"Losers, poltroons and nudniks" in Woody Allen's *Mere Anarchy*

A linguistic approach to comic failure

Isabel Ermida

This article represents a pragmatic approach to humorous literature. Specifically, it focuses on the linguistic ways in which Woody Allen renders the broad theme of failure in his *Mere Anarchy* collection of short stories (2007), simultaneously engendering humour and providing amusement for his readers. The paper covers the following aspects: a summary of the thematic variations on failure in the short stories; a reflection about the character correlates around the central motif of the "loser" in the collection; a review of the concepts of linguistic humour and incongruity; and a textual analysis of the script oppositions underlying such stylistic devices as simile, understatement, and irony. The article thus aims to show that human failure and unhappiness can be successfully turned into humorous material and that Allen manages to blur the frontier between tragedy and comedy thanks to his linguistic expertise.

1. Introduction

Allen's latest collection of short stories, *Mere Anarchy* (2007), is a keen reminder not only that human failure and disgrace can have comic potential, but also that laughter is often immune to compassion and moral correctness. The heroes in these frantic urban tales are quintessential losers who tell first-person stories of misadventure and disaster, in a successful combination of situational ("de re") and linguistic ("de dicto") humour. By experiencing a variety of negative emotions, ranging from humiliation to deceit, through frustration and loss, the protagonists illustrate the gap existing between attempt and achievement, or between dream and delusion, all the while making us laugh. Allen's secret, it seems, lies in language, namely in the semantic and stylistic mechanisms that convey comic incongruity.

This article aims at analysing these mechanisms and at discussing how Allen's language succeeds in communicating humour and in turning potentially tragic situations into comic ones. In order to achieve these goals, I will begin by discussing the themes

of the stories, which are variations on failure from different perspectives and to different degrees, and then the characters, which are by extension, to use a phrase which Allen employs in one of the stories, "an array of losers of every description" (2007: 10). I will then cover the notions of comic incongruity and script opposition and examine a few illustrative cases in the texts under focus. Next, I will analyse the stylistic strategies which Allen uses to convey comic incongruity by focusing on simile, understatement and irony. At the same time, I will sketch a semantic analysis of the oppositions underlying these figures of speech.

It should be added that the present approach is pragmatics-oriented in that the notions of comic incongruity and script opposition, as put forth by I-R models and SSTH respectively (namely, the Incongruity-Resolution paradigm and Raskin's Semantic Script Theory of Humour), are actually about communication of humour. In fact, resolving the discrepancy between incongruous textual elements in Allen's short stories, as in other comic literary works, involves working out the sender-recipient axis, with its intersection between the humorous intention on the part of the writer and the reader's capacity to decode it successfully. This author-reader interaction is, obviously, different from other types of humorous practice, like stand-up comedy or face-to-face conversational joking (which imply the co-presence of the two communicative parties), but it requires similar forms of cognitive achievement from the participants. Accordingly, this article tries to show that the study of humour in literature calls for a pragmatic methodology, lest the author-reader interface, albeit detached in terms of time and place, be overlooked.

2. Thematic variations on failure

The range of themes to be found in Allen's collection, varied as it is, is unmistakably failure-oriented. Most of them evolve around the systematically unfulfilled wish for money or, alternatively, the wish for success, fame and recognition. Never is there any wish, say, for love or interpersonal fulfilment. The desire that Allen portrays is, therefore, materialistic and selfish, which is the first step to making the readers distance themselves from the doomed fate of the characters. Within this frame, and despite the refreshing variety of plots and situations, some recurrent sub-themes can be traced.

A major sub-theme is taking and being second choice, which involves aspirant artists' unacknowledged "brilliance". Would-be writers, would-be actors, would-be stars – all of them proud of themselves but on the dole – are forced to compromise their self-proclaimed genius to make ends meet. A good example of this is "This Nib for Hire", a story about second-rate writing jobs in "novelisation", which means turning cinema blockbusters into cheap paperbacks. Along the same lines, "Glory Hallelujah, Sold" tells the tale of a "psalm scrivener" (Allen 2007: 75), that is, a writer of prayers for cash that gets into trouble when his prayers are not answered. Likewise, "Tandoori Ransom" is about a substitute actor with prima-donna dreams. It takes place in distant

India, where a film crew is shooting, and where the hero is mistakenly kidnapped for the star, ending up having his body "diagrammed on a chart" (Allen 2007: 21) by a roomful of frenzied fanatics.

Another sub-theme is the shallow dilemmas of the rich. Even though most of the stories picture people in need of a few extra dollars, some focus on well-off characters, who nevertheless also undergo loss of their pride and honour, for instance, or... their money. In "Nanny Dearest", Allen tells us the only-too-frequent story of a Park Avenue nanny who threatens to publish her employers' memoirs, in which she refers to her boss as a "witless boor wearing a toupee" and to his wife as a "portly ice queen with tapioca thighs" (Allen 2007: 59). Manhattan high society is also the topic of "The Rejection", a story about a couple who cannot get their three-year-old accepted into one of the best Upper-East-Side preschools, because in the tests he was "tentative with blocks". More dramatic still is the plot in "Attention Geniuses: Cash Only", where Dr Skeezix Feebleman, a shrink owning two Ferraris, dreams of the financial gains Dr Gachet's free treatment of Van Gogh must have earned him, and accepts to treat a lunatic composer in exchange for songs, eventually going bankrupt. Big money is also present in "Calisthenics, Poison Ivy, Final Cut" – an epistolary story about greed, or, about wanting too much and getting too little. It reproduces the initially polite but later ferocious letters exchanged between the parents of an adolescent, whose experimental movie is bought by Miramax, and the owners of the summer film camp where the movie was made, both of whom want to pocket the profit alone.

