

Postmodern Humour in Woody Allen's Short Stories

Puskás, Andrea

Abstract: The paper examines the relationship of postmodernism and humour with special attention to their appearance in the short stories of the American director and writer Woody Allen. The research examines the short stories from Woody Allen's short story collection *Side Effects* to illustrate the connection between postmodernism and humour in an American cultural and literary context. It examines parodic humour, mocking, self-reflection, the linkage of public and private selves and irony in the short stories as well as the special way they ridicule convention and tradition. The paper investigates how Woody Allen's stories exploit the opportunities of postmodern irony and points out how they apply the elements of stand-up comedy and juxtapose the intellectual and the banal.

Key words: postmodernism, humour, irony, short story, stand-up comedy, intellectualism

1. Introduction

"Not only there is no God, but try finding a plumber on Sunday."

(Woody Allen)¹

Although Woody Allen is best known as the director and scriptwriter of several cult films, he is also the writer of outstanding and witty short stories, which first appeared in three basic collections namely *Getting Even* (1971), *Without Feathers* (1975) and *Side Effects* (1980). The short stories discuss struggles with God, religion, identity, satirize social phenomena, construct new universes in the most comic and playful way.

The collection *Side Effects* is an anthology of 17 short stories, which were written between 1975 and 1980. It includes Allen's famous short story *The Kugelmass Episode*, which won the O. Henry Award, the annual American award for short stories in 1978, the same year Allen won his first Academy Award for his film *Annie Hall*.

Humour is the driving engine of each short story. In one of them, *Reminiscences: Places and People*, Allen reveals the essence of a good piece of writing: "In order to be a writer (...) one must take chances and not be afraid to look foolish"

¹ http://thinkexist.com/quotation/not_only_is_there_no_god-but_try_finding_a/227164.html (Accessed: 10 September 2014)

(Allen 1998, 393). The stories themselves 'look foolish' indeed, in the most entertaining sense of the word. Woody Allen's name has been linked with postmodernism several times; his short stories are great examples of postmodern fiction as well. The paper argues that the special way of using humour in *Side Effects* reflects the postmodern attempt to question authorities and to bring the high and the low, the mainstream and the marginal closer to each other, and they create a comic atmosphere by juxtaposing the intellectual and the banal.

2. Postmodern Humour

Postmodernism has a great variety of definitions, however, the basic assumption that links all of them is the belief that postmodern texts celebrate fragmentation and diversity, emphasise chaos and doubt and construct new worlds. Brian McHale claims that unlike modernist texts, postmodern fiction asks ontological questions and its basic concern is to confront different worlds and reflect on the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects (McHale 1987, 10).

In his essay *Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective* (1992) Ihab Hassan lists more specific features of postmodern texts. He distinguishes eleven signs typical for postmodernism: indeterminacy, fragmentation, decanonisation, self-less-ness or depth-less-ness, the unrepresentable, irony, hybridisation, carnivalisation, performance or participation, constructionism and immanence (Hassan 1992, 198). All these features can be easily detected in Allen's short stories. His specific mode of world-making, his approach to the search or loss of identity, the uncertain atmosphere of his stories, the way he connects formal fragmentation with indeterminacy and the way he breaks and subverts cultural codes definitely make him one of the representatives of postmodern writing. The stories in *Side Effects* figure out the traditional, conservative approach to sexuality, human relations and the impersonality of intellectualism.

Woody Allen's special usage of humour in his texts very much underlines the assumption that postmodern humour is not merely the ironic depiction of cultural codes or the tool of ridiculing authorities. Apart from irony he uses variations of humour in order to suggest that there are no absolute truths, no reliable solutions and messages, just playfulness and laughter, many times at the banality and absurdity of existence.

