

AMELIA PRECUP

“IF ONLY GOD WOULD GIVE ME SOME CLEAR SIGN!” GOD, RELIGION, AND MORALITY IN WOODY ALLEN’S SHORT FICTION

Amelia Precup

Babes-Bolyai University, Faculty of Letters, Department of English Language and Literature, Cluj, Romania.

Email: amelia.nan@gmail.com

Abstract: Woody Allen’s uneasy relationship with organized religions, as represented in his entire work, has often drawn accusations of atheism and ethnic self-hatred, just as his personal behavior, as represented in the media, has stirred a series of allegations of immorality. However, Woody Allen’s exploration of religion, faith, and morality is far more complex and epitomizes the experience of modern man, living in a disenchanted universe. While most scholars focused on discussing the provocative debates over faith and religion in Woody Allen’s films, the main purpose of this paper is to investigate what underlies Woody Allen’s obsessive preoccupation with the existence of divinity, as expressed in that part of his work which received little critical attention, namely his short fiction. The purpose of such an analysis is not to clear Woody Allen’s vexed reputation, but to understand the relevance of his individual ideology for the religious and moral conundrums of modern man. The corpus selected for this analysis consists of a series of relevant short stories and essays published in the 1991 edition of *The Complete Prose of Woody Allen*, a volume which gathers the texts published in three other short story collections.

Key Words: Woody Allen, short stories, atheism, normative Judaism, organized religion, theodicy, faith, morality, theological debate.

Woody Allen's obsessive preoccupation with scrutinizing ontological arguments is at the core of his artistic creation. It generates and subsumes a series of assorted concerns with regard to the predicaments of modern man, such as the desire to understand the nature of reality, the concept of ultimate justice, the role of spirituality as a guiding principle, the illusory character of redemption as advertized by organized religions, or the need to find a coping mechanism for the ominously foreshadowing future, which can only lead to extinction. As Woody Allen himself admits, mortality and theology are at the center of his work. In an interview by Eric Lax he confessed that his entire creative effort is underpinned by "an obsession with death, an obsession with God or the lack of God, [and] the question of why are we here."¹ Even though these concerns span Woody Allen's entire artistic universe, they allow specific nuances in his short stories, which come to complete their exploration as done in his films

Although he has been often labeled atheist, mainly because of his rejection of normative religious worship, in my opinion, Allen's deep preoccupation with theological questions contradicts this labeling. Behind his quarrel with religion, his outright condemnation of normative religion on moral grounds, and his chronic questioning of God's existence, Woody Allen's texts reveal a sense of bitterness emerging from a mixture of the awareness of the abandoned world and a nostalgic understanding of the individual's need for the comforting idea of a higher power. Therefore, my contention is that, while his view on religion is grounded in the twentieth-century demystified and secularized reality, his exploration of faith and morality is not only a reaction, but an addition to a moral system consistent with secular humanism: he embraces and promotes the idea that moral guidelines should come from within, but he also obsessively explores the individual's need to believe.

Woody Allen's recurrent, obsessive, almost fanatical preoccupation with the existence or the absence of God emphasizes the ethical and moral dimension of living in a potentially godless world. Ranging from crude, ludicrous aphorisms built on non sequiturs to complex quests and meditation, from agnosticism to atheistic remarks, Woody Allen's quest for God and the doubts it brings along constitute an infinite source of disillusion which continuously nourishes the neuroses of the characters that populate his literary and artistic universe.

Although Woody Allen exploits the universalizing potential of his theological quest and extends his inquiry into religious questions to epitomize the predicaments of the individual living in the contemporary society, given his Jewish upbringing, the exploration of theological questions begins and develops within the framework of Jewish religious practices and beliefs. As Woody Allen himself confessed, "the only religion I feel I can write about with any accuracy is the Jewish religion. I have no feel for the details of Christianity."² Nevertheless, his challenging, often inimical, attitude towards organized religion has often been interpreted as

specifically targeting Judaism and its religious strictures and therefore has given rise to accusations of ethnic self-hatred or anti-Semitic conduct.

Besides Allen's intimate knowledge of Judaism, the hardship and victimization of the Jewish people offer him the prerequisites to exercise his argumentative reasoning, which starts with the discrepancies he perceives between the religious representations of the divine power and the evil which overruns the world. Richard Blake also points out that, "[f]or Woody Allen, God's simultaneous love for humanity and tolerance for unspeakable evil present a supreme theological mystery, even when he reflects upon it in comic terms."³ Woody Allen's skepticism about the goodness and righteousness of the higher being promoted by organized religions constitutes the drive for his ceaselessly challenging the existence of God. This attitude of questioning God's actions, absence, or indifference is not necessarily symptomatic for atheism, but represents a continuation of a tradition which was born within Hasidic Judaism. Contesting God's ways and putting Him to trial for the suffering of His chosen people is not an uncommon practice of Judaism. As Lawrence Epstein explains,

God was sometimes put on trial – especially by Hasidic rabbis in Eastern Europe – for allowing evil to exist in the world and for the travails that had beset the chosen people. Once, during a terrible famine in the Ukraine, the Hasidic rabbis assembled as a Rabbinical Court with God as defendant. The rabbis listened to their leader, who was making the claim against God, and then met to deliberate. Their verdict was that God was guilty.⁴

The trial is not exactly a sign of rebellion, but rather an attempt to humanize the divine and bring it closer to the people. This attitude denotes the tendency of the Jewish tradition to cultivate a certain type of familiarity between God and His subjects. Moreover, the Jewish holiday of Purim is celebrated with plays and skits which grant the authors the liberty to speak against the most sacred aspects of Judaism, thus showing how religion found an appropriate strategy to accommodate rebellion through the comic. Not even the rabbis, the teachers, or the sacred texts can escape being turned into the subject of ridicule and parody. As Lawrence Epstein points out, "[s]uch a tradition gave carefully demarcated approval to confronting even the most sacred with laughter."⁵ Often, the boldness of Hassidic rabbis when confronting God verges on rudeness, but, as Judith Stora-Sandor argues, all the accusations of having abandoned His people, all the invectives and the rage are but signs of the "lover's quarrel"⁶ which, in her opinion, is the phrase which best describes the relationship between the Jews and their God.