Conning and deceit are another lavish sub-theme in Allen's stories. The very first one, whose telling title is nothing but "To Err is Human – To Float Divine", is about a man who is tricked into taking a course in super-natural powers, ranging from levitation to translocation through omniscience, so as to foretell the lottery. Tricksters are also present in "How Deadly Your Taste Buds, My Sweet", which reports on auction bidding for a fake rare white truffle and the fix a private-eye is lured into by a ravishing blonde. In "Sam, You Made the Pants Too Fragrant", a vain American is persuaded to visit a posh British tailor in Savile Road, specialising in high-tech/gadget suits, the problem being that they either set on fire or send their wearers ricocheting. The ultimate charlatan can be seen in "Sing, You Sacher Tortes", a story about a theatre manager specialising in colossal failures who succeeds in getting credulous acquaintances of his to foot the bill. But it is perhaps in "On a Bad Day You Can See Forever" that lying and cheating are best rendered. It is about getting a house redone while living in it – with the daily company of the workers, whose lesser fake excuse for constant delays is getting dengue fever in Machu Picchu.

No matter how desperate the characters' situations may become, the important point to bear in mind is that the stories never have a truly bad ending. Nobody dies, for a start, or gets into really serious trouble. Instead, characters somehow manage to "save their neck", as the phrase goes, in extremis. True enough, they always fail whatever their intention/dream/purpose initially was, but their failure is by no means tragic. And the fact that most stories are first-person narratives also confirms that they are

tales of survival, which *is* after all a form of success. But, as we shall see, it is language that signals the humorous mode, which accordingly leads to a comic resolution.

3. The loser type and other character correlates

The figure of the loser, a person who is regularly unsuccessful, is the quintessential character in Allen's fictional world. His stories are peopled mostly by men (female characters are usually cast in supporting roles) struggling to be someone in a frantic, competitive, ruthless New York, while systematically confronting all sorts of threats, risks and pressures. Around these comically doomed protagonists whirls a range of other characters, equally in distress. There is a passage in the first story of Allen's collection where he describes the people gathering at the Sublime Ascension Centre, a supernatural power facility run by a decadent clairvoyant named Galaxie Sunstroke, in a way that might well apply to the gallery of characters in the stories themselves.

(1) As far as I could discern, the compound was awash with losers of every description: poltroons and nudniks, actresses who guided their each move by the planets, the overweight, a man who had been involved in some kind of taxidermy scandal, a midget in denial. (Allen 2007: 10)

The explicit reference to "losers" is indeed telling as to the human material Allen caricatures, but the diversity of losers, as well as the degree of failure, differs considerably from story to story. There are working-class and uneducated losers, like a night watchman at a wax museum and a private detective, and there are middle-class, college educated ones, like Dr Feebleman, the psychiatrist who makes the mistake of accepting original songs of dubious quality as therapy payment (Allen 2007: 117), and Benno Duckworth, a former poetry editor of a *Dry Heaves: A Journal of Opinion* and present author of a volume on anapestic dimeter (Allen 2007: 31). They can be poor, like the wannabe actor taking a humiliating job as lighting double to Harvey Afflatus, and aspirant writers who go around on the verge of starvation, like Flanders Mealworm (35). But they can also be wealthy, like Winston Snell and Monroe B Varnishke, Manhattan upper-class big shots, or Harvey Bidnick, friend to Dr Diverticulinsky, the Birdwings and the Offals (Allen 2007: 59). The characters' psychological portrait also varies a great deal. Some are gullible low-profile citizens dreaming about the numbers of New York State Lottery, whereas others are arrogant and pretentious pseudo-intellectuals and artists who compare themselves to Dostoyevsky (Allen 2007: 35), or think they have been "graced by the gods with (...) vivid and abundant gifts for the arts" (Allen 2007: 13).

Despite their variety, all the characters share the characteristic of falling victim to some trickster or another, or just to the circumstances of fate. Within the sham scheme format, examples of charlatans are legion. For instance, Mr Binky Peplum, a self-proclaimed "postmodern" tailor (Allen 2007: 31), tries to sell fabrics that reject odours,

garments that are mood elevators and suits that recharge the customer's cellular phones, only to send them to intensive care. E Coli Biggs, a film producer who stays incognito in luxury hotels with secretaries-cum-masseuses clad in garter belts, does justice to his bacterial name: he is the ultimate conman, escaping at the last minute from whatever imbroglio he concocts under yet another alias (Allen 2007: 43). Another perfect swindler is Max Arbogast, a building contractor whose deadlines "keep receding like a six-pack in the desert" and whose alibis "rival *The Arabian Nights*" (Allen 2007: 113). One final example of a trickster is Wolf Silverglide, a music producer resembling "a ferret in gabardine" (124), who publishes the songs written by a psychiatric patient as a form of payment to his shrink, Dr Feebleman. The affair ends disgracefully.

(2) Silverglide folded his extravaganza like a deck chair and blew town photon-fast, leaving me to deal with the avalanche of plagiary suits that poured in. (Allen 2007: 124)

There are also outright criminals in Allen's gallery, like murderers and child abusers, as is the case of Veerappan, the leader of an Indian gang, a "legendary brigand, quick to slaughter" (Allen 2007: 19), and a nanny – a "Swedish woman resembling Stanley Ketchel" – who was caught bouncing her employers' son "horizontally across her shoulders in what wrestlers call the Argentine backbreaker" (Allen 2007: 57). But most other secondary characters are just inoffensive liars, like Reg Millipede, who claims to be "vice-president in charge of customer relations for one of the biggest charnel houses on the Isle of Wight" (Allen 2007: 26), or Galaxie Sunstroke, the psychic, who, "oddly unomniscient for a creature of her reputed majesty", asks the hero what he does for a living (Allen 2007: 9).

