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Revisiting *Annie Hall*: Exploring Jewish Identity on the Silver Screen

Henry Hoffman

In 1978, Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* won "Best Picture" at the 50th Academy Awards.

Though promoted as a romantic comedy, the film marked a departure from the farcical content of Allen's earlier work and catapulted him into stardom as a renowned Hollywood filmmaker. Set in Upper Manhattan, the film tracks the trajectory and eventual implosion of a relationship between Alvy Singer, played by Woody Allen himself, and Annie Hall, a role that earned Diane Keaton the Academy Award for "Best Actress." *Annie Hall* had an immediate and profound impact on American culture, earning widespread praise from critics and moviegoers alike, and even sparking a late 1970s fashion movement, dubbed the "Annie Hall Look," which saw women dressing in male dress shirts, ties, and suit vests much like those worn by Annie in the film.¹

Since its release, *Annie Hall's* storied legacy has only grown. The American Film Institute ranked it as the fourth greatest comedy and the thirty-first greatest film of all time,² and in 1992, it was selected by the Library of Congress for preservation in its National Film Registry³ for its cultural, historical, and aesthetic contributions to American film. Any film this impactful demands closer scrutiny.

Notable about *Annie Hall* is its deliberate engagement with Jewish identity. Alvy Singer, the movie's protagonist, practically defines himself by the Jewish culture in which he was raised. Although there is a long history of Jewish presence in comedy, and despite the fact that Woody Allen had directed six films prior to the release of *Annie Hall*, it was still nearly unheard of for such a

widely viewed and critically acclaimed film to employ an unquestionably Jewish character as its lead. Allen's intent to embrace Jewishness in the character of Alvy is made especially clear when one looks at the various titles proposed for the film. Though Allen originally wished to name it *Anhedonia*, the clinical term for the inability to feel pleasure, this title was rejected on the grounds that very few people would understand what the term meant.⁴ Among the alternate titles suggested by co-writer Marshall Brickman were *It Had to be Jew*, and *Me and My Goy*,⁵ both of which embrace Judaism directly. While ultimately, "Annie Hall" was the title best regarded by test audiences, Brickman's title proposals highlight the important and undeniable Jewishness of *Annie Hall*.

This research paper will explore the reception history of *Annie Hall*, focusing particularly on the role it played in shaping and presenting American Jewish identity. More specifically, this paper will attempt to understand how Allen's presentation of Jewish identity was received by both Jews and non-Jews upon its release, and how the film contributes to our greater understanding of the American Jewish experience. I will argue that Allen's development of Jewish identity, particularly in the character of Alvy Singer, is characterized by both contrast and connection. I will explain how Judaism in *Annie Hall* is linked culturally to a nagging anxiety, the city of New York, and a pervasive sense of outsidership. I will also discuss how Allen utilizes the character of Annie, her traditional midwestern family, and the city of Los Angeles as points of contrast to comment on Jewish-gentile compatibility and the isolated role of the Jew in American society. Finally, it is critical to note that, in more recent years, Woody Allen has been credibly accused of sexually abusing his adoptive daughter Dylan Farrow. Although this reception history seeks to examine the conversations and debates surrounding *Annie Hall* contemporary with its release, this serious scandal must necessarily

factor into the way we view Allen as an auteur and a public figure, and the legacy of his cinematic output.

My research primarily draws on critical movie reviews and Opinion Editorial pieces published in the late 1970s and the early 1980s: I make use of a number of historically Jewish newspapers, including the *Boston Advocate*, the *Philadelphia Exponent*, the *B'nai B'rith Messenger*, and the *Southern Israelite*, while also utilizing databases such as the Pittsburgh Jewish Newspaper Project and Tel Aviv University's Historical Jewish Press Database. Furthermore, I draw on content from a number of secular sources, including the *Chicago Sun-Times* and *The Washington Post*, as well as several New York-based publications such as *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, and *The Village Voice*, while also offering my personal interpretations of the film where necessary. All quotes from the film come directly from Allen's original screenplay. Finally, I incorporate academic literature written on *Annie Hall*, working with film resource databases such as Reader's Guide Retrospect, and drawing from academic publications on Jewish identity in film to better understand Allen's long-term impact. Ultimately, by exploring the important themes and occasional criticisms cited by critics, I hope to offer a comprehensive picture of how Jewish identity is presented in this iconic film.