In the light of the troubled and traumatic history of the Jewish people, "jokes about God afforded the Jews the opportunity to soften blasphemy with wit, to raise serious questions about the nature of belief, and to laugh through the pain."⁷ More sympathetic than other critics to Woody Allen's treatment of normative Judaism, Rabbi Joseph Telushkin claims that Allen possesses a deep understanding of the tension point of the jokes which target God and has mastered the art of balancing the hilarious and the revolting. In Telushkin's words, "[j]okes aimed at God tend to be the gentlest in Jewish tradition – ironic digs, rather than belly laughs. More than any other contemporary comedian, Woody Allen is the master of this genre."⁸

By assuming the vernacular of Hasidic storytelling in "Hassidic Tales, with a Guide to Their Interpretation by the Noted Scholar", Woody Allen borrows from the tradition of Hasidic Judaism and exploits it to point out the shortcomings of organized religions. Hasidism, a branch of Judaism born in the eighteenth century under the guidance of Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, was often the target of Rabbinic Judaism and of the supporters of the Jewish Enlightenment movement, the Haskalah, because the principles of Hasidism were said to cultivate superstition and ignorance. Hasidic Judaism promotes Jewish mysticism and a panentheistic view of the world, alongside a positive, optimistic religious fervor, manifested through singing and dancing, as opposed to legalistic Judaism, to secular studies, and rationalism. Storytelling plays a crucial role in Hasidic education and therefore Hasidic Judaism generated a vast didactic and hagiographic literature. Woody Allen's "Hassidic Tales, with a Guide to Their Interpretation by the Noted Scholar" features six tales, followed by mock-commentaries and parodical interpretations which ridicule the *pilpul*⁹. In each of them, Woody Allen turns the Rabbis' makeshift remarks into the catalyst of the comic effect, thus sabotaging the architecture of Hassidic storytelling by means of parody. For example, when a woman stops Rabbi Zwi Chaim Yisroel, "a man who developed whining to an art unheard of in the West"¹⁰, and asks him why Jewish people are not allowed to eat pork, the Rabbi retorts as follows: "'We're *not*?' the Rev said incredulously. 'Uh-oh.'"¹¹

In "Hassidic Tales" Woody Allen ridicules and downplays the importance of abiding by the Jewish law and respecting all major religious norms, such as the requirements imposed by the *kashrut*¹² law and customs, synagogue attendance, or seeking for rabbinic advice when under the harrow. The parodical commentaries accompanying each tale mislead the interpretation, by pointing towards superficial hermeneutic paths, such as pride and vanity, beauty, or Hebrew law, while the real intent behind Woody Allen's so-called Hassidic tales is to expose and ridicule the deficiencies and flaws of organized religions. Woody Allen also alludes to the imposture of those who teach the sacred texts whenever he has the chance. Religion becomes just a set of rituals devoid of sense and

performed by impostors. Besides the above mentioned example regarding *kosher* food, Woody Allen begins the commentary on the tale about Rabbi Raditz of Poland as follows: "Here the Rabbi is asked to make a value judgment between Moses and Abraham. This is not an easy matter, particularly for a man who has never read the Bible and has been faking it."¹³

Woody Allen exaggerates in order to criticize the discrepancy between the oppressive views of religious ideology and the humane as he writes: "For this, the Rabbi bashes his head in, which, according to the Torah, is one of the most subtle methods of showing concern."¹⁴ The same idea reappears later in the text, when Allen writes: "Certain Orthodox tribes believe suffering is the only way to redeem oneself, and scholars write of a cult called the Essenes, who deliberately went around bumping into walls. God, according to the later books of Moses, is benevolent, although there are still a great many subjects he'd rather not go into."¹⁵ The irony behind associating divine concern with bashing one's head or the achievement of atonement with bumping into walls ridicules naïve theodicy and alludes to the shortcomings and corruption of organized religions which focus on cultivating a sense of guilt rather than offering a loving and caring image of God. It also points to the troubled history and the suffering of the chosen people whose fate is supposed to be God's main concern and emphasizes the mutual exclusiveness and contradiction between the definition of a lovable God and the way in which this love manifests in the life of His subjects. As Laurent Dandrieu argues, for Woody Allen, the prophetic vision of a God who would not interfere with earthly matters out of respect for the free agency of His subjects is unsatisfactory. God's non-interfering policy is unacceptable; it is a rich source of anxiety and existential malaise and constitutes the major premise for the doubt about the existence of a higher power which, above all, is supposed to be protective and loving. Therefore, the God of Israel, as portrayed by normative religion, fails to offer Woody Allen's characters comfort for their metaphysical anguish and to help them fight existential anxieties.

