a personal consistency: man's hopelessness is reflected in his lack of feathers.

Allen's schlemiel's familiar despair is also expressed in the defeats his character suffers. In "Count Dracula", the vampire's dinner appointment happens to occur on the day of an eclipse of the sun. Dracula mistakenly emerges seven hours early and dissolves into a pile of white ash; his simple hosts survive because of their innocence, unknowingly protected by the cosmos. When an Allen character does enjoy success, it is either strange or hallucinatory. For example, in "Reminiscences" a list of failures culminates in an improbable success – Juan, "a simple pig farmer who could not write his name but somehow managed to defraud I.T.T. out of six million dollars". It seems that Allen's world is so bleak that any success must be this implausible. Also in "Reminiscences" a genre normally characterized by nostalgic delights becomes a chronicle of absurd surprises: a stifling Brooklyn summer's day receives a massive snowfall; a pretzel seller is chased up a tree by vicious dogs – only to find more dogs at the top of the tree.

Allen's prose establishes a world in which his characters consistently face instability and

disorder. Outsiders to both the sustaining religious and social traditions in which they were raised, temperamentally alienated from the dominant culture, the schlemiel in Allen's prose are men stuck in the middle, moving painfully towards emotional freedom. Shadowed by the threat of psychic breakdown, they make uneasy comic heroes, and their stories contain a genuine attraction to the exploration and exploitation of traditionally accepted philosophical and social notions.

Themes. As part of Allen's involvement in understanding and representing the American experience today, his prose deals with broad philosophical, social, and cultural issues: existential concerns, the will to live, art, history, science, politics, death, an afterlife, and institutional religion. His prose generally does not suggest easy solutions to different tensions in life. Instead, he often dramatizes these issues by conveying them through a fragmented consciousness that in itself suggests psychic and social displacement.

However curious Allen's schlemiel may be about the world beyond, he is limited to his own experiences and needs. In "Examining Psychic Phenomena", he points out that "there is no question that there is an unseen world. The problem is, how far is it from midtown and how late is it open". In "My Philosophy", each philosophical observation ends on a note of bathos or anticlimax: "The universe is merely a fleeting idea in God's mind – a pretty uncomfortable thought, particularly if you've just made a down payment on a house".

Allen deflates every venture into philosophy, making material and practical observations the inescapable extra baggage which accompanies every thought. His parody and ironic undercutting tend to be expressed through schlemiel examining the emergence and evolution of the schlemiel character through some of the more important literary works of the Jewish-American canon. We have seen that they have many things in common, particularly their penchant for catastrophe and their ability to survive it. In order to understand the ways in which the schlemiel is used in the works of Woody Allen it is important to realize who its schlemiel predecessors are and in which way they have influenced him. The schlemiel character never stays the same. His evolution is influenced by his surroundings, his inner fears and insecurities and by his creator's goals.

By using the schlemiel character, Allen writes prose parody which often assumes a writing style that undermines itself, and frequently parodies different kinds of fictional styles and genres. His "No Kaddish for Weinstein" parodies the self-

analytical monologues of a below-Bellow intellectual, who "suffered untold injustices and persecutions because of his religion, mostly from his parents". Though they are Jewish, "they could never accept the fact that their son was Jewish". Allen reverses the familiar themes of alienation, assimilation, and parental pressures in contemporary Jewish-American fiction.

In his story "A Twenties Memory", Allen examines and parodies the relationship between his character and art. The story is a memoir of someone who likes to be associated with great artists but has no understanding of their work or language. The character betrays his literary pretensions by misusing terms. For example, he was working through what he "felt was a major American novel but the print was too small and [he] couldn't get through it". In the same vein, Juan Gris "began to break [Alice Tokla's] face and body down into its basic geometrical forms until the police came and pulled him off". Salvador Dali's one-man show proved "a huge success, as one man showed up". Memoirs attend to irrelevant trivia about the artists, but do not illuminate their art. The narrator of "A Twenties Memory" imposes his ignorance on his material in the same way that the analyses in "Slang Origins" can be traced to that narrator's admission that time did not allow him to research the subject properly – so his etymologies are based on information from friends and his own common sense – which all prove to be uncommon nonsense.