The connection between postmodernism and humour has been studied by various literary critics and scholars including Paul McDonald, Lance Olsen or Nancy A. Walker. All of them agree that humour is very often the integral part of the atmosphere postmodern texts provide. More and more critics point out that postmodern humour is not necessarily pessimistic and deconstructive, but beside its dark, pessimistic face and absurdist black humour it also offers a lighter and more optimistic potential. Olsen formulates this notion in the following way:

What is striking about postmodern humor, then, is its refusal to see truth as something that exists along an either-or axis. Consequently, postmodern humour at the same time becomes both a negative and a positive perspective on the world. [...] Postmodern humor delights in its own sense of liberty. It delights in its own sense of process. Indeed, process is everything because the goal is at best uncertain, at worst nonexistence.

(Olsen 1990, 19)

The above assumption suggests that postmodern humour is based on juxtaposition, and emphasises the process rather than the goal. One of the basic goals of postmodern humour is to challenge and undermine authority. Humour is a wonderful tool to avoid seeming too emotional and to celebrate plurality, since it provides alternative perspectives and standpoints.

In her Introduction to *What's So Funny: Humor in American Culture* (1998), Nancy A. Walker sees American humour as something which always has a purpose. She claims that the key themes of American humour seem to relate to three main areas. The first is ethnic experience, the second is social interaction, by which she understands "the possibility of social harmony" (Walker 1998, 64). The third area is the American Dream of "equality, opportunity and freedom" (Walker 1998, 65). These three main areas also appear in *Side Effects* and it can be assumed that somehow, these areas or topics reflect the basic characteristic features of postmodernism as well.

Discussing ethnic identity can be seen as the manifestation of approved cultural diversity and shifting this issue to the foreground underlines the fact that ethnicity is not just an important element in the process of identity formation, but also a key category that has to be reconsidered. The combination of humour with postmodernism and the discourse of ethnicity suggest that there has been a need in American culture to highlight inherited master narratives of ethnic heritage and religious issues from a new perspective.

The second key theme of American humour listed by Walker is social interaction, which is closely linked with the postmodern attempt to re-examine social practices and society as such. Postmodernism investigates the consequences of the breakdown of communication, the relationship between the private and the public sphere; however, humour makes it more possible to draw a more positive conclusion on the above issues. To a certain extent, without humour, the postmodern message of alienation, chaos and diversification remains a pessimistic, aimless idea providing no values and axioms. Humour and laughter are a positive agency in postmodern culture and literature, which points out that the postmodern world is not necessarily pessimistic and disastrous.

The American Dream and its impact on the individual have been many times identified as one of the most central elements to American comic imagination. Paul McDonald claims that there is such a sharp distance between the promises

of the American Dream and American reality that the new term of "the Great American Joke" has become more accurate to express such disparity – a term first used by Louis D. Rubin, Jr. (McDonald 2010, 23). In this case, humour is also used as the tool of offering an alternative, the tool of possible progress in order to construct a more ideal and liveable world.

Apart from the above-mentioned main themes, Woody Allen applies several tools of postmodern humour. He highlights the needs and wants of the American Little Man, reflects on ethnic identity, provides a reconsidered view on religion, culture and society and constructs new identities. In his short stories he exploits the techniques of stand-up comedy and undermines the authority of highly intellectual narratives.

2.1. The Story of the (Jewish) American Little Man

Allen's protagonists are typical examples of the everyday little man. They are not unique at all, office workers, doctors, teachers, writers, people who constantly look for happiness and satisfaction in their own way. A common feature that almost all characters share is their constant dissatisfaction. In *The Lunatic's Tale* the protagonist searches ideal happiness; though he has everything, he wants more and more. He is the typical consumer: never satisfied with what he has, always gullible and ready to buy something new. "Never to find all the requirements one needs in a single member of the opposite sex" (Allen 1998, 384). He believes that perfection exists; however, he finds it impossible to reach.

