

## The Recipe for “Sheer Dessert” – Woody Allen’s Short Stories for *The New Yorker*

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the relationship between Woody Allen’s short fiction and the immediate literary context represented by the tradition of *The New Yorker*, the magazine where he published most of his texts and which exerted considerable influence on an entire class of twentieth-century American writers. A closer look into what makes this high degree of compatibility between Allen’s short fiction and what came to be referred to as ‘*The New Yorker* short story’ provides valuable insight into the dominant aesthetic coordinates of the literary tradition cultivated by the magazine, as well as into the universe of Woody Allen’s short fiction.

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*When* referring to the short pieces he wrote for *The New Yorker*, Woody Allen calls them “sheer dessert,”<sup>1</sup> a phrase which reveals both the pleasure intended for the readers and the satisfaction he has when he assumes the role of writer.<sup>2</sup> Most of Woody Allen’s short stories and casual pieces have first appeared in *The New Yorker*, a magazine which greatly influenced twentieth century American short story writing and had a substantial impact on the shaping of the aesthetic taste of twentieth-century American readership. Given Woody Allen’s long history as a contributor to the magazine, it is safe to assume that both parties have derived considerable benefit from this collaboration. Therefore, the investigation of Woody Allen’s work against the literary tradition developed by *The New Yorker* reveals both the main aesthetic direction of the magazine and its impact on Woody Allen’s writing style.

*The New Yorker* is, undoubtedly, one of the most influential intellectual magazines in the United States. It is a place where readers can find good humour, good journalism, culture, and intellectual affirmation. Soon after its appearance, it turned into an icon of metropolitan sophistication and derived its power “from its association with Manhattan, which [in the postwar years] had become the most powerful urban center in

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<sup>1</sup> Allen quoted in Eric Lax, *Woody Allen and His Comedy* (Hamish, Hamilton & London: Elm Tree Books, 1975), 224.

<sup>2</sup> Apparently, unlike filmmaking, the process of writing responds to Woody Allen’s isolationist and escapist needs, as he confessed in a conversation with Eric Lax, published in *Woody Allen and His Comedy*: “I like writing for *The New Yorker*. I like the pure joy of waking up in my house, having my breakfast, going into a room by myself, and writing. It’s pleasurable because it’s lazy and escapist. ... although I’m not saying it comes easy” (220).

the world”<sup>1</sup>. Founded in 1925 by Harold Ross, *The New Yorker* was meant as a “reflection in word and picture of metropolitan life,” which promoted “gaiety, wit, and satire.”<sup>2</sup> If the first few issues failed to convince the “smart urbanites” about the quality of the magazine, by the beginning of the 1930’s, “it would hit its stride.”<sup>3</sup> In time, this magazine created a new category of cartoons, exerted considerable influence upon twentieth-century American fiction, and established new standards for American journalism. *The New Yorker* created a subculture of the educated, civilized, sophisticated individuals, who wanted to distance themselves from the trivialities of mass culture, by offering them an alternative, urban, exclusivist space where they could project their illusions and desires. As Mary F. Corey noted, “Ross created a distinctly modern magazine that altered the style and content of contemporary American fiction, perfected a new form of literary journalism, established new standards for humor and comic art, and shaped numerous social and cultural agendas.”<sup>4</sup> Harold Ross ran the magazine until his death, in 1952. His successor, William Shawn, did his best to follow in the steps of his predecessor and succeeded to preserve and reinforce the spirit of the magazine, as it had been set out by its founder. In his book *About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made*, Ben Yagoda captured the spirit of the magazine in one paragraph: “*The New Yorker* was sophistication in the form of a weekly magazine; its early incarnation was animated by the qualities embodied in the world. It was knowing, a trifle world-weary, prone to self-consciousness and irony, scornful of conversational wisdom or morality, resistant to enthusiasm or wholehearted commitment of any kind, and incapable of being shocked.”<sup>5</sup>

Both the short fiction and the comic art published in *The New Yorker* subscribed to and reinforced the magazine’s aura of sophistication. The magazine cultivated these genres to such an extent that, in time, they came to be referred to as distinctive aesthetic categories: ‘the *New Yorker* cartoon’ and ‘the *New Yorker* short story.’ The birth of this new breed of artistic expression signalled that both the short stories and the cartoons published in *The New Yorker* “transcended mere genres and became cultural categories, the very names implying a specific kind of aesthetic lens on experience.”<sup>6</sup>

During the first decade of its existence, the magazine’s aesthetic trend was rather vague and its eclectic content was unified only by the common New York theme. The quality of the short stories published in *The New Yorker* came to be appreciated only in the early 1940s, after Katherine White had published an anthology entitled *Short Stories from the New Yorker*. A year later, Edward O’Brien decided to include three of those short stories in his anthology, *Best American Short Stories*. Thenceforth, short stories from *The New Yorker* have been included in the series of anthologies edited by

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<sup>1</sup> Mary F. Corey, *The World through a Monocle: The New Yorker at Midcentury* (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: Harvard University Press, 1999), x.

<sup>2</sup> Ross quoted in Ben Yagoda, *About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made* (London: Duckworth, 2000), 39.

<sup>3</sup> George H. Douglas, *The Smart Magazines: 50 years of literary revelry & high jinks at Vanity Fair, The New Yorker, Life, Esquire and The Smart Set* (Hamden: Shoe String Press, 1991), 130.

<sup>4</sup> Corey, *The World through a Monocle*, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Yagoda, *About Town*, 57.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 12.

Edward O'Brien, a practice continued by his successor, Martha Foley. After World War II, "the magazine became [...] the most sought-after literary showplace in the country."<sup>1</sup> Indeed, for many aspiring writers and poets, *The New Yorker* represented the best way to start their writing careers since having their texts accepted by the fiction editors of the magazine meant receiving public credit for their writing. A considerable number of texts published, for the first time, in *The New Yorker* would soon become some of the best known and most anthologized texts of twentieth-century American literature. Irvin Shaw, J. D. Salinger, John Cheever, Vladimir Nabokov, Philip Roth, Donald Barthelme, and Raymond Carver are only some of the most famous writers who contributed to *The New Yorker*.