What begins as a response to an artistic endeavor quickly degenerates into irrelevant pedantry. The first line of this story establishes the character's conflicting energies and enthusiasm: "Understand you are dealing with a man who knocked off *Finegans Wake* on the roller coaster at Coney Island, penetrating the abstruse Joycean arcana with ease, despite enough violent lurching to shake loose my silver fillings". Allen's main character is the zippy dilettante unable to appreciate or concentrate on what is basic in art. He is an outsider, unable to understand the language of the group he wants to belong to.

In "The Schmeed Memoirs", Allen parodies the spate of Nazi reminiscence. Schmeed makes the usual Nazi rationalizations: a simple barber, he pleads ignorance about what was going on at the time. He did not know Hitler was a Nazi; he thought he worked for a phone company. Then there is the argument of personal needs – when he found out who Hitler was, "It was too late to do anything, as I had made a down payment for some furniture". At one point he had considered such subversive activities as "loosening the Fuhrer's neck napkin and allowing some tiny hairs to get down his back". His nerves failed at the last

moment. Schmeed is a typical example of the schlemiel character in the way he makes an inappropriate or nonsensical comment while at the same time satirizing a view or state of mind.

One of Allen's most complex mock- heroic stories is "Yes, But Can the Steam Engine Do This?" from the collection *Getting Even*. The piece begins as if it were to concern itself with the writer's Kafkaesque hound, a beagle named Joseph K., but it becomes a parody of historical biography. Allen tells the heroic saga of how the Earl of Sandwich invented the sandwich. Allen's prose suggests a magnificent undertaking, and the Earl is portrayed as a true artist struggling through various obstacles to a heroic breakthrough. The Earl is shown as obsessed with food. His graduate thesis deals with "The Analysis and Attendant Phenomena of Snacks" and at Cambridge he is charged with stealing loaves of bread for use in "unnatural experiments". These details parody familiar elements in the Hollywood films about mad scientists. The narrator elevates the sandwich to the complexity of a scientific discovery and a work of art. Allen presents us this story in ludicrous detail. At the end of "Yes, But Can the Steam Engine Do This?" the narrator admits that his heroic saga might be an illusion: "My grasp of history is a bit shaky, and my capacity for romanticizing easily dwarfs that of the average acidhead". The title of the saga suggests that human creativity is superior to mechanical performance, however laborious and inefficient man's effort might be. The exaggerated story is not history but "romanticizing" that gives a glimpse of the human effort as opposed to the mechanical. Without the solace of such myths, man might sink to the miseries of Joseph K., the beagle who visits a Jungian veterinarian in order to be assured that "jowls are not a social drawback". Through this "little" schlemiel Allen seems to say that unlike machines, man needs and creates myths that magnify human achievement.

Even though Allen is rarely openly political in his works, he does examine the process of political argument. For example, in "Remembering Needleman" a mock eulogy turns into an ironic demonstration of how horrifying, inhuman, and irresponsibly philosophy can be rationalized. Though Needleman is obviously a moronic Nazi, the speaker nevertheless claims heroic virtues for him. Needleman managed to offend everybody. Harvard dismissed him for his Communist sympathies, but then he alienated the left by testifying for the House Un-American Activities Committee. He justified this compromise by arguing that "political actions have no moral

consequences but exist outside of the realm of the true Being".

An irresponsible academic, Needleman dabbled in politics without principle, nor integrity. Allen makes it clear that academic study cannot be detached from the real political consequences. Denying responsibility for the consequences of his theories, Needleman goes so far as to rationalize away existence itself: "After much reflection, Needleman's intellectual integrity convinced him that he didn't exist, his friends didn't exist, and the only thing that was real was his I.O.U. to the bank for six million marks". The precise sum of Needleman's debt, the six million marks, is the Nazi toll of Jewish lives. Allen recalls the real consequences of Nazi politics in the very phrase by which Needleman tries to absolve himself of responsibility. Attracted to the Brownshirts because the color set off his eyes, Needleman represents the vanity of espousing a policy without taking the responsibility for its effects. Refusing to relate cause and effect, he turns an error into a pattern of behavior. An example of this is how he turns a simple error into a behavioral pattern: "[t]oo proud to admit it was a mistake," when he was fell out of his box at an opera, "he attended the opera every night for a month and repeated it each time". Again we see in which way Allen uses his character in order to exploit one particular topic.

