

## SESSION FOUR



From New York to L.A., via  
Wisconsin: *Annie Hall*

Feature film, 1977

Director: Woody Allen

Screenplay: Woody Allen and  
Marshall Brickman

Alvy Singer: Woody Allen

Annie Hall: Diane Keaton

Alison Porchnik: Carol Kane

Max: Tony Roberts

Tony Lacey: Paul Simon

Mom Hall: Colleen Dewhurst

Duane Hall: Christopher Walken

Length: 99 minutes

To many Americans, Woody Allen is Jewish humor. Of late, he is beloved and reviled, but he continues to make us laugh – often at ourselves. More than the other comics in this series, he tackles head-on the ironies and idiosyncrasies of being a Jew in twentieth-century America.

Alvy Singer, the autobiographical protagonist of *Annie Hall*, established the persona of an amusingly bright, self-conscious, anxiety-ridden, middle-aged New York Jewish male – from that point on identifiable as the “Woody Allen” type. The film presents Alvy’s involvement with Annie Hall, a Midwestern WASP who comes to New York to become a singer. A unique portrait of opposites attracting, the film examines how two people from very different backgrounds attempt – and ultimately fail – to understand and live with each other. It focuses closely on the Jewish identity of its central character and on that character’s interaction with his past, with Jewish history, and with the non-Jewish world around him.

The Jewishness of Woody Allen represents a key component of his public image, in both fact and 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. An “unJewish Allen,” Professor Gerald Mast writes, “is as unthinkable as Chaplin without his cane, Groucho without his moustache, or Fields without his nose.”

Woody Allen was born Allan Stewart Konigsberg in 1935. His parents, both the children of immigrants, born on the Lower East Side in the first decade of the century, grew up speaking Yiddish as well as English. The writer/actor/director was raised in the Midwood section of Brooklyn, which like much of the borough in the 1930s,

**Alvy:** *Well, I can't live – We can't have this discussion all the time. The country makes me nervous. There's . . . you get crickets and it's quiet. . . . There's no place to walk after dinner, and . . . there's the screens with the dead moths behind them, and . . . you got the Manson family possible. . . .*

was largely Jewish.

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-business ladder until, in the middle 1960s, he established himself as a comedian.

Allen staked out his reputation as a stand-up comic performing in nightclubs, 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, the little man beset by misfortune. This represents one image through which the great Yiddish writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth century (Sholem Aleichem, in particular) responded to their precarious existence in Eastern Europe. Allen reproduced this image in his comedy, in keeping with a tradition that lent a touch of pathos, even tragedy, to his laughter.

Early in his career Woody Allen worked as a writer for comedians and television personalities, including Sid Caesar, Jack Paar and Johnny Carson, and for the Broadway stage (*Don't Drink the Water*) and films, beginning with *What's New Pussycat?* (1965). His early films included spoofs of genres, such as Japanese sci-fi/horror films (*What's Up, Tiger Lily?* 1966), James Bond films (*Casino Royale*, 1967), and documentaries (*Take the Money and Run*, 1969). Before making *Annie Hall*, Allen wrote, directed, and performed in *Take the Money and Run* (1969), *Bananas* (1971), *Play it Again, Sam* (1972), *Everything You've Always Wanted To Know About Sex* (1972), *Sleeper* (1973), and *Love and Death* (1975). He has continued to make other sophisticated, romantic movies about relationships, including *Manhattan* (1979), *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986), *Alice* (1990), and *A Midsummer*

*Night's Sex Comedy* (1982); serious studies of relationships, e.g., *Interiors* (1978) and *September* (1987), and *Husbands and Wives* (1992); as well as films that pay homage to the popular culture and entertainment of bygone eras, e.g., *Purple Rose of Cairo* (1986), *Radio Days* (1987), *Broadway Danny Rose* (1984). *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989) was a controversial look at Jewish morality, and *Shadows and Fog* (1991) Allen's exploration of antisemitism and the Holocaust. In his recent film *Bullets over Broadway*, Allen doesn't appear; he's now much older than the film's hero.

*Annie Hall* is a pivotal film in Woody Allen's career, marking his transformation from a comedian who makes funny movies to a serious filmmaker with a unique command of the medium. A commercial and critical success, the film received four Academy Awards: best picture, screenplay, actress, and director. Allen didn't attend the awards ceremonies.