Although it is common to refer to the fiction published in *The New Yorker* as a distinctive category which appears to have created a specific literary tradition, most attempts to define the particular aesthetic coordinates of *The New Yorker* short story stir controversy and fail to come up with an all-encompassing solution. Of course, such a generally valid recipe is more of a utopian desideratum than a realistic endeavour, especially in the case of a weekly magazine which underwent a series of changes in order to accommodate its readers' needs for almost a century. Nevertheless, a minimal aesthetic framework would be more than helpful in assessing the coherence of the fiction editor's demands, as well as the value of the published works.

Even if the fiction editors of the magazine seemed to have had a very clear idea as to what kind of texts were in tune with the spirit of the magazine, the rejection letters sent to writers frequently contained the least convincing, often amusing justifications. In a letter in which she tried to explain the rejection of "In the Charming City" by Morley Callaghan, Katherine White wrote: "Mr. Ross feels that the short stories we use have to be quite special in type – *New Yorker*-ish – if that word means anything to you ..."<sup>2</sup> Still, if one was to closely explore the short fiction and the casual pieces published by *The New Yorker* along its entire history, one might come to the conclusion that the significance of 'that word' might escape even the venerable Mr. Eustace Tilley.<sup>3</sup> In a 1945 letter to Mrs. Norton Baskin, Harold Ross admits to the high degree of subjectivity involved in the selection of the materials to be published when he writes: "[w]e are unquestionably captious and careless frequently and occasionally we suggest changes for the mere sake of change, or for a peculiar personal feeling, ..."<sup>4</sup> Renata Adler, a long-term contributor to the magazine, also shows her scepticism in regard to this distinctive short fiction category when she states that the 'sensibility' guiding the acceptance of a text in the pages of *The New Yorker* "was formed and altered by the publication of each piece".<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, James Purdy remarked that "if you read all their stories every week for a year you'd begin to think that most of them were

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid. 215.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 55.

<sup>3</sup> Mr. Eustace Tilley is the symbolic figure of the magazine, the dressy dandy with sideburns, wearing a monocle and a high hat, created by Rea Irvin for the cover of the first issue of the magazine.

<sup>4</sup> Harold Ross, "Letter to Mrs. Norton Baskin," 30 November 1945. *Letters from the Editor. The New Yorker's Harold Ross*, ed. Thomas Kunkel (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 301.

<sup>5</sup> Renata Adler, *Gone: The Last Days of the New Yorker* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 56.

written by the same person using different names”.<sup>1</sup> Eventually, Purdy’s derogatory intention, apart from denouncing what he saw as a wearisome series of literary texts, emphasizes that there is, indeed, a spirit and an aesthetic trend specific for *The New Yorker*, whose main coordinates can be traced back to Harold Ross’ 1925 prospectus and can be defined both by closely analyzing the texts published in the magazine and *via negativa*, by looking at the rejection letters mailed to all the writers whose texts were not *New Yorker-ish* enough.<sup>2</sup>

The essential prerequisite for a text to make it in the next issue of *The New Yorker* was, of course, to embrace a New York theme. The experience of the sophisticated urban reality was the only one that could find representation in the magazine. The magazine has always demonstrated a distinct preference for the stylized rendering of the urban environment, for the fictional retelling of different aspects of contemporary life, which involved characters belonging to the upper-middle class and coming from a geographical context closely resembling the New York metropolitan space. This preference found justification in the magazine’s declared attempt to render the local colour and catch the full flavour of metropolitan life.

Given that *The New Yorker* was conceived as a humorous magazine from the very beginning, it was only natural that the editors should always require humorous short stories. Both cartoonists and comic writers bore the responsibility for “charting the outlines of the ‘*New Yorker* school of humor’”<sup>3</sup> and for reinforcing the tradition of “chic American humor”<sup>4</sup> established by Harold Ross. As set forth by its founder, the magazine used to refuse vulgar and slapstick humour, but has always encouraged witty texts, in which the humorous effect sprang from intellectual games and erudite references, thus transforming the *New Yorker* prose humour into “a contemporary, urban scion of America’s most distinguished comic tradition.”<sup>5</sup>

Another significant requirement of *The New Yorker*’s fiction editors was that the text be bereft of sentimentalism. Writers have always been required to rise above the emotional and the pathetic mode and work towards entertaining the intellect, since the deep exploration of human emotions was considered inadequate to the spirit of the magazine. In a 1948 letter to Harold Ross, writer Kay Boyle confessed: “[i]f my hero wished to tell the girl he loved her, he would say so, right out, in my book – but for the *New Yorker* I am certain I would write, ‘I love you, I think, somewhat’ – or ‘It feels a little like love.’”<sup>6</sup> The shift from the emotional to the rational was viewed as a sign of sophistication and, therefore, erudite, intellectual references have always been preferred to pathetic explorations of human experience.

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<sup>1</sup> Purdy quoted in William Peden, *The American Short Story: Continuity and Change, 1940–1975* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. 1964. Boston MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1975), 12.

<sup>2</sup> Ben Yagoda’s book *About Town: The New Yorker and the World it Made* provides several examples of such rejection letters.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Blair, and Hamlin Hill, *America’s Humor: from Poor Richard to Doonesbury* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 421.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 417.

<sup>5</sup> Judith Yaross Lee, *Defining New Yorker Humor* (University Press of Mississippi: Jackson, 2000), 247.

<sup>6</sup> Yagoda, *About Town*, 205.

If during the first four decades of the magazine's existence, the fiction editors of *The New Yorker* manifested a fairly traditional taste in fiction and demonstrated low tolerance for the fantastic, for allegorical fiction, and for experimental or subversive writing, in the mid-sixties they opened up to postmodernist playfulness, "especially if its subject matter was urban and its tone ironic."<sup>1</sup> *The New Yorker* began to publish short stories by Donald Barthelme, Jorge Luis Borges, Don DeLillo, and other representatives of postmodernist fiction.