The logical inconsistencies emerging from the discrepancies between the faith and the fate of the Jews, most often translated into universal dominants which trespass ethnic boundaries and epitomize the experience of mankind, are often situated at the center of Woody Allen's preoccupation and constitute the drive for his quest for God and meaning. Woody Allen explores the relationship between God and the individual using the logic of mundane empiricism and looking for proofs of God's existence in the most insignificant, trivial aspects of quotidian life, in the smallest details of individual experience. His quest is metaphysical, but his methods remain materialistic. A beautiful woman, with well lined teeth can become the proof of God's existence. In "If the Impressionists Had Been Dentists", Vincent van Gogh, going through a postmodern,

transworld identity transformation which turned him into a dentist, writes to his brother, Theo: "Theo, she drives me mad! Wild with desire! Her bite! I've never seen such a bite! Her teeth come together perfectly! ... Claire's teeth close and meet! When this happens you know there is a God! And yet she's not too perfect."¹⁶ At the same time, not being able to find the perfect woman can determine the individual to renounce the idea of a loving God. In "The Early Essays" Woody Allen writes a fairly important bracketed note in this respect: "(Actually, the prettiest ones are almost always the most boring, and that is why some people feel there is no God)."¹⁷ The aphorisms at the end of "My Philosophy", which count among the most famous of Woody Allen's aphorisms, play on similar associations which make the trivial belittle the highly metaphysical. Woody Allen writes: "The universe is merely a fleeting idea in God's mind – a pretty uncomfortable thought, particularly if you've just made a down payment on a house."¹⁸ The existence of God is easily contested by the clumsy *schlemiel* that renounces Him, but, at the same time, needs Him, both to assuage his doubt and pain and to take care of more pragmatic aspects of life, such as a Swiss bank account. In "Selections from the Allen Notebook" Woody Allen writes: "[a]nd how can I believe in God when just last week I got my tongue caught in the roller of an electric typewriter? I am plagued by doubts. What if everything is an illusion and nothing exists? In that case, I definitely overpaid for my carpet. If only God would give me some clear sign! Like making a large deposit in my name at a Swiss bank."¹⁹

In "Notes from the Overfed", a text inspired by Dostoevsky's novella "Notes from the Underground" merged with articles from "Weight Watchers" magazine and touched by a shade of Kafkian influence, Woody Allen challenges God's action as well as the effect of religious doctrines upon people. When asked by his uncle whether he believes in God, Woody Allen's unnamed narrator answers as follows: "I do not believe in God," I told him. "For if there is a God, then tell me, Uncle, why is there poverty and baldness? Why do some men go through life immune to a thousand mortal enemies of the race, while others get a migraine that lasts for weeks? Why are our days numbered and not, say, lettered? Answer me, Uncle. Or have I shocked you?"²⁰ In this case, faith and the existence of God are conditioned by and verified through the dialectics between the affliction and scourges of mankind and the immediate, trivial misfortunes of the little man. The chain of thoughts is eventually twisted by comical non sequitur to attenuate the harshness of the accusations and to counterbalance the seriousness of the question. Just like Dostoevsky's novella, Woody Allen's text tackles suffering, the enjoyment of pain, and alienation.

"Notes from the Overfed" is the monologue of an overweight person, whose fingers are fat, whose wrists are fat, whose eyes are fat, and, whose fat, if it could speak, "would probably speak of man's intense loneliness."²¹ The narrator explains both his condition and his utter loneliness as a

result of religious initiation, as the unnamed narrator confesses: "I was not always fat. It is the Church that has made me thus."²² He had been initiated by his uncle who, in the spirit of Hasidic panentheism, told him that God was everywhere. Thus, one logical conclusion is that by eating, one gets closer to God: "If God is everywhere, I had concluded, then He is in food. Therefore, the more I ate the godlier I would become. Impelled by this new religious fervor, I gluttoned myself like a fanatic. In six months, I was the holiest of holies, with a heart entirely devoted to my prayers and a stomach that crossed the state line by itself."²³ In this confessional story, Woody Allen resorts to the strategy of excess to perform a bitter-comic exploration of the man's need to believe and the believer's willingness to transcend his limits and accept suffering as a way of (literally) absorbing God. The narrator falls for the tantalizing carrot of religious comfort, only to find himself rambling in delusion and powerless in front of mortality. He concludes the story with an insightful and paradoxical remark: "For life is change and fat is life, and fat is also death. Don't you see? Fat is everything! Unless, of course, you're overweight."²⁴

Woody Allen's parody targets organized religions in "Mr. Big" as well. Here, the metaphysical quest for God receives a strong material dimension and turns into a detective case. Detective Kaiser Lupowitz, hired to find God, begins his search with religion. Even before confronting religious representatives directly, he intuitively feels that they would sooner prevent him from finding God, rather than providing a way to do so. Detective Lupowitz thinks to himself: "Maybe God did exist and maybe He didn't, but somewhere in that city there were sure a lot of guys who were going to try and keep me from finding out."²⁵ When Kaiser Lupowitz visits the Rabbi and the Pope, ironies pile atop ironies and his suspicion about their being unable to help with the quest is confirmed. The questions about the existence and the whereabouts of God terrify Rabbi Itzhak Wiseman. He replies: "Of course there's a you-know-what, but I'm not even allowed to say His name or He'll strike me dead, which I could never understand why someone is so touchy about having his name said."²⁶ The Rabbi provides evidence for God's existence, ranging from trivial proofs, such as his being able to buy a great coat for a small price, to the extraordinary stories told by the sacred texts. The Rabbi says: "Hey-what's the Old Testament? Chopped liver? How do you think Moses got the Israelites out of Egypt? With a smile and a tap dance? Believe me, you don't part the Red Sea with some gismo from Korvette's. It takes power."²⁷ However, the Rabbi's arguments fail to convince detective Lupowitz because the discussion moves towards the hardships of the chosen people, which constitutes a fairly strong counterargument.