Annie Hall enjoyed mostly positive reviews from Jewish and non-Jewish critics alike. However, Jewish critics frequently raised concerns about Allen's direct portrayal of Judaism within the film. Since *Annie Hall* marked a milestone in Jewish representation in film, many critics in Jewish publications felt betrayed by Allen's presentation of his Jewish protagonist. In developing the character of Alvy as a neurotic, pessimistic nebbish, many argued that Woody Allen was guilty of solidifying Jewish cultural stereotypes and of painting Jews in a generally negative light. Woody

Allen demonstrated this habit in his other films and his standup career, where he exploited his whiny, paranoid, intellectual persona for laughs. However, given the wide-reaching success of *Annie Hall*, the implications of such stereotyping become more troublesome. Jack Geldbart, writing for *The Southern Israelite*, voiced his concern on this very topic, arguing that Woody Allen's portrayal of Alvy in *Annie Hall*, while continuing a longstanding tradition of Jewish self-deprecation, is "even more harmful to the Jewish image since [it] is so artfully cloaked in humor."⁶ There are many instances in the film where Allen toys with Alvy's paranoid fixation on antisemitism,⁷ such as when Alvy repeatedly proposes to see *The Sorrow and the Pity*, a four-and-half-hour Holocaust documentary, on his dates with Annie, and when Alvy ridiculously insists to his friend Rob that an NBC executive once asked him "Jew eat?" rather than "did you eat?"⁸ Allen clearly means this in jest, and it is certainly amusing to think of Alvy as so cripplingly neurotic that he projects antisemitism onto even the most harmless of interactions. Nevertheless, the humor in the joke speaks directly to Geldbart's criticism; by presenting Alvy as a funny caricature, it is much easier to palate the characteristics of his negative stereotyping without properly engaging with them.⁹

Gelbart was not alone in this line of criticism; in fact, most of the Jewish newspapers and periodicals that reviewed *Annie Hall* took issue with Allen's Jewish characters in one way or another. Herbert Luft, in a column for the *B'Nai B'rith Messenger*, argued that, while the movie was entertaining, "we have one strong objection to the film; it plays with the image of the Jew, kids about nazis and anti-semites, even to the point of inserting excerpts from Marcel Ophuls' tragic documentary [*The Sorrow and the Pity*]"¹⁰. Luft proceeded to argue that an otherwise excellent film is tarnished by Allen's choice to casually make light of antisemitism and the Holocaust, which he argues is both irresponsible and harmful to the broader Jewish community. Others still struggled to

identify with the character of Alvy, claiming that his persona was more of a caricature than anything of substance, and that his Jewish background was employed by Allen *solely* as a gag for comedic effect.¹¹ Allen himself is open about the fact that Alvy's character is essentially a caricature. Though many critics interpreted Alvy as an autobiographical figure¹² - after all, both Alvy and Allen grew up poor in New York, graduated from NYU, and went on to be famous comedians - Allen has been quick to deny this. In an interview with *Rolling Stone Magazine*, he explained that, "The stuff that people insist is autobiographical is almost invariably not" and that characters such as Alvy are, "so exaggerated that it's virtually meaningless."¹³ Allen is open about the fact that his characters, especially Alvy, are in many ways absurd caricatures. However, such archetypes can have staying power. Ultimately, the marks of Alvy's onscreen persona as a neurotic, discontent, New York Jew can be seen as the inspiration behind such iconic roles as George Costanza of *Seinfeld* and Larry David's character in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*.¹⁴ Clearly, Jewish critics were onto something when they noted that a funny yet negative trope about Jews might persist once it had entered the mainstream. Although *Annie Hall* enjoyed otherwise glowing praise from the Jewish community, the wide-reaching impact of Alvy Singer and his stereotypically Jewish persona forever complicated the film's reception.

