# Without Feathers Study Guide

## Without Feathers by Woody Allen

BOOKRAGS

# Contents

# Selections from the Allen Notebooks

## Selections from the Allen Notebooks Summary

The book begins with a small series of short, first person excerpts from what purports to be Woody Allen's secret journal. Woody is paranoid and can't sleep. He has health problems. He shares a story idea about a parrot who becomes Secretary of Agriculture. He worries about his girlfriend, whom he knows only as "W." He has failed at suicide and asks absurd questions about the afterlife. His brother beats him with a pig bladder. He is wracked with guilt for hating his father who wore a gas mask to his first play.

Woody's nephew has some strange ailment and is covered in feathers. Woody decides to break off his engagement with W. He is plagued by doubts about God because of cruel and silly accidents. He is convinced that if his soul lives on with no body, his clothes will be too loose. W runs away with a circus geek, saving Woody the trouble of breaking off their relationship. Woody burns all his plays and poetry, and the room catches fire. He's being sued. In the end, he tries to cry but finds he's crying out his ears.

## Selections from the Allen Notebooks Analysis

Woody shares peculiar dreams, neurotic fears, and blatantly silly ruminations on topics ranging from love to faith to suicide. He writes of his many dysfunctional relationships: with his brother, with his father, and with his girlfriend, whom he knows only as "W." Occasionally, Woody shares an absurdly funny and nonsensical story idea.

The title of the collection of stories comes from the quote Allen references from Emily Dickinson, which calls hope "the thing with feathers." Woody absurdly indicates that the thing with feathers is really his nephew. More seriously, though, the title Without Features refers to a lack of hope.

The introduction declares that the excerpts are to "be published posthumously or after [Woody Allen's] death, whichever comes first." This sets the tone for the rest of the section, suggesting to the reader that the journal is a work of parody rather than actual, real-life excerpts from the private writings of Woody Allen. Woody's perplexity at W's single-letter name is a parody of a journal-writing convention in which people are referred to only by the first letter of their names.

A laughable sort of anxiety permeates much of the journal, contrasting the momentousness of human emotion with mundane problems. Serious anxieties arise from a lack of napkins. Woody's boundless neuroses fuel a range of hilariously skewed observations. It is difficult to forget, however, that the journal is a work of fiction, as the tone is unfailingly silly even as the character shares the details of his latest suicide attempt. Ultimately, Woody the character isn't much of a character at all, but merely a parody of the author himself.

# Examining Psychic Phenomena

## Examining Psychic Phenomena Summary

In the introduction, an unknown first person speaker asserts a belief in, if not understanding of, the unseen world. The man to answer questions of the afterlife, the speaker insists, is one Dr. Osgood Mulford Twelge, author of a soon to be released book entitled, simply enough, Boo! What follows, the narrator explains, is a sampling of Dr. Twelge's more celebrated cases involving the supernatural.

The first such story is that of Mr. J.C. Dubbs, who, in March of 1882, saw the ghost of a brother who had died fourteen years previously. The ghost reportedly urged his brother not to worry, explaining that—although a ghost—he was just in town for the weekend, and warned his still-living sibling that a dark blue suit and argyle socks were a bad idea. Dr. Twelge marks the event as a classic case of the apparition phenomena and relates that J.C. Dubbs had several more visits from his departed brother. On one occasion, the ghost caused Mrs. Dubbs to hover over the dinner table for twenty minutes, until finally she fell atop the dinner table and into the gravy.

Albert Sykes, another of the doctor's subjects, reports that he's experienced several instances of spirit departure, his spirit leaving its physical form behind to go off on its own, shopping, drinking, and even vacationing without Sykes. Dr. Twelge claims that such spiritual departure was common in 1910 when the spirits of American tourists could often be seen on the streets of India searching for the American consulate. He compares the spiritual departure phenomena to transubstantiation, relating the story of Sir Arthur Nurney, whose life was changed when he unexpectedly and spontaneously teleported from his bathtub to the string section of the Vienna Symphony Orchestra.

Dr. Twelge also reports several supposed instances of extrasensory perception. One subject foresaw that his grandfather would be killed by a speeding truck, only to have the old man, later that day, instead slip on a chicken-salad sandwich and fall off the Chrysler Building. Another account, a transcript from a séance, tells of a departed husband speaking from beyond the grave to ask his still-living wife how long chicken needs to broil. Finally, Dr. Twelge tells of Londos, the noted Greek psychic who helped catch the Dusseldorf Strangler, and Aristonidis, a 16th century count who made successful predictions so broad as to be inevitable or, if specific, of too little consequence to matter.