Allen's character's obsession with death is apparent in many of his works. In "A Guide to Some of the Lesser Ballads", section called *The Sacrifice* begins as follows: "A melodic prelude recounts man's relation to the earth and why he always seems to wind up buried in it". This statement expresses not only the narrator's fantastic vision of life, but the essential dynamic of his prose style. In his book *Woody Allen's Angst*, Sander H. Lee notes that "Allen's bathetic undertow expresses the downward thrust of life". While there is a rare cheeriness in Allen's description of a New Orleans funeral in "Reminiscences", the funeral is one without death. In the middle of the parade and dancing, someone realizes that the man who was buried was not dead, or even sick: "He was yodeling all the time". While the band plays on, each onlooker is buried in turn "on the theory that the deceased will go down the smoothest". When it finally becomes obvious that no one has died, "it is too late to get a body, because of the holiday rush". The joy here is possible only because the celebrants are not dealing with death as the terminal fact of the human experience.

In his one-act play "Death", Allen introduces to us a simple salesman who is roused from his peace to confront his mortality. The character's name is

Kleinman (Yiddish for "little man"). Kleinman is awakened to join a vigilante hunt for a murderer. He spends the play trying either to find safety or to determine what his function in the hunt is. At one point, he is accused of being the murderer, but his lynching is interrupted when word arrives that the killer has been caught elsewhere. When Kleinman finds the murderer, he finds he is Death. Death, thus, resembles the murderer. Mortally stabbed by Death, Kleinman urges the society to "cooperate...God is the only enemy". But the others take this to be delirium and continue their wild hunt for Death.

Kleinman is a schlemiel character for many reasons. For one thing, he babbles and continually asks questions. His bewilderment about his role in the vigilante's plan represents man's isolation in the absurd cosmos. As his friend, Al, notes: "Each of us only knows one small fraction of the overall plan at any given moment- his own assignment- and no one is allowed to disclose his function to another". But as usual, Allen's hero, as an outsider ignorant of the codes used around him, is never told his part in the plan. Like other Allen's schlemiels, Kleinman is caught in up in a pressing social reality. Hence the variety of characters with whom Kleinman must deal during the play – his unsympathetic wife, a doctor, a policeman, a man who has recovered from death, and the factions of plotters and counterplotters. At one point, Kleinman is caught between them, in an atmosphere of madness and paranoia: "Choose, you worm," one citizen commands, "I've got a good mind to cut your throat, the way you shilly- shally". Kleinman is portrayed as inquisitive, defensive and paranoid. Kleinman admits to the persona's extreme nausea and his difficulty with women. After he kisses Gina, she promptly bills him, and Kleinman dissolves into guilt: "I didn't mean to act like an animal – I'm really one of the nicest people I know". Allen's character is exposed to challenges from which there is no escape, except maybe in the world of the absurd reasoning.

One common armament against death is the belief in an afterlife. Although Allen often considers the idea in his prose, he usually presents it as unlikely. However, in "Conversations with Helmholtz" he leaves some doubt when he reports that Freud's death "was the event that caused the final break between Helmholtz and Freud, and the two rarely spoke afterwards". "Rarely", that is, not "never". Any afterlife that Allen imagines is dominated by the everyday concerns of this life: "What is it about death that bothers me so much? Probably the hours. Melnick says the soul is immortal and lives on after the body drops away, but if my soul exists

without my body I am convinced all my clothes will be loose-fitting". In his *Woody Allen's Angst*, Sander H. Lee suggests that "Allen's uncertainty about the prospect of an afterlife relates to his wider doubts about the existence of God".