Whatever the relationships these secondary characters establish with the protagonists in the stories, the fact is that the latter fall victim to the former's manipulation and dishonesty, and also to their own ingenuity, ambition or bad luck. As a result, every plan, strategy, or scheme they devise systematically fails. A good sum-up of this dynamic of failure is the passage where a group of would-be actors tries to help a colleague double, kidnapped for mistake in India.

(3) When news of my plight appeared as a filler in the rear pages of *Backstage*, a group of politically active extras deemed it an outrage and swore to hold a midnight vigil but could not jimmy loose sufficient capital to purchase the required candles. (Allen 2007: 21)

So far, the plots and the characters I have reviewed illustrate a type of humour that is usually called "situational". Indeed, some of the situations just described might well be played, say, in silent films, or in mime routines, exactly because they are non-linguistic, or, to use Cicero's terminology, "de re". The house renovation sequence, for instance, with the owners taking boiling showers that make them look like lobsters, could well be pantomimed.

But "linguistic", or "de dicto", humour is also a lavish source of comicality in Allen's collection. What is more, I claim that it is through language that the potentially tragic material of the plots is comically harboured. The characters' names, for one thing, are safe comic hints, and so is the assortment of figures of speech which are used to convey comic incongruity. But it is the principle of semantic opposition, detectable in lexical items or extended lexical sequences, that pervades through "Mere Anarchy", giving it an unmistakably humorous flavour. Next I offer a few general remarks on the incongruous nature of linguistic humour.

4. Linguistic humour and incongruity

As most theories of linguistic humour acknowledge, *incongruity* is the key to comic effect. In other words, a discrepancy between two meanings which overlap, and corresponding surprise, is what establishes the humorous nature of an utterance. Before I analyse the expression of this principle in Allen's collection, a brief historical preamble is called for.

The relationship between laughter (a poor predecessor of the term "humour", whose lexical appearance dates only from the 18th century, cf. Escarpit 1960:3), incongruity and surprise was, not surprisingly, first remarked by Aristotle in *Rhetoric* (3.11), where he states:

> "Novelties of expression" arise when there is an element of surprise, and (...) the thing turns out contrary to what we were expecting, like the jokes found in comic writers, produced by deceptive alterations in words, and by unexpected words in verse, where the listener anticipates one thing and hears another.

Forerunners of the incongruity theory of humour can also be found in Latin Antiquity, with Cicero and Quintilian, again from the "laughter" point of view (on the need for a theoretical distinction between the terms "laughter" and "humour", see e.g. Levine 1969: 1, Olbrechts-Tyteca 1974: 14, Lewis 1989: 8). The former author claims that "when we are expecting to hear a particular phrase, and something different is uttered (...) our own mistake even makes us laugh ourselves (*De Oratore*, II.lxiii.255). And the latter asserts in Institutio Oratoria: "The adaptation to one thing of a circumstance which usually applies to something else [is] a type of jest which we may regard as being an ingenious form of fiction. (cf. VI-iii, 61).

The element of surprise is also present in some interesting writings by Renaissance authors. In De Ridiculis (1550), Madius echoes Cicero's distinction between *de dicto* and *de re* humour, establishing surprise (*admiratio*) as one of comedy's driving forces (Attardo 1994). Along similar lines, Giangiorgio Trissino (1562) defends, in Aristotle's vein, that the comic effect derives from the audience's frustrated expectations.

In the 18th century, two authors rescue the theory of incongruity from oblivion. In 1764, James Beattie elaborates on the notion of humorous incongruity as follows:

"Laughter arises from the view of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage." And Kant states, "The joke must always contain something that may deceive" (1790: 238). Schopenhauer (1818: 59) takes up the idea, claiming that laughter "results from the suddenly perceived incongruity between a concept and the real objects."

In the 20th century, three important names help to establish the incongruity theory of humour. The first is Bergson (1900: 74), who defines the humorous situation as follows: "A situation is always comic whenever it simultaneously belongs to two absolutely independent series of events that hide two different sets of meanings." Freud (1905: 365) introduces an important distinction between funniness and strangeness: "The comic phenomenon results from contrasting representations, yes, but only insofar as they give rise to a comic effect and not to a strange one." And Koestler (1964) propounds what is known as "bisociation theory", according to which humour involves a semantic displacement, be it from a metaphorical to a literal dimension (cf. 1964: 36), or from a current, "dominant", signification to a previously neglected aspect of the whole (1964: 91). Whatever the case, Koestler (1964: 93) claims, humour is to be achieved through the "ability to break away from the stereotyped routines of thought", which often takes the shape of a "feat of mental acrobatics".

Yet another influential approach to incongruity in humour is Suls's (1972, 1983), whose "incongruity resolution" model manages to overthrow Koestler's (1964) hitherto dominant notion of bisociation (on a discussion of Suls's impact, see Dynel 2009). Instead of regarding incongruity as merely an oscillation between two juxtaposed matrices, Suls defends that there must be a resolution, or problem-solving, process whereby one signification is substituted for another. In other words, there must be a sudden shift, or "an abrupt transfer of the train of thought from one matrix to another governed by a different logic or rule" (Suls 1972: 95, Dynel 2009: 61). This two-stage framework, identifying the incongruity plus solving it, allows for the incongruity to become "congruous", so to speak, and to become meaningful within the realm of the joke.

