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## Woody Allen and the Comic Tradition in America

Karen C. Blansfield

Of the American humorists who have emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, Woody Allen is one of the most sophisticated and versatile, and surely one of the most prolific and well-known. His resilient comedy, which wrestles with age-old philosophical problems, and his beleaguered, self-deprecating personas have made Allen a kind of cult figure, a Chaplinesque hero of the “little man” engulfed by the absurdities, frustrations, and neuroses of modern urban life. His penchant for confronting these fears and obsessions—most notably, God, sex, and death—and transforming them into witty, humorous, but often dark parodies have prompted such comments as Douglas Brode’s that Allen is the “key comic consciousness of our times” and “a walking compendium of a generation’s concerns, comically stated” (13, 21).

As an American humorist, Allen is best known as a filmmaker, the director, writer, and star of such acclaimed movies as *Annie Hall*, *Zelig*, and *Hannah and Her Sisters*, as well as of critical flops like *Interiors* and *Stardust Memories*. But Allen is also important as an author, though less renowned, and his three collections of prose pieces—*Getting Even*, *Without Feathers*, and *Side Effects*—mark him as a master of comic technique and a documenter of the zeitgeist. Furthermore, although Allen is very much a twentieth-century humorist, he shares a kinship with a range of American writers from the colonial period through contemporary times—particularly the *New Yorker* school and associates like James Thurber, E.B. White, and S.J. Perelman—and his style, use of conventions, and thematic concerns clearly establish Allen in the tradition of the comic imagination in America.

Allen’s prose employs a number of formal devices which have shaped American humor from its inception: funny names, comic exaggeration, allusions, excessive ornamentation, and verbal incongruity—the juxtaposition of lofty and mundane ideas or language. A glance at any of Allen’s stories yields such odd-sounding characters as Fabian Plotnick, Kermit Kroll, Joshua Fleagle, or Dr. Ossip Parks, names which in their humorous connotations and appropriate context have much in common with predecessors like Silence Dogood, Ichabod Crane, Ransy Sniffle, Flem Snopes, and Stella-Rondo. Such offbeat names are humorous partly because they are so deliberately ridiculous (like “Moltvick Dorf, the anchovy trainer” [WF 28]), partly because—like their literary ancestors—they reflect the characters they identify (Heather Butkiss is “a

long-haired blond” whose “figure described a set of parabolas that could cause cardiac arrest in a yak” [*GE* 139]), and partly because they play on established stereotypes (hence, Sir Chester Ramsbottom of Shropshire in “The UFO Menace” parodies the British country gentleman [*SE* 28], while the characters Diabetes and Trichinosis in “God (A Play)” mimic familiar figures from ancient Greek drama [*WF* 123-79]).

The tendency to exaggerate, which has long pervaded American comic literature, also characterizes Allen’s writing, though he is generally more absurd than the early humorists and often resorts to preposterous images. In the American tradition, exaggeration has found expression in frontier humor, tall tales like Thomas Bangs Thorpe’s “The Big Bear of Arkansas,” and outrageous lies, which often depend on duping the reader or listener, as in Augustus Baldwin Longstreet’s account of “The Horse Swap.” Hyperbole has also found an outlet in such resonant prose as Faulkner’s description of Eula Varner in *The Hamlet*, where the excessive richness and profundity of the language ridicule its simple subject:

[Eula Varner’s] entire appearance suggested some symbology out of the old Dionysic times—honey in sunlight and bursting grapes, the writhes bleeding of the crushed fecundated vine beneath the hard rapacious trampling goat-hoof. She seemed to be not a living integer of her contemporary scene, but rather to exist in a teeming vacuum in which her days followed one another as though behind sound-proof glass, where she seemed to listen in sullen bemusement, with a weary wisdom heired of all mammalian maturity, to the enlarging of her own organs. (95)

Allen’s exaggeration, though it shares Faulkner’s flair for verbal embellishment, differs from earlier American humor most noticeably in its obsessive introspection. Rather than turning outward to the reader or listener, Allen’s humor tends to be more subjective and self-conscious, born of the narrator’s guilt or desire, as in this passage from “A Little Louder, Please”:

It began one day last January when I was standing in McGinnis’ Bar on Broadway, engulfing a slab of the world’s richest cheesecake and suffering the guilty, cholesterolish hallucination that I could hear my aorta congealing into a hockey puck. Standing next to me was a nerve-shattering blonde, who waxed and waned under a black chemise with enough provocation to induce lycanthropy in a Boy Scout. (*GE* 104)

