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**MAJOR INFLUENCES IN WOODY ALLEN’S
SHORT FICTION**

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Summary

Woody Allen is one of the most prolific artists of the twentieth century. He is a highly praised director and scriptwriter, a successful actor, a dedicated clarinetist, an appreciated playwright, and an awarded short fiction writer. His entire work testifies for the efforts he put into creating an easily identifiable style, which never fails to provoke laughter and which distinguishes his work from that of other artists, and into the creation of a remarkable fictional persona, the Jewish New Yorker, the neurotic eccentric, constantly obsessing about love, art, death, the existence of God, the fate of the universe, and the meaning of life. This fictional persona became the hallmark of Woody Allen’s entire work and proved capable of drawing considerable recognition and identification from his targeted audience.

As an admirer of Woody Allen’s work, I did more than watch his films and read his short fiction. I always tried to get a more profound understanding of his artistic universe by reading

reviews, interviews, articles, and books about his work. I came up with the idea for this research after noticing that most studies on Woody Allen's work focus on his films, analyzing various aspects, from plot, technique, influences, characters, to his comic power and his ideological perspectives, while his short fiction received little attention from critics and scholars. His short stories are briefly mentioned in books dedicated to his films, but there are no extensive critical studies to cover this area of his work.

Although not as well known as his films, Woody Allen's short fiction represents a significant part of his work. Woody Allen's short stories, essays, and casual pieces range from parodical philosophical essays to mock-historiographic, mock-journalistic, and starkly surrealistic pieces, to parodical reinterpretations of hardboiled fiction and other formula fiction types. Although Woody Allen's short fiction tackles a wide range of subjects, they all spring from a common reservoir of existentialist concerns and revolve around the absurdity of life and the decadent self-absorption of modern man, the miasmatic awareness of mortality and the subtle perversion of religion, the intractability of romantic relationships, sexuality, morality, and obsessive psychological pain. His stories are told in one of the most comic dialects known in literature, a dialect originating in Jewish humor, modernized by the syntax of stand-up comedy, and urbanized by the comic tradition of the *New Yorker* short story. Woody Allen's short fiction is configured as a densely comic exploration of the laden existential concerns which trouble the neurotic urban self. His lively and intense literary style aligns his writing to the tradition of famous American comedians and humorous writers with whom erudition, existential anxieties, psychoanalysis, and sexuality have been domesticated and introduced into mainstream American comedy. He is part of the Robert Benchley and S. J. Perelman lineage that founded and consolidated the comic tradition of *The New Yorker*, and he enriches this tradition by exposing it to the aesthetic exuberance of literary postmodernism. Woody Allen's short fiction brims over with postmodern playfulness and his short stories can be easily used as a guidebook to postmodernist literary strategies. At the same time, his texts are underpinned by a thick undelayer of references pertaining to the author's ethnic cultural legacy, which he uses for the consolidation of the authenticity of his work.

While the splendid array of film awards is often considered his greatest achievement, Woody Allen's literary skills have also been awarded. One of his best known short stories, "The Kugelmass Episode", published for the first time in *The New Yorker*, on May 2, 1977, brought

him the O. Henry Award for Best Short Story in 1978. This award stands for the crowning of his literary efforts. It indicates the exceptional merits of his short story and represents an important critical recognition of his talents as a short story writer. The O. Henry Award was founded by the Society of Arts and Sciences in 1919 and is meant to support the evolution of the art of the short story by annually honoring one English language short story published in American or Canadian periodicals. The O. Henry Award represents an important achievement in a short story writer's career and it places Woody Allen's name on the firmament of the American short story tradition, along with famous and widely appreciated writers such as William Faulkner, Truman Capote, Irvin Shaw, Flannery O'Connor, Joyce Carol Oates, Eudora Welty, Bernard Malamud, John Cheever, Cynthia Ozick, or Saul Bellow.

Some of Woody Allen's short stories have been anthologized in well-known and highly appreciated editions. For example, Woody Allen's name, along with that of Groucho Marx, is mentioned in the section dedicated to Jewish humor of the *Jewish American Literature. A Norton Anthology*, edited by Chametzky, Jules et al. The same section of this anthology contains Woody Allen's short story "The Scrolls" as an illustration of one of the best manifestations of Jewish humor in short fiction. The seventh edition of *The Norton Reader. An Anthology of Expository Prose* also includes one of Woody Allen's texts, "Selections from the Allen Notebooks" in the section entitled "Prose Forms: Journals," together with texts and excerpts signed by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and May Sarton.