The stories are full of jokes about depression and insecurity that form the protagonists' identities. Almost all protagonists are the victims of circumstances. In *Nefarious Times We Live In* the first-person narrator tells us: "I had just been medically discharged from the army, the results of certain scientific experiments performed on me without my knowledge" (Allen 1998, 397). They are not able to govern their own lives and are constantly exposed to various influences. Even their place of living and job seems to be determined by coincidence. On the other hand, it can be assumed that most protagonists are somehow connected to New York – they either live there, like Sidney Kugelmass or are somehow influenced by it. They are mostly Jews, which is not always directly stated; sometimes there are only indirect references to their religion, e.g. the mention of their rabbi or the kabbalah. However, religion is regarded as something unreliable and rather manipulative throughout the stories. In *The Condemned* belonging to a certain kind of religion is even ridiculed: "Father Bernard shook his head. 'This time of year, I think most of your major faiths are filled,' he said. 'Probably the best I could do on such short notice is maybe make a call and get you into something Hindu. I'll need a passport-sized photograph, though'" (Allen 1998, 313). It seems that the most powerful engines of the protagonists' identities are dissatisfaction and the eager pursuit of happiness, due to which their behaviour is often seen as incompatible with outside, social expectations, no matter how strong these outside influences are.

2.2. The Bizarre and the Absurd

The clash between private and public expectations is not the only powerful opposition exploited in the collection. The short stories in *Side Effects* frequently confront serious and childish behaviour and present absurd, even bizarre situation and solutions. They very typically place childish behaviour in a serious setting, such as a workplace, an office or the academic environment of a university.

In *The Diet*, the protagonist F. experiences the hostile behaviour of his colleagues regularly. "Sometimes, if he turned around rapidly, he would discover thirty or forty coworkers inches away from him with tongues outstretched" (Allen 1998, 370). Later on, F. becomes the target of wild (and at the same time ridiculous) expression of childish hatred: "Once, Traub, a petty clerk, had nodded courteously, and when F. nodded back Traub fired an apple at him" (Allen 1998, 370). The inclusion of unexpected and bizarre elements in the narration juxtaposes the serious and the frivolous, and allows the latter to undermine the former. It is no longer possible to take F.'s life failures, unsuccessful public and private life seriously or at least with deserved respect with the image of office workers throwing apples and sticking out their tongue in one's mind. A very similar absurd world is created in *The Kugelmass Episode*.

John Barth argues that when the characters of a work of fiction become authors or readers of the work they are in, we are reminded of the "fictitious aspect of our own existence" (Barth 1990, 81-82). *The Kugelmass Episode* offers something even more complicated and bizarre: with the help of a magician the protagonist, Sidney Kugelmass, a frustrated professor of humanities, a dissatisfied Jewish New Yorker, enters the world of a fictive, literary character, Madame Bovary and has an affair with her. He becomes the character of the novel he has once read and taught in order to avoid the disillusioning reality of his everyday life. He finds short-term satisfaction in the novel, however, he makes a mistake by trying to project his idealized, fictive life into reality, and is not aware of the dangers and risks of his choice. Later on, Emma Bovary comes to New York, and suddenly, the literary character from a classic novel becomes part of the New York reality of the short story. This absurd circumstance becomes the source of further complications and problems. The story has a bizarre ending, Kugelmass enters the magic cabinet again, however, due to an unexpected mistake, the cabinet explodes, Persky the magician, the only person who can help Kugelmass get back to New York dies, so Kugelmass remains in a Spanish course book forever and is unable to come back to "reality", which definitely gains a new definition after all.

The short story is not only the parody of literary criticism and interpretation but also disfigures the attempt to write literary works with aims other than entertainment and laughter. The story ridicules reader-response criticism and its assumption that the reader's interpretation and understanding shapes the

message of the story and the idea of giving too much significance to the relationship between the reader and the text and the reader's contribution to the meaning of the text. In the short story, the protagonist enters the text literally and thus effects the interpretation of all those who read the novel at that time: "(...) at this very moment students in various classrooms across the country were saying to their teachers, 'Who is this character on page 100? A bald Jew is kissing Madame Bovary?'" (Allen 1998, 352).