This nervous, neurotic concern with minor occurrences is amplified even further by the spiralling quality of the language. Like Perelman, who could decorate his prose like a Christmas tree (Gerald Weales called him

the *New Yorker's* "master of ornamentation" [240]), Allen can transform a fairly casual, straightforward sentence ("Standing next to me was a blonde") into a ritzy one by loading it with clauses and phrases, and the humor is compounded as those verbal constructions become increasingly complex, while the content accelerates in absurdity:

The joy buzzer underwent many modifications, the most celebrated of which occurred after the introduction of chewing gum by Santa Ana (I believe chewing gum was originally a dish of his wife's that simply would not go down) and took the form of a spearmint-gum pack equipped with a subtle mousetrap mechanism. (*GE* 135)

Such disproportion between language and subject produces a ribald humor born of incongruity. Though Weales suggests that this sort of elaboration "may have had a deleterious effect on the *New Yorker* at its most serious" (238), it is central to the structure of Allen's comic prose, and it reaches burlesque proportions when used to expound on a simple generality through an accumulation of absurd Rube Goldbergian-details. Consider, for example, the hilarious logic of the paranoid narrator in "A Little Louder, Please" who is trying to win a radio contest:

A further bone-chilling example of my mimetic shortcomings materialized only a few weeks later, when two free tickets to the theatre turned up at my door—the result of my correctly identifying the singing voice of Mama Yancey on a radio program a fortnight prior. First prize was a Bentley, and in my excitement to get my call in to the disc jockey promptly I had bolted naked from the tub. Seizing the telephone with one wet hand while attempting to turn off the radio with the other, I ricocheted off the ceiling, while lights dimmed for miles around, as they did when Lepke got the chair. My second orbit around the chandelier was interrupted by the open drawer of a Louis Quinze desk, which I met head on, catching an ormolu mount across the mouth. A florid insignia on my face, which now looked as if it had been stamped by a rococo cookie cutter, plus a knot on my head the size of an auk egg, affected my lucidity, causing me to place second to Mrs. Sleet Mazursky, and . . . scotching my dreams of the Bentley . . . (*GE* 107)

Obviously, these outrageous antics are not meant to be taken literally, but the narrator's deadpan, straightforward tone and coherent account make such perfect sense that the piece is simultaneously believable yet absurd, serious yet outrageously laughable, the product of a mind obsessed by calamities while still detached enough to retell them in a style orchestrated for effect. This kind of sophisticated, deliberate incongruity, reflecting a world that is nonsensical and baffling, shapes much of Allen's written humor.

Occasionally, Allen even parlays this technique into an entire story, as with "Nefarious Times We Live In." Structured as a flashback through its first-person narrator Willard Pogrebin, this zany cause-effect memoir, which depends uncharacteristically on a surprise twist at the end, laments how the main character had a "childhood ambition . . . to play Mendelssohn on the cello or perhaps dance on point in the great capitals of the world" (*SE* 85) but instead ended up as a would-be presidential assassin. As in "A Little Louder, Please," the series of intervening events, ludicrous though they be, are logically connected and seriously reported by the narrator: After a medical discharge from the army, he undergoes electroshock therapy at a veteran's hospital, then hitchhikes across the country and is kidnapped by health zealots; later he gets arrested for "trying to marry an oyster," turns to religion while in jail, and after his release ends up in the hospital again, this time firmly convinced that he is Igor Stravinsky—and on it goes.

One other prominent stylistic device which defines Allen's comic prose is the non-sequitur, of which he is a master, firing them off in dizzying, sometimes overwhelming barrages. This is a contemporary technique, not found in early American or even early twentieth-century writers, and usually associated with verbal rather than written humor. Allen's use of it owes more to film ancestors like the Marx Brothers and Buster Keaton than to American prose writers. Sometimes Allen's non-sequiturs simply juxtapose familiar and absurd phrases, as in this line from "The Condemned": "An appeal for clemency was turned down on a technicality when it was learned Cloquet's lawyer had filed it while wearing a cardboard moustache" (*SE* 14). At other times, though, the balance is more startling, as when a serious, often weighty statement is followed by a ridiculous yet curiously logical response, such as this one from "The Schmeed Memoirs": "After the Allied invasion, Hitler developed dry, unruly hair" (*GE* 23). Or this, from "Examining Psychic Phenomena": "There is no question that there is an unseen world. The problem is, how far is it from midtown and how late is it open?" (*WF* 7). The non-sequitur is just one more rhetorical indicator of the world of instability and disorder which Allen's comic perception embraces.