Allen's fullest treatment of this uncertainty is in his private-eye parody, "Mr. Big". Kaiser Lupowitz, Allen's main character, is a hard-boiled detective who is hired by a sexy woman to find God. True to the expectations, the woman turns out to be untrustworthy. She claims to be a nude model with the cheeky name of Heather Butkiss, but she is later identified as a Vassar philosophy major named Claire Rosenzweig, then as a Radcliffe teacher, and finally as Ellen Shepherd, a Bryn Mawr physics professor. Her identities as libertine, academic, and scientist represent three different concerns about God's existence. As Lupowitz eventually discovers, this woman gained access to God by posing as a pantheist, then killed Him at a party populated with characters from *The Maltese Falcon*. As the character seeking God is His killer, the very search, the act of doubt, may constitute a murder. Before Lupowitz can solve the case he must confront the usual suspects, witnesses, and authorities. One is a rabbi who has rather material grounds for his faith in God's existence: 'How do I know? Could I get a suit like this for fourteen dollars if there was no one up there? Here, feel the gabardine- how can you doubt?' ("Mr. Big" 283). All the characters that Lupowitz has to confront in his search, together with the setting, the language, and the other formal elements of a detective story, provide a context for Allen's search for truth. The parody of "Mr. Big" is the reverse of Allen's usual method. As a rule, Sander H. Lee, explains, "Allen treats a small subject in a narrative style that is too lofty for it. Here he applies a low literary form, the private-eye story, to a lofty subject, the mystery of God" (*Woody Allen's Angst* 78). The low form of Allen's story embodies man's material base, which prompts him to postulate the existence of a higher reality and yet prevents his total faith in it. Once again, Allen creates a schlemiel figure who is sent out to find God in a world full of problems of doubt, faith, and moral authority.

In his prose, Allen often satirizes aspects of institutional religion. Most of his religious jokes derive from his own identity as a Jew. For instance, in "A Look at Organized Crime" we meet Gaetano Santucci, also known as Little Tony, or Rabbi Sharpstein. It may be due to this "rabbi's" Sabbath tastes that the list of Cosa Nostra crimes includes "the transportation of a large white-fish across the state line for immoral purposes" ("A Look at Organized Crime" 155). Allen's rabbis provide a microcosm of Jewish history, especially

as it involves the perpetual tension between the Jew's fidelity to his tradition and the pressures of assimilation. According to Sander H. Lee, the rabbis in Allen's work all seem variants of his Rabbi Ben Kaddish, from his "Hassidic Tales". Rabbi Ben Kaddish is followed in the story by a Polish-joke rabbi, "who was said to have inspired many pogroms with his sense of humor" ("Hassidic Tales" 208). After Rabbi Shimmel comes the most modern rabbi, Rabbi Zwi Chaim Yisroel. He seems the closest to Allen's persona, being the man who "developed whining art to an art unheard of in the west" (209). The most assimilated of the rabbis, when asked why Jews are not supposed to eat pork, rabbi Yisroel replies: "We're *not*? Uh-oh" (210). In this spirit, the commentator explains that "some scholars believe that the Torah merely suggested not eating pork at certain restaurants" (210). By detailing the flaws of Jewish savants, "The Hasidic Tales" demonstrates the difficulty of sustaining a traditional identity in an unsympathetic society – and a traditional faith in the face of apparent abandonment by one's God.

When he experiences self-doubt or any discomfort, Allen's character turns to creating his own absurd universe. But behind this apparently aimless absurdity is a general concern about our everyday reality. Sander H. Lee writes: "Woody Allen's essays are a feast of inspired nonsense. And, as always, there's method for Allen's madness, for the cracked mirror of his surreal comedy reflects the assorted idiocies and pretensions of the moment. And running through all the essays is Woody's interest in the way we use and abuse language, pumping it up to swell our own importance, manhandling it so as to maintain noncommunication. (*Woody Allen's Angst* 50)

With his characters' escalations into fantasy, its anachronisms, disparities, and dissonances, Allen's prose reflects a world which seems absurd. Nothing is presented on a realistic scale: actions are either bigger or smaller than in life, either exaggerated or diminished. The schlemiels in his prose are outsiders, but they also enjoy a sense of strong individuality that an outsider often sacrifices for the sake of social acceptance. In an age of technology and uniformity when people generally try to control characteristics that might distinguish them from what is socially accepted, Allen creates a character who is used as metaphorical device in order to parody and satirize many social, cultural, and philosophical issues. His schlemiel's loneliness, uncertainties, dissatisfactions, his mockery of bureaucrats and academics, and his sexual traumas reflect a strong criticism of cultural currents. Once again,

the schlemiel character becomes a hero for the age of anxiety and his success is based on how well he communicates his feelings and thoughts. Allen achieves his objective by creating an absurd

framework for his schlemiels. The world his personae inhabit seems hopeless, but it's his character who keeps trying to make sense.

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