### **“Sifting the Pieces”**

Woody Allen, as Alvy Singer, a stand-up comic, opens *Annie Hall* by telling two jokes. The first is about two elderly women at a Catskills resort. One says, “Boy, the food at this place is really terrible,” to which the other replies, “Yeah, I know. And such small portions.” “Well,” adds Alvy, “that's essentially how I feel about life.” In the second joke he repeats the famous line attributed to Groucho Marx, “I would never want to belong to any club that would have someone like me for a member.” And that, he says, “is the key point about my relationships with women.”

At the outset, it's clear that his relationship with Annie Hall has failed, as did those with his two wives – both of them Jewish, i.e., members of the club. Speaking directly to the audience, as he speaks to strangers on the street throughout the film, Alvy Singer explains, “Annie and I just broke up, and I still can't get my mind around that, you know. I keep sifting the pieces of the relationship through my mind.”

“Sifting the pieces” is a cue to the form and content of this episodic film. Scenes shift back and forth in time, embracing not only the period of Alvy and Annie's involvement, but reaching back to their childhood years as

**Alvy:** *I was thrown out of N.Y.U. my freshman year for cheating on my metaphysics final. You know, I looked within the soul of the boy sitting next to me.*

well. This structure is used to point up other key contrasts in the film: between male and female, New York (where Alvy and Annie meet) and Los Angeles (where they break up), Jewish and WASP culture, city and country.

Allen plays with the medium of film in a variety of ways. Sometimes the present meets the past – as in the scene where Alvy, Annie, and Alvy’s friend Max (played by Tony Roberts) visit the Coney Island neighborhood where Alvy grew up and “eavesdrop” on a Singer family gathering during 1945, or when Annie and Alvy “visit” her past romantic involvements. Allen superimposes subtitles on the scene of Alvy and Annie’s first conversation, to present the characters’ unspoken thoughts juxtaposed – comically as well as insightfully – with their small talk. Characters occasionally turn and address the camera; for example, when Alvy and Annie argue over whether she said “change my life” or “change my wife,” Alvy asks viewers to corroborate his version.

Some devices refer self-consciously to the film medium, e.g., the inclusion of footage from another film (*The Sorrow and the Pity*), the production scenes of Max’s television show, the animated cartoon of Alvy with the wicked queen in *Snow White*, and the rehearsal of Alvy’s first play. After Alvy suddenly pulls media historian and critic Marshall McLuhan from behind a billboard in the lobby of a movie theater to come to his defense against a pompous professor, Alvy turns to the audience and says, “Boy, if life were only like this!”

### **A Funny Thing About Relationships**

This Woody Allen masterpiece captures with one deft touch after another the quixotic nature of sexual attraction between men and women of differing ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds. Alvy Singer recalls that his first wife, Alison Porchnick, was ideal for him in every way; she was “beautiful, willing, and intelligent.” However, Carol Kane’s Alison is clearly Jewish. Upon first meeting her, Allen’s Alvy rolls his eyes at her name and declares that she clearly is the product of a New York Jewish environment, socialist summer camps, Brandeis University. “I love being reduced to a cultural stereotype,” Alison shoots back. Their marriage fails, Alvy muses, because of the phenomenon

described in the Groucho Marx joke. His second wife, Robin, is more confident and fashionable, but affected, status-conscious, and distant. At a party, he complains that he's tired of talking to people who write for *Dysentary*, and then adds that he heard that *Commentary* and *Dissent* have merged. This is an inside/Jewish joke for those who know the magazines have opposing points of view. For others, it's an amusing pun.

In contrast to Alison and Robin, Annie Hall appears in his life like a breath of fresh air – a gentile female in the tradition of the “dizzy dames” of the romantic Hollywood comedies. Semi-articulate, charming, willowy, with long, straight fair hair, she dissolves in giggles while chasing after giant unkosher lobsters that scuttle across the floor. She has a typical American family in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, complete with an antisemitic “Grammy Hall.” Early in their first meeting, Annie tells Alvy, “You’re what Grammy Hall calls a real Jew.”

Alvy, as his opening jokes suggest, is not satisfied with anything, including Annie. He tries to transform her into something, someone, more closely resembling his own Jewish cultural image – sending her to adult education classes, where she makes him jealous by becoming friendly with her professor, and psychotherapy, where she explores her own past and personality, separate and different from his. He instructs her on his obsession with death and drags her to films about the Holocaust. Annie in return says that maybe she can teach him to relax and have a little more fun. Despite (or because of) his efforts, she accuses him repeatedly of thinking “I’m not smart enough for you,” but ultimately she outgrows him. In his post-Annie days, the measure of Alvy’s loss can be seen in the form of another woman; she stands in the kitchen of his apartment, staring humorlessly at lobsters that are only lobsters.