In his search for answers, detective Lupowitz goes to see Chicago Phil, an “avowed atheist”²⁸ who, despite his complete lack of religious faith, gives the detective another lead. Chicago Phil tells Kaiser Lupowitz: “The guy never existed, Kaiser. This is the straight dope. It's a big hype. There's no Mr. Big. It's a syndicate. Mostly Sicilian. It's international. But there is no actual head. Except maybe the Pope.”²⁹ The encounter with the Pope is even more illuminating; although it does not cast any light upon the existence of God, it brings out more clearly the inconsistency and artificiality of organized religions, which seem more preoccupied with norms and appearance than with the essence of religious practices. The Pope is portrayed as a mobster and the dialogue between him and Kaiser reveals the shallowness and the materialistic concerns of religion:

“Sure He exists, Lupowitz, but I'm the only one that communicates with Him. He speaks only through me.”

“Why you, pal?”

“Because I got the red suit.”

“This get-up?”

“Don't knock it. Every morning I rise, put on this red suit, and suddenly I'm a big cheese. It's all in the suit. I mean, face it, if I went around in slacks and a sports jacket, I couldn't get arrested religion-wise.”

“Then it's a hype. There's no God.”

“I don't know. But what's the difference? The money's good.”³⁰

Nevertheless, if religion fails, philosophy seems to bring Kaiser Lupowitz closer to the subject of his quest. This narrative turn, hiding an ideological twist not at all surprising for a text written by Woody Allen, curtails the omniscient pretences, the sweeping totalizations and monolithic beliefs of religion and exposes the shallowness and vulnerability of religious practices and doctrines, while emphasizing the profound implication of critical philosophical thought in theological debates. Kaiser's sound judgment engages and epitomizes canonical philosophical reflections on the existence, nature, and character of a supreme being, which both develop a philosophically grounded theodicy and promulgate the non-existence or the disappearance of God. Kaiser Lupowitz recalls:

I had a beer at O'Rourke's and tried to add it all up, but it made no sense at all. Socrates was a suicide-or so they said. Christ was murdered.

Nietzsche went nuts. If there was someone out there, He sure as hell didn't want anybody to know it... Could Descartes have been right? Was the universe dualistic? Or did Kant hit it on the head when he postulated the existence of God on moral grounds?³¹

The same idea that the search for God is more philosophical than religious is also emphasized in "Spring Bulletin", a parodical description of the students' curriculum. Woody Allen writes: "PHILOSOPHY XXIX-B: Introduction to God. Confrontation with the Creator of the universe through informal lectures and field trips."³² Still, philosophical assumptions only preempt such a needed discussion, but are far from providing any straight answers or unerring resolutions.

The ending of "Mr. Big" opens up several hermeneutic paths. The detective breaks the case and exposes Ellen Shepherd, a professor of physics at Bryn Mawr, as the murderer of God, because she, with her "pretty little scientific mind, had to have absolute certainty."³³ While the text can be easily interpreted as a metaphor for the 'death' of the traditional philosophical discourse and its being replaced by semantics or, from a gender studies perspective, as the destruction of a patriarchal paradigm, it also sustains an interpretation according to which science killed God and shook down all philosophical attempts to find answers. Nevertheless, even if it destroyed the 'fairy tales' of religion and philosophy, science has also failed to offer the solution to psychological torments. Instead of providing answers, it led to further questions. In "My Speech to the Graduates" Woody Allen writes:

True, science has taught us how to pasteurize cheese. And true, this can be fun in mixed company – but what of the H-bomb? Have you ever seen what happens when one of those things falls off a desk accidentally? And where is science when one ponders the eternal riddles? How did the cosmos originate? How long has it been around? Did matter begin with an explosion or by the word of God? And if by the latter, could He not have begun it just two weeks earlier to take advantage of some of the warmer weather? Exactly what do we mean when we say, man is mortal? Obviously it's not a compliment.³⁴

The key to understanding Woody Allen's view of the relationship between the individual and God is also to be found in "Mr. Big", where the

question regarding the existence of God is nuanced. To the tormenting question about the existence of God Woody Allen adds a series of assorted questions such as "what does He look like?" and "where can I find Him?." The following dialogue between Claire Rosensweig (as this was, at the time, the name of the female character with fluid identity) and detective Kaiser Lupowitz becomes emblematic for most of Woody Allen's self-reflexive characters. Woody Allen writes:

"What does God look like?"
 "I've never seen him."
 "Well, how do you know He exists?"
 "That's for you to find out."³⁵

Woody Allen's characters, ceaselessly struggling with the vision of a desolating existence under the dictatorship of death, take upon themselves the task of finding out, of looking for answers to these impenetrable questions, as a possible way to find relief for the otherwise unbearable awareness of the finitude of the universe. This endeavor moves the imperative need for the existence of a higher power and the corrosive disillusionment emerging from all the failed attempts to find God at the center of the drama of Woody Allen's characters, which is meant to epitomize the crisis of the modern man. In Woody Allen's vision, the modern man is, by definition, challenged to create his own moral structure in order to fight chaos. As he writes in "My Speech to the Graduates", "[m]odern man is here defined as any person born after Nietzsche's edict that 'God is dead,' but before the hit recording 'I Wanna Hold Your Hand.'"³⁶ Thus, in Woody Allen's opinion, the generations most affected by the awareness of the inexistence of absolute meaning and values were brought up with the Nietzschean nihilistic legacy to which he later adds the specific rhetoric of the baby boomers and the Generation Jones³⁷ which grew up in a period of dramatic social and cultural change and completely remodeled society.