While the letters of rejection would not usually cause any further discussion, the quarrel between the writers and the fiction editors would start only after a text had been accepted for publication. The editors' obsession with grammatical correctness,<sup>2</sup> with clear and explicit writing styles would often ruin the authors' efforts to create the ambiguities they considered of uttermost importance for their texts. Vladimir Nabokov is famous for his resistance against the changes made by the *New Yorker's* editors. "Why not have the reader re-read a sentence now and then? It won't hurt him,"<sup>3</sup> he said in a futile attempt to protect his. Nevertheless, the parochial attitudes and the dictatorial voices of the fiction editors of *The New Yorker* would most often win the argument, since conformation to their trenchant recommendations was an essential requirement for the publication of the text.

While the set of coordinates described above seem to govern the majority of texts published by *The New Yorker*, often the fiction editors can be found guilty of bending or even breaking the rules, as many of the texts which made it into the pages of the magazine would not fit the measures of the Procrustean bed laid by *The New Yorker*. Although one can find numerous such examples, the humorous touch, the intellectual references, and the elitist metropolitan style remain the main coordinates which govern the short fiction, the cartoons, and the journalism published in *The New Yorker*.

Probably because he felt like their "most illiterate writer,"<sup>4</sup> Woody Allen worked hard to improve his writing technique and to come up with better, more humorous and more sophisticated pieces in order to accommodate the literary requirements of *The New Yorker*. He began his collaboration with *The New Yorker* in 1966, when he submitted for consideration "The Gossage-Vardebedian Papers," a text built around an aggressive exchange of letters between two people playing chess via mail, who end up engaging in a petty quarrel rather than focusing on the game. *Playboy* had solicited him a text, but he ended up sending it to *The New Yorker*. He apparently owes this move to his then fiancée, Louise Lesser, who encouraged him to send it to *The New Yorker* because she claimed that the piece was good enough to be published there.

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<sup>1</sup> Kasia Boddy, *The American Short Story since 1950* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 40.

<sup>2</sup> George H. Douglas claims that Harold Ross' frenzied "preoccupation with punctuation marks" should be understood as a compensation mechanism for his "inferior education" and "huge pockets of ignorance" (132). Apparently, this preoccupation with commas, periods, and semicolons was passed on to the fiction editors of the magazine.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Yagoda, *About Town*, 226.

<sup>4</sup> Woody Allen tells Eric Lax in a discussion about his collaboration with *The New Yorker*: "When I first wrote for them, I always assumed that it had to be complex, because I'm probably their most illiterate writer – my grammar and spelling are just laughable. What I've been trying to do is get more and better laughs clearer and easier" (in Lax, *Woody Allen and His Comedy* 223).



**Teodora Cosman**, *Overexposure*, positive  
40cm x 40cm, pencil on canvas, 2012

Being published in *The New Yorker* represented one of the most important signs of recognition a short story writer could receive. As Woody Allen confessed, “[t]o me, as of everyone else of my generation, *The New Yorker* was hallowed ground. .... I was shocked when I got this phone call back saying that if I’d make a few changes, they’d print it.”<sup>1</sup> Allen was willing to sacrifice his writing in whatever ways would make it fit for publication. As he later confessed, “I would have been willing to turn the ending into an aquafoil.”<sup>2</sup>

From 1966 until 1980, Woody Allen had a number of twenty-eight short stories published in *The New Yorker*, including some of his most famous texts such as “Hassidic Tales with a Guide to Their Interpretation by the Noted Scholar” in which he absorbed the vernacular of Hasidic storytelling and Talmudic interpretation, “My Philosophy” which ends with some of his most famous aphorisms, “The Whore of

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Yagoda, *About Town*, 368.

<sup>2</sup> Lax, *Woody Allen*, 223.

Mensa”, one of his most popular short stories<sup>1</sup>, or the O. Henry Award winner, “The Kugelmass Episode”. In 1980, Woody Allen ceased to submit short stories to *The New Yorker* because he wanted to put more energy into his film work. Nevertheless, in 2000 he resumed his collaboration with the magazine and continues to contribute short fiction and casual pieces to *The New Yorker* to this day. Writing for *The New Yorker* seems to respond to some basic need whose satisfaction gives him much pleasure, as Allen recurrently refers to his collaboration with the magazine by using culinary metaphors: “writing is pure gravy. Every time I get a piece published in the *New Yorker*, it’s like the first time all over again.”<sup>2</sup>

The aesthetic direction of *The New Yorker* short story and the editorial recommendations of the magazine had a considerable impact on Woody Allen’s writing and shaped it in a very specific manner. The New York related thematic was never a problem in the case of Woody Allen, who is “metropolitan to the bone.”<sup>3</sup> His work testifies for an intimate knowledge of the city’s subtleties. For him, the city is not only an endless reservoir of creative resources, but the only source which can feed his artistic drives because, as he points out in a *Rolling Stone* interview, the only reality he accepted and felt comfortable with was that of the urban environment. Woody Allen confessed: “I am definitely a child of the city streets, and I feel at home on my own two feet, you know, not in a car or a train or anything like that. In Manhattan, I know the town. I know how to get places. I know where to get cabs. I know where to duck in and go to the bathroom if I have to. And what restaurants to eat at and which ones to avoid. I just feel at home in the city.”<sup>4</sup>

Woody Allen’s short stories always convey a sense of immersion into the urban space and his narrative always cleaves to the imagery of the upper-middle class metropolitan life. The relationship between his characters and the city is both conceptual and material. The grandeur of the city mesmerizes its inhabitants while the gridded streets and skyscrapers protect the modern man’s anxieties and neuroses against the perils of nature and wilderness. The pulsating urban chaos is always in tune with the agonizing existential struggle of the characters. For example, in “No Kaddish for Weinstein,” the city emulates Mr. Weinstein’s inner turmoil and tribulation as he thinks: “Some city. Chaos everyplace ... I wonder what the people of New Jersey do.”<sup>5</sup> The characters and the city interrelate through a symbiotic interface which manifests on a metaphorical and psychological, as well as on a material level and allows for confusing projections and identifications. The urban space supports their moral conundrums and transforms according to their emotional and psychological torments and dysfunctions.