### **The Woody Allen School of (Jewish) Humor**

Woody Allen’s comic style is in the tradition of the others studied in this course. A great fan of the Marx Brothers, he incorporates some of their zaniness in his comedy, and he worked on *Your Show of Shows* with Sid Caesar and Mel Brooks. Gene Wilder, who acted under both Allen and Brooks, compares the two: “It’s as if Woody lights ten

**Mrs. Hall:** *How do you plan to spend the holidays, Mrs. Singer?*

**Mrs. Singer:** *We fast.*

**Mrs. Hall:** *Fast?*

**Mrs. Singer:** *No food. To atone for our sins.*

**Mrs. Hall:** *What sins? I don't understand.*

**Mrs. Singer:** *To tell you the truth, neither do we.*

thousand safety matches to illuminate a city. Each one of them is a little epiphany, topical, ethnic, or political. What Mel wants is to set off atom bombs of laughter.” Allen’s humor is self-conscious; he is often the subject, chronicling his inner life with irony and wisecracks – and slapstick too. His is an intelligent humor. “Woody Allen is the clown who thinks about the way we think,” Mast writes. He turns his comic muse to philosophy, sex, God, art, therapy, relationships, death, urban life, and his neuroses – and other ailments. And, Judaism, or more precisely, the Jewish culture he grew up with, is an important theme.

In a monologue, he described his parents’ values as “God and carpeting.” For many Jews of his generation, that line will resonate, conjuring up a post-immigrant middle-class world. (For non-Jews, the line is simply funny, as he juxtaposes the spiritual with the mundane.) Mast points out that for Allen, being Jewish was not simply an hereditary accident. His humor seems to be infused with Jewish sensibility – but his Jewishness is complex.

In *Annie Hall*, Alvy Singer’s identification as a Jew, and the pervasive sense of dread this has imparted to him, are central to the film’s humor. Whether antisemitism is prevalent in America or not, Alvy certainly perceives its presence. Walking down the street in an early scene, talking to his best friend Rob, Alvy insists that a television producer was baiting him by saying, “Jew eat? Not ‘Did you eat’ but Jew eat – get it?” In another scene he proclaims, “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!”

Nevertheless, Alvy flies out to Wisconsin to subject himself to just these prejudices, and imagines that Grammy Hall sees him as a bearded Hasid during a chilly Easter dinner at the Hall household. “Dynamite ham,” he compliments, and catches a withering look from Grammy, who clearly doubts his expertise, even his right to comment, on the quality of this food. He compares, in his mind’s eye, the quiet comportment of the Halls to the untidy, loud, argumentative holiday meals of his youth. In a brilliant split-screen crossover, the two families have a conversation.

Like Alvy Singer, Allen, when he made this film, was twice divorced. Though he publicly tries to deny similarities between his life and his art, the character of Alvy's ambivalence about Judaism seem to mirror Allen's. The attitude is irreverent, sometimes hostile, and perhaps has much to do with the absence of meaningful Jewish culture in his life.

Though Woody Allen himself and some observers, including biographer Eric Lax, have denied the importance of Jewishness to his work, most critics – and many viewers – would disagree. The schlemiel, the little man at odds with his environment, besieged by fate, self-deprecating, with a highly refined sense of the absurd, is the comic character most often associated with Woody Allen, and it is strongly in the tradition of Jewish humor. "*Annie Hall*," writes Graham McCann,

radically accentuated the Jewish aspect of Allen's movie persona; it is not made into something comic or curious, but rather it adds depth to the character, drawing attention to another distinctive feature. Alvy Singer (and his later incarnations) is an outsider, critically examining the American Dream from somewhere off-centre.

The issues of antisemitism and the Holocaust figure prominently in the identity of Alvy Singer (as of many Jews in America today). Jewish religion, to the extent that it figures at all – in the Hasidic Alvy pictured in Grammy Hall's mind and in his parents' ignorance of why they're fasting – is not placed in a positive light.

In his pursuit of the shiksa Alvy is following a common motif in American Jewish film and literature, memorably articulated by Philip Roth in Portnoy's Complaint:

O America! America! it may have been gold in the streets to my grandparents, it may have been a chicken in every pot to my father and mother, but to me, a child whose earliest movie memories are of Ann Rutherford and Alice Faye, America is a shikse nestling under your arm whispering love love love love love!