No matter how decisive these contributions were to the comprehension of the humorous phenomenon, the explanation of its strictly linguistic nature was to be supplied by Raskin, who in 1985 put forth what quickly became an established semantic theory of humour. Up till then, only scattered and unsystematic contributions to the understanding of verbal humour were available. According to Raskin, two premises are necessary and sufficient for humour to occur in a given text: a) there have to be two opposing scripts; and b) the scripts have to overlap, partially or completely. By *script* he means "a large chunk of information surrounding a word or evoked by it" (Raskin 1985: 81). The impact which Raskin's Semantic Script Theory of Humour (SSTH) has had on the analysis of linguistic humour is so great that ever since only small additions have proven effective (e.g. Attardo and Raskin 1991), while the bulk of the original theory has remained valid and operative.

Strange though it may sound, Attardo and Raskin's (1991) General Theory of Verbal Humour (GTVH) openly denies affiliation with incongruity-based models, on the

grounds that not all script oppositions can be mechanically classified as incongruities (though simple negation and contradiction admittedly can), and that the SSTH and the GTVH make no use of arousal-resolution elements, as most incongruity-based approaches do. Furthermore, the GTVH is claimed to gain nothing from being equated with the incongruity paradigm, because it is "much better defined, developed, and explicated than a regular incongruity-based theory" (Attardo and Raskin 1991: 331; on a discussion, see Dynel 2009). However, in my view, the SSTH is by and large incongruity-informed, as it propounds an opposition between two (partially or completely) overlapping scripts which is unexpected and causes surprise and perplexity. Now, this is the way incongruities work, whether or not they are resolved. Therefore, I suggest we take the following discussion of Allen's script oppositions in light of the incongruity paradigm, which allows us to identify the concomitance of contrastive frames of reference.

The linguistic humour in Allen's collection is indeed, to a great extent, based on lexically evoked semantic oppositions which overlap and cause surprise. A look at the stories will unveil a large number of examples illustrating this strategy, a sample of which is given next.

5. Script oppositions in *Mere Anarchy*

As they constitute the very essence of comicality, occurrences of script oppositions are so numerous in Allen's collection that we cannot but cover a small number. All of them can be read, in lexical terms, as instances of *antonymy*, i.e., as an inherently incompatible binary contrast, which implies that "male", for instance, entails "not female" (cf. Murphy 2003). Let it be noted, however, that some cases are "local antonyms", which, as Raskin puts it, are "two linguistic entities whose meanings are opposite only within a particular discourse and solely for the purposes of this discourse" (Raskin 1985:108). In stylistic terms, on the other hand, the oppositions can be read as instances of *antithesis*, a rhetorical device which I regard as the quintessential incongruity operator. In other words, it is as if antithesis were the leading figure in a stylistic approach to a comic literary text, absorbing or merging into all the others. In the next section, we shall see that similes, understatements and ironies also exhibit an underlying antithetical architecture.

An interesting script opposition emerges in the introductory story, when the hero is going through a "tsunami of junk mail" and reads ads regarding psychic advice of various sorts:

(4) Naturally, at the end of all these trips to the centre of the soul, a small emolument to cover stamps and any other expenses the guru may have incurred in another life is in order. (Allen 2007: 4)

The antithesis is here established between a reference to the soul and another to petty earthly worries. If we were to apply script theory to this extract, we would have two opposing scripts that overlap, namely SPIRIT VS. MATTER. The same semantic opposition between the spiritual and the material and mundane can be found further on in the same story, when Max Endorphine is telling the hero all about his success in Vegas ever since he acquired supernatural powers:

(5) If I'm ever unsure about a nag or whether to hit or stick at blackjack, there's this tiny consortium of angels I tap into. I mean, just 'cause someone's got wings and is made of ectoplasm don't mean they can't handicap. (Allen 2007: 8)

The soul is also under focus in another story, where an unemployed writer, Hamish Specter, takes a job as a writer of prayers, after reading an ad that specified "No atheists please". He reflects:

(6) Skeptic that I was as an adolescent, I had recently come to believe in a Supreme Being after thumbing through a Victoria's Secret catalogue.
(Allen 2007: 74)

The script opposition in this extract is between SOUL and BODY or, more drastically, between SACRED and PROFANE, and it is the incongruity of the combination that produces humour. When Specter meets Moe Bottomfeeder, the Prayer Jockey, the following dialogue takes place:

(7) – "What can I do for you?"
– "I saw your ad", I wheezed. "In *The Voice*. Right under the Vassar coeds who specialise in body rubs."
– "Right, right," Bottomfeeder said, licking his fingers. "So, you want to be a psalm scrivener... Any experience?"
– "I did do a TV pilot called *Nun For Me, Thanks*, about some devout sisters in a convent who build a neutron bomb." (Allen 2007: 75)

The passage reveals two antithetical situations: an advertisement for prayers being placed next to one for erotic massage; and pious nuns building a mass deadly weapon. In script analysis terms, there are two overlapping oppositions, respectively: SOUL vs. BODY (or SACRED vs. PROFANE) again in the first case, and GOOD vs. EVIL in the second.

The topic of finding neutral information published contiguously to more personal and private one is also explored in the passage where Flanders Mealworm, the writer on the dole, receives a call from E Coli Biggs. The exchange that follows places the IDENTITY script against the SCATOLOGY one, establishing an antithetical opposition between PUBLIC and PRIVATE:

(8) – "Where did you get my number?" I inquired. "It's unlisted."
– "From the Internet. It's there alongside the x-rays of your colonoscopy."
(Allen 2007: 36)

Humorous script oppositions can be found where least expected, such as in secondary passages or in introductory links to the action moments. The following extract establishes an opposition between using a paper shredder and organising data alphabetically:

(9) As I was carefully filling the new postal arrivals alphabetically in the paper shredder...I noticed there was an unsolicited little journal (...) (Allen 2007: 3)

The incongruity in the extract obviously springs from the absurd alphabetical procedure used to get rid of junk mail, which one uses when storing information, and not when disposing of it (on the absurd, see e.g. Feinberg 1978, Wilson 1979, Dolitsky 1984, Purdie 1993). Script-wise, there is an overlapping opposition between, say, GARBAGE and STORAGE.

The antithesis between NIMBLENESS and CLUMSINESS, or between COMPETENCE and INEPTNESS, is present in the side-splitting story where the cinema double is abducted. The actual kidnapping moment, which is also a perfect illustration of the topic of failure, is rendered as follows:

(10) As the martial arts were part of my acting background, I suddenly snapped to the ground and uncoiled, sending forth a lightning-power kick, which fortunately for my abductors hit air and caused me to fall directly into the open trunk of a waiting Plymouth, where the door was promptly locked. (Allen 2007: 18)

(11) Using deep-breathing exercises I had mastered in acting class, I managed to retain my composure for at least eight seconds before emitting a medley of bloodcurdling bleats and hyperventilated into oblivion. (Allen 2007: 19)

Perhaps the best example of a humorous script opposition in Allen's collection is an existential one. In "Sing, You Sacher Tortes", Fabian Wunch, the perfect shyster, expresses a hilarious solution to the worst fear in a human being's LIFE: DEATH. The antithesis is blatant, and so is a parallel script opposition between TRIUMPH (explicitly phrased) and FAILURE (death's ultimate synonym). The passage takes place when Wunch, trying to convince the narrator to help him finance another of his Broadway flops, reports on the plot to be staged (an intricate and farfetched tale gathering all the major intellectual figures in Vienna at the *belle époque*), and says:

(12) "Freud unblocks Mahler so he can write again and as a result Mahler triumphs over his lifelong fear of death."
"How does Mahler triumph over his lifelong fear of death?" I asked.
"By dying. I figured it out – it's really the only way." (Allen 2007: 104)

6. Stylistic devices conveying comic incongruity

If we look at the generous array of rhetorical devices Allen uses in his collection, we will realise that they spring from semantic oppositions that can be handled in script

theory terms. Indeed, the employment of figures of speech aims either at introducing a new script opposition and corresponding incongruity effect, or at reinforcing an existing opposition in a certain narrative passage. For want of space, we shall concentrate on three figures of speech only: simile, understatement and irony.

6.1 Simile

Similes are an abundant source of humour in Allen's "Mere Anarchy". Strictly speaking, they are words or phrases that establish a comparison using the connectives "as" or "like". But other syntactic formulations are also possible, such as the use of the verb "resemble" or the adjective "comparable". More often than not, similes in Allen's stories occur in combination with other devices, like antithesis or hyperbole. They lend themselves to a script opposition analysis, since the comparisons they set up can be read as contrasts. Indeed, as Ross (1998: 35) claims, similes can be classed as "apparent contradictions" and as a type of "semantic incongruity", insofar as the image they evoke "is bizarre or awkwardly incongruous".

The story about the shrink that goes bankrupt starts with a hilarious reference to jogging as a health risk and not as a health enhancer, combined with a historical simile, which sets an opposition between HEALTH and DISEASE:

(13) Jogging along Fifth Avenue last summer as part of a fitness program designed to reduce my life expectancy *to that of a nineteenth-century coal miner*, I paused at an outdoor café ... to renovate my flagging respiratory system with a chilled screwdriver. [Italics mine, henceforth] (Allen 2007: 117)

The next sentence boasts another simile, which alludes to one of the Disney films and establishes an incongruity between the ADROITNESS vs. CLUMSINESS scripts:

(14) Orange juice being well up on my prescribed regimen, I quaffed several rounds and upon rising managed to execute a series of corybantic figures, *not unlike the infant Bambi taking his first steps*. (Allen 2007: 117)

An obviously incongruous humorous simile is used in a physics-inspired little story, "Strung out", where an office clerk compares himself to Einstein, only to add a small correction:

(15) The big bang, black holes and the primordial soup turn up every Tuesday in the science section of the Times, and as a result my grasp of general relativity and quantum mechanics now equal Einstein's – Einstein Moomjy, that is, the rug seller. (Allen 2007: 127)

Obviously, the script opposition underlying the simile is between KNOWLEDGE and IGNORANCE, while there is another humorous contrast set between the important questions of the universe, which transcend the layman, and the limited and accessible reality of a section in a paper, let alone of rug selling.

The story about the fraudulent building contractor who leads the narrator and his wife to bankruptcy and madness has a range of humorous similes, one of which sets a script opposition between HONESTY and DISHONESTY:

(16) I discovered that a series of tax shelters structured to maximise my earnings had begun to strike the IRS as curiously *similar to those of Al Capone*. (Allen 2007: 123)

In the same passage, when the narrator gathers the courage to complain about the budget inflation, the contractor attributes the fault to him, in what can be regarded as a script opposition between COMPLAINT and ACCUSATION. The simile is combined with a hyperbole, insofar as the narrator implicitly compares his domestic cost overruns with nothing less but the German inflation of the 20's. In this case, the linguistic formulation of the simile is remote, since it lacks an explicit comparative particle, but it is expresses a comparison, nonetheless.

(17) When I confronted Arbogast with my disenchantment over cost overruns *that were challenging the German inflation of the 1920s*, he laid it off to my "psychotic demand for change orders." (Allen 2007: 114)

Later that night, hearing a sound downstairs, the narrator gets out of bed and, stepping on his glasses, bolts face-first into an expensive porphyry dolphin Arbogast had bought. The slapstick passage, a universal laughter stimulant, according to Giora (1994: 6), contains yet another humorous simile, all the while setting another opposition between DEXTERITY and CLUMSINESS. Also, it should be noted that the simile precedes a comparison which also reports on the effects of the unfortunate fall (i.e. the idea that it causes the protagonist to lose visual accuracy and almost faint). It should be added that the Arthur Rank logo features a man hitting a huge gong, whereas the Aurora Borealis stands for a massive vision of the stars in the sky, of which one supposedly gets to have a clear view when receiving a heavy blow:

(18) The blow caused my middle ear to ring *like the Arthur Rank logo* and rewarded me as well with an unimpeded view of the Aurora Borealis. (Allen 2007: 115)

The story closes under utter failure in the form of bankruptcy, owing not only to Arbogast's expenditure, but also to the building inspectors' safety violation charges, which the court sanctions. The extract contains a simile which signals the switch from the VICTIM to the OFFENDER scripts:

(19) I also have some dim recall of sitting before a judge who sat glowering *like an El Greco cardinal* as he mulched me to the tune of many zeroes. (Allen 2007: 115)

But the most exaggerated and farfetched similes in Allen's collection are perhaps to be found in the story about the theatrical production of *Fun de Siècle* (note the pun on "fin de siècle"). Here is a sample, taken from the beginning of the story, just as the

narrator runs into that "peerless purveyor of schlock Fabian Wunch" (Allen 2007: 99). After each quote, next, I suggest an underlying script opposition.

(20) Bald, cheroot-sucking, and *as phlegmatic as the Wall of China*, Wunch is a producer of the old school... (Allen 2007: 99) [HUMAN VS. NON-HUMAN]

(21) Given the consistency and dimensions of his exaltation of flops, it has remained a puzzle *on a par with string theory* how he manages to raise money for each fresh theatrical holocaust. (Allen 2007: 99) [SCIENTIFIC VS. MUNDANE]

(22) Hence, when a beefy arm in a Sy Syms suit curled itself around my shoulder blades, (...) I could feel the wallet in my pocket instinctively clenching *like an endangered abalone*. (Allen 2007: 99) [ANIMATE VS. INANIMATE]

(23) "(...) I got an undiscovered genius mints hit songs *like the Japs roll off Toyotas.* Right now the kid walks dogs for a living (...)" (Allen 2007: 100) [ARTISTIC/CREATIVE VS. TECHNICAL/MECHANICAL]

6.2 Understatement

The stylistic device whereby events and circumstances are made to seem less important, impressive or serious than they really are is a plentiful one in Allen's writing. According to Nash (1985: 152), *understatement* is a form of sarcasm, notably the use of a "pro-code" which understates a certain claim. The notion captures humour which, unlike irony, does not contradict what is meant, but says it in a restrained, understated, way. For instance, "Tom is lazy" may be sarcastically said as "Tom does not believe in hard work" [pro-code]. Understatement is yet another strategy Allen employs to set overlapping semantic oppositions and thus establish comic incongruity.

The story about the cinema double's ransom begins with the hero taking a plane to India, in which the VIOLENT TURBULENCE script is understated (the phrase "light chop" hardly describes it) and followed by a hyperbolic simile:

(24) The trip was uneventful save for some "light chop", which caused the passengers to ricochet off the cabin wall like boiled atoms. (Allen 2007: 16)

During his long abduction predicament, the narrator never fails to trust his colleagues' efforts to rescue him, up until the following moment:

(25) After five days of no response, however, in which Veerappan's spies told him the writer had reworked the script and the film was now being pulled up stakes and relocated in Auckland, *I began to feel uneasy*. (Allen 2007: 21)

The adjective "uneasy" obviously understates the legitimate despair anyone would feel under such extreme circumstances, and it is humorous qua dislocated and insufficient. In script analysis, the opposition is between TERROR and UNEASINESS.

The story about the shrink who receives "sheet songs" (note yet another pun) in exchange for therapy has a few hilarious understatements, whose comicality lies in the

fact that the narrator does not seem to notice that he made a very bad deal. For a few months, Dr Feebleman's "faith in [Pepkin's] genius abides undiminished" (Allen 2007: 120), and he receives "over a kilo of songs" – but no "suggestion of the green and crinkly" (Allen 2007: 122). At a certain point he finally concedes:

(26) That not a single music maven I visited could find a molecule of promise in a hot cabaret number like "Make with the Hormones" or the sublime ballad "Early Alzheimer's" has given me *fleeting intimations that Pepkin may not be the next Irving Berlin*. (Allen 2007: 122)

The blatant understatement puts forth a comic script opposition between EXCELLENCE and WORTHLESSNESS, which pervades through the story. Later on in the text, Feebleman finally manages to stage a few of Pepkin's songs, with the help of a fraudulent producer, Silverglide. Here is what follows:

(27) The show opened with *mixed* notices. *The Poultryman's Journal* enjoyed it, as did *Cigar Magazine*. The dailies, along with *Time* and *Newsweek*, were *more reserved*, forming a consensus best summed up by the critic who called it "a black hole of imbecility." (Allen 2007: 124)

Once again, Feebleman fails to report objectively on the critics' opinions, which are overwhelmingly negative, and instead he mentions two ridiculously anonymous publications to counterbalance them. The use of the adjective "mixed" instead of, say, "near-consensual", and "reserved" instead of "devastating" are two obvious signs of understatement.

A similar adjectival hitch is present in the story about the clerk with philosophical worries, who says:

(28) Because the concept of up and down is relative, the elevator I got went to the roof, where it was very *difficult* to hail a taxi. (Allen 2007: 128)

"Difficult" is hardly the adjective one would choose to describe such a situation, in which "impossible" or "unthinkable" or "farfetched" would be more adequate alternatives.

One last example of understatement is used in the first story, in which Galaxie Sunstroke, the psychic, asks the narrator what he does for a living. He answers:

(29) "Night watchman at a wax museum", I replied, "but it's not as fulfilling as it sounds." (Allen 2007: 9)

Obviously, saying that such a job "sounds fulfilling" is humorous because it is implausible. Actually, the understatement conceals a script opposition between FRUSTRATION and FULFILMENT, or an incongruity between BOREDOM VS. EXCITEMENT.

6.3 Irony

The debate around irony and its relation with humour is too intricate for us to tackle in this limited space (but see Ermida 2008). Suffice it to say that irony is a trope based

on the employment of a "counter-code" (cf. Nash 1985: 152), as opposed to sarcasm or understatement, which are based on the use of a "pro-code", "a set of lexical forms that are blatantly equivalent to the 'maternal proposition' in terms of denotation" (Nash 1985: 152). In traditional rhetoric, irony also consists in saying the opposite of what the orator means. On the other hand, the pragmatic tradition established by Grice (1975) views irony as an infringement of the first maxim of quality which stipulates that the speaker should always tell the truth so as to obey the Cooperative Principle. By flouting the maxim, Grice adds, the speaker is conveying an implicature aimed at providing additional, non-literal, effects. Humorous communication typically illustrates this particular mechanism of maxim flouting and non-literality. In Allen's "Mere Anarchy" (like elsewhere in his work, cf. Ermida 2005), the use of irony can be read not only as a case of Gricean implicature, but also as yet another strategy to convey comic incongruity, and as such it deserves our attention here.

Let us again begin by looking at "Tandoori Ransom". The lighting double to Afflatus is told that there is no room for him with the film crew on the charter flight to India, the reason being that the leading lady made a last-minute decision to bring her rottweiler along. He reports on the situation by using an adverb and an adjective that are exactly the opposite of what one might expect to hear given the negative – or, rather, utterly unfair – circumstances. The incongruity of their use is therefore comic, while the corresponding irony is obvious. In script analysis terms, the irony sets an opposition between GOOD FORTUNE VS. MISFORTUNE, and FASCINATION VS. REPULSION:

(30) *Fortunately* there was room for me aboard a return flight carrying a convention of beggars, and though I couldn't parse a word of Urdu I was *fascinated* as they compared afflictions and examined one another's bowls. (Allen 2007: 16)

Further on in the same story, when the situation becomes critical (i.e. when the abductors find out their mistake and realise that the actor they kidnapped is not the "movie idol" they had in mind), Veerappan, the gang leader, insults the protagonist in a very significant way, saying that he is "the type that drives a cab or works at an answering service waiting for that one big break that never comes" (Allen 2007: 20). Besides the fact that nowhere else in the story is the definition for failure given in such eloquent tones, the typically American cultural references are absurd qua dislocated, and therefore comic. Script-wise, the opposition here is clearly between SUCCESS and FAILURE. The protagonist reacts in the following way:

(31) "Now, wait a minute", I *yelled*, despite eight inches of black masking tape across my mouth, but before I could *really warm up to my theme* I received a wallop in the sconce with a *huqqa*. I held my tongue as Veerappan segued into his peroration. All the crass bunglers were to be decapitated, he decreed *benevolently*. (Allen 2007: 20)

Several occurrences of irony enrich this passage. To begin with, "yell" is hardly the verb to use when the subject has eight inches if tape over his mouth. Secondly, such a start

is actually a non-start, a point from which no "warming up to the theme" is possible, since the theme was never really introduced. Finally, decreeing decapitation is not a benevolent attitude at all. In short, what is meant is the exact opposite of what is said.

The Broadway producer story also contains interesting occurrences of irony. The following passage, a particularly rich one, since it also exhibits two amusing similes and a hyperbole, has a crucial ironical adjective that renders the situation all the more comical. The narrator has just bumped into Wunch, who immediately seizes him and begins his usual exploitation attempts:

(32) Were I a squid, this preamble alone would have been more than enough to trigger the ejaculation of black ink, and yet before I could scream for the riot police I found myself sucked up and flip-screened crosstown to a *modest* French restaurant, where, for as little as two hundred and fifty dollars per person, one could eat like Ivan Denisovich. (Allen 2007: 100)

"Modest" is definitely not an accurate description for a restaurant that charges such a sum for a meal. The underlying script opposition in this passage is, therefore, between MODESTY and LUXURY. After the ordeal of listening to Wunch's plot, the narrator ends his tale with a patently false statement regarding an alleged theatre superstition. Indeed, no superstition, theatrical or otherwise, is phrased ever so accurately as to exactly fit the situation in hand: in this case, the image of Kafka sprinkling sand and dancing on the stage is precisely what Wunch fantasises for the play he wants the narrator to finance. In script terms, KAFKA-THE-NIHILIST is in direct opposition to, say, KAFKA-THE-DANCER, which amounts to expressing a script contrast between EXISTENTIAL ANGST and MUNDANE PLEASURE:

(33) As far as me backing up *Fun de Siècle*, there's an old theatre superstition that any show in which Franz Kafka sprinkles sand on the stage and does a soft-shoe is just too big a risk. (Allen 2007: 106)

The story about the psychiatric patient who pays his shrink by writing songs also contains a few hilarious ironies, one of which can be found when Dr Feebleman, after six months of treatment and, as mentioned above, a "kilo of songs", elaborates on the brilliance of his patient's creations:

(34) One is a *sophisticated* bauble called "If You'll be My Puma in Yuma I'll Be Your Stork in New York". It's best crooned, and is replete with *clever* double entendres. (Allen 2007: 121)

Once again, the adjectives "sophisticated" and "clever" are not, at least judging by the lyrics, a good assessment of the song in question. As is the case with all previous extracts under analysis, the passage is humorous because of its incongruity. Besides, the irony establishes a semantic opposition between two sets of scripts that overlap: on the one hand, SOPHISTICATION and CLEVERNESS, on the other, respectively, PRIMITIVENESS and STUPIDITY. Exactly the same oppositions are present in yet another occurrence

of irony, regarding another of Pepkin's songs, in which the adjective "magnificent" does not fit a description of such an aesthetic product:

(35) The best number was a torch song called "Italics mine", which boasted the *magnificent* lyric "You're fine, like rare wine, I *love you* (italics mine)".
(Allen 2007: 124)

7. Conclusion

In retrospect, the present analysis of "Mere Anarchy" provides lavish evidence of Allen's linguistic expertise in achieving comic effect. I could have mentioned many other examples to illustrate the generous range of rhetorical strategies he employs to convey, and reinforce, humorous incongruity. Still, the ones I did examine confirm my initial claim that the humour in "Mere Anarchy" is not only situational ("de re") but also, and especially, linguistic ("de dicto"). No matter how depressing the characters' situation may become, Allen narrates their troubles with such lively comicality that the reader never shares a sense of pathos. In fact, although the heroes suffer an array of negative emotions, from frustration through delusion to loss, their predicaments are systematically rendered in a comic light.

As this article shows, the fact that most situations are exaggerated and, at times, downright absurd does not alone explain the flawless humour in the stories. Neither does the fact that the characters' plight is most of the time caused by selfish greed and ambition, which makes the readers detach themselves from their tragedy-prone fate and read it in a disparaging light which allows for comic pleasure. Rather, Allen's humorous expertise seems, as initially ventured, to be, first and foremost, linguistic. The semantic organisation of the texts, based on a combination of script oppositeness and overlap, is blended with a proficient use of stylistic devices which signal, and enhance, comic incongruity. In a nutshell, it is language that is responsible for turning a latently poignant plot material into a few good, uncompassionate, laughs.

References

Allen, Woody. 2007. *Mere Anarchy*. New York: Random House.
Aristotle. 1959 [IV BC]. *Rhetoric*. W.D. Ross (ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Attardo, Salvatore. 1994. *Linguistic Theories of Humour*. Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
Attardo, Salvatore and Victor Raskin. 1991. "Script theory revis(it)ed: joke similarity and joke representation model." *Humor* 4: 293–347.
Beattie, James. 1971 [1764]. *Essays*. New York: Garland Publishing.
Bergson, Henri. 1900. *Le Rire, Essai sur la Signification du Comique*. Paris: PUF, 1978.
Cicero. 1948 [55 BC]. *De Oratore*. London: Heinemann. 2 Vols. 235–68, 371–97.

Chiaro, Delia. 1994. *The Language of Jokes: Analysing Verbal Play*. London and New York: Routledge.

Dolitsky, Marlene. 1983. "Humour and the unsaid." *Journal of Pragmatics* 7, 39–48.

Dynel, Marta. 2009. *Humorous Garden-Paths: A Pragmatic-Cognitive Study*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Ermida, Isabel. 2005. "When saying is not meaning: A pragmatic approach to humorous ironies." In *Pragmatics Today*, Piotr Cap (ed.), 235–244. Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang.

Ermida, Isabel. 2008. The Language of Comic Narratives: Humor Construction in Short Stories. Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Escarpit, Robert. 1981 [1960]. *L'Humour*. Paris: P.U.F.

Feinberg, Leonard. 1978. *The Secret of Humor*. Amsterdam: Rodopi N.V.

Freud, Sigmund. 1960 [1905]. *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. James Strachey (transl.). London: Penguin.

Grice, Paul. 1975. "Logic and Conversation." In *Syntax and Semantics*, *Speech Acts*, Peter Cole and Jerry Morgan (eds), 41–59. New York: Academic.

Kant, Immanuel. 1978 [1790]. *Critique of Judgement*. English Tr. James Creed Meredith. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Koestler, Arthur. 1964. *The Act of Creation*. London: Pan Books.

Levine, Jacob (ed.). 1969. *Motivation in Humor*. New York: Atherthon.

Lewis, Paul. 1989. *Comic Effects: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Humour in Literature*. Albany; NY: State University of New York.

Murphy, M. Lynne. 2003. Semantic Relations and the Lexicon: Antonymy, synonymy, and other Paradigms. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nash, Walter. 1985. *The Language of Humour*: *Style and Technique in Comic Discourse*. London and New York: Longman.

Olbrechts-Tyteca, Lucie. 1974. *Le Comique du Discours*. Bruxelles: Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles.

Purdie, Susan. 1993. *Comedy, the Mastery of Discourse*. New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Tokyo, Singapore: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Quintilian. 2006 [ca. 95 AD]. *Institutio Oratoria*. T. Reinhardt and M. Winterbottom (eds). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Raskin, Victor. 1985. *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*. Dordrecht-Boston-Lancaster: D. Reidel.

Ross, Alison. 1998. *The Language of Humour*. London-New York: Routledge.

Schopenhauer, Arthur. 1966 [1818]. *The World as Will and Representation*. New York: Dover Publications. 2 vols.

Suls, Jerry. 1972. "A two-stage model for the appreciation of jokes and cartoons: An information processing analysis." In *The Psychology of Humor*, Jeffrey Goldstein and Paul McGhee (eds), 81–100. New York: Academic Press.

Suls, Jerry. 1983. "Cognitive processes in humor appreciation." In *Handbook of Humor Research,* Vol.1, Paul McGhee and Jeffrey Goldstein (eds), 39–57. New York: Springer Verlag.

Wilson, Christopher P. 1979. *Jokes: Form, Content, Use and Function*. London: Academic Press.