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<sup>1</sup> “The Whore of Mensa” is still one of Woody Allen’s most popular short stories. Even today there are several personal blogs where people discuss the text. Moreover, the short story inspired a journal entitled “The Whores of Mensa” which publishes “sequential literature for the masses.” (see [www.whoresofmensa.com](http://www.whoresofmensa.com)).

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Bill Adler, and Jerry Feinman, *Woody Allen: Clown Prince of American Humor* (New York: Pinnacle Books, 1975), 5.

<sup>3</sup> John Lahr, *Show and Tell: New Yorker Profiles* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Woody Allen, *The Illustrated Woody Allen Reader*, ed. Linda Sunshine (London: Jonathan Cape, 1993), 80.

<sup>5</sup> Woody Allen, “No Kaddish for Weinstein,” *The New Yorker* 3 March 1975: 34–35, 35.

Even so, there is always room for the sophisticated urbanite to point out his superior, elitist condition, as shown in the above mentioned quote, through the reference to the people of New Jersey.

Through the examination of social life reflected in the deep analysis of personal issues, Woody Allen manages to catch the texture of urban American life. He discloses and ridicules the mores of a decayed society which cannot offer individuals any grand values on which to underpin their existence. However, the magnificence of the city still shows in the inhabitants' sophistication and intellectualism; bookstores, libraries, concert halls, and museums nurture their intellectual fetishism, while the streets, the restaurants, and the bars create an atmosphere which stimulates them to meditate on the most profound aspects of human existence.

Woody Allen's texts often transform into comic exaggeration of urban experience, into a travesty of the upper-middle class sophisticated society. For example, the narrator of "Yes, but Can the Steam Engine Do This?," contemplates the New York skyline and indulges in profound meditation, while waiting for Joseph K., his beagle, "to emerge from his regular Tuesday fifty-minute hour with a Park Avenue therapist – a Jungian veterinarian who, for fifty dollars per session, labors valiantly to convince him that jowls are not a social drawback."<sup>1</sup> The narrator confessed: "[m]y eyes became moist as I looked out the window at the shimmering towers of the city, and I experienced a sense of eternity, marveling at man's ineradicable place in the universe."<sup>2</sup> It only takes the opening paragraph for Woody Allen to capture the versatile hypostasis of the city and the multifaceted essence of city life. The overwhelming magnificence of the New York skyline which arouses the individual's desire to immerse into the contemplation of life and eternity is unexpectedly and strongly contrasted by the decayed and corrupt city life. The same individual who is able to engage in existential meditation is also put in the unflattering situation of waiting for his beagle to finish its therapy session. Moreover, Woody Allen takes the opportunity to ridicule the urban hysteria about psychotherapy by extending this treatment to dogs, thus turning it into the marker of a distorted sense of urban sophistication. The ridicule of the shallowness of city life is reinforced by the amusing allusion to its exaggerated emphasis on appearance, which can cause depression even in dogs: Joseph K. needs therapy to get over the problem with its jowls, which it perceives as a social handicap. What is even more disturbing (and amusing, at the same time) than the association of these two extremely different perspectives is the normality and the harmony by which they overlap.

The large majority of Woody Allen's short stories have an urban setting and, in most cases, it is easily recognizable as New York. Most often, in the construction of the urban space he chooses to work with an imbricate structure of opposite perspectives which catches the complexity of urban experience, thus fitting his fictional universe into the thematic sphere demarcated by *The New Yorker's* fiction editors.

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<sup>1</sup> Woody Allen, "Yes, but Can the Steam Engine Do This?" *The New Yorker*, 8 October 1966: 52–53, 52.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



The quintessential trait of Woody Allen's work springs from his comic talent<sup>1</sup> and, as Renée Curry remarked, "[a]fter working year in and year out for four decades, Woody Allen has become a comic tradition unto himself."<sup>2</sup> Vittorio Hösle goes so far as to assign the credit for the reinstatement of comedy as high art to Woody Allen. In Hösle's words, "[o]ne can even defend the thesis that Woody Allen recovers the fullness of the comic that had been lost by high art – of course with exceptions such as Rabelais and, in some of his plays, Shakespeare – for more than two millennia."<sup>3</sup>

The humour of Woody Allen's short fiction positions him in the lineage of *The New Yorker's* best humorous writers. As Sanford Pinsker noted, "scholars need not break a sweat to establish Allen's lineage to the Little Man of Robert Benchley, to Charlie Chaplin's Little Tramp, indeed, to a host of precursors from the pages of the *New Yorker* magazine."<sup>4</sup> This comic persona, the Little Man, characterized by fallibility and by his inability to cope with an overbearing environment is, in Maurice Yacowar opinion, the key to Woody Allen's success since it openly confesses "his private fears and failures,"<sup>5</sup> thus creating a sense of intimacy with the audience and the readership he addresses. Woody Allen uses this distinctive persona and his comic talent to transform everything, from major philosophical, ontological, and theological questions, suicide attempts, emotional cravings and crises, and psychological disorders to social conventions, family relationship, sexual desires, quotidian affairs, and physiological aspects, into pretexts for laughter. Woody Allen's texts are abundant with jokes which win over the reader but which can also turn, at times, into potential weaknesses. Roger Angell, the fiction editor of *The New Yorker* remembered his reaction to one of Woody Allen's texts, which he described as "too funny."<sup>6</sup>

Woody Allen's ebullient humour manifests both at the level of the architecture of his phrases, as well as in the construction of the narrative, and penetrates the formal level of his agile mixing of discourses and genres. His writing style is patterned with non sequiturs, stylistic *mélanges*, paradoxical combinations, and logical disruptions which make it easy to generate smiles and laughs out of every phrase or, at least, every paragraph. The ludicrous descent from the lofty, the sophisticated, and the highly philosophical to the ordinary, the physiological, and the trivial covers a wide leeway, ranging from the smallest details of individual experience to major metaphysical concerns or to summing up an entire social trend. For example, the second section of "My Philosophy" is entitled "Eschatological Dialectics as a Means of Coping with

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<sup>1</sup> Most scholars interested in Woody Allen's work either dedicate entire books to Woody Allen's humor, or, at least investigate his comic power in separate chapters or refer to it throughout their entire work. While most exegetic works tackle Woody Allen's films, his short fiction has also drawn the attention of a few scholars who chose to analyze the mechanism of humor in his prose work.

