

The function of humor in woody allen's films essay sample

[Entertainment](#), [Movie](#)



The function of humor in Woody Allen's films is argued by many critics. This essay will focus on the comments of Ray Carney, Sam Girgus and Nancy Pogel. Carney argues that, "Comedy is the wound through which serious meaning bleeds out of Allen's work." (Carney, 14). He argues that there is no genuine drama that develops in Allen's films because of the his execution and his humor. On the other hand, Girgus and Pogel give a more positive position on Allen's use of humor in his films. This paper will evaluate Carney's critique on Allen's humor and an analysis alongside the arguments presented by Girgus and Pogel.

Carney believes that Woody Allen uses humor to avoid having to express the character's genuine intention and motivation. Allen doesn't engage his characters in a process of discovery, either social or verbal, that dramatize real life and significant art. He believes that Allen's characters are really abstract pseudo-characters and that Allen turns to comedic diversions to allow his characters to escape dramatic scenes and situations without engaging in the processes of real life.

Take the scenes in "Annie Hall" for example. Alvy (Woody Allen) and Annie (Diane Keaton) discuss art. The subtitles are completely different from what was being said by both characters. Alvy's main intention was to ask Annie out. There is also the scene where they are making love and Annie is not completely there in the moment, so the "ghost of Annie" is presented to the audience sitting on a chair.

Carney further argues that Woody Allen presents a cinematic world without authenticity, a reality that has been hygienically cleansed, "...one that

extends beyond the cleanliness of the sets to the squeaky-cleanness of the events, plots, and characters.” This is accomplished, Carney says, through the film’s narration, titles, and music among other devices that seemingly give the film artistic gloss and audience appeal but in reality obscure the real dramatic contents with packaging.

A scene from “ Annie Hall” that best explain the previous paragraph is Alvy’s joke at the dinner table. “ I’m making excellent progress. Pretty soon when I lie down on his couch, I won’t have to wear the lobster bib.” He’s joking about his lack of progress or growth. A child wears a lobster bib at a restaurant. It’s like saying “ pretty soon I’ll be able to take off the training wheels” or “ pretty soon I won’t have to wear diapers.”

Carney finds Allen’s cinematic process and use of comedy as fatal flaws. “ Every time a scene starts to get truly interesting or complex,” Carney writes, “ Allen is just too good at turning it into a joke to allow himself or his viewers to explore it, to learn anything from it. Comedy is not used to complicate our responses or to enlarge our perspective on an event, but to soften our view of it, to protect Allen’s characters (and scenes) from becoming truly disturbing.”

He offers an example in “ Annie Hall” when Alvy and Annie are offered cocaine. Alvy sneezes and blows the cocaine all over the floor. Carney’s observation is that just when the scene is about to enter the realm of real and significant drama, the scene turns away and is exploited for comedy. (Carney, 7).

In Allen's defense, Sam Girgus views him as a modern day Charlie Chaplin, and regards his films quite differently than Carney. Starting with the opening monologue in which Alvy reveals his inner thoughts to the audience, the film convinces the viewer into a position that supports the centrality of Alvy as the developing subject within the film's narrative. Alvy often breaks through the fourth wall and talks to the audience right in front of the camera. Carney sees this as avoidance in "Annie Hall." On the other hand, Girgus believes it offers a re-interpretative narrative to instill the film with Allen's artistic vision of human behavior. (Girgus, 44).

He is more interested in the methodology of Woody Allen's technique – specifically how his narrative approach reorganizes the internal logic of the film's thematic meaning. Girgus also points out Allen's constant references to Freud. This is seen in "Hannah and Her Sisters." Three sisters, Lee, Holly and Hannah get together and exchange partners. Hannah's husband Elliot falls in love with Lee. Holly survives a personal crisis and meets Mickey, who happens to be the former husband of Hannah. These affairs occur in two Thanksgivings.

Carney describes the drama in the celebration of Hannah's family as dramatic avoidance. Hannah is the backbone. Lee is the subject of everyone's lust. Holly is the odd one out. The inter-action of the sisters among one another and their relationships with their husbands reveals what Girgus' "brilliant techniques and motifs."

This is because “ Hannah and Her Sisters” is Allen’s most accessible film. He interweaves multiply story lines and presents these in a wonderful and rich, hilarious and human manner. Even during the scene with great dramatic tension, the true element of comedy manages to surface. Examples are the bumbling of Elliot, Holly’s hostility and Mickey’s quest for existence. These are all set along the confines of solemnity.

For Nancy Pogel, on the other hand, Allen represents the Little Man, or “ dementia-praecox,” in the tradition of Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, Buster Keaton, and Bob Hope, who she describes as Allen’s comedy ancestors. (Pogel, 2). His works have somber and philosophical undertones that are reminiscent to the silent films of Chaplin and Keaton.

Allen is also able to combine the comic and tragic elements in “ Hannah and Her Sisters.” Pogel views Allen’s humor as dialogic – of resonating in a larger context. His films carry on the dialogues through various ideas, styles and form. (Pogel, 6). Carney concentrates on what he perceives as Allen’s dramatic avoidance, Girgus sees comedic statement while Pogel observe that Allen’s films celebrate the inter-action of the characters and their struggle in the social context.

Carney remarks on Allen’s escape when the scenes get serious (mentioned in the previous paragraph – the subtitles during dinner and Annie’s ghost). Girgus observes the purpose of Allen’s breaking through the fourth wall in order to reach to the audience better in “ Annie Hall.” Pogel analyzes the

relationship among the characters, specifically the relationship of the sisters and their husbands in "Hannah and Her Sisters."

Carney concludes that Allen focuses too much on the comedy, thus his shortcoming as a dramatist. This is why his article provides a somehow negative review on the three-time Academy Award winning writer. However, there are critics like Girgus and Pogel who presents Allen's depth in storytelling through the technique he utilizes in his film and the build up of the characters in his story.

In conclusion, in the above essay I successfully evaluated Carney's position of how Allen uses humor in his films and analyzed how his position relates to the views of Girgus and Pogel. What Carney, Girgus, and Pogel all share is the desire to understand the films of Woody Allen. What each finds is significantly different, often polarized, and entirely determined by the elements each focuses upon and mostly highly values.