Critical references to Woody Allen's short fiction only appeared in recent years, but this part of his work still remains surprisingly understudied. Most of the studies on his short fiction are published in volumes which focus on Woody Allen's cinematographic work. There is no extensive research dedicated exclusively to Woody Allen's short fiction and all the articles and critical explorations of his work seem to have cast his short fiction in a supporting role, while the leading role is still assigned to his films.

The present thesis finds its legitimacy in the scarcity of critical material on Woody Allen's short fiction and undertakes the task of filling this gap by casting his short stories and casual pieces into a leading role and by performing an extensive exploration of the major influences which acted upon and shaped his writing. My contention is that Woody Allen's short fiction responds to and mirrors a set of factors represented by the immediate literary context of *The New Yorker* magazine, the larger literary context of American postmodernism, and the

cultural heritage of Woody Allen's Jewish upbringing. Therefore, I decided to organize this thesis into three major chapters, each tackling one major influence which acted upon Woody Allen's writing. The corpus I have selected for my research consists of two short story volumes, *The Complete Prose of Woody Allen*, published by Wings Books in 1991, and *Mere Anarchy*, published in 2008 by Edbury Press. The edition of *The Complete Prose of Woody Allen* I have chosen contains the other three previously published volumes of short stories, *Getting Even* (1971), *Without Feathers* (1975), and *Side Effects* (1980).

I decided to begin my research with a brief survey of Woody Allen's background and accomplishments and continue with the exploration of what I see as one of the major influences in his writing, the literary tradition of *The New Yorker*, a magazine which has always been the preferred venue for the publication of his short stories. Being published in *The New Yorker* represented one of the greatest literary achievements for the beginning of young Woody Allen's writing career and influenced his writing to a great extent. *The New Yorker* made its mark as one of the most prestigious cultural magazines in the world and, soon after it had made its appearance on the newsstands, it became an icon of urban cultural sophistication. The elitist aura of the magazine and the meritocracy implied by the selection process of the material to be published transformed it into a magnet for both aspiring and consecrated writers. Along its publication without interruption for almost a century now, the pages of the magazine have nestled the works of some of the most influential writers of the twentieth century such as Renata Adler, Donald Barthelme, Saul Bellow, Jorge Luis Borges, Truman Capote, Raymond Carver, John Cheever, E. L. Doctorow, Jamaica Kincaid, Milan Kundera, Alice Munro, Murakami Haruki, Vladimir Nabokov, Dorothy Parker, Philip Roth, Salman Rushdie, J. D. Salinger, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Susan Sontag, or John Updike.

For Woody Allen, the acceptance of his texts by the fiction editors of *The New Yorker* meant both being offered a way into the most esteemed literary circle of the century and being encouraged to embrace a specific aesthetic lineage. Therefore, the first chapter of this thesis tackles the implications of Woody Allen's collaboration with *The New Yorker* which is, in my opinion, one of the most important factors in the shaping of his writing. The discussion begins with a brief evaluation of the magazine's cultural potency and of the relationship between *The New Yorker* and its contributors, with focus on the particular case of Woody Allen. Although the aesthetic of *The New Yorker* is not easily confinable to an all-encompassing definition, the

researches of scholars involved in studying different aspects of the magazine, such as Ben Yagoda, Mary F. Corey, and Judith Yaross Lee, were very helpful in establishing a guideline which helped evaluating the influences of the recommendations of the magazine's fiction editors on Woody Allen's short fiction.

Woody Allen's writing style espoused the aesthetic of *The New Yorker* and what seems to have been love at first sight, turned into a long-term relationship, which began almost half a century ago and still shows its fruitfulness. Seen either as blameful stylistic homogeneity or as laudable aesthetic tradition, the recommendations of *The New Yorker's* fiction editors had a considerable impact on the writing style of the writers who published there along the years and shaped the aesthetic taste of generations of readers. A dedicated contributor, Woody Allen respected the tradition of *The New Yorker* short story. As discussed in the first chapter, Woody Allen's short stories and casuals conscientiously respond to the recommendations of *The New Yorker* fiction editors and contribute to advancing the aesthetics promoted by the magazine. His short fiction is urban par excellence and its humorous qualities are beyond question. It brims over with erudition and catches the atmosphere of metropolitan sophistication encouraged by *The New Yorker*. Woody Allen followed in the steps of his predecessors and, at the same time, contributed to the invigoration and the reinforcement of the spirit of the magazine. He learned from his predecessors; he filtered the legacy of Robert Benchley and S. J. Perelman through his own artistic sensibility and transformed it into a unique, easily recognizable style.