<sup>2</sup> Renée R. Curry, "Woody Allen: The Artist as Worker," in *Perspectives on Woody Allen*, ed. Renée R. Curry (New York: G.K. Hall & Co, 1996.), 3–18, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Vittorio Hösle, *Woody Allen. An Essay on the Meaning of the Comical* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Sanford Pinsker, *The Schlemiel as Metaphor. Studies in the Yiddish and American Jewish novel* (Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1971), 163.

<sup>5</sup> Yacowar, Maurice. *Loser Take All. The Comic Art of Woody Allen* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co, 1979), 9.

<sup>6</sup> Yagoda, *About Town*, 369.

Shingles.” The subtitle itself ridicules and trivializes all major theological concerns about the end of mankind through the simple association with the treatment of shingles, while also revealing the author’s cynical view of the mystical and religious doctrines regarding the final destiny of humankind and the final judgment. The entire section reinforces the idea promoted by the title, as the unnamed narrator meditates: “We can say that the universe consists of a substance, and this substance we will call "atoms," or else we will call it "monads." ... This, of course, does not explain why the soul is immortal. Nor does it say anything about an afterlife, or about the feeling my Uncle Sender has that he is being followed by Albanians.”<sup>1</sup> In only one paragraph, Woody Allen dismisses and trivializes both Leibniz’ and Democritus’ philosophical systems and renders them irrelevant and useless both against the metaphysical challenge of proving the soul’s immortality and against the mundane problems of a good nephew, preoccupied with the schizophrenic persecutory delusions that distort Uncle Sender’s sense of reality. In the final section of “My Philosophy” entitled “Aphorisms” Woody Allen carries on disparaging major theological concerns and grand philosophical matters that he exposes by means of vulgar simplification. Woody Allen writes: “Eternal nothingness is O.K. if you’re dressed for it.”<sup>2</sup> Metaphysics is here trivialized by the association with the social etiquette which values appearance above anything else.

These surprising shifts and logical distortions became the recognition factors that the readership instantly associates with Woody Allen. He speaks of the most troublesome aspects of human existence in the most hilarious manner and achieves the humorous effect through the design of his phrases based on the yoking of the most heterogeneous ideas. Maurice Charney argues that Woody Allen’s favourite strategy for creating comic effects is the non sequitur, which he defines as a type of association which “plays with the possibility of a logical link that isn’t really there.”<sup>3</sup> In the specific case of Woody Allen, Charney claims that the non sequitur is “a free associational, spontaneous kind of humor preoccupied with certain metaphysical themes” and that “these portentous themes are deflated by a very materialistic and practical conclusion that may have little or nothing to do literally with the original proposition.”<sup>4</sup> Woody Allen treats the script of the jokes with great care and, although unexpected, his non sequiturs are not completely random. Existentialist concerns come up in Woody Allen’s fiction with a self-propelled intensity which is instantly diluted by the trivializing effect of the non sequiturs. A logical reconnection, however twisted, is still possible and results in a comic effect. This technique allows Woody Allen to avoid pathetic seriousness and to attenuate the gravity of the existential aspects he plays out in his short fiction.

While the situations presented in his short stories are rarely amusing in themselves, Woody Allen succeeds in transforming even the most tragic event into comic material. In *The Language of Comic Narratives*, Isabel Ermida identifies a set of five principles a text has to respect in order to be considered humorous and applies them to Woody Allen’s short story “The Lunatic’s Tale” in order to identify the mechanisms

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<sup>1</sup> Woody Allen, “My Philosophy,” *The New Yorker*, 27 December 1969: 25–26, 25.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>3</sup> Maurice Charney, “Woody Allen’s non sequiturs,” *Humor – International Journal of Humor Research* 8, no. 4 (1995): 339–348, 340.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 347.

behind Woody Allen's power to transform the most unfortunate situations of the individual's life into comic narratives. Ermida concludes that his comic narrative is "not limited to being a chain of independent joke-like structures."<sup>1</sup> She claims that the discursive organization of humour relies on a complex strategy which involves the interaction of supra-scripts, the interplay between stimulating the reader to infer the course of the narrative and the deflation of the reader's expectations, the presence of 'the unsaid,' conveyed through allusions and presuppositions, and a series of "clues, obstacles, and traps laid out by the author" which turn out to be "a strategy of making the reader succeed in solving the text and enjoying its reward: amusement."<sup>2</sup> Isabel Ermida pursues a similar quest in her study "'Losers, poltroons and nudniks' in Woody Allen's *Mere Anarchy*"<sup>3</sup> where she explores the semantic and stylistic mechanisms Woody Allen uses for the comic incongruity which transforms human failure and the wide range of assorted negative emotions into comic material. Based on Isabel Ermida's research, we can conclude that Woody Allen's comic power resides in his ability to master and blend a series of complex linguistics mechanisms and humorous devices, and that his humorous texts, although influenced by the legacy of his stand-up comedy days, are not just a long string of jokes.

The underlayer of Isabel Ermida's research, that is, her analysis of how negative emotions and experiences are transformed into comic material, points to another important aspect of Woody Allen's humour. His comedy always attenuates the anxiety associated with the futile nature of existence and the pain residing in his acute sense of evanescence. Confining the fear of death to an aesthetic realm protected by humour renders it more manageable. This mechanism of palliating the threat of human mortality through humour links Woody Allen's work to that of his predecessors from *The New Yorker*. As Sanford Pinsker noted, "[l]ike Benchley, like Thurber, like Perelman, Allen cannot recount his complicated griefs without making them seem comic."<sup>4</sup>

Another important aspect of Woody Allen's short fiction, which links it to the tradition of the *New Yorker* short story, is its rich erudition. The magazine always encouraged highly erudite references which should go beyond the power of understanding of the "old lady from Dubuque",<sup>5</sup> and prided itself on its intellectualism, as a sign of sophistication. Woody Allen's texts are highly intellectual and spiced with highbrow allusions. Reading Woody Allen's texts often feels like navigating an erudite minefield. As James M. Wallace put it, Allen's short fiction is "a literary mousetrap, inviting educated readers to nibble at an appetizing and complex work of literature and

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<sup>1</sup> Isabel Ermida, *The Language of Comic Narratives. Humor Construction in Short Stories*, ed. Victor Raskin and Willibald Ruch (Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2008), 204.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 205.