The plights and psychological ordeals of Woody Allen's characters epitomize the ongoing changes in the cultural experiences of modern man who witnessed the profound changes in the articulation of the world. In a 1997 interview for *Les Inrockuptibles*, Woody Allen pleaded for a rational and realistic, though painful, approach to a reality which leaves no room for the grand narratives of the past. In Woody Allen's words, "[i]t is not a disaster, but we must learn to live with the pain. Accept that there is no other way, that all traditional solutions, all philosophies of life with which we grew up are fallacious: psychiatry, religion, Marxism, intellectualism..."³⁸ In the absence of a higher power, the open destiny of the individual is diffuse and human experience is seen as meaningless. The effervescence of the quest and the assertiveness of relegating God are, at

times, replaced by the bitterness of resignation of the alienated modern man, touched by a slight sense of nostalgia for a nowadays impossible naivety and blissful unawareness. In "My Speech to the Graduates" Woody Allen emphasizes the fundamental disenchantment of the modern man who sunders the myths and symbols of pre-Nietzschean world:

I often think how comforting life must have been for early man because he believed in a powerful, benevolent Creator who looked after all things. Imagine his disappointment when he saw his wife putting on weight. Contemporary man, of course, has no such peace of mind. He finds himself in the midst of a crisis of faith. He is what we fashionably call "alienated." He has seen the ravages of war, he has known natural catastrophes, he has been to singles bars.³⁹

As seen above, Woody Allen's short stories explore the idea of a higher power from various perspectives, ranging from an assiduous quest for a sign of God's existence to contesting religious practices and boldly asserting that divinity is but an empty position. According to Sander Lee, Woody Allen's "love-hate relationship with God" makes his art oscillate between an "intellectual tendency toward atheism" and a "spiritual yearning for some sort of salvation"⁴⁰, between a nihilistic vision of the universe as an empty, meaningless place and bitter nostalgia for an impossible state of spiritual delusion. The theme of religious coerciveness as insensitive to the individual's needs dominates the jeremiad of that category of Woody Allen's characters that are still looking for God in religion. Of course, their efforts end in disappointment, as we could see in the case of "Notes from the Overfed". They epitomize the tragic sense of modern life through a crude, disenchanted attitude and develop an apocalypse complex. The psychological mauling of Woody Allen's characters is rooted in the author's own awareness of the malevolence of the universe, since, as Woody Allen confessed: "[t]he empty universe is another item that scares me, along with eternal annihilation, aging, terminal illness and the absence of God in a hostile raging world. I always felt that as long as man is finite he will never truly be relaxed."⁴¹

Although Woody Allen's stories are rich in theological questions, Richard A. Blake argues that Allen enters "the realm of the sacred on a tourist visa; he remains a citizen of the profane world where such questions fascinate and terrify to such an extent that they provoke laughter, the nervous giggle of one not quite sure what he will find at the end of the search."⁴² Nevertheless, Woody Allen's 'nervous giggles' are in no way gratuitous; they coagulate around the imperative of individual

responsibility and his assiduous search fathoms a series of moral and ethical questions. Caught in a potentially godless world and torn apart by the crisis of faith, the modern man is confronted with the challenge to fill the moral vacuum, to find an alternative to divine justice and a mechanism of coping with an indifferent universe. In the absence of an absolute system of values and permanent meaning, morality becomes a lax concept. Thus, in the spirit of existentialism, meaning and morality become exclusively the individual's responsibility.

The exploration of moral relativism gains complex valences in Woody Allen's films, such as *Crimes and Misdemeanors* or *Match Point*, where he takes this concept to the extreme and fathoms the moral implications of murder. This particular aspect was also tackled in his short stories. In "The Condemned," a short story about the French Resistance, Cloquet, standing over Gaston Brisseau with a revolver in his hand, ponders on whether to kill him. Gaston Brisseau was an "infamous Fascist informer" who "ratted on his friends for the pure sake of it."⁴³ Cloquet's effervescent cogitations emphasize the individual's need for absolute justice, accentuate his strong sense of universal responsibility, and reveal his great affliction caused by the absence of transcendent moral guidance. Woody Allen writes:

By choosing my action, I choose it for all mankind. But what if everyone in the world behaved like me and came here and shot Brisseau through the ear? What a mess! Not to mention the commotion from the doorbell ringing all night. And of course we'd need valet parking. Ah, God, how the mind boggles when it turns to moral or ethical considerations! Better not to think too much.⁴⁴

Although Cloquet decided to spare Brisseau's life and leave, the next morning he was arrested for the murder of Gaston Brisseau. Even though Cloquet was innocent, the evidence found at the crime scene was more than compelling: fingerprints at the scene and on the murder weapon. He was tried, found guilty, and sentenced to death by guillotine. While waiting for his execution, Cloquet continued to ponder on the meaning of life and the existence of God.

"The Condemned" begins in a way which reminds of Camus' *The Stranger* and continues as the fictional illustration of the ideal of Sartrean existentialism, twisted by the harshness of an unjust reality. Existentialist ethics and individual responsibility are severely punished by the absurdity of life. Fortunately for Cloquet, Woody Allen decided to spare his life by giving the short story a strange, sudden, non-sensical ending in which the real murderer confessed the crime. Unlike the case of Woody Allen's above mentioned films, "The Condemned" features an innocent man who is

guilty of only contemplating murder. Moreover, the murder he has in mind is somehow justified by ideological principles, while the murderers of Woody Allen's films commit manslaughter only to remove uncomfortable mistresses from their otherwise comfortable and accomplished lives.