The second chapter of my thesis investigates the relationship between Woody Allen's short fiction and the larger literary context represented by postmodernism, the movement which dominated the stage of post-war American literature. The late Sixties were marked as a period of tempestuous social, political, and cultural changes in American history, closely mirrored by the cultural productions of the age. Sensitive to these social changes, writers have begun to challenge all traditional literary conventions with unprecedented exuberance, striving to demonstrate the contradictions of a world in flux and the fictional nature of reality itself. By placing their stakes on imagined alternatives and ceaselessly shifting perspectives, postmodernist writers challenge the concept of reality, identity, and totalizing truths. The orderly chronological sequence of narration is distorted, the center is extirpated, and the neat spatial representation is bent, broken, twisted, and transformed into a metaphor for an unreliable reality; the coherence of a governing consciousness lost ground to fragmentation, the *mélange* of often contradictory conceptual

schemes replaced the exploration of feelings, and even language itself has been put under scrutiny.

Woody Allen's career as a short story writer began under this new paradigm and witnessed the effusion of postmodernist experimentation and playfulness. The postmodern relativist outlook governs his writing as he explores the repertoire of narrative possibilities and conventions. The second chapter of this thesis deals with the analysis of the postmodernist literary strategies employed and reprocessed by Woody Allen's short fiction. The analysis commences with a general survey of postmodernism and its manifestation in the sphere of such a flexible literary genre as the short story, and continues with the specific exploration of Woody Allen's short stories in relation to the experimental trend of postmodernism. For a more coherent approach, I decided to work with the fundamental coordinates of narration – space, time, consciousness, emotion, and form – and dedicate a separate subchapter to the analysis of Woody Allen's choices regarding the usage and the reshaping of each of them, in response to the ethos of postmodernism. I decided to analyze Woody Allen's short stories within the framework provided by studies in literary postmodernism performed by scholars such as Gerhard Hoffman, Brian McHale, and Linda Hutcheon, as well as within the larger theoretical framework forged by the major theorists of postmodernism, Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, and Fredric Jameson. The premise of this chapter is that Woody Allen's short stories can be read as an allegory of postmodernist literary strategies and that his writing closely reflects the postmodern ideology as set forth by the above mentioned theorists. Moreover, I argue that Woody Allen goes one step further towards exposing the aesthetic perils of postmodernism's willingness to indulge in extreme experimentation and, at the same time, goes one step back, towards the much cherished sense of responsibility and authenticity stemming from existentialist philosophy, which he uses as a binder for the de-centered postmodern universe.

Within the larger post-war American literary context, Woody Allen's literary work subscribes to the playful aestheticism of postmodernism and would perfectly fit a Procrustean bed forged by the major theorists of postmodernism, if it were not for the existentialist ethos underpinning his entire work. In a very Allen-specific manner, he combines postmodernist techniques and existentialism in what comes to be a mark of his artistic authenticity. His fiction participates in the postmodern dialectics between contestation and reinvention by adopting a deconstructionist attitude, by contesting the value of grand narratives, and by attempting to cope

with the dubieties, the disillusionment, and the vagaries of post-war realities through the reconstruction of worlds in a new imaginary register governed by the comic-parodic mode, by irony and playfulness, and by an acute sense of the absurd. His fictional worlds are often constructed so as to emphasize the fragility of ‘the real’ and its replacement by ‘the simulated’, thus aligning his work to Baudrillard’s perspective on the deconstruction of essentialist notions of reality. In Woody Allen’s short fiction, metaphysical aspirations surrender to the pragmatism and the materialism of the consumerist society described by Fredric Jameson. Still, Allen does not lose the sense of responsibility to self and the authenticity, which are tributary to the existentialist tradition.