## Examining Psychic Phenomena Analysis

Allen has turned the whole spiritualist/parapsychologist discourse on its head. Woody Allen's spirits are, in a word, ordinary. These are not beings from beyond the veil come to share wisdom with the living, nor are they vengeful creatures bent on visiting their rage upon the living. Rather, they are just people who happen to be dead, no more or

less significant than their living counterparts. They offer common advice and ask equally mundane questions. This so sharply deviates from the tradition that it proves humorous; imagine that someone would return from the grave merely to offer fashion advice. In this light, Allen's depiction of death is merely a continuation of life, warts and all.

Albert Sykes and his wayward spirit offer a similarly pedestrian take on the subject. Sykes' spirit, after all, seems to behave very much as Sykes himself might, and since the spirit is solid enough to be arrested for shoplifting a tie at Macy's, the reader might conclude that Sykes and his spirit never parted ways. The story has a sense of there being little difference between a man and his spirit. Their goals, their motivations, and their desires are one in the same. This casts the intangible component of man on the same footing with transitory. Even without flesh, the spirit yet yearns for fashionable attire.

# A Guide to Some of the Lesser Ballets

## A Guide to Some of the Lesser Ballets Summary

Instead of a traditional story, "A Guide to Some of the Lesser Ballets" is a collection of short descriptions of "lesser" ballets. The first, "Dmitri," is the tale of a girl named Natasha, who, despite the affections of an awkward suitor named Leonid, falls in love with a marionette named Dmitri. Leonid fails in an attempt to murder the puppet and, through unknown means and apparently to the delight of many, the play concludes with Natasha fracturing her skull.

"The Sacrifice" begins with a cast of personified seasons and elements. Man offends Nature by biting her on the hip, resulting in a six-month long winter. The elders of mankind try to placate Nature with the sacrifice of a young woman, forcing the girl to dance herself to death. The effort fails, and the play somehow ends with the elders being subpoenaed for a mail-fraud charge.

In "The Spell," Prince Sigmund falls in love with Yvette, a woman who is cursed by a magician named Von Epps to exist as half human, half swan. Sigmund swears that he'll undertake the quest necessary to break the spell; he will attend secretarial school to learn shorthand. Soon after, Von Epps appears in the form of yesterday's laundry and abducts the swan woman. A week passes, and Sigmund is to marry a woman named Justine. Von Epps crashes the wedding, and Sigmund promptly stabs him through the heart, killing him. Prince Sigmund soon locates Yvette and rushes to her side, ignoring his fiancé's declarations of love. Yvette announces that only death can lift her curse, whereupon she commits suicide by running headlong into a brick wall. Sigmund follows in kind, taking his own life by swallowing a barbell.

Strangest of all, "The Predators" is a ballet about garden insects. The pests find their quest for a buttered roll interrupted when a procession of women, bearing a large can of pesticide, overpower and imprison the insects with the intention of later eating them. Despite herself, one of the young women falls in love with a pest, a common housefly. They dance and plan for a nuptial flight. In the end, the girl changes her mind and eats the fly anyway.

The final play, "A Day in the Life of a Doe," is a one scene play in which a doe, after nibbling on some leaves, unexpectedly coughs and drops dead.

## A Guide to Some of the Lesser Ballets Analysis

Ballet is rife with vivid, perhaps surreal devices that are not necessarily intended to convey a realistic plot. Rather, ballet is an expressive, stylized form of beauty and passion, appealing to the heart ahead of the mind. Allen plays on this already abstruse quality of the medium by presenting these works as bordering on the nonsensical. In so

doing, Allen demonstrates that the fantastic isn't so far removed from the ridiculous, and this is the realization that creates humor.

Love, a lofty, elevated emotion in most ballets, is depicted here as something awkward and capricious. Natasha falls in love with a wooden-headed puppet, dismissing her real suitor as a brainless idiot. Prince Sigmund, meanwhile, is betrothed to Justine even as he promises his heart to Yvette, and rather than keep his promise to lift the swan woman's curse, Sigmund instead pursues his original plan to marry Justine, whom, he reasons, at least doesn't have a beak. As soon as Yvette is found, Justine is tossed aside. Of course, the paramour of the "The Predators" is eaten by his lover, so perhaps Justine should count herself lucky.

The reader will note that each tale ends on a note of anticlimax. What's more, the endings are not, in any traditional sense, logical or even truly satisfying. Allen once again inverts our expectations, substituting the usual lofty emotion for something ill-fitting and mundane. The effect is strange, surprising, and delightfully humorous.