While Allen is an adept and imaginative craftsman, skillful at manipulating all these tools of comedy, his real power and depth as a humorist lie in his broader perception of the incongruity and contradictions inherent in life and in American society. His comic vision, like that of most great humorists, is essentially tragic, lamenting the gap between the ideal and the real, between exquisite hope and sordid fact which exists in our world, our culture, and our everyday lives, and acknowledging the

impossibility of ever closing that gap. For Allen, as for dark visionaries like Twain, Perelman, or Thurber, humor offers both a means of bridging that gap and a respite from bleak despair.

His prose mirrors this chasm between idealism and reality through the ludicrous interplay of the lofty and the trivial, in language, subject matter, and design. Like Perelman's acrid comedy, Allen's is inherently schizophrenic, involving a "shared entangling of reason and lunacy, substance and pose, the esoteric and the colloquial . . . which goes beyond style to a comic impulse Allen describes as 'hostile,' a perception of life as inherently chaotic" (Jacobs 27). A simple line such as, "I keep wondering if there is an afterlife, and if there is will they be able to change a twenty?" epitomizes this juxtaposition of the metaphysical and the mundane which shapes the best of Allen's work and creates a constant, engaging tension. Yet while this disparity reiterates the gulf between lofty ruminations and practical considerations, the sheer logic and believability with which Allen presents it, syntactically and rhetorically, underscores the persistent human belief that somehow this gap *can* be closed and the ideal *can* become real. In this sense, comedy—at least Allen's comedy—is an expression of faith and an affirmation of hope.

Much of Allen's comic prose aims at placing abstract ideas in a pragmatic perspective. He is obsessed with philosophical matters, and examining them from the viewpoint of a "little mind" provides a convenient ploy for setting up an incongruity that is both amusing and instructive, suggesting that all the education in the world won't answer some questions, nor will rhetoric offer any defense. The narrator of "My Philosophy" is a homespun philosopher who, during a convalescence from a broken foot (caused by his wife accidentally dropping a spoonful of her first soufflé on it), reads "some of Western society's most formidable thinkers" and is inspired to pen his own musings:

In formulating any philosophy, the first consideration must always be: What can we know? That is, what can we be sure we know, or sure that we know we knew it, if indeed it is at all knowable. Or have we simply forgotten it and are too embarrassed to say anything? . . . By "knowable," incidentally, I do not mean that which can be known by perception of the senses, or that which can be grasped by the mind, but more that which can be said to be Known or to possess a Knownness or Knowability, or at least something you can mention to a friend. (GE 28-29)

Allen is obviously having great fun with language here, spoofing the circular, elusive discourse of philosophers in a parody that finally dwindles down into a familiar, graspable statement, a quality philosophy often lacks. But at the same time he is implying that the mysteries of

existence are no less (or more) accessible to the common man than to the learned one. "In a word," as one critic points out, "higher education can leave us as foolish, lunatic, malicious, and vulnerable as ever" (Yacowan 97). Still, while he is parodying this rhetoric, Allen is also presuming the reader's familiarity with the study and structure of philosophy. The essay, alluding to such thinkers as Kierkegaard, Spinoza, and Hume, imitates the format of a treatise and incorporates such sections as the Kantian "Critique of Pure Dread" (from which the previous excerpt is taken), "Eschatological Dialectics As a Means of Coping with Shingles," and "Aphorisms" ("Eternal nothingness is O.K. if you're dressed for it"), patterned after Nietzsche's writings. This practice of exploiting the rhetorical mode itself as a vehicle of comedy is one of Allen's favorite ploys.

In an early selection such as this one, which comes from Allen's first collection of prose, the lofty and the mundane meet pretty much on a one-to-one basis, with a steady equilibrium between serious and humorous repartee. But in a later piece such as "My Speech to the Graduates," the incongruity is far less balanced, loaded on the side of the serious. The witty interjections of the somber commentator occur only rarely and seem strained, reflecting perhaps the author's darkening vision of the world and bitterly acknowledging the futility of the ideal and the real ever converging. Even the one-liners struggle to get off the ground: "He [contemporary man] has seen the ravages of war, he has known natural catastrophes, he has been to singles bars" (*SE* 59).