Most of Woody Allen's short stories have didactical, moralizing endings which show that murderers are punished, blackmailers get arrested, and people who deviate from moral conduct or are guilty of gluttony, snobbism, superficiality, and cheating end up learning a valuable lesson. At times, Woody Allen's apocalypse complex makes him launch into direct social admonishment as he does in "My Speech to the Graduates":

Instead of facing these challenges we turn instead to distractions like drugs and sex. We live in far too permissive a society. Never before has pornography been this rampant. And those films are lit so badly! We are a people who lack defined goals. We have never learned to love. We lack leaders and coherent programs. We have no spiritual center. We are adrift alone in the cosmos wreaking monstrous violence on one another out of frustration and pain.⁴⁵

Woody Allen's prose work emphasizes the idea of individual responsibility, which becomes the most powerful force in preventing a potentially godless universe from completely surrendering to the ethics of hedonism and transforming into a cesspool. This is also well articulated in "My Speech to the Graduates" where he writes: "Naturally belief in a divine intelligence inspires tranquility. But this does not free us from our human responsibilities."⁴⁶ Woody Allen embraces nihilism and refutes the idea of a transcendent being just to reinforce the imperative of individual moral structure and the responsibility of each individual to manage the dialectics between personal integrity and the principles of pleasure.

In a more recent interview by Eric Lax, Woody Allen defends his work against the accusations of atheism and immorality and emphasizes the need of the disenchanted modern man to find moral guidance. In a sarcastic defense of his moral stance he points towards organized religions as financially driven organizations which sell illusions. Faith is seen as a mechanism of denial and normative religion as a strategy of manipulation. In Woody Allen's words,

People jump at the conclusion that what I'm saying is that anything goes, but actually I'm asking

the question: given the worst, how do we carry on, or even why should we choose to carry on? Of course, we don't choose – the choice is hardwired into us. The blood chooses to live. ... Anyhow, religious people don't want to acknowledge the reality that contradicts their fairy tale. And if it is a godless universe, they're out of business. The cash flow stops.⁴⁷

Woody Allen also takes the opportunity to promote his plea for a sense of responsibility and morality outside what he sees as the pretentious moralism and the artificial norms of organized religions, as the noblest way to manage the morass of immoral human drives, while also admitting to the desolation associated with the lack of transcendent meaning and God:

If you acknowledge the awful truth of human existence and choose to be a decent human being in the face of it rather than lie to yourself that there's going to be some heavenly reward or some punishment, it seems to me more noble [sic.]. If there is a reward or a punishment or a payoff somehow and you act well, then you're acting well not out of noble motives, the same so-called Christian motives. ... To me it's a damn shame that the universe doesn't have any God or meaning, and yet only when you can accept that can you then go on to lead what these people call a Christian life – that is, a decent, moral life. You can only lead it if you acknowledge what you're up against to begin with and shuck off the fairy tales that lead you to make choices in life that you're making not really for moral reasons but for taking down a big score in the afterlife.⁴⁸

Woody Allen's work is fundamentally moral. The question of morality shapes along the quest for God and meaning. The existential dilemma of Woody Allen's characters springs from the lack of ontological foundation for ethical and moral values. The wages of consciousness which trouble the individual, the burdens of radical freedom, and the consequential meaninglessness of human experience create and reinforce the neuroses of his characters. As Laurent Dandrieu argues, "[i]f Woody Allen was made in God's image, then the portrait is undoubtedly shaky. But if God is made in Woody Allen's image, then God looks suspiciously like a neurosis. For

Woody Allen, things only exist as subjects of neurosis. This is also valid for God himself. Does He exist? The question is insoluble, making it the material of unfathomable and endless anxieties.”⁴⁹ The awareness of radical ontological freedom continuously nourishes the anxiety of the individual and confines his plight to the dialectic of hope and despair, but the “[c]onflict between despair and hope can only be resolved on an individual basis, not in any theoretical way.”⁵⁰ Metaphysical despair is slightly attenuated by this solution of individual responsibility and morality which becomes the only viable way to cope with the anguish and emotional vulnerability caused by the apocalypse complex.

In his exploration of the question of divinity and divine justice, Woody Allen cultivates a sense of hostility towards organized religions. This mutinous attitude is overtly articulated in his entire work. Woody Allen militates for a new language of good and evil which originates in individual responsibility and undermines naïve theodicy. Nevertheless, by embracing this position, he does not stand alone within the Jewish tradition. For example, Arthur Miller never undermined the role his Jewish heritage played in his work, but he distanced himself from religious practice and became a self-proclaimed Jewish atheist. Nevertheless, the dramatization of the horrors of the Holocaust and the Nazi's pogroms against Jews in plays such as *After the Fall* or *Broken Glass*, together with his exploitation of questions of morality and guilt testify for a strong sense of belonging and community awareness. Philip Roth's characters often repudiate religious norms and rebel against the idea of absolute power. Roth himself declared in an interview that he did not have a religious bone in his body and that the world would be a better place if people stopped believing in God.⁵¹ However, the case of Woody Allen is slightly different. Although he rejects the basic theodicy of punishment and reward, he shows a deep understanding for the individual's need to seek reassurance in a higher power and hope for divine justice. He is also too interested in finding out and puts too much energy into looking for signs of God's (non)existence, contesting God's actions, challenging God, blaming God, and even proclaiming God's death to be easily classified as atheist. As his character Sandy Bates from *Stardust Memories* says, “[t]o you – to you I'm an atheist... to God, I'm the loyal opposition.”⁵² There is the thin line between agnosticism and atheism that Woody Allen does not always seem comfortable crossing. Nevertheless, when it comes to organized religion, he cultivates a strong sense of hostility towards religious pretense, religious norms and severity.