"Despite Allen's protestations that he is not an alienated Jew seeking assimilation through the love of a shikse," McCann observes, "his characters often exhibit just such a desire: think of Alvy Singer, acutely sensitive to anti-semitism and the 'classic Jew haters' in Annie's family."

Like Philip Roth, Allen has been criticized within the

**Alvy:** *So this is how it ends – at a health food store on Sunset Boulevard.*

Jewish community for his negative depictions of Jewish life. “No one more than Allen,” writes Samuel H. Dresner in *Midstream*, for example, “has enabled so many to view the Jew, especially the religious Jew, in so corrupt a manner.” Writing in the *Jewish Spectator*, Mark E. Bleiweiss states, “At any early age, Allen concluded that his sheltered, distorted, and inadequate Jewish upbringing characterizes all of Judaism.” Indeed, his view of Judaism can appear to be quite narrow, focusing on clichés and negative stereotypes; his point of view is still that of the boy who hates Hebrew School. He seems to have limited experience with modern Jews who take their Judaism seriously.

Some viewers may be offended by Allen’s portrayal of Jews, finding his choices inappropriate, especially in a work aimed at a general (non-Jewish) audience. Some may laugh at the images, but be uncomfortable with them. Woody Allen himself has, of course, become the focus of extensive publicity about his private life.

More than the other comics, Woody Allen is a New York Jewish comic. His humor, of course, can be appreciated by Midwesterners and Southerners and people who’ve never seen Broadway and Central Park, but those who know New York, especially Jewish New York, laugh with special recognition at his films. It’s a humor with a serious undercurrent; his films have a lot to say about the condition of Jews in contemporary America.

**While you watch, consider:**

- ◆ What feelings do you have toward Alvy Singer?
- ◆ How does Woody Allen amuse the audience? Why is he so effective?
- ◆ Do you see traces of Groucho Marx in Woody Allen?
- ◆ How is the Jewishness of Alvy, his family, and some of his friends used to create humor in distinctive ways?

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- ◆ *Annie Hall* begins with Alvy telling two jokes:
 

“Two elderly women are at a Catskill Mountain resort. One of them says, ‘Boy, the food at this place is really terrible.’ And the other one says, ‘Yeah, I know. And such small portions.’”

“I would never want to belong to any club that would have someone like me for a member.”

How do these jokes establish the point of view of the film? What insights do they provide into the character and world view of Alvy Singer?
- ◆ Are the elements of humor in *Annie Hall* similar or different from those in other films we have seen?
- ◆ Sometimes a comic moment generates real insight into a particular situation, as when the two families are presented. How are comedy and insight linked in the film?
- ◆ Allen tackles the difficult, complex subject of intermarriage with humor. Does he add to your understanding of the issue? How do you feel about his making light of such a pressing concern for the Jewish community?
- ◆ Several critics have contrasted Woody Allen and Mel Brooks as Jewish comic filmmakers who pursue sharply different, if not opposite, agendas. Critic Kenneth Tynan, for example, described Brooks as “extrovert,” Allen as “introvert.” How do you think these two artists’ works compare? What do you make of their common early experiences as writers for Sid Caesar’s comedy-variety programs in the 1950’s?
- ◆ Woody Allen seems uninterested and uncomfortable with Judaism, yet his comic art seems so “Jewish.” How do you explain this paradox?

- ◆ In making jokes about antisemitism, does Woody Allen help to dispel it – or advance it?
- ◆ Is it possible to disconnect the artist from his work? Is it possible for people who are angry at Allen because of his personal life to appreciate his films?
- ◆ As Jewish life in America evolves further, do you think an artist like Allen – who has a narrow view of Jewish life – will be able to keep us laughing? In another generation, will his jokes seem outdated?

**FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES**

1. View some of Woody Allen's other films, most of which are available on videocassette. Compare those he made before *Annie Hall* with those made after. To what extent is *Annie Hall* a watershed in his career, and to what extent is it indebted to his earlier works? How has Allen's aesthetic changed over the course of his subsequent films?
2. Consider the notion of Woody Allen's embodying a type, or persona, in his various film roles. To what extent are his performances in the films he has written and directed separate characters, and to what extent do they conform to a comic persona (compared, for example, to the Marx Brothers in their various film roles)?
3. One of Allen's favorite film comedians is Bob Hope. Screen one or more of Hope's comic movies. Which elements in his films do you think might have inspired Allen's work?

**FOR FURTHER READING**

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