Once again Allen employs a recognized format, turning the traditionally optimistic and uplifting commencement address, with all its familiar catch phrases, into a nihilistic sermon that contrasts sharply with the humor of "My Philosophy":

More than any other time in history, mankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness, the other, to total extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly. I speak, by the way, not with any sense of futility, but with a panicky conviction of the absolute meaninglessness of existence which could easily be misinterpreted as pessimism. It is not. It is merely a healthy concern for the predicament of modern man. . . . This "predicament" can be stated one of two ways, though certain linguistic philosophers prefer to reduce it to a mathematic equation where it can be easily solved and even carried around in the wallet. (*SE* 57)

Perhaps Allen is simply parodying the breezy sophistry of the graduation pep talk. Nevertheless, the speech betrays a rueful disillusion, presumably his own. For like Twain, with whom he has so much in common, Allen seems to grow progressively more pessimistic in his humor, reflecting his own observation "that as you get older your vision gets

darker” (Jacobs 136) and that “Life is, in the end, a concentration camp” (Brode 18).

While metaphysical matters and the fate of modern man are key themes in Allen’s humor, he also tackles cultural and academic failures and pretensions, again playing the formal language and structure of an educated society against the simple, direct vernacular of the “little guy” to spoof entrenched attitudes and to suggest a disparity between an ideal democracy and a real inequality.

Though he lacks the bite or moral fervor of Twain, Allen does occasionally lash out at the more blatant inequities of our culture. In “A Look At Organized Crime,” for example, one of his harsher indictments of American society, the horror of the institution filters through the humor. The finely balanced juxtaposition of the serious with the ludicrous induces a constant tension that produces a rather unsettling power. Compare the factual, sobering opening line of the piece with its lighter follow-up: “It is no secret that organized crime in America takes in over forty billion dollars a year. This is quite a profitable sum, especially when one considers that the Mafia spends very little for office supplies” (*GE* 13). Or the immediate shift here from grim statistics to trivial, cartoonish detail: “Last year, organized crime was directly responsible for more than one hundred murders, and *mafiosi* participated indirectly in several hundred more, either by lending the killers carfare or by holding their coats” (*GE* 13). In pieces like these, which border on commentary with their accusatory tone, the incongruity of the prose parallels the incongruity of the democracy on which it is based, implying the troublesome imperfections of that democracy and clearly illustrating how humor can be “valuable in searching out the shortcomings and liabilities of society” (Rubin 4).

The shortcomings of the fantasy world as an escape from drab reality provide another focus for Allen’s restless and discerning eye. The gap between the ideal and the real is perhaps most painfully apparent in the desire to escape the monotony of everyday life through the dreams of glory and visions of romance which, while chimeric, somehow seem attainable. To actually live one’s fantasy, to satisfy that aching spiritual hunger, is the happiest of fates, though such a materialization would obviously prove its undoing. In “The Kugelmass Episode,” the story which best illustrates this mind/body dichotomy, the central character is able to enter his fantasy of a romantic liaison with Emma Bovary (a fulfillment which recurs in *The Purple Rose of Cairo*), but in the end he finds that the strains of that fantasy are no less than the strains of real life with his real wife.



The wistful protagonist, an aging humanities professor, is one of Allen's most endearing and sympathetic characters, and his urgency to capture a bit of life's magic before it's over touches a universal chord. "I'm not getting younger, so before it's too late I want to make love in Venice, trade quips at '21,' and exchange coy glances over red wine and candlelight," he tells his analyst. "I had a dream last night. I was skipping through a meadow holding a picnic basket and the basket was marked 'Options.' And then I saw there was a hole in the basket" (*SE* 41-42). That story, one of Allen's finest and the winner of a 1977 O. Henry Award is, in one critic's estimation, a "worthy successor" to Walter Mitty, and it "reveals as much about our cultural moment as Thurber's tale did about his" (Pinsker 636).