It is inaccurate, however, to say that Jewish identity *in general* is portrayed only through excess and stereotyping in the film; rather, some of the greatest merits of *Annie Hall* involve its commentary on the American Jewish experience. Tom Allen of *The Village Voice* puts it best when he states that *Annie Hall*, "beautifully modulates between the Jew and the gentile,"¹⁵ using Alvy and Annie as its means to do so. Thus, the story of *Annie Hall* is one of inherent contrast, in which Woody Allen uses the relationship between Annie and Alvy to explore the interplay between Jewish

and more traditional American life. If Alvy is defined by his Jewishness (for better or for worse), Annie is in every way his foil. She is spontaneous, relaxed, and carefree, raised comfortably in a WASP-y, midwestern household every bit as stereotypical as Alvy's. These differences account for much of the initial attraction between them; each thinks of the other as someone quirky and unique, someone who complements their least desirable traits and brings out their best. Annie counters Alvy's anxiety with fun and liveliness and pushes him out of his comfort zone. Alvy supports Annie's dream to become a successful singer and pays for her therapy, which, in turn, boosts her self-esteem. Despite their fundamental differences, they seem to pair perfectly together for a while, their occasional dysfunctionality an inevitable side effect of love.¹⁶ Film critic Andrew Sarris describes their relationship as a "pairing so ridiculously impossible that it becomes indescribably moving."¹⁷ Allen makes it clear that this relationship *is* impossible, even within a fictional, cinematic universe. Although doomed to fail by its nature, the viewer finds this pursuit of futile love compelling. Soon, Annie grows insecure that she is not smart enough to keep up with Alvy's intellect. When Annie, by Alvy's suggestion, begins to take adult courses, Alvy becomes jealous about how much she admires her professor.¹⁸ The relationship balances on a tightrope for the latter half of the movie - it seems sure to fail, but it is saved; they finally break up, only to get back together again - until they conclusively end it as the movie draws to a close, providing what has now long been an obvious answer to Alvy's question of why they broke up.

They were too different; this much is abundantly clear. It reasonably follows then that, since their differences stem from their different cultural and religious upbringings, then these very upbringings are responsible for the failure of the relationship. Sarris again argues that the relationship between Annie and Alvy was inspired by Allen's own "self-conscious magnification of

the tension between Jew and gentile,”¹⁹ which he subsequently projected onto the film’s central conflict. His juxtaposition of Alvy and Annie quickly turns into a broader juxtaposition of Jewish life with a more traditional lifestyle of Protestant America. No scene does a better job showcasing this than a memorable sequence where Annie and her family invite Alvy over for Easter dinner.

The whole episode is hilariously cringeworthy, another example of Allen employing humor to touch on an otherwise sensitive topic.²⁰ Over the course of the dinner, the Hall family serves Alvy ham, which he cannot eat, and the conversation comes to an abrupt halt anytime Alvy says anything. Most directly, Annie’s grandmother “Grammy Hall,” who Annie has warned is an anti-Semite, won’t stop glaring at Alvy. In a series of back and forth close up shots between Alvy and Grammy Hall, we see that Grammy Hall views Alvy as a Hasidic Jew, donning payess and dressed entirely in black. Or perhaps it is only Alvy assuming that this *must* be how she sees him, so uncomfortable is he in such an unfamiliar setting.²¹ Christopher Knight explains how, as in many cases in the film, it is impossible to separate Alvy’s narrative subjectivity from what *actually* has occurred, noting that, “Generally, what we know about Annie and about the relationship comes filtered through Alvy.”²² Regardless, it allows the viewer to better understand the discomfort Alvy frequently associates with his own Jewish identity. Either Grammy Hall *does* think of him as pariah because of his Jewishness, in which case Alvy’s exaggerated anxiety about antisemitism is somewhat vindicated, or he is so deeply paranoid that we cannot help but to pity him and his, by his own account, miserable condition.