To conclude, Woody Allen's short stories continue and add to the exploration of religious and moral questions, as done in his cinematographic work. They reveal accents and nuances of the strain of understanding the condition of the individual living in a disenchanted world and of managing this understanding. Allen's examination probes various hypostases of the modern man's relationship with divinity,

ranging from the dismissal of religious practices and beliefs to questioning the existence of God, to assessing the role of science as replacement for an absent deity, to futile attempts to mitigate the anxiety provoked by the acute awareness of biological determinism and the finitude of the universe, and to the crucial role of individual responsibility and morality. His restless interrogations and quests for answers make him one of the most relevant contemporary writers when it comes to understanding the religious and philosophical conundrums of modern man.

Notes:

¹ Allen, interview by Eric Lax, *Woody Allen and His Comedy*, (Hamish, Hamilton & London: Elm Tree Books, 1975), 45.

² Allen, interview by Stig Björkman, *Woody Allen on Woody Allen in Conversation with Stig Björkman*, (London & Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995), 212.

³ Richard A. Blake, *Woody Allen. Profane and Sacred*, (Lanham, Md. & London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1995), 12.

⁴ Lawrence Epstein, *The Haunted Smile. The Story of Jewish Comedians in America*, (New York: PublicAffairs, 2001), 289.

⁵ Epstein, 289.

⁶ Judith Stora-Sandor, *L'humour juif dans la littérature: De Job à Woody Allen*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1984), 60. My translation. In original: *Querelle d'amoureux, pourrait-on appeler les rapports du Juif avec son Dieu*.

⁷ Jason Kalman, "Heckling the Divine: Woody Allen, the Book of Job, and Jewish Theology after the Holocaust", in *Jews and Humor. Studies in Jewish Civilization*, Ed. Leonard J. Greenspoon (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2010), 178.

⁸ Joseph Telushkin, "God & Humor. Poking fun at the Master of the Universe", http://www.myjewishlearning.com/culture/2/Humor/What_is_Jewish_Humor/Divine_Humor.shtml?p=1, (accessed August 20, 2013).

⁹ The *pilpul* is a Talmudic method of reasoning and drawing conclusions, based on spiritual subtlety and keenness.

¹⁰ Woody Allen, "Hassidic Tales, with a Guide to Their Interpretation by the Noted Scholar", in *The Complete Prose of Woody Allen*, Woody Allen, (New York: Wings Books, 1991), 209.

¹¹ Allen, "Hassidic Tales", 210.

¹² The Jewish dietary tradition.

¹³ Allen, "Hassidic Tales", 208.

¹⁴ Allen, "Hassidic Tales", 208.

¹⁵ Allen, "Hassidic Tales", 211.

¹⁶ Allen, "If the Impressionists Had Been Dentists." in *The Complete Prose of Woody Allen*. Woody Allen, (New York: Wings Books, 1991), 110.

¹⁷ Allen, "The Early Essays", in *The Complete Prose of Woody Allen*, Woody Allen, (New York: Wings Books, 1991), 64.

¹⁸ Allen, "My Philosophy", in *The Complete Prose of Woody Allen*, Woody Allen, (New York: Wings Books, 1991), 173.

¹⁹ Allen, "Selections from the Allen Notebooks", in *The Complete Prose of Woody Allen*, Woody Allen, (New York: Wings Books, 1991), 10.

²⁰ Allen, "Notes from the Overfed", in *The Complete Prose of Woody Allen*, by Woody Allen, (New York: Wings Books, 1991), 227

²¹ Allen, "Notes from the Overfed", 227.

²² Allen, "Notes from the Overfed", 227.

²³ Allen, "Notes from the Overfed", 229.

²⁴ Allen, "Notes from the Overfed", 229.

²⁵ Allen, "Mr. Big", in *The Complete Prose of Woody Allen*, Woody Allen, (New York: Wings Books, 1991), 285.

²⁶ Allen, "Mr. Big", 285.

²⁷ Allen, "Mr. Big", 285.

²⁸ Allen, "Mr. Big", 286.

²⁹ Allen, "Mr. Big", 286.

³⁰ Allen, "Mr. Big", 289.

³¹ Allen, "Mr. Big", 287.

³² Allen, "Spring Bulletin", in *The Complete Prose of Woody Allen*, by Woody Allen, (New York: Wings Books, 1991), 201.

³³ Allen, "Mr. Big", 290.

³⁴ Allen, "My Speech to the Graduates", in *The Complete Prose of Woody Allen*, by Woody Allen, (New York: Wings Books, 1991), 364

³⁵ Allen, "Mr. Big", 285.

³⁶ Allen, "My Speech to the Graduates", 363.

³⁷ The term 'baby boomer' refers to people born after WWII, during a period of great increase in birth rate which is most commonly referred to as the period between 1946 and 1964. "Generation Jones" is a term used by Jonathan Pontell to distinguish between the first generation of baby boomers and those born between 1954 and 1965. Woody Allen's mention of the Beatles' "I Wanna Hold Your Hand" hit release in 1963 would mark the end of the baby boom period.

³⁸ Allen, Woody, « *Trop réaliste pour être un génie : Woody Allen* », interviewer C. Fevret, *Les Inrockuptibles*, (5 Février 1997).

<http://www.lesinrocks.com/1997/02/05/cinema/actualite-cinema/trop-realiste-pour-etre-un-genie-woody-allen-11232839/> (accessed March 13, 2013). My translation. In original: «Ce n'est pas un désastre, mais il faut apprendre à vivre avec la douleur. Accepter qu'il n'y a pas d'issue, que toutes les solutions traditionnelles, toutes les philosophies de la vie avec lesquelles nous avons grandi sont non valables : la psychiatrie, la religion, le marxisme, l'intellectualisme...»

³⁹ Allen, "My Speech to the Graduates", 364-65.

⁴⁰ Sander Lee, *Woody Allen's Angst. Philosophical Commentaries on His Serious Films*. (Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1997), 2.

⁴¹ Allen qtd. in Kalman, 186.

⁴² Blake, 20.

⁴³ Allen, "The Condemned", in *The Complete Prose of Woody Allen*, by Woody Allen, (New York: Wings Books, 1991), 308.

⁴⁴ Allen, "The Condemned", 310.

⁴⁵ Allen, "My Speech to the Graduates", 366.

⁴⁶ Allen, "My Speech to the Graduates", 365.

⁴⁷ Woody Allen, interview by Eric Lax, *Conversations with Woody Allen*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 124.

⁴⁸ Allen in Lax, *Conversations*, 124-25.

⁴⁹ Laurent Dandrieu, *Woody Allen, Portrait d'un antimoderne*, (Paris: CNRS Editions,

2010), 144. My translation. In original: «Si Woody Allen a été fait à l'image de Dieu, alors le portrait est sans doute tremblé. Mais si Dieu est à l'image de Woody Allen, alors Dieu ressemble étrangement à une névrose. Pour Woody Allen, les choses n'existent qu'en tant que sujets de névrose. Il en va aussi de Dieu lui-même. Existe-t-il? La question est insoluble, ce qui en fait la matière d'insondable et interminables angoisses.»

⁵⁰ Allen qtd. in Lee, 374.

⁵¹ See *Philip Roth on Fame, Sex, and God*. Interview by Rita Braver. (CBS. 3 October 2010) <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/philip-roth-on-fame-sex-and-god/> (accessed August 10, 2013).

⁵² Woody Allen, *Stardust Memories*. Directed by Woody Allen. Produced by Robert Greenhut. Performed by Woody Allen, Charlotte Rampling and Jessica Harper, (1980, New York, United Artists). DVD

References:

Allen, Woody. "Hassidic Tales, with a Guide to Their Interpretation by the Noted Scholar." In *The Complete Prose of Woody Allen*, Woody Allen, 206-212. E-book. New York: Wings Books, 1991.

Allen, Woody. "If the Impressionists Had Been Dentists." In *The Complete Prose of Woody Allen*, Woody Allen, 105-112. E-book. New York: Wings Books, 1991.

Allen, Woody. "Mr. Big." In *The Complete Prose of Woody Allen*, Woody Allen, 282-292. E-book. New York: Wings Books, 1991.

Allen, Woody. "My Philosophy." In *The Complete Prose of Woody Allen*, 167-174. E-book. New York: Wings Books, 1991.

Allen, Woody. "My Speech to the Graduates." In *The Complete Prose of Woody Allen*, Woody Allen, 361-366. E-book. New York: Wings Books, 1991.

Allen, Woody. "Notes from the Overfed." In *The Complete Prose of Woody Allen*, Woody Allen, 223-230. E-book. New York: Wings Books, 1991.

Allen, Woody. "Selections from the Allen Notebooks." In *The Complete Prose of Woody Allen*, Woody Allen, 5-12. E-book. New York: Wings Books, 1991.

Allen, Woody. "Spring Bulletin." In *The Complete Prose of Woody Allen*, Woody Allen, 198-204. E-book. New York: Wings Books, 1991.

Allen, Woody. *Stardust Memories*. Film. Directed by Woody Allen. Produced by Robert Greenhut. Performed by Woody Allen, Charlotte Rampling and Jessica Harper. New York: United Artists, 1980. DVD.

Allen, Woody. "The Condemned." In *The Complete Prose of Woody Allen*. New York, Woody Allen, 306-314. E-book. New York: Wings Books, 1991.

Allen, Woody. "The Early Essays." In *The Complete Prose of Woody Allen*, 59-66. E-book. New York: Wings Books, 1991.

Allen, Woody, interviewer par C. Fevret. *Trop réaliste pour être un génie : Woody Allen* Paris: Les Inrockuptibles, (5 Février 1997. on line).

Björkman, Stig. *Woody Allen on Woody Allen in Conversation with Stig Björkman*. (1993). London & Boston: Faber and Faber, 1995.

Blake, Richard A. *Woody Allen. Profane and Sacred*. Lanham, Md. & London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1995.

Dandrieu, Laurent. *Woody Allen, Portrait d'un antimoderne*. Paris: CNRS Editions, 2010.

Epstein, Lawrence J. *The Haunted Smile. The Story of Jewish Comedians in America*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2001.

Kalman, Jason. "Heckling the Divine: Woody Allen, the Book of Job, and Jewish Theology after the Holocaust." Edited by Leonard J. Greenspoon. *Jews and Humor. Studies in Jewish Civilization. Proceedings of the Twenty-Second Annual Symposium of the Klutznick Chair in Jewish Civilization*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2010. 175-194.

Lax, Eric. *Conversations with Woody Allen*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007.

Lax, Eric. *Woody Allen and His Comedy*. Hamish, Hamilton & London: Elm Tree Books, 1975.

Lee, Sander H. *Woody Allen's Angst. Philosophical Commentaries on His Serious Films*. Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1997.

Roth, Philip, interview by Rita Braver. *Philip Roth on Fame, Sex, and God* CBS. October 3, 2010. Web. Accessed on 11 February 2013.

Stora-Sandor, Judith. *L'humour juif dans la littérature: De Job à Woody Allen*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1984.

Telushkin, Joseph. "God & Humor. Poking fun at the Master of the Universe", *MyJewishLearning Website*. <http://www.myjewishlearning.com> (accessed August 20, 2013).