Since Woody Allen’s short fiction witnessed the birth, the blooming, and the fading away of postmodernism, it captured both the deconstructive tendencies and the liberating drives of the ethos of postmodernism; it assumed postmodernism’s ironic attitude and playful mode. In the process of constructing fictional worlds, Woody Allen relies on the power of postmodernist techniques and strategies to contest the fundamental patterns of coherent space. He builds a world with an implausible map through juxtaposition, interpolation, superimposition, and misattribution, as defined by Brian McHale in his research on postmodernist fiction’s representations of space. Woody Allen’s penchant for experimenting with spatial representations enables him to convey a strong sense of the absurd and emphasizes the unreliable nature of reality. Woody Allen manipulates the geometry of decentered, fragmented, and overlapped spatial dimensions in order to illustrate the basic existentialist creed of his entire work: reality is absurd and not even the fictional reinvention of the world can make it meaningful. The challenging of epistemological certainties puts the validity of ultimate truths under thorough scrutiny and exposes them as mere artifacts.

The present is the temporal dominant of Woody Allen’s narrative and he works towards reinforcing the idea of a present continuum as a medium which unifies the essential concerns of human existence; his short fiction revolves around the dialectic of continuity and impermanence. The organizing principle of temporality in his work follows a cyclical process of gathering and dispersing experiences in order to store time in a perpetual present moment as an attempt to win the bet against biological determinism. The exploration of the past functions as an ancillary device used to verify and confirm the unreliability of any grand discourses bereft of the power to encompass the promise of an ultimate meaning. Even the romantic paradigm of Woody Allen’s

fiction is shaped by similar skepticism and distrust, and is directed towards deconstructing the myth of everlasting, redeeming love.

In the spirit of postmodernism, Woody Allen's short fiction is able to shape-shift and camouflage under a large variety of literary forms in order to expose literary conventions. His texts often come out as hybrids, stylistic *mélanges*, and heteroglotic triumphs of seemingly incompatible discourses. Therefore, a special section of the second chapter is dedicated to the exploration of Woody Allen's active experimentation with style, narrative, literary genres.

Given the author's ability to master postmodernist literary strategies and reflect the ethos of postmodernism to a great extent, his short fiction can easily serve a didactic purpose. Still, there is something peculiar about Woody Allen's postmodernist fictional universe and this peculiarity consists of the existence of a centered consciousness to govern it and of a set of thematic strings which bind it into a surprisingly coherent whole. This centered consciousness which dominates Woody Allen's short fiction is protected against postmodern disintegration by the legacy of existentialist philosophy which functions as the essential thematic concern in Woody Allen's texts. The 'Allen self' discussed in the second chapter is not a well-rounded, conventional character that evolves in a traditional, heroic manner. It evolves horizontally; it develops through experimentation and metamorphosis and assumes different roles and positions as part of the same central quest for meaning. The quest led to the only viable mitigating solution which promotes the responsibility of self and emphasizes the importance of individual morality. Woody Allen's characters have to accept who they are; they are obliged to be themselves and to establish a personal set of moral guidelines. The existence of this governing consciousness, confronted with the same set of existentialist dilemmas from various perspectives, becomes a hallmark of authenticity within a cultural context in which authenticity seems to have lost the dignity it used to have for previous cultural movements.

The central consciousness of Woody Allen's short fiction reunites the tradition of Benchley's "Little Man," the *schlemiel* figure of the Jewish tradition, and the anti-hero of post-war American literature. Woody Allen blends and continues these traditions and transforms the central consciousness of his literary work into the quintessential New York Jew, the amusing weakling, the clumsy neurotic, caught in his own ceaseless struggle with the absurdity of the universe.

As a member of a hyphenated culture, Woody Allen's short fiction incorporates the strong influences coming from each side of the hyphen. Therefore, the third chapter of this thesis tackles the ways in which Woody Allen chose to use his Jewish cultural legacy, to combine and reshape it in order to reconstruct and revise basic human issues regarding social identity, consciousness, existence, faith, religion, and morality.

Woody Allen's work often blends postmodernist aesthetic strategies with elements pertaining to his Jewish upbringing. After all, his Jewish legacy plays an essential role in the binding of an otherwise fragmented postmodernist fictional universe. Woody Allen's Jewishness is not religious, but cultural. His existentialist beliefs shape a potentially godless universe and reinforce his cynical view of religion and religious practice. His refusal of organized religion shows in his uneasy relationship with normative Judaism and is the basis of all ethnic self-hatred accusations that have been cast his way. Although he is fast in rejecting ethnic labels and might not be the 'ideal' Jewish writer as envisaged by Cynthia Ozick, his writing has been definitely shaped under the influence of the Jewish culture and never ceases to reveal its hybridism. As discussed in the third chapter, Woody Allen shares the sensibilities common to most Jewish - American writers and his work is often associated and compared with that of Philip Roth.