The dinner sequence further highlights the more general feeling of Jewish outsidership, another critical theme in *Annie Hall*. Without even considering Grammy Hall, the dinner is still incredibly uncomfortable to watch, simply because neither Alvy nor the rest of the Hall family has

any notion of how to interact with one another. It is not that the Hall family doesn't make an effort, nor that they are not kind; the source of the tension is more subtle than that. Though they try to engage with Alvy, they fail to understand his admittedly Jewish sense of humor and give up after a couple of attempts. Alvy, on the other hand, is incredibly judgmental, interjecting with an occasional aside to the audience about how ridiculous they all are. He is thrown off by how unfamiliar the Hall family is, claiming they are "nothing like my family, you know. The two are like oil and water,"²³ As the scene progresses, he feels further apart from the crowd.

The dinner sequence underscores an important clash between the Jew of the City and the Protestant of Suburbia, and, along with Allen's neurotic paranoia, crystallizes the sense of Jewish discomfort as an imposter in the American way of life. In their book *The Americanization of the Jews*, Robert Seltzer and Norman Cohen use *Annie Hall* as an example to make a compelling case that Jews in America have to endure a double standard when it comes to money and greed. Seltzer notes that, when Annie originally explains that Grammy Hall "hates Jews" because "they just make money,"²⁴ she reveals her own hypocrisy, as there is "no stigma attached to the love of money in America."²⁵ Grammy Hall is, after all, presented as an affluent, All-American grandmother, fitting seamlessly into a troubled history of American antisemitism. Though she is obviously also highly caricatured, it is clear that Allen employs these caricatures not only for comedic effect, but also as symbols that more generally represent the group from which the character hails. Whether Allen intended to make the specific commentary on the hypocrisy of antisemitism or not is immaterial in an exploration of reception rather than intent, and Seltzer and Cohen's reasoning above is sound. Either way, the blatant antisemitism of Grammy Hall and the rest of the Hall family's more well-intended inability to connect underscore a fundamental failure of communication between Jewish

and non-Jewish American life. The dinner sequence ends with an innovative use of split-screen to highlight the differences between the Hall family and the Singer family. Not surprisingly, these differences appear to be all but irreconcilable.

Furthermore, there is almost certainly an element of Jewish self-dissatisfaction wrapped up in the broader theme of Jewish outsidership. Many critics were quick to note Alvy's own struggle to accept his Jewish identity. David Sterritt, writer for the *Christian Science Monitor*, notes that "He can't decide if he likes being Jewish,"²⁶ while Roger Ebert argues that Alvy's problem is not inherently that "He's self-consciously a New Yorker... a Jew, an intellectual... [but] that he understands this all so well. He's not a victim of forces beyond his control, but their author."²⁷ Alvy knows he has problems, and routinely sees a therapist to talk through his neuroses. He is also smart enough to recognize that his problems stem from him, his upbringing, and the high-stress environment of New York. Since Allen makes every effort to link these problematic traits to Alvy's Jewishness, it makes sense that Alvy's own insecurities and ambivalence towards his identity relate to this very Jewishness. Andrew Sarris, once again, sums it up best when stating that "Allen comes perilously close to summing up what *Annie Hall* is all about when he tells the old Groucho Marx-cum-Sigmund Freud joke about not wanting to belong to a club of which he was made a member,"²⁸ a comment that can be applied both directly to Alvy's dating life, and more loosely to his own relationship with cultural Judaism. It is not fair to classify this relationship as one of self-loathing, for, despite Alvy's outspoken pessimism, he has no desire to change in any profound way. He is comfortable with himself and with what is familiar to him. However, he is also undeniably frustrated with himself, his pickiness, his indecision, and his constant restlessness. As long as he continues to

grapple with these traits, which are stressed even further when compared to Annie's personality, he necessarily feels out of place.