One of Allen's favorite targets has always been the world of academia and pseudo-intellectualism, a world which divides the so-called educated and sophisticated from the ignorant and uncultured. He ridicules abstruse scholarship and critical overreaction, diletantism, philistinism, and popular fads in such selections as "The Metterling Lists," the first volume of Hans Metterling's laundry lists, "with an erudite commentary by the noted Metterling scholar Gunther Eisenbud" (*GE* 3); "The Scrolls," which A.H. Bauer called "probably the greatest archaeological find in history with the exception of the recovery of his cuff links from a tomb in Jerusalem" (*WF* 21-22); and "Examining Psychic Phenomena," in which "questions about psychic phenomena are answered in a soon-to-be-published book, *Boo!*, by Dr. Osgood Mulford Twelge, the noted parapsychologist and professor of ectoplasm at Columbia University" (*WF* 7).

But again, as in other pieces, much of the humor in these stabs at pomposity derives from the reader's familiarity with these subjects and with the modes which Allen is imitating. Without a knowledge of the long-standing Shakespeare-Bacon debate, for instance, the essay "But Soft . . . Real Soft" which parodies it would lose much of its effect, even though the play of language is in itself amusing:

Ben Jonson is not to be confused with Samuel Johnson. He was Samuel Johnson. Samuel Johnson was not. Johnson was Samuel Pepys. Pepys was actually Raleigh, who had escaped from the tower to write *Paradise Lost* under the name of John Milton, a poet who because of blindness accidentally escaped to the tower and was hanged under the name of Jonathan Swift. This all becomes clearer when we realize that George Eliot was a woman. (*WF* 186-87)

And unless we have a cursory familiarity with existential ideas and with works like Camus's *The Stranger* or Sartre's *Nausea*, how can we

comprehend the indecisive dilemma of Cloquet in “The Condemned” or understand his overwhelming nausea “caused by his intense awareness of the contingency of life” and relievable only with “an Existential Alka-Seltzer” (*SE* 11)?

Without an awareness of literary analysis, of August Strindberg and his plays, or of the spate of expatriate Paris writings (especially *A Moveable Feast*), pieces like “Irish Genius,” “Lovborg’s Women Considered,” and “A Twenties Memory” would deflate, though again, the linguistic incongruity and the unexpected reversals contain their own humor, as when Allen points out that Lovborg was originally spelled “Lövborg, until, in later years, he removed the two dots from above the o and placed them over his eyebrows” (*WF* 26), or when he describes Hemingway as “[b]ronzed and bearded, . . . already beginning to develop that familiar flat prose style about the eyes and mouth” (*GE* 91).

So, writing in the very modes at which he is poking fun, Allen turns these modes back on themselves, just as he turns the language back on itself, and he demands of the reader the same educated awareness which leads to these narcissistic pretensions in the first place. His seeming anti-intellectualism thus becomes a comic brand of intellectualism itself, so that Allen, in the end, is ridiculing himself: he becomes, so to speak, the butt of the joke.

This quality lies at the heart of Allen’s humor, for he is, in some respects, an intellectual’s comic, even though, like Shakespeare, he is also accessible to lesser educated audiences by virtue of his linguistic versatility and comic strokes. He ridicules the obscurities, pretensions, and profundities of high culture, yet he nevertheless admires and respects the realm of learning on which such culture is founded, from art to literature to philosophy. He has always shunned the charge of anti-intellectualism and continually denies that he is attempting to do anything more than simply be funny. “I don’t believe in art as a social force,” he once commented. “To me, all art—comedy, opera, painting, anything—is a diversion, an entertainment” (Allen 25). Yet he has also acknowledged that “great humor is intellectual without trying to be” (qtd. in Yacowar 2). His own collections of prose are rich in allusions, both subtle and overt, and a full comprehension and appreciation of them demands some background in the world’s creative and intellectual output. This is perhaps the ultimate paradox for a man who flunked out of two colleges and who once lamented, “I loathed every day and regret every day I spent in school” (qtd. in Brode 14).

One final way in which Allen capitalizes on rhetorical modes is his occasional reversal of approach, employing a lower literary form to explore some esoteric subject. Such is the case with “Mr. Big” and “The

Whore of Mensa,” in which the sub-genre of detective fiction provides the framework for considering the weightier matter of God and the mind respectively, both stories being told through the conventional hardboiled, first-person narrator.

In “Mr. Big,” the Sam Spade protagonist meets his blonde Brigid O’Shaughnessy, who sends him on an existential quest for God that parallels Spade’s search for the black bird, and since the detective story always requires a murder victim, it’s obvious from the start that Nietzsche’s “God is Dead” theory will clinch this whodunit. In “The Whore of Mensa” (whose very title belies its incongruity), the physical is supplanted by the mental, and the main character is in search not of carnal stimulation but of intellectual. “I mean, my wife is great, don’t get me wrong,” asserts the quivering, aptly named protagonist Word Babcock. “But she won’t discuss Pound with me. Or Eliot. I didn’t know that when I married her.” Having arranged his “quickies” through Flossie, “a madam . . . with a master’s in comparative lit,” Word now hires Kaiser Lupowitz to rescue him from blackmail: “They bugged the motel room. They got tapes of me discussing *The Waste Land* and *Styles of Radical Will* . . . .”

Joining this traditionally low-caste literary genre with loftier ideas offers an effective formal means of placing abstruse concepts in a pragmatic perspective. The gritty, visceral world of the private-eye contrasts sharply with the pure, elusive realm of the thinker, and the alignment of the prostitute’s trade with intellectual need is a trenchant metaphor, underscoring the moral and spiritual malaise of modern urban intellectuals. While this approach is far from traditional, Allen seems to imply that it is as good as any other, providing an imaginative modern allegory for contemporary man’s troubled and sterile life.

As usual, Allen is assuming the reader’s understanding of conventional attitudes toward the genre, for the irony here, and the immense contrast, hinges on the recognition of the detective genre’s low cultural position. At the same time, he is poking fun at those very pretensions which disdain such “base” forms, and he elevates the genre from this fate by using it as a vehicle for metaphysical ideas, again creating a sophisticated incongruity that produces the humor. Thus, the attitude toward humor here is founded in the accepted higher and lower genres of literature, a stance that also links Allen to nineteenth-century American attitudes which placed such strong emphasis on the hierarchy of genres.

Woody Allen once commented that the aim of his life’s work is “to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race. Then to see if they can be turned out in plastic” (Allen 25). While this remark is somewhat self-disparaging, displaying the same impulse toward comic levity that marks all of his writing, it also suggests the breadth of cultural

ambitions that defines him as an American humorist. His extraordinary vision reaches into the myriad cracks of contemporary American life, discerning humor in the most seemingly insignificant aspects of the everyday scene, even restaurant reviews, diet magazines, and adult education. His eclectic commentary encompasses such disparate modes as bathetic collusion, mock heroic, and straightforward narrative, and his identities range from prostitute to revolutionary to private eye, a selection as diverse as Ben Franklin's.

Allen's anxiety-ridden vision, representative of twentieth-century cultural shifts in America, is not singular among modern humorists. "As America has become more self-conscious and educated, its humor has become more verbal and less physical" (Lahr 3). It has also become more confessional, and Allen—ever the paranoid and guilt-ridden victim—unabashedly voices the fears and trepidations we all feel and epitomizes the solipsistic sort of humorist who is becoming increasingly more prevalent. "Allen's great comic strength," remarks Paul Zimmerman, "lies in his willingness to dramatize his most intimate psychological tensions, to exaggerate them for comic effect, of course, but nonetheless to share the personal terrain of his own neuroses . . . [and] summon the laughter of recognition in each of us" (qtd. in Brode 20).

Allen is very much an American humorist, not only in his links to the comic tradition and his dependence on American attitudes and concerns, but also in the way that his bold and imaginative incongruities—the essence of comedy—reflect the contradiction of the American experience. If verbal incongruity is an emblem of "the nature and the problem of democracy," of the conflict between "the ideals of freedom, equality, . . . the conviction that ordinary people can vote wisely" and the reality that ordinary people suspect "abstract ideals and values" (Rubin 5), then Allen's humor is indeed emblematic of the culture from which it emerges.

And if, as Rubin suggests, the dilemma of the American writer has always been how to marry the high-flown and the low, how to join the metaphysical with the ordinary, how to align virtue and civilization with the common and simplistic, then Allen confronts this dilemma head-on by exposing its impossibility. If American society is particularly vulnerable to the clash between cultural expectation and reality, it is also rich in material to illustrate that vulnerability, and Allen mines its sources incessantly. In language, subject matter, and mode, he joins the lofty with the everyday, and the result is invariably ludicrous and a viable contender for the Great American Joke. As one critic remarks, "The point is, finally,

not that Allen is funny, which he is not, but that he is funny, which he is, and that in this day and age of nuclear weapons and Martha Mitchell, who's to say?" (Prattleback 164).

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