As demonstrated in the last chapter of this thesis, the discussion of the major themes in Woody Allen's short fiction calls for the consideration of his Jewish cultural heritage. Most of his characters draw on Jewish stereotypes and, when he decides to explore family dynamics, the family is always Jewish. He displays a particular sensitivity to the Jewish traumatic history, which could hardly be emulated by any writer who did not feel a strong connection with the Jewish community. Woody Allen's well-known quarrel with God, his rejection of organized religions, as well as the emphasis he places on morality constitute essential themes in his work and bear an ethnic code. Moreover, the most distinctive trait of Woody Allen's entire work, its humorous power, has been shaped under the influences of Jewish humor.

Still, in Woody Allen's short fiction, ethnicity does not serve as a trigger for alienation. Unlike other Jewish-American writers, he does not dwell much on social and cultural differences, nor on the marginal condition of hyphenated cultures. While in his films the situation is slightly different, in Woody Allen's short fiction ethnicity is not a theme; it simply represents a constituent part of experience. Nevertheless, this attitude only brings him closer to

many of his fellow Jewish-American writers since the tendency of escaping ethnic boundaries through the universalization of the Jewish condition is fairly common among them.

As demonstrated in this thesis, the literary merits of Woody Allen's short fiction help it transcend its label of mere entertainment for intellectuals. Woody Allen's short fiction synthesizes three major influences, three sets of cultural factors, essential for the definition of twentieth century American culture: the aesthetic of *The New Yorker*, literary postmodernism, and ethnic writing. While the impact of literary postmodernism can easily withstand the generalization I have just made, the other two sets of factors should also be understood as having an enriching impact on American literature and culture. Although *The New Yorker* was meant for the inhabitants of the New York metropolitan area, its wide readership demonstrated that it could not be confined to geographical limits. The sense of elitism and cultural sophistication it promoted also appealed to readers and writers who did not belong to the space the magazine was originally intended for and therefore I dare consider the magazine among the forces that shaped twentieth century American culture. Moreover, New York set itself up as the world's cultural pole after World War II and became a point of reference for contemporary culture worldwide. Just as the influences of *The New Yorker* are not limited to a confinable geography, the impact of the Jewish cultural legacy is not restricted to the boundary of a specific ethnic community. The focus on the marginal and the re-evaluation of ethnic cultural legacy has always been on the agenda of postmodernism and, within the context of the "American Kaleidoscope," ethnicity can only contribute to cultural enhancement, but, beyond all these, Jewish culture transcended its marginal status through the work of influential writers and artists who made room for its particularities in the mainstream. Therefore, one can safely contend that Woody Allen's short fiction embodies and transforms, in a unique manner, some of the most important forces which shaped contemporary American culture.

Although not as well-known as his films, Woody Allen's short stories are just as worthy of critical consideration and this thesis only paves the way for future research. While I agree that Woody Allen's short fiction is no threat to the major gods of the twentieth century American short story, such as Ernest Hemingway, Scot Fitzgerald, Flannery O'Connor, William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, or John Updike, Woody Allen did demonstrate his skills in writing accomplished, poignant texts.

This research opens the way for further exploration of Woody Allen's literary universe and offers valuable insight for all future comparative approaches either to his work, or to the literary contexts his work responds to. I believe that each chapter can be expanded into a separate research by including the work of other authors, representative for each literary context explored herein. For once, the literary tradition of *The New Yorker* is still understudied and a comparative approach would shed more light on the aesthetic direction of the magazine. A study on the ways in which major literary movements like modernism and postmodernism made their way in the pages of the magazine would be beneficial and would add to the vast scholarship dealing with those particular movements. The activity of Jewish-American writers at *The New Yorker* is also worth of closer consideration, since the best-known and widely appreciated writers of the Jewish-American canon (Isaac Bashevis Singer, Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, or Cynthia Ozick) have all contributed to the magazine. As mentioned above, the interplay of Jewishness and postmodernism presents an interesting dynamics in Woody Allen's short stories and a comparative research on how postmodernist literary techniques and Jewish cultural elements interact in post-war Jewish-American short stories might lead to insightful discoveries which could very well serve didactic purposes.

The most important result of this thesis is that it started to fill the gap in the scholarship on Woody Allen's work. It has closely analyzed an important part of his creative universe that has, so far, remained surprisingly understudied, and has offered the fundamentals for integrating Woody Allen's literary activity within the broad context of twentieth-century American literature.