There *is* one place where Alvy does feel at home, at least as much as his neuroticism allows him to. That place is New York City, and Alvy's complex relationship with it offers important insights into Jewish outsidership by highlighting where Jews feel like they belong in American culture. Critics were quick to seize on the obvious parallels between Alvy and Manhattan. Alex Goldman, writing immediately after the World Premiere of *Annie Hall* at the Los Angeles Film Expo, concluded that the film was part of Allen's "continuing saga of the 'contemporary urban neurotics' [and that] in it, Woody uses his friends and his city (New York) to present the theme he knows best."²⁹ There is a glaring link between the "City that never sleeps" and a character whose mind is never perfectly at rest, so much so that the city begins to serve a character in itself that amplifies Alvy's defining traits. It might seem that a more relaxed environment could do Alvy some good, but he needs the intensity of the city to match his own. He is constantly on edge, and often miserable because of it, but he would never dare to escape it because it is all that he knows. He thrives in a place where being able to interact with people explosively and impatiently is the norm. He picks fights in movie lines, and is curt with his fans. When he visits the Hall family, Alvy does not know how to handle the quiet, overly polite dinner interaction, where only one person speaks at a time. In fact, Allen utilizes more diegetic silence over the course of that dinner scene than at any other point in the movie to heighten the contrast between the Hall family residence and the bustle of Manhattan, creating a palpable tension shared by Alvy and the viewer alike.

The inescapable pull of New York on Alvy is most clearly emphasized when he flies out to Los Angeles with Annie for an award show ceremony. Even before flying out, Alvy has made his

distaste for the West Coast abundantly clear.³⁰ When his friend Rob insists that he move out to California on the grounds that it will help his career as a comedian, Alvy responds that he would never want to live in a city “where the only cultural advantage is being able to make a right turn on a red light.”³¹ Beneath this retort is a clear and unconditional resistance to leaving New York, even though living far from Los Angeles makes his career in show business significantly more difficult. When they arrive in Los Angeles towards the end of the film, Alvy clarifies what else he dislikes so much about the West Coast. He does not like the fact that people have to drive everywhere (he fears driving and claims to have given it up altogether many years ago), and he hates how spread out everything is. Alvy spends most of his time in Los Angeles in residential areas, flitting from house to house to visit friends and attend parties. These neighborhoods show no sign of being part of a city, and instead share far more in common with the suburb where the Hall family lives. The way Alvy acts, and the discomfort he voices while in California, greatly mirror how he felt while staying with the Halls. It seems the main link between these two locations is that they are distinctly *not* New York. Without the bustle, the noise, and the relative anonymity, Alvy feels anxious and vulnerable.

Annie, on the other hand, has never felt more at home. Whereas Alvy is constantly on edge, Annie is thrilled by the laid-back freedom and creativity that she sees in the Hollywood lifestyle. While Alvy has difficulty expressing his emotions, save for a couple of outbursts, Annie is taken by the openness of the culture, the lack of worry and judgment.³² Very quickly, both critics and viewers begin to realize that New York is a foil of Los Angeles in the exact same way that Alvy is a foil of Annie. The cities and their critical differences in lifestyle seem to articulate what precisely is incompatible about Annie and Alvy’s relationship. It is no surprise that the two of them conclusively break up on the flight back to New York, now undoubtedly aware that they are always doomed to

fail. Annie even goes as far as to compare Alvy to Manhattan during their breakup, telling him, “You’re incapable of enjoying life, you’re like New York, you’re an island.”³³ This quote hearkens back to the original working title of the film, *Anhedonia*³⁴, but also takes a further step by linking this lack of joy intrinsically to Manhattan, the people he knows, and the culture in which he was raised. Alvy’s identity is the very entity that denies him joy, an identity in which Jewishness, neuroticism, and the New York way are deeply crosslinked to one another.³⁵

When Annie moves out of Alvy’s apartment, the two of them divide up their belongings. They are civil, even quippy, and apparently resigned to the irreconcilability of their love. One point of minor conflict is the question of who gets to keep the copy of Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice*. This brief episode turns into one final illustrative example of their core differences. As Penelope Gilliatt of the *New Yorker* observes, “[Alvy] buys any book with “death” or “dying” in the title. After they split up... [Annie] says firmly that the copy of *Death in Venice* he gave her was something he chose only for the name.”³⁶ Alvy saw Annie as a young, carefree naiveté, and though he loved her, he could never truly relate to her. Annie realizes at the end that Alvy was trying to sculpt Annie in his image in order to make their relationship work, giving her books about mortality and paying for her adult classes in an empty attempt to make the whimsical, but immature dreamer he saw grow up. He wanted to push his “New Yorker anxiety” onto her because he understood, deep down, that the two of them would not work out as it was. One would invariably have to change, and given Alvy’s stubbornness, he figured it had to be Annie. But he pushed too hard, and though at first she was receptive to his slight tweaks, she ultimately learned to push back and not to budge. After the break up, Annie decides to move out to Los Angeles full time to pursue her music career, and, when Alvy

spontaneously flies out in a melodramatic attempt to get her to come back to New York with him (note how he would never consider staying out in Los Angeles with her), she flatly rejects the offer.

Though Annie's moment of standing up for herself is empowering, it still seems that Woody Allen sides with Alvy. Despite Annie's gravitation towards the superstardom of Hollywood, Allen's cinematic choices reflect a disdain for the superficiality of Los Angeles culture. Uniquely during the LA sequence, Allen strings together his scenes with little vignettes, each more absurd than the previous, to highlight the silliness of Hollywood. This culminates in a then-unknown Jeff Goldblum, speaking on the phone with his guru and delivering the iconic quote "I forgot my mantra." This line remains memorable in part because of Goldblum's later success, but more so because it perfectly captures, in an over-the-top caricature consistent with film's style, the phony spirituality and smug emptiness that Allen links to the entertainment industry. Just as he does with Alvy, Annie, Grammy Hall, and countless other side characters, he seizes on cultural stereotypes to get his point across in a humorous fashion.

In contrast to Los Angeles, Allen presents New York in a largely romanticized fashion, showing it only through the glamour of the Upper East Side.³⁷ Tom Allen ends his review of the film simply by concluding that, "New York comes out aglow, and the talent-grinding Los Angeles as a fearsome malignancy."³⁸ The problems that we, as viewers, so easily identify in Alvy are clearly linked to the New York lifestyle. The intensity and apprehension are not, in themselves, romantic. And of course, Woody Allen insists that Alvy mostly does not represent him as a person. Nonetheless, something universally appealing about New York shines through. Whereas Los Angeles is shallow and caught up in its own love of itself, Manhattan is genuine, gritty, and real. Alvy needs Manhattan because he is too deeply nihilistic to deal with any form of pretense. He grew up poor, in a no-

nonsense Jewish household; directness and sincerity, for better or for worse, are all he is equipped to deal with. And, regardless of how autobiographical the film may actually be, Allen makes it clear that he sides against Los Angeles, and in favor of Manhattan, for these precise reasons.

Today, *Annie Hall* is remembered as Woody Allen's crowning achievement, a classic of American Cinema, and, perhaps most of all, the standard-bearer for the romantic comedy genre. Subsequently, any doomed on-screen couple, from *When Harry Met Sally*³⁹ to *500 Days of Summer*,⁴⁰ invariably elicits a comparison to Annie and Alvy. Yet, there must be more to why the film endures, why it enjoys such a distinguished place in our collective memory. Roger Ebert notes that what sets *Annie Hall* apart from other films is that Allen "wants to do a lot more this time than just keep us laughing. By looking into some of his own relationships, some of his own patterns, he wants to examine how a personality works."⁴¹ What Allen renders is a deeply personal film that allows its characters to muse on love, morality, anxiety, identity, and the complex, ever-growing networks that tie them all together. Allen develops the interplay of these themes within Alvy, his Jewish protagonist, how this was understood by critics, and what messages Allen hoped to transmit through Alvy's ups and downs, triumphs and struggles. While occasionally, Allen caricatures Alvy simply for the laughs, these jokes contribute towards a deeper message. By exaggerating Alvy's Jewishness and contrasting it with Annie's clear lack of Jewishness, Allen articulates the subtle yet present sense of Jewish otherness, grants insight into the significance of New York in Jewish culture, and ultimately sheds some light on what it is like to be Jewish in America. Though many directors have subsequently tried, no film has offered a more poignant, thoughtful glance into the American Jewish experience since.

Henry Hoffman graduated in May 2020 and studied Biology with plans to attend medical school after graduating. While most premeds feel sick at the thought of writing 15+ page history papers, Henry inexplicably writes them for fun.

Endnotes

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