# The Scrolls

## The Scrolls Summary

An unknown narrator tells the tale of a shepherd wandering in the Gulf of Aqaba who accidentally stumbles upon a cave. Within, the narrator explains, the shepherd finds several scrolls, each written in a series of ancient tongues. While experts admit that the scrolls are likely forgeries, especially owing to the repeated use of the word "Oldsmobile" throughout the text, it is nevertheless named as a significant archaeological find. What follows, the narrator claims, are the words translated from the fragments themselves.

God and Satan enter into a wager based on whether or not Job, God's most devout follower, will abandon his faith when sorely tested by adversity. God mounts abuse upon Job, covering him with sticky sauce, slaying a tenth of his kind, and smacking Mrs. Job upside the head with a polo mallet. The abuse escalates until God carelessly allows Job to grab him in a headlock. Job interrogates the almighty about the recent abuse, but God refuses to explain his mysterious ways to a mere mortal. Job dismisses God's non-responsiveness as a cop-out and implores God to take his job as deity more seriously.

In the early hours of the morning, Abraham wakes his son Isaac to inform him that God has willed the boy to be sacrificed immediately. Both Isaac and his mother Sarah, neither liking the idea, express doubt that God would command such thing, instead suggesting that maybe it was a practical joke perpetuated by one of Abraham's friends. Abraham insists that it was a deep, resonant, well-modulated voice of God himself. Later, as Isaac is about to sacrifice Isaac, God intervenes, chiding Abraham for not being able to take a joke. God then muses aloud that some men will follow any order, no matter how ridiculous, as long as it comes from a deep, resonant, well-modulated voice.

A small businessman asks God why his t-shirts won't sell when those of his competitors fly off the shelves. God tells the man to put a small alligator over the pocket. The man does so and, lo, his shirts are hugely successful. The man's competitors now lament their lost sales and express frustration at God's divine intervention. The selection concludes with a series of silly "laws and proverbs," including a question posed to God asking what he's done lately.

## The Scrolls Analysis

"The Scrolls" depicts a relationship that is as frustrating as it is funny, the bond between men of faith and their sophomoric divine creator. Woody Allen's God is both arbitrary and manipulative. He mistreats Job, a devout believer, merely to win a bet with Satan. Similarly, he asks Abraham to kill his own son, waiting until the last possible minute—after much worry and concern—to reveal that he was only kidding. Job and Abraham,

both devout men, are punished for their faith. God shows no remorse, clearly seeing himself as above reproach.

Even when God means well, by offering advice to the t-shirt salesman, there is still a sense that no good can come of his intervention. In choosing to help the one salesman, God has denied success to that man's competitors. This compels a question of justice. What makes one man more worthy of success than another? God? If God can decide the success or failure of individuals, what does that say about free will? After all, one can never be certain whether his or her success (or failure) was divinely preordained. This presents God as the proverbial bull in a china shop. He can't intervene in human affairs without damaging something.

# Lovborg's Women Considered

## Lovborg's Women Considered Summary

An unnamed narrator suggests that no writer has created stronger female characters than Jorgen Lovborg, a Scandinavian playwright whose heartbreaking experiences with the opposite sex drove him to create depressing, shocking plays, as well to bring about a safer means of weighing herring.

An excerpt from Lovborg's I Prefer to Yodel introduces Hedvig, a character based on Lovborg's own much loved, but domineering sister. In the scene, Hedvig responds to the unfortunate news that the roof of the hen house has collapsed on Klavar Akdal, rendering him forevermore blind and bald. Although she was aware that the roof was made of substandard materials, Hedvig responds aggressively to the news, betraying only the barest hint of remorse. The scene concludes with Hedvig offering to wash everyone's shorts.

A second excerpt, this one from While We Three Hemorrhage, Dorf and Netta, husband and wife, discuss how Dorf might acquire his father's hereditary disease, a prize currently possessed by Dorf's brother Eyeowulf. Netta responds to Dorf's fretting with scorn, insisting that more drastic measures, such as pickling Eyeowulf, are necessary. When Dorf balks, Netta, in disgust for her spineless husband, reveals to Dorf that he is in actuality a dwarf, a fact that she and Dorf's mother concealed from him by keeping a household to scale with his height. The narrator claims that Dorf and Netta are symbols of old and new Europe respectively, and the character of Netta was based on Lovborg's wife of eight years.