Allen comments on how literary criticism should be treated and makes fun of those who take writing, literature and being a writer too seriously. In the short story *Reminiscences: Places and People*, his character, Maugham gives a rather funny advice to a young author, making fun of serious stylistic, formal or other literary criteria and the idea that such criteria can make a piece of writing more or less valuable: "Maugham then offers the greatest advice anyone could give to a young author: 'At the end of an interrogatory sentence, place a question mark. You'd be surprised how effective it can be'" (Allen 1998, 393). He not only disregards literary criticism – in the same short story he writes: "One must never take criticism too seriously" (Allen 1998, 392) but many times juxtaposes the ideal life art or literature show with the miserable and very simple life of his protagonists. In *The Shallowest Man* one of the characters says: "Who cares what the point of the story is? If it even has a point. It was an entertaining anecdote. Let's order" (Allen 1998, 426). He undermines the authority of literary criticism and literature and assumes that stories do not have to include any message at all.

3. Stand-Up Comedy in the Short Story

The atmosphere of the short stories in the collection *Side Effects* is very similar to the realm of stand-up comedy. The narrator of each story reminds us of a stand-up comedian, who explores issues in the form of dialogue, takes everyday events and subjects them to detailed analysis. In *The Philosophy of Humour* (2012), Paul McDonald explains that the activity of stand-up comedy involves an element of detachment and impartial reflection, as well as a shift in perspective and has the purpose of challenging tradition critically and approaching authority and accepted wisdom in a special way (McDonald 2012, 112-113). The comedian entertains his or her audience not by telling prefabricated jokes but many times by telling stories about observed everyday experiences. Very similarly, the narrator of the short stories in *Side Effects* tell the reader stories structured on observation, reflections on puzzling everyday lives and life events from the perspective of a cynic. Just like stand-up comedians, the narrator sometimes even addresses the reader, e.g. in *The Lunatic's Tale*: "For, dear reader, I was not always what is popularly referred to as 'a New York street crazy,'" (Allen 1998, 379), "Undoubtedly, dear reader, you have heard the expression, 'a body that wouldn't quit'" (Allen 1998, 380) or "Pity my dilemma, dear reader!" (Allen 1998, 384). The narrator communicates in an easy-going, informal style and addresses the reader as an old friend.

A stand-up comedian constantly figures out the analysed details of the everyday event and in order to amuse his or her audience ridicules and even exaggerates them and many times provides shocking, absurd images. Paul McDonald points out: "In American popular culture entertainment always takes precedence over authenticity" (McDonald 2010, 31). This is the exact case of stand-up comedians, in order to entertain, they transform, exaggerate, make shifts and juxtapose, and in the meantime the audience quits thinking about whether the story or the characters are authentic or not. Whether the story being heard is trustworthy is no more important, the only thing that matters is laughter. Laughter and its subverting potential give the audience the power to transform reality, more exactly the minor details of everyday life into images that are comic, absurd or bizarre. Similarly, the short stories in *Side Effects* include the very same purpose and function: the stand-up comedian narrator uses humour to lift the details, moments of everyday experience into the realm of what McDonald calls the "comic corrective" (McDonald 2010, 41). The stories' cynicism helps both the narrator and the reader avoid being and seeming vulnerable and emotional.

4. (Anti)Intellectual Humour

In the short stories, Woody Allen displays the typical American, who has everything that is necessary for a comfortable and pleasurable living; however, he is constantly dissatisfied and feels the need for a change. The absurdity of having everything but having nothing at the same time is a motif that repeatedly appears in almost each short story. The narrator-protagonist of *The Lunatic's Tale* honestly confesses: "And so it was that I was the most miserable of men. On the surface, apparently blessed with all the necessities for the good life. Underneath, desperately in search of a fulfilling love" (Allen 1998, 381). However, again, before the story could go deeper into any intellectual discourse on the essence of life and the discussion of things, values that would make the protagonist content and would fill his life with love, the narrator avoids any kind of philosophical discourse by finishing quickly with a joke: "Is anything in nature actually "perfect" with the exception of my Uncle Hyman's stupidity?" (Allen 1998, 381). The joke is based on the juxtaposition of nature's perfection, a dignified, philosophical issue and the uncle's stupidity, a banal comment on an empty and valueless state and condition.

The story of *The Lunatic's Tale* offers the most number of deep philosophical and moral questions out of all the short stories. The protagonist is a formerly wealthy and successful doctor, now roller-skating unshaven down Broadway, who tells us the story of his breakdown. He pursued sensual pleasures and was unable to choose between two women, one of them was smart and reasonably attractive, the other the most beautiful woman he could ever imagine. During

the first half of the story, several serious discourses are opened, such as the needs of a happy life, the secret of perfection as well as the discussion of meaningful relationships. There are various intellectual references, such as the mentions of Eliot and Bach, intellectual remarks ("the "coed who enjoys Bach and Beowulf" looked like Grendel, and the "Bay Area bisexual" told me I didn't quite coincide with either of her desires" Allen 1998, 381) and philosophical dilemmas openly discussed with the protagonist's analyst (psychological level) and his rabbi (religious level).

The story is full of questions and dilemmas, the narrator's uncertainty and inability to choose makes the reader want to have answers and obtain solutions. However, the last couple of paragraphs include a bizarre twist. Being a brain surgeon, the protagonist transplants the brilliant brain into the perfect female body, marries the ideal woman he has created and after a few months becomes again dissatisfied with the dream woman and falls in love with a less attractive stewardess. The ending of the story completely negates and even ridicules the intellectual quest of the preceding passages. This unexpected and comic turn suggests that the protagonist failed to control his life and environment and it is impossible to get answers and solve dilemmas on philosophical, moral or religious levels. Allen even subverts the grounds of all intellectual, moral, scientific, psychological or philosophical attempts to explain the world and provide security and certainty. He even refuses to believe that the intellect is able to understand the basic motivation of human beings and is able to get rid of constant dissatisfaction.

The open refusal of intellectualism and claiming that the intellect fails to provide answers seem to dominate the overall atmosphere of the short stories; however, there are various intellectual comments at unexpected parts, which reveal that though the writer refuses to discuss matters on an intellectual level, he cannot resist playing with the readers general knowledge and checks the level of the reader's education by testing whether s/he laughs at certain parts of the text. In the short story *The Condemned* he plays with the reader's (non) existing knowledge of Shakespearean plays, more concretely one of the most discussed and bloodiest play *Titus Andronicus*: "Even the works of the great Shakespeare will disappear when the universe burns out – not such a terrible thought, of course, when it comes to a play like *Titus Andronicus*, but what about the others?" (Allen 1998, 313). Though he suggests that intellectualism cannot provide answers to existential questions, he constantly plays with the intellect and 'intelligent jokes'. In *Remembering Needleman* he writes: "Human freedom for Needleman consisted of being aware of the absurdity of life. 'God is silent,' he was fond of saying, 'now if we can only get Man to shut up'" (Allen 1998, 301). It seems that for Allen, though intellectualism is not able to solve existential questions, there is something more superfluous: the combination of speech and human stupidity.

5. Conclusion

Woody Allen is one of the most central figures of contemporary American culture. His short stories in the collection *Side Effects* are great examples of the application of postmodern humour. The analyses of the collection's short stories has shown that Allen's basic method for creating a comic atmosphere is the juxtaposition of the serious and the frivolous, the intellectual and the banal. By using the elements of stand-up comedy he also contributes to shifting the traditional narrative closer to popular culture, by making it more informal and interactive. Although the stories refuse to believe that human nature and existence can be explained on an intellectual, psychological or religious level (and thus question the authority of philosophy, morality and religion), they constantly play with the intellect, the reader's literary knowledge and provide unexpected, sometimes even bizarre endings, and suggest that the only way to find happiness is laughter and playfulness.

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