<sup>3</sup> Isabel Ermida, "'Losers, poltroons and nudniks' in Woody Allen's *Mere Anarchy*: A linguistic approach to comic failure," *The Pragmatics of Humour across Discourse Domains*, ed. Marta Dynel (Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2011), 335–352.

<sup>4</sup> Pinsker, *The Schemiel*, 168.

<sup>5</sup> In the prospectus that Harold Ross sent to potential investors and subscribers when he was preparing the launching of the new magazine, he claimed that the magazine "is not edited for the old lady in Dubuque" (qtd. in Yagoda 39).

ensnaring pretentious academics ... The problem, of course, is in knowing exactly what springs the trap.”<sup>1</sup>

Oddly enough, Woody Allen pretends to be unaware of the high degree of erudition required on the part of his readers. In a discussion with Eric Lax, Woody Allen attempts to diminish the importance of high brow allusions in his texts by claiming that: “I want people to read my stories without the slightest investment of intellect and laugh. ... I don’t want them to have to read through two paragraphs of erudite references. I want them to start laughing almost immediately.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed, readers start laughing immediately, but intellectuals laugh much better. Often, slapstick incidents are told in intellectual slang. For example, the episode which led to the physical impairment of the narrator of “On a Bad Day You Can See Forever” is recounted as follows: “Eager to catch her eye, I had attempted to clean and jerk a barbell equal in weight to two Steinways when my spine suddenly assumed the shape of a Möbius strip, and the lion’s share of my cartilage parted audibly.”<sup>3</sup> Other stories pose greater demands on the reader. Woody Allen begins his casual piece “Above the Law, Below the Box Springs” as follows:

Wilton’s Creek lies at the center of the Great Plains, north of Shepherd’s Grove, to the left of Dobb’s Point, and just about the bluffs that form Planck’s constant. The land is arable and is found primarily on the ground. Once a year, the swirling winds from the Kinna Hurrah rip through the open fields, lifting farmers from their work and depositing them hundreds of miles to the south, where they often resettle and open boutiques.<sup>4</sup>

For readers unfamiliar with the geography of the United States, with Planck’s constant, or unaware that Kinna Hurrah, or Ken Ayin Hara, is Yiddish for “May there be no evil eye,” the opening of “Above the Law, Below the Box Springs” might make no sense. They would not be able to understand the spatial misattributions and be amused by the intrusive, non-topographic elements, which make the raw material for the puns and jokes in the fragment, and which are supposed to prepare the readers for the surreal, absurd, illogical fictional world they are about to enter.

There are, of course, some texts in which the intellectual reference only sustains a specific joke, but missing the reference would not completely jeopardize the text. For example, in “No Kaddish for Weinstein,” Woody Allen writes: “He had been a precocious child. An intellectual. At twelve, he had translated the poems of T. S. Eliot into English, after some vandals had broken into the library and translated them into French.”<sup>5</sup> Even if the readers are unaware of who T. S. Eliot was, they can still assume that translating poems at the age of twelve is fairly uncommon. Probably the knowledge

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<sup>1</sup> M. James Wallace, “The Mousetrap: Reading Woody Allen,” *Woody Allen and Philosophy*, ed. Mark T. Conard and Aeon J. Skoble (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court, 2004. 69–88), 72.

<sup>2</sup> Lax, *Woody Allen*, 221.

<sup>3</sup> Woody Allen, “On a Bad Day You Can See Forever,” *The New Yorker*, 13 November 2000: 156–163, 156.

<sup>4</sup> Woody Allen, “Above the Law, Below the Box Springs,” *The New Yorker*, 21 November 2005: 34–36, 34.

<sup>5</sup> Allen, “No Kaddish,” 34.

about T. S. Eliot's style and the length of his poems might add to the admiration for such a translation, but given the resonance of the name, the readers can infer that those poems have actually been written in English, whence the redundancy of the translation and the first humorous touch. The vandals' profanation of Mr. Weinstein's early work reinforces the humoristic effect because it activates a highly implausible course of action and, at the same time, alludes to the sensitivity of the intellectual whose work has been tempered with. Although Mr. Weinstein's personal history is described using references to literature, missing out the reference can be compensated by means of logical deduction and does not fully jeopardize the understanding of the text.

However, in most cases, erudite references are crucial to grasping the meaning of Woody Allen's texts. For example, one of Woody Allen's best known short stories, "The Kugelmass Episode" cannot be fully appreciated unless the reader is familiar with Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and with the concept of bovarism. Moreover, the humorous effect of the ending depends on the reader's being familiar with Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* and with theories about the consumerist society. "The Schmeed Memoirs,"<sup>1</sup> a text in which Woody Allen captures the entire array of major events which occurred inside the Third Reich between 1940 and 1945 and translates them into tonsorial affairs, can only appeal to readers familiar with World War II, with Hitler's high officials and, most importantly, with the symbolic value of the sideburns for Jews. Several other short stories and casual pieces pose similar problems. As James M. Wallace points out, " 'Sing, You Sacher Tortes' would be unintelligible to a reader unfamiliar with the geography, history, and culture of New York City, and with sideshows, gangster lore, Jewish history, Yiddish, Las Vegas lounge acts, the theater, modern physics, the fashion industry, French grooming products, Viennese pastries, cigars – and probably much more ..."<sup>2</sup> Often, Woody Allen's texts assume a certain kind of readerly readiness which has to do with the New York metropolitan space. He often inserts into the texts references that only New Yorkers would understand, thus creating a sense of complicity between his short fiction and his targeted readership and simultaneously reinforcing the pretence of exclusivity specific for New York. As Adler and Feinman noted,

New York City is a place that, more than once, has threatened to secede from New York State. Very likely. They'd like to secede from the Union, as well. They're a unique people, tough and funny. Workers. Wisecrackers. Ironic and mean and tender all at the same time. It's what you get when you cross Middle-European peasants with robber barons and let the mixture ferment. You get Barbara Streisand. You get Benny and Berle and Youngman and Sam Goldwin and Charlie Feldman and, oh, just everybody. You get Woody Allen.<sup>3</sup>

The richness of Woody Allen's erudite references is overwhelming. It is part of the piquancy of his style and places his writing in the elitist realm of highbrow entertainment. His texts continuously challenge the reader to decipher the allusions, to make connections and to dig deeper for new layers of signification. Thus, the aesthetic

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<sup>1</sup> Woody Allen, "The Schmeed Memoirs," *The New Yorker*, 17 April 1971: 36–37.

<sup>2</sup> Wallace, "The Mousetrap", 70.

<sup>3</sup> Adler and Feinman, *Woody Allen*, 74.

pleasure is often replaced with the satisfaction resulting from winning the wager against the erudite references. Shared background knowledge is a prerequisite for humour and, even more so, for intellectual jokes. Nevertheless, the challenge does not end with recognizing the reference, but continues with the even more stimulating intellectual exercise of connecting the dots. As James M. Wallace notes, the complexity of Woody Allen's short fiction goes far beyond the literal layer and invites the reader's mind to ceaselessly forge for meaning. In James M. Wallace's words, "[f]or a reader without a brain like Allen's, even a complete liberal arts education and a good search engine are only partially helpful in disentangling his work. He demands much more than simply recognizing allusions and references; there's difficult mental work to be done – the work of interpreting beyond literal level – and the possibilities appear endless."<sup>1</sup>

As if this ceaseless intellectual teasing is not enough, Woody Allen also indulges in ridiculing intellectual sophistication and often exposes it as pseudo-intellectualism. In "No Kaddish for Weinstein" he writes: "Adelman, his friend who used to play dreidel with him on Rush Street, had studied driving at the Sorbonne. He could handle a car beautifully and had already driven many places by himself."<sup>2</sup> Woody Allen's irony targets academic snobbishness when he infers that not even driving can be learned elsewhere than at a prestigious high education institution, such as the Sorbonne. Apparently drivers learn to drive gracefully and independently if they study there.

By mocking (pseudo)intellectual sophistication and academic snobbery, Woody Allen actually pokes fun at his readers. Most of his texts are designed as intellectual games, but this predisposition of his escalates in "The Whore of Mensa." In this short story, Woody Allen goes beyond his usual intellectual flirtation with the reader and organizes his text as a parodical assault which exposes the excessive appetite for erudite discussions as fetishist practice. In "The Whore of Mensa" he imagines a world where fine gentlemen look for intellectual entertainment offered by call girls. The whores of Mensa sell pleasurable intellectual and emotional experiences as follows:

For fifty bucks, I learned, you could "relate without getting close." For a hundred, a girl would lend you her Bartok records, have dinner, and then let you watch while she had an anxiety attack. For one-fifty, you could listen to FM radio with twins. For three bills, you got 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.<sup>3</sup>

The overlap between intellectual fetishism and sexuality is rendered visible on the surface level of the text since the narrative of the story revolves around a blackmail case orchestrated by Flossie, the madam that manages the call-girls service, against a man whose wife fails to fulfil his intellectual cravings. The dialogues are designed so as to support the scenario of discussions about sexual affairs. For example, Word Babcock,

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<sup>1</sup> Wallace, "The Mousetrap", 70–71.

<sup>2</sup> Allen, "No Kaddish", 34.

<sup>3</sup> Woody Allen, "The Whore of Mensa," *The New Yorker*, 16 December 1974: 37–38, 38.

the subject of the blackmail, tells detective Kaiser Lupowitz: “See, I need a woman who’s mentally stimulating, Kaiser. And I’m willing to pay for it. I don’t want an involvement – I want a quick intellectual experience, then I want the girl to leave. Christ, Kaiser, I’m a happily married man.”<sup>1</sup>

While traditional theories of fetishism<sup>2</sup> define it as a type of sexual perversion in which sexual desire and sexual pleasure are dependent upon an object whose intended purpose is replaced, through synecdoche, with a sexual purpose, Woody Allen operates a major shift and moves the focus from the object, to the ritual. In “The Whore of Mensa,” the fetishist practice does not involve the material object, the book, the work of art, but shifts towards the erudite discussion and the intellectual or artistic experience.

In his book *Fetishism and Its Discontents in Post-1960 American Fiction*, Christopher Kocela analyzes the manifold manifestations of fetishism in late-twentieth century American literature and explores novels, essays, and short stories by Thomas Pynchon, Kathy Acker, Ishmael Reed, Tim O’Brien, John Hawkes, and Robert Coover. Kocela contends that these authors revisit and redefine fetishism as “a strategy for expressing social and political discontent, and for diagnosing historical and cultural trends particular to the second half of the twentieth century.”<sup>3</sup> Kocela claims that these authors insist on the fetishist disavowal as defined by Freud which allows the fetishist to understand and, at the same time, to refuse the traumatic reality. Nevertheless, fetishism loses the quality of inoffensive and domesticated sexual perversion assigned by the Freudian theory and becomes a form of social subversion used to challenge “contemporary ideological fantasy.”<sup>4</sup> Although Woody Allen’s “The Whore of Mensa” does not count among the texts investigated by Christopher Kocela, it aligns to this trend of the late-twentieth century American fiction. “The Whore of Mensa” redefines the strategies of fetishist practices and reinforces their subversive potential for the diagnosis and the exposure of socio-cultural practices which verge on a pathological state. Woody Allen’s text ridicules the exaggerated appetite for erudition as a deviant social practice and, at the same time, exposes the ostentatious parade of intellectualism as a marker of class affiliation. From this perspective, Woody Allen’s reinterpretation of fetishism brings it closer to Jean Baudrillard’s theory which draws on the theory of Karl Marx and approaches fetishism in terms of social semiotics, as a mediator of social value. Thus, intellectualism and erudition (or pseudo-intellectualism and the pretence of erudition) become the markers of elite class, of belonging to a sophisticated metropolitan group characterized by the need to escape the mediocrity of quotidian life.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>2</sup> Charles de Brosses introduces the term *fetish* in his 1760 book, *Du culte des dieux fétiches ou Parallèle de l'ancienne religion de l'Égypte avec la religion actuelle de Nigritie* where he describes it as a form of religious practice based on the worshipping of animals and inanimate objects. The term gains wider connotations in the nineteenth century when Karl Marx introduced the concept of *commodity fetishism*. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the term starts being used in psychoanalysis to describe deviant sexual practices. The first to describe *sexual fetishism* is Jean-Martin Charcot, but the term itself is only used by his disciple, Alfred Binet, and gains popularity through the work of Sigmund Freud.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Kocela, *Fetishism and Its Discontents in Post-1960 American Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 4.

<sup>4</sup> Idem.

Humour and intellectualism help Woody Allen's short fiction conform to the 'de-sentimentalization' requirements of *The New Yorker*, as both laughter and over-intellectualization inhibit sentimental and pathetic reactions. Woody Allen's writing is devoid of sentimental contemplation and is meant to stimulate the intellect, even when it appears to be exploring human emotions. Although Woody Allen engages in the exploration of romantic relationships, he always controls the excess of feeling through reason and humour. For example, in "The Early Essays" he writes: "Is it better to be the lover or the loved one? Neither, if your cholesterol is over six hundred."<sup>1</sup> What promises to be a debate on romantic relationships falls in the realm of the trivial and the physiological. This descent from the exalted to the common and the mundane, a technique discussed above, also serves to balance the emotional content of experience and stirs an intellectual rather than an emotional response to comedy.

In most cases, Woody Allen's short fiction respects the clarity requirements of the *New Yorker* fiction editors. His texts are easy to read and do not challenge the reader with ambiguities. Nevertheless, as seen in the above discussion about the overwhelming erudition of his short fiction, the understanding of his texts would often require reading the entire humanities section of a library, and a few more books of science. Still, the complete clarity and objectivity promoted by the *New Yorker* are sometimes twisted and turned against themselves in a mock-surrealist loop. Indeed, Woody Allen likes to indulge in playful experimentation and the line between the realistic and the surreal is often erased. Woody Allen often juxtaposes a rich sense of the grotesque with an acute sense of the comic and creates exaggerated characters and situations. For example, in "The UFO Menace," Woody Allen writes:

A typical "explained" incident is the one reported by Sir Chester Ramsbottom, on June 5, 1961, in Shropshire: "I was driving along the road at 2 A.M. and saw a cigar-shaped object that seemed to be tracking my car. No matter which way I drove, it stayed with me, turning sharply at right angles. It was a fierce, glowing red, and in spite of twisting and turning the car at high speed I could not lose it. I became alarmed and began sweating. I let out a shriek of terror and apparently fainted, but awoke in a hospital, miraculously unharmed." Upon investigation, experts determined that the "cigar-shaped object" was Sir Chester's nose. Naturally, all his evasive actions could not lose it, since it was attached to his face.<sup>2</sup>

The disruption and the distortion of the real through comic-grotesque metamorphoses result in the rearrangement of the structures of meaning, based on the association between the bizarre, the ludicrous, and the unreal. Woody Allen exploits the darkly comic potential of this technique through a strategy of excess. His short fiction often combines the surreal with the farcical and even those texts written in the spirit of realism, still bear a strong sense of the absurd and the parodical.

Woody Allen's exploration of the absurd and the nonsensical and his appetite for breaching logic do not fully align to the initial scope of the magazine. Marc S. Reisch briefly analyzes the dynamics between Woody Allen's penchant for the absurd and for nonsensical associations and *The New Yorker's* preference for clarity and he concludes that:

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<sup>1</sup> Woody Allen, "The Early Essays," *The New Yorker*, 20 January 1973: 32–33, 32.

<sup>2</sup> Woody Allen, "The UFO Menace," *The New Yorker*, 13 June 1977: 31–33, 32.



The earlier generation of humor writers for the *New Yorker* subscribe to the original aims of that magazine. A prospectus of the *New Yorker* declares, 'it will hate bunk. ... its integrity will be above suspicion.' Allen's characters make bunk a virtue and entirely sidestep the question of integrity. By consistently assuming a high brow attitude, Allen's characters parody the *New Yorker* writers who had wanted to clear away the excess baggage that bunk brings in its wake.<sup>1</sup>

While there is some validity to Marc S. Reisch's remark regarding the initial premises of the magazine and their apparent incompatibility with Woody Allen's appetite for 'bunk,' in my opinion, Woody Allen's short fiction does not challenge the question of integrity. Moreover, the dominant trend of the magazine underwent some changes over the decades and, by the time Woody Allen submitted his first piece to *The New Yorker*, the magazine had already opened up to literary experiments. A decade before the beginning of their collaboration, *The New Yorker* would have probably frowned upon Woody Allen's short stories and casuals, but in the mid-sixties the magazine displayed an increased tolerance (which, in time, turned into an appetite) for experimental and surreal short fiction. In the sixties, they began to appreciate the fictional possibilities opened by the postmodernist matrix and, therefore, Woody Allen's exuberant fiction fitted perfectly in the pages of the magazine. As discussed above, Woody Allen's short stories and casual pieces seem to align to a considerable degree to the requirements of the magazine's fiction editors. Moreover, as Woody Allen confessed, he thinks of *The New Yorker* as the most appropriate venue for his 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 above, 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*. This high degree of compatibility and mutual appreciation seems to be the key to their ongoing, long term collaboration.

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<sup>1</sup> Marc S. Reisch, "Woody Allen: American Prose Humorist," *Perspectives on Woody Allen*, ed. Renée R. Curry (New York: G.K. Hall & Co, 1996), 137–145, 142.