

## **Woody Allen:** The Schlemiel as Modern Philosopher

Ocean Avenue. One of Brooklyn's major thoroughfares. At one end of the avenue lies the Atlantic Ocean; at the other, the East River. Skyscrapers of Manhattan beckon across the water. About halfway along Ocean Avenue lies the neighborhood of Midwood, Woody Allen's boyhood home. While the ocean figures frequently in Allen's films, Manhattan looms far larger. But each end of the avenue exerted some force on the young Allen Stewart Konigsberg, who adopted the name Woody Allen in 1952. He turned his eyes up the avenue, away from the ocean and from his Brooklyn neighborhood, toward those high rises of Manhattan.

The Jewishness of Woody Allen, one of the best known and most distinctive American filmmakers, represents a key component of his public image, in both fact and in film. Because he stars in his movies, in addition to writing and directing them, Allen occupies a unique position in American popular culture and in the American Jewish imagination.

Allen's boyhood is typical of American Jews in the years before and after World War II. His neighborhood and his home, like those of so many of Brooklyn's residents in the 1930s, were Jewish. An extended family, including grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, surrounded Allen in his youth. The world of Yiddish and of religious Judaism functioned as an integral component of both family and neighborhood. Thus, the Old Country was very much in evidence, as was the New Old Country, where his parents had grown up. Both his parents were the offspring of immigrants – his father's family from Russia, his mother's from Vienna. His grandparents, one set secular and the other observant, spoke Yiddish. In 1935, shortly after Allen's birth on December 1 of that year, his parents moved to Ocean Avenue in Brooklyn.

Biographer Eric Lax reports that movie theaters became Allen's second home by the time he was seven. Unfortunately for him as he grew up, but fortunately for the rest of the world, school never became as safe or as comfortable an environment as the local movie house. He was, however, good at humor – which hurt him in school but provided his entry into show business. When Allen was sixteen he changed his name (although not legally until 1960) and began submitting jokes to newspaper columnists like Walter Winchell and Earl Wilson. From there it was a steady climb up the show-biz ladder until, in the middle 1960s, he established himself as a comic performer.

Allen staked out his reputation as a stand-up comic performing in nightclubs, on college campuses, and on television, and humor remains his first and fundamental link with Jewish tradition. The public persona he adopted was a classic Jewish comic figure: the schlemiel. He was a little man at odds with his environment, forever befuddled by fate. This represents one image through

which the great Yiddish writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Sholem Aleichem, in particular) responded to their precarious existence in Eastern Europe. Allen reproduced this image in his comedy, especially in his films, knowing that a whole tradition lent a touch of pathos, even tragedy, to his laughter.

By inhabiting the schlemiel persona himself (instead of looking from the outside), Allen uses another essential element of Jewish humor – self-deprecation. As far back as Sigmund Freud (in “Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious”), commentators have noted how much sharp self-criticism Jewish humor includes. Albert Memmi feels this tendency stems from the Jew’s self-rejection in light of his constant rejection by the non-Jew (i.e., Jewish self-hatred). “In making fun of himself . . . the Jew reveals his absurd preoccupations, the acrobatics to which he resorts to face them, his complicated and ludicrous adaptations to life in a too-harsh world, one which he can’t face unprotected. Jewish humor tells of the fundamental lack of adaptation of the Jew to non-Jewish society.” Sig Altman, in *The Comic Image of the Jew*, supports Memmi’s contention when he notes that Jewish self-deprecation and self-irony remain constant companions of a people continually forced to live under someone else’s rules. The adaptation of a self-mocking demeanor may also ward off possible aggression and make Jews seem as inoffensive as possible – a sensible tactic in a perpetually hostile world. Yet the adoption of the schlemiel figure also responds to the ordeal of civility; it even attacks it: “The schlemiel is used as a cultural reaction to the prevailing Anglo-Saxon model of restraint in action, thought and speech. . . . The American schlemiel declares his humanity by loving and suffering in defiance of the forces of depersonalization and the ethic of enlightened stoicism.”

Allen also reproduces another characteristically Jewish element in his humor, what the biblical scholar and literary critic Robert Alter calls “The Domestication of Myth.” This Jewish humor, also a product of the historical circumstances of Jews in Eastern Europe and in the first generations of Americanization, grounds itself in the realm of the mundane, “a world of homey practical realities.” In a similar vein, Mark Shechner sees Jewish humor as characterized by “a sudden thrusting downward from the exalted to the workaday, from the tragic to the trivial, from the Hebrew to the Yiddish, from the biblical cadence to the commercial slogan.” One of Allen’s own classic one-liners suffices to demonstrate this yoking of disparate realms and Allen’s own subscription to this element of Jewish humor: “My parents were very Old-World people. Their values were God and carpeting.”

In his comic mode, Woody Allen can be very funny. His use of language, including elements of Yiddish, his sense of dialogue and timing combine to create memorable moments that cause audiences to laugh out loud. His style is indeed very Jewish. It’s not so much that he looks at Jewish questions, but that he looks at questions in a Jewish way.

Allen is the archetypal American Jewish artist in one key respect: the absence of Judaism itself in most (though as we will see, significantly not all) of his work. One might, in fact, call Judaism the structuring absence of his mature films; his cinema is a constant working out of this missing link, a continual search for a substitute for Judaism. Jewish artists often manifest this absence through the search for social justice or the participation in popular life-style trends. For Allen, the cinema itself substitutes for Judaism. Although he began his film career by humorously parodying earlier films and forms, his career has gradually explored the place of movies within a complete, meaningful life. This life will be lived in the predominant settings associated with American Jewry – urban America, often within the world of show business – but meaning will be derived from a search for the transcendent found in the movies.

Allen's search for tradition is also a matter of coming to terms with influences, many of which derive from Jewishness although he borrows from other significant traditions as well. In addition to European art cinema, he draws upon the tradition of American silent comedy, especially the works of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and Harold Lloyd. In fact, Allen's cinema progresses precisely by the degree to which he gradually abandons the established physical traditions of comedy in favor of a metaphysical approach exemplified by Bergman and Fellini.

If the amount of scholarship and criticism devoted to an artist's work forms an accurate index of professional status, Woody Allen ranks in the forefront of contemporary American directors. He is written about more frequently than any other American director working today. Among contemporary directors, in fact, the amount of written text devoted to Allen rivals that of such world-renowned filmmakers as Akira Kurosawa, Jean-Luc Godard, Federico Fellini, and Ingmar Bergman. Books and articles devoted to Allen match the stack of works devoted to such acknowledged directors in the pantheon of American cinema as John Ford, Alfred Hitchcock, and Orson Welles. Allen has even achieved cult status through the publication of some strange books devoted to him and his work (for example, Dee Burton's *I Dream of Woody* and *The Movies of Woody Allen: A Short, Neurotic Quiz Book*, by David Wild).

But Woody Allen remains neither the exclusive province of the academy nor the obscure object of the cultish. He has achieved a rare celebrity; he is as recognizable as any tabloid movie star, yet as respected for his work as any serious writer or political pundit. Even if his box-office success fails to measure up to some of his younger colleagues in Hollywood or New York, his status in American cinema is unique. He is a filmmaker who has almost total control over his projects, as well as almost totally insular working methods. Since 1969 he has been one of the most prolific of filmmakers in the United States.

In recent times, Allen's personal life has been more prominent in the news than his films. For some people, it is impossible to view the old and new movies with the same openness to Allen's message, whether it is comic or serious. For

others, his life and his art are separate, and his recent past has no bearing on appreciating what is extraordinary about his films.

Writing in *The New Yorker*, critic Adam Gopnick says about Allen in a piece entitled “The Outsider”: “That Woody is no longer so easy to love may be to his advantage. He stands before us now as it sometimes seems he wanted to all along, a stranger to his time at last.”

## SESSION ONE



Film, 1977

Director: Woody Allen

Screenplay: Woody Allen and Marshall  
Brickman

Alvy Singer: Woody Allen

Annie Hall: Diane Keaton

Allison Porchnik: Carol Kane

Max: Tony Roberts

Tony Lacey: Paul Simon

Length: 94 minutes

**Alvy:** *I'm comparatively normal  
for a guy raised in Brooklyn.*

*Annie Hall* represents a remarkable achievement in the American cinema. One of the few outright comedies to win an Oscar as Best Picture, it provided Woody Allen with a commercial success of enviable proportions. The film also marks a break from his earlier works, which, though commercially successful and critically appreciated, predominantly parody other films and film styles. In turning away from sheer imitation, Allen produced something truly original. Yet the film's uniqueness lies precisely in the way it stands as a virtual compendium of the Jewish experience in America, how it acknowledges Jewish educational, professional, and social achievements in the United States, and the way it depicts a lingering sense of antisemitism and self-hatred.

In producing this distillation of the American Jewish experience, Allen turns to overtly autobiographical sources. Alvy Singer, the film's main character, provides not only information about the filmmaker himself but also an archetypal image of the modern American Jew. Early in their first meeting, Annie informs Alvy, "You're what Grammy Hall calls a real Jew." The urban setting, the commitment to social justice, the upper middle-class lifestyle, the acknowledgment of roots in the New Old Country of neighborhood Brooklyn, and the pervasive sense of humorous dread clearly stereotype the contemporary American Jew. These characteristics accurately reflect Allen's real-life background, achievements, and current concerns – not to mention the shared concerns of much of American Jewry.

### **The Life and Times of Alvy Singer**

Few aspects of the American Jewish experience remain unacknowledged in this comic portrait of the artist as

**Alvy:** *You know how you're always trying to get things to come out perfect in art because . . . it's real difficult in life.*

a young Jewish American man. If antisemitism seems remarkably absent in America's ethnic tolerance and heterogeneity, it nevertheless rears its ugly head from time to time, and Alvy Singer certainly perceives its presence – real or imagined. Talking to his best friend on the street, Alvy insists a television producer was baiting him by saying, “Jew eat? Not ‘Did you eat’ but Jew eat – get it?” Dining with the Halls at Easter, he remains similarly convinced that Grammy Hall envisions him as a Hasidic Jew, or at least he feels this way when trapped in her contemptuous stare.

The dynamics of self-hatred may be detected in the film's opening joke, when Alvy tells the audience one of his key problems is that he believes, like Groucho Marx, that he never wants to belong to a club that would have someone like him as a member. While his divorces from two Jewish women are not necessarily the byproducts of his self-hatred (although he wonders if they might be), the dynamic of his dilemma resides in Alvy's anguished cry: “The failure of the rest of America to support New York City economically is antisemitism. The rest of America thinks of us as Communist-Jewish-Homosexual-Pornographers. I live here and I think of us sometimes like that!” Certainly Alvy experiences the ordeal of civility when, in his mind's eye, he compares the quiet comportment of the Halls at Easter dinner to the highly argumentative holiday meals of his youth.

His reconstructed memories reveal Alvy's journey from Coney Island, where his lower-middle-class family resided under the roller coaster, to Manhattan. The trip across the Brooklyn Bridge symbolizes not simply a five-minute passage over the East River, but a major stepping-stone in the American Jewish experience. His residing with his first wife, Allison Porchnik, in semibohemian squalor with books strewn about and a mattress on the floor subtly indexes the Jewish involvement with developing alternative lifestyles in the late 1950s, like the Beat generation and the emerging New Left. Alvy, in this sequence, agonizes over the assassination of JFK. By the time we see him with Robin, wife number two, Alvy lives in a more fashionable uptown apartment, a gathering place for literary and academic eminences. When he starts to date Annie Hall, he has a large apartment of his own.

**Alvy:** *I've a very pessimistic view of life. You should know this about me if we're going to go out, you know. I feel that life is divided up into the horrible and the miserable . . . The horrible would be like, uh, I don't know, terminal cases, you know? And blind people, crippled. I don't know how they get through life. It's amazing to me . . . And the miserable is everyone else. That's all. So, when you go through life you should be grateful that you're miserable. You're very lucky – to be miserable.*

This change in physical geography and financial ability is reflected in the look and attitude of his two wives. From the modest and politically committed Allison, with her long hair worn free and frizzy, Alvy progresses to the more confident, assertive, and socially committed Robin, with hair style, makeup, jewelry, and dress in the very latest fashion. The inevitable next step in Alvy's life, and in the life-course of many American Jews, is to the non-Jew, the WASP princess, the shiksa.

The shiksa in Annie Hall is not necessarily an advance in Alvy's life, not necessarily preferable a priori to the Jewish woman or a reflection of simple self-hatred. He will, after all, break up with Annie Hall too. Indeed, the film begins with Alvy and Annie's relationship at an end, and reflects on why this occurred. Allen makes the Jewishness of Alvy's two ex-wives apparent, even if through rather subtle and particularized codes of recognition.

Thus, Alvy meets Allison at a time when he is climbing up the show business ladder; in their meeting scene he performs at a benefit to further a liberal political cause – the presidential candidacy of Adlai Stevenson. Allison, Alvy discovers, is a volunteer for Stevenson and a graduate student writing her thesis on “Political Commitment in Twentieth Century Literature.” To this news Alvy can only stammer out a litany of descriptions that seem remarkably accurate: “New York Jewish, Left-wing, liberal intellectual, Central Park West, Brandeis University, Socialist Summer camps, father with the Ben Shahn drawings...” Allison's response to this caricatured rendition of a certain image is also right on the mark: “I love being reduced to a cultural stereotype.”

Second wife Robin is another variation on the contemporary Jewish woman. Not the political but the intellectual Jew, Robin is equally stereotyped in humorous and revealing ways. At a party Alvy complains about having useless discussions with people who write for *Dysentery*. Robin corrects him by saying *Commentary*, but Alvy wickedly responds that *Commentary* and *Dissent* have merged. Such a joke operates on many levels. Its essential point in this context, however, is that both are actual Jewish intellectual journals, and their merger is as

far-fetched as the joke. Finally, Allen incorporates sexist humor. Robin, for example, can never make love with Alvy with any sort of noise in the background, a distinct disadvantage for anyone living in Manhattan.

But Alvy's pursuit of the shiksa ends with more than a simple breakup with Annie Hall. Alvy, in effect, tries to transform her into something, someone, more closely resembling his own Jewish cultural image. A central dynamic in Alvy's relationship to Annie reproduces a common motif in American Jewish literature and cinema: the education of the shiksa by the Jewish man. Typically, this takes the form of the Jewish man sharing his intellectual, cultural, and philosophical pursuits with the WASP woman who, in turn, offers the Jewish man an education in the senses. (Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* is archetypal on this score.) Thus, Annie responds to Alvy's offer to teach her about books and films by saying that maybe she can teach him to relax and have a little more fun. Such an offer strikes him positively, for despite his professional success and fame Alvy still cannot enjoy himself. In fact, Allen's original intention was to entitle this film "Anhedonia," a psychological term indicating the inability to feel happiness.

But from where does this anhedonia spring? Perhaps it stems from a series of issues intimately associated with being Jewish. For example, Alvy's obsession with death manifests itself humorously in everything from a concern with the dissolution of the universe (in a flashback scene he stops doing his homework when he learns that the earth will eventually break apart) to the continued purchase of books with "death" in the title. Surely this obsession with death reverts back to images of the Holocaust, images he constantly replays through numerous re-viewings of the monumental documentary about French resistance to and collaboration with the Nazis, *The Sorrow and the Pity*. He also uses a classic Jewish joke to explain his own ambivalence about life: Two Jewish ladies at a Catskill Mountain resort complain about the food. Says the first, "The food here is terrible." Says the second, "Yes and such small portions!" This very specific world view grounded in Jewish history and tradition informs Alvy's life and, therefore, his relationships.

For all the film's invocations of the Jewish economic and intellectual success in America, Alvy's historical sense of the precariousness of existence, and the way Allen rejects the schlemiel persona in favor of a more well-rounded character with much self-confidence and appeal, Judaism is almost absent from *Annie Hall*. When Judaism is invoked, it serves the purpose of humor, and not a sympathetic humor at that. In the split-screen dinner sequence between the Halls and the Singers, Annie's mother asks Alvy's parents how they plan to spend the holidays. The Singers reply that they will fast to atone for their sins. Thus Yom Kippur, the holiest day in Judaism, is clearly referenced. When Mrs. Hall expresses some confusion over this idea, the Singers reveal that they are equally befuddled. Alvy's fears about death certainly reflect an anxiety about the meaning of existence, a gap he tries to fill with romantic relationships. Yet it remains ironic that in a film where being Jewish is so significantly foregrounded, Judaism as religion is almost totally absent.

**Alvy:** . . . *Grammy Hall?*

**Annie:** *Yeab, my grammy.*

**Alvy:** *What did you do, grow up in a Norman Rockwell painting?*

**While you watch, consider:**

- ◆ How do Annie and Alvy view the world differently?
- ◆ How closely does the fictional Alvy resemble the real Woody Allen, as you imagine the writer/director to be?
- ◆ What makes this film funny?

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- ◆ Why is it significant that Allen himself plays a schlemiel-type character?
- ◆ Is Alvy's relationship with Annie based on an attraction of opposites?
- ◆ What role does memory – personal and collective – play in the film?
- ◆ What does the split-screen eating scene say about the Halls and the Singers?
- ◆ Throughout the film Allen juxtaposes Los Angeles to New York. Why is Alvy so scornful of Los Angeles? Why does Annie feel so comfortable there?
- ◆ Do you think that antisemitism is as much on the minds of contemporary American Jews as is the case with Alvy? How does fear of antisemitism – or the perceived need to stand up as Jews to face antisemitic statements – relate to Jewish identity?
- ◆ It is not his religious views – which he rarely speaks of – that makes Alvy so clearly Jewish. What is his sense of Jewishness based on?
- ◆ Alvy Singer seems obsessed with being Jewish yet there are no signs of his connection to the Jewish community. How does this paradox play out in Jewish life?
- ◆ Woody Allen's view of Jewish men and women is funny but based on stereotypes. While it is true that there's truth in stereotypes, they're not the whole truth. What's absent from his vision?

## SESSION TWO



## Crimes and Misdemeanors

Film, 1989  
 Director: Woody Allen  
 Screenplay: Woody Allen

Lester: Alan Alda  
 Clifford: Woody Allen  
 Hally: Mia Farrow  
 Dolores: Anjelica Huston  
 Judah: Martin Landau  
 Jack: Jerry Orbach  
 Rabbi Ben: Sam Waterston  
 Miriam: Claire Bloom

Length: 104 minutes

**Ben:** *It's a fundamental difference in the way we view the world. You see it as harsh and empty of values and pitiless, and I couldn't go on living if I didn't feel with all my heart a moral structure with real meaning and forgiveness and some kind of higher power. Otherwise there's no basis to know how to live.*

The absent Judaism in *Annie Hall* becomes a structuring principle in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*. In this film, Allen attempts to explore the meaning and value of Judaism in contemporary American life. The film poses a complex and deeply troubling set of responses.

*Crimes and Misdemeanors* is unique among Allen's works as a serious film with a leading Jewish character. Allen wrote and directed serious films before this one (like *Interiors* and *Another Woman*), but the focus was always on female, non-Jewish characters. His films with Jews were comedies. Allen clearly believed that any film starring himself had to be a comedy, so that *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, a serious film with a Jewish protagonist, needed someone else to play the lead. It fell, therefore, to Martin Landau to inhabit an archetypically Jewish character and to lend it serious, even tragic, overtones.

### Of Crimes, Lesser Crimes, and Faith

Clearly deriving his title from Dostoevsky's inherently Christian *Crime and Punishment*, Allen set *Crimes and Misdemeanors* in a typically Jewish world: science and medicine (and country clubs). Yet, like Dostoevsky's tormented hero, the well-to-do ophthalmologist-protagonist of Allen's film is obsessed by a powerful loss of faith, gripped by a compelling existential angst, and possessed by a profound sense of guilt. A murderer like Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov, Dr. Judah Rosenthal neither seeks nor finds any Christian redemption, but he is "saved" in a far different manner. Moreover, he actively recalls his Jewish upbringing and Judaic background as he engages in spiritual and intellectual dialogues with a sympathetic and deeply faithful rabbi. That Judah does not "return" to Judaism or, alternately, is not punished for his crime says

**Judah:** *What do you mean? People carry awful deeds around with them. What do you expect him to do, turn himself in? I mean, this is reality. In reality, we rationalize. We deny or we couldn't go on living.*

something about Woody Allen's continuing doubts about the existence of God and the meaning of life, as well as his ambivalence about the belief of his ancestors.

Judah Rosenthal, like Alvy Singer, struggles to make sense of his life through his past. Thus, at a moment of intense guilt after he has arranged for his mistress's murder, Judah returns to the New Old Country of neighborhood Queens, back to his boyhood home. Here he remembers a typical family gathering, a Passover seder. Significantly, the scene, at least in Judah's memory, revolves around his father and his aunt arguing with each other but directing their arguments to him. Their debate further represents a symbolic battle for Judah's soul between faith and cynicism. Judah's father, Sol, quietly and insistently proclaims his faith in God against all secular doubters, while his aunt May invokes the searing memory of the Holocaust as proof of God's absence. To Sol's assertion that God sees everything and will punish the wicked, Aunt May incredulously cries, "Oh, who, like Hitler? Six million Jews burned to death and he got away with it!"

Sol will not hear of doubts, but Judah, his son the scientist, the sophisticated rationalist, is plagued by them. And Judah remains, until the end, torn about his own beliefs. For him, the murder of Dolores, the most heinous crime he can commit, must ultimately be taken as a test of God's presence, just as on a much larger scale the Holocaust created a monumental rift in Judaic theology. That Judah is a murderer, whereas in the Holocaust Jews were murdered, is perhaps Allen's disguised response to the deterioration of Jewish ethical standards. When he goes unpunished, Judah takes grim satisfaction in proving his father, as well as previous generations of Jewish thinkers, wrong.

Yet Judah's stance does not go entirely unchallenged. Ben, a rabbi, goes blind despite Judah's best efforts to prevent it. He reminds Judah of Sol. Ben's faith in God permits him to maintain a firm belief in moral structure, in a life with real meaning and significance. These are beliefs about which Woody Allen is skeptical, as he allows Judah to go not only unpunished but untormented – Allen's proof of the meaninglessness of existence – and uses this to suggest the absence of moral structure. When the blind

**Sharon:** *My father takes after his Aunt May. She rejected the Bible because it had an unbelievable central character.*

rabbi dances with his daughter at her wedding, his sadly triumphant promenade becomes both the height of rational folly and the sublime faith in God's goodness.

We have dealt thus far with only half of this film, those events implied by the "crimes" of the title. The "misdemeanors" are equally significant. Although Judaism does not function so clearly in this portion of the picture, it is still Jewish in sensibility. Both Cliff, a documentary filmmaker and something of a schlemiel, and Lester, a successful television producer, represent Jewish involvement in the entertainment industry. Moreover, Cliff's documentaries represent the Jewish concern for social justice. Even more to the point, his latest project, a documentary on philosopher Louis Levy, foregrounds the Holocaust and makes explicit the search for values and meaning via Levy's monologues.

Cliff desires a relationship with Hally, a shiksa, while he is in the process of breaking up with his Jewish wife. Even with Hally, an established and extremely intelligent professional, we see something of the education of the shiksa by the Jewish man. The film is a complex portrait of the urban milieu, the confused and confusing state of middle-class existence, Cliff's own deteriorating marriage, his sister's disastrous date through the classified ads, Judah's adultery, Lester's womanizing. It is a contemporary portrait of a secular Jewish community enmeshed in a state of ambivalence and moral ambiguity.

Perhaps this ambivalence and ambiguity stem from a lack of faith. Certainly the question of faith, as we have seen, is strongly sutured into the film. On the other hand, Allen wonders if we are all quite literally blind to the world around us. Perhaps no American film of recent memory is so carefully and clearly symbolic as *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, with its motif of sight and sightlessness. Central to this motif is Judah's own career as an ophthalmologist. In addition, more than once Judah recalls his father at prayer in the synagogue and his father's claim that "the eyes of God are on us always." Perhaps, he tells the gathered crowd in the film's first scene, that is why he became an eye doctor. The belief that God sees all initially paralyzes him from contemplating Dolores's murder and then plagues him after the deed is done. Judah goes to her

**Professor Levy:** *We are all faced throughout our lives with agonizing decisions, moral choices. . . . We are, in fact, the sum total of our choices. . . . Human happiness does not seem to have been included in the design of creation. It is only we, with our capacity to love, who give meaning to the indifferent universe.*

apartment, looks into Dolores's dead, sightless eyes, and remembers her belief that the eyes are the windows of the soul.

The question of whether God sees is further symbolized by Ben, the rabbi who finally loses his sight. Yet Judah, the eye doctor who launched his career under the impetus of a desire to explore whether or not God sees, cannot see any meaning in his own life. Similarly Cliff, the documentary filmmaker whose job is to see the truth in people and in society, can see no meaning to his life after Hally marries Lester, nor can he understand or see what she values in him.

Thus Allen brings Judah and Cliff together in the film's final scene to commiserate with each other over their inability to see any purpose in life. But it is the rabbi, retaining his faith while losing his sight, whose dancing image dominates the film's final frames.

**While you watch, consider:**

- ◆ How the motif of sight (seeing and blindness) relates to the film's major ideas.
- ◆ How do you feel about Judah as the film progresses? Are you sympathetic toward him?
- ◆ What links the film's "crimes" and "misdemeanors"?
- ◆ What role does Louis Levy, the subject of Cliff's documentary, play in the film?

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- ◆ How does Allen, in a sense, return to his schlemiel persona in this film?
- ◆ How does Cliff relate to women in this film? Is it similar or different than Alvy in *Annie Hall*?
- ◆ Several sibling relationships are depicted in the film. Is there something particularly Jewish about their interactions?
- ◆ How would you characterize Cliff, Judah, Lester, and Ben? What are their values, their world views? Can they be seen as four different kinds of individuals? Four different kinds of Jews?
- ◆ Judah and Ben are on opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of questions of God and faith. Can there be a middle ground?
- ◆ Do the ideas about religion and philosophy that are expressed reflect your attitudes or make you question your own beliefs?
- ◆ Is there more than one “crime” in this film?
- ◆ How does Woody Allen use comedy to attack some very serious issues in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*? What are the limits of comedy?
- ◆ Does the film show American Jewish life in a positive light in any way? What does Woody Allen love and hate most about middle-class, middle-aged Jews?

## SUGGESTIONS FOR READING AND VIEWING

### Books

- ◆ Brode, Douglas. *Woody Allen: His Films and Career*. Rev. ed. Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1991. A solid career overview with well-observed film-by-film analyses.
- ◆ Lax, Eric. *Woody Allen: A Biography*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991. Bestselling biography provides little criticism or critique but a wealth of fascinating detail for the casual and the confirmed fan.
- ◆ Yacowar, Maurice. *Loser Take All*. Rev. ed. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1991. Most intelligent and perceptive, as well as accessible, appreciation of Allen from an academic critic.

### Films

- ◆ *Take the Money and Run* (1969). First film as writer-director, done in a mock documentary style, has much to offer in terms of the creation of the schlemiel image on film and the importance of thinly disguised autobiography in the creation of the Jewish persona.
- ◆ *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex\* (\*But were afraid to ask . . .)* (1972). Parodic adaptation of bestselling book shows an increasing awareness of film technique along with an increased willingness to utilize overtly Jewish characters, albeit for humor.
- ◆ *Manhattan* (1979). Lush New York cityscapes and Gershwin tunes to match make this one of the most critically acclaimed of Allen's "serious" comedies of contemporary urban life.
- ◆ *Stardust Memories* (1980). As critically pilloried as *Manhattan* was acclaimed, the film is nevertheless important for Allen to work through his ambivalence about his own identity and celebrity.
- ◆ *Zelig* (1983). Intellectually and technically dazzling mock documentary of an American Jew of the 1920s so insecure that he constantly and literally transformed himself to fit in, "to assimilate like mad."
- ◆ *Broadway Danny Rose* (1984). Affectionate tribute to the lovable losers on the fringes of show business with Allen as a small-time Jewish theatrical agent.

- ◆ *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986). Complex, extremely amusing and perceptive look at the lives and loves of three sisters and their equally neurotic mates.
- ◆ *Radio Days* (1987). Ultimately affectionate tribute to lower-middle-class Jewish life in neighborhood New York just before and during WW II.
- ◆ “Oedipus Wrecks” (part of *New York Stories*) (1989). The ultimate Jewish mother appears in the sky above Manhattan.