The final piece, from Mellow Pears, follows an exchange between Berte and Mrs. Sanstad. Conversation quickly turns to Henrick, Santad's son, Berte's lover, when the passive aggressive Mrs. Sanstad bullies the younger woman with her extensive knowledge of her son and his many failings. Mrs. Sanstad finally reveals that she has betrayed Berte's confidence by sharing with Henrrick her true feelings about his arch supports. Berte is devastated and, upon hearing that Henrick has left for Oslo with his geranium, takes her own life. Mrs. Sanstand laments that she must live that she has chickpeas to arrange before nightfall. The narrator claims that Mrs. Sanstand was Lovborg's revenge against his mother, who was a major source of trauma throughout the playwright's childhood.

## Lovborg's Women Considered Analysis

As with the earlier selections, here again the author adopts a mock voice of authority over his own fictional work. In truth, these excerpts are not gathered from an actual collection of plays. Therefore, the significance of Henrick's geranium, for example, is unknowable. There is no remainder of the play to provide context to the snippets

provided here. Rather, the intent of these pieces, along with the attending commentary, is to lampoon the maudlin playwright (not the fictional Lovborg specifically, but all such playwrights) along with the similarly self-indulgent literary critic.

Note the way that Allen parodies a critic's tendency to assume knowledge of the author, as he eagerly explains the supposed relationship between Lovborg's work and the playwright's private life. As irony would have it this case, the critic actually does have the authority to explain Lovborg's work, as both the playwright and his critic are the creations of Woody Allen.

Interestingly, the critic here refers to Lovborg as a creator of strong female characters, and yet, two of these women fall back into pattern of traditional domesticity (washing and cooking respectively) and one actually kills herself. Even Netta, who is certainly vicious enough, seems to prefer exercising her agency through Dorf, her husband, and when Dorf disappoints her ambitions, she emasculates him. Does this make her strong, or is this merely the tantrum of a spoiled brat? It may be that Allen is saying something about how critics choose to characterize female characters.

If these characters do indeed parallel the women of Lovborg's life, as the critic suggests, then it would be safe to assume that Lovborg parallels the characters of Dorf and Henrick. This implies that Lovborg's wife of eight years was abusive toward him and that Lovborg's mother was smothering. Berte might represent a girl whom Lovborg once loved and lost thanks to his mother's intervention.

# The Whore of Mensa

## The Whore of Mensa Summary

Word Babock, joy buzzer manufacturer and closet intellectual, wants to hire private investigator Kaiser Lupowitz to assist him with a would be blackmailer. Word explains the situation to Kaiser. It seems that six months prior, Word, craving the sort of intellectual stimulation that his wife can't provide, employed a service that would send young college girls to engage him in literary discussion. Unknown to Word, the service taped these conversations. Flossie, the madam of the service, is now demanding that Word pay her ten thousand dollars in exchange for not revealing everything to his wife. Hearing all this, Kaiser decides to take the case.

Kaiser contacts Flossie to arrange a discussion for himself, and after a short cram session using a Monarch College Outline on Melville, finds himself in the company of a young redhead named Sherry. Kaiser quickly assesses the girl's routine as pseudo-intellectual, a mechanical recitation of canned responses. Kaiser, pretending to be a police officer, threatens to arrest Sherry for discussing Melville for money. The girl, alarmed, begs for mercy, explaining that she just needed the money to complete her master's. In exchange for immunity, the Sherry reveals that the Hunter College Book Store is the front for Flossie's call-girl service.

By dropping Sherry's name, Kaiser is given access to the secret back room of the Hunter College Book Store where several brainy girls lounge about studying Penguin Classics. Kaiser soon finds at the wrong end of Flossie's .38 and is alarmed to discover that she is actually a he, surgically altered to look like a woman and wearing a mask. Kaiser disarms Flossie with ease and the police show up soon after. To celebrate, Kaiser looks up an old account named Gloria who graduated Cum Laud in physical education.

## The Whore of Mensa Analysis

While most of the story is firmly entrenched in the tradition of detective pulp fiction, the undercurrent of Woody Allen's absurdist humor is apparent throughout. Word, for example, manufactures joy buzzers, a primitive gag item entirely at odds with Word's closet intellectual demeanor. Kaiser, meanwhile, who seems on the surface entirely unimpressed by the idea of feminine intelligensia, offers several detailed observations of their behavior that perhaps betrays an interest.

The call-girl service, Kaiser discovers, offers to fulfill a variety of odd, supposedly intellectual fantasies, including watching a girl have a panic attack or seeing her fake a suicide. Such latent absurdism is even more effective due to its stark contrast with the pulp narrative.

It's difficult to say what the story says about women in academia, in part because the work, while constructively true to its pulp origins, is still a parody. What is interesting, however, is the way that women continue to be objectified by men even without the purely physical component. Sherry admits to faking her way through literary discussions with men, and yet, the men don't seem to notice. This suggests that these conversations are less a true engagement and more of a performance for the sake of the man. The men don't truly care if the women are intellectuals at all, only that they appear as such.

# Death (A Play)

## Death (A Play) Summary

Kleinman wakes from a dead sleep when a group of men pound on his door in the early hours of the morning. Recognizing the voice of a man named Hacker, Kleinman answers the door to find half-a-dozen men waiting on his doorstep. They insist that he immediately get dressed and join them in their vigilante hunt for the strangler who's been operating in the neighborhood. Kleinman has no idea what they're talking about and shows much reluctance to join them, insisting that he has work in the morning. As the mob elaborates on the many crimes of the strangler, Kleinman grows afraid. Hacker insists that Kleinman dress warmly and ready himself to go. Kleinman does as he's told.

Preoccupied with search for his shoehorn and complaining to himself about his predicament, Kleinman is startled by the sudden appearance of an old battle-ax named Anna. Kleinman explains his mob conscription and the two discuss the recent murders. The reason that Kleinman was unaware of the murders, Anna explains, is that Kleinman has been too preoccupied with his own affairs. When Anna asks for further details on the mob's plans, Kleinman confesses ignorance, but insists that he has the greatest confidence in Hacker and the others.

Finally dressed, Kleinman finds that most of the mob has gone. Only Al remains outside. Al explains to Kleinman that the others had to push on in order to maintain the timing of the plan. Kleinman is to wait word from Hacker, who will then explain what Kleinman is supposed to do. Kleinman, annoyed, insists on knowing what the plan is, but Al pleads ignorance. Only Hacker knows the whole plan. Individuals only know those tasks to which they are assigned. In this manner, no one can compromise the operation under duress. Al bids Kleinman farewell, leaving the nervous man alone in the cold, dark night to wait for word from Hacker.

Kleinman wanders anxiously through the night wondering what the plan could be. Is he bait? Are the others watching him? It suddenly occurs to Kleinman that he's wandered into an unfamiliar part of town, far from where he was stationed. By chance, Kleinman encounters the doctor, another member of vigilante squad. While the doctor proves as unhelpful as Al, offering no new information concerning the supposed plan, he does share with Kleinman his own plan to dissect the killer down to the chromosome. In this way, the doctor explains, one can gain an intimate understanding of the killer. Kleinman questions whether it's even possible to really know anyone, leading the doctor to dismiss Kleinman as a complete idiot.

The two men hear a scream, followed by the sound of approaching footfalls. The doctor insists that Kleinman follow him down an alley. Kleinman refuses, citing that the alley is a dead end, offering no means of escape in the event of danger. The doctor bids Kleinman farewell and departs. Attempting to flee in terror, Kleinman accidentally runs full tilt into a young prostitute (and fellow vigilante) named Gina, who is at that moment

also attempting to flee in terror. She recognizes Kleinman immediately, but, like the others, is unable to provide Kleinman with neither any further clarity with regard to the plan nor any information regarding his role in said plan. She does, however, reveal that Hacker was murdered. Or was it Maxwell? She isn't sure. The two talk for a moment about the emptiness of outer space when Kleinman suddenly kisses Gina, whereupon, being a prostitute, she charges him six dollars. Gina then departs to fulfill her role in the plan.

The doctor reappears, dying to a stab wound in the back. Kleinman, despite the doctor's warning that he might draw undue attention to himself, calls for help. A man responds to Kleinman's cries, sees the situation, and departs again to find help, but not before informing Kleinman that the others looking for him on a matter of great importance. As the doctor fades away, Kleinman suggests that since the doctor is dying, perhaps he might take over for the doctor's role in the plan. The doctor dismisses the idea, explaining that Kleinman lacks the necessary skills. With his last words, the doctor implores Kleinman not fail the group.

The man returns with a police officer. After a brief discussion of death and what might lie beyond, the man reveals that Hacker wasn't murdered by the killer, but rather, by the plotters. The man explains that since Hacker's plan wasn't yielding any results, there has been dissent in the ranks of vigilantes. Other factions have formed. Where before there was but one plan, the man explains, now there are several. Kleinman is stupefied by the idea that now there are several plans that he knows nothing about. The man takes Kleinman's confusion to mean disloyalty and, pulling a knife, insists that Kleinman choose a side. The cop, meanwhile, still miffed by Kleinman's earlier implication that the police were more effective than Hacker, does not intervene.

Hacker's men suddenly appear and ask Kleinman where he's been. Kleinman is dumbfounded. The man announces that Kleinman has joined his side. Hacker's men look to Kleinman for confirmation, but Kleinman is far too confused to offer a coherent answer. A second group appears and immediately takes an adversarial stance against the first. Despite Kleinman's best efforts to reconcile the two factions, to make them understand that none of this gets them any closer to catching the killer, the two sides pull weapons and begin to fight.

Suddenly, everyone ceases fighting. An impressive, religious-seeming procession approaches. An assistant to the famed clairvoyant Hans Spiro rings a gong and announces to all assembled that they have found the murderer. Hans Spiro himself approaches Kleinman and, despite the man's protests, smells him up and down. Kleinman, growing increasingly nervous, tries to explain away whatever odors might be found on his person. Hans finally announces that Kleinman is the murderer. The crowd takes Spiro's word as gospel and immediately turns hostile. They are just about to lynch Kleinman when someone suddenly announces that the true killer was caught in the act of trying to strangle Edith Cox and is now trapped behind the warehouse. After a quick apology to Kleinman, everyone hurries away to the warehouse.

Kleinman, alone once again, resolves to wash his hands of the whole thing and return home. Just then, a man who looks very much like Kleinman himself, walks up and nonchalantly introduces himself as the homicidal killer, affirming also that he plans to kill Kleinman. Kleinman declares the man crazy, and the killer wholeheartedly agrees. Kleinman inquires as to why the murderer does what he does, but the killer doesn't offer any reasons, insisting that having reasons is for the sane. Kleinman suggests that the killer might find help in science or psychiatry, but the killer dismisses the idea. Science can't measure sanity and psychiatry requires honesty. Kleinman cries for help, but the killer nevertheless succeed in mortally wounding him with a switchblade.

A crowd forms around Kleinman. Fading fast, he describes the killer as resembling himself. One of the vigilantes protests, insisting that Jensen said that the killer looked like Jensen, tall and blond. Kleinman, annoyed, dismisses the idea. Falling into delirium, Kleinman demands cooperation and declares that God is the only enemy. Kleinman dies. A man runs up to announce that the killer was spotted near some railroad tracks. Everyone takes off in pursuit.

## Death (A Play) Analysis

While Kleinman is certainly the most intelligent, rational character of the play, he nevertheless falls victim to the entropy of groupthink. His desire to cooperate, to be accepted by his peers, drives Kleinman deny his own rational thought, to allow himself to become an instrument (of the plan) rather than a free-willed individual. Throughout much of the play, Kleinman continues to believe that the plan, once it asserts itself, will prove him with context and purpose. He seems unwilling to accept that things truly are as chaotic as they seem to be, and so he spends the entire play worried that it is he who has somehow failed the plan, rather than the plan failing him. Accepting that the plan is a fraud, after all, means that Kleinman must also accept that everyone involved in the plan, himself included, is a fool.

The author seems to suggest that Hacker's plan parallels the "God's plan" of Judeo-Christian tradition, the belief that all things in heaven and Earth serve a purpose known only by their creator. Similarly, Hacker's plan is known only to Hacker, and since Hacker is dead throughout much of the play, he, much like God, isn't available to answer questions.

The problem is one of faith vs. free will. Kleinman, his agency supplanted by that of the plan, can't act in his own best interests. When he should be sleeping, he is awake. When he should be warm and safe in his home, he's outside, waiting in the cold, where, at any moment, he might be killed by a maniac. Adherence to the plan makes it impossible for Kleinman to behave responsibly. All decisions, no matter how rationale they may be, are superseded by the mysterious, unknowable plan. Since Kleinman doesn't even know what the plan is, he can't even evaluate the wisdom of any action undertaken in its name. This makes self-governance, in the context of the plan, impossible.

The killer looks like Kleinman. The killer looks like Jensen too. The author presents the killer as an everyman. He is literally every man. Like the vigilantes themselves, the killer doesn't have a sense of why he behaves as he does. He doesn't kill out of desire or out of enjoyment. He doesn't kill for any rational purpose. Rather, he simply kills because, as the killer, it's what he's expected to do. Like the vigilantes, Kleinman included, the killer is defined not by the free will of an individual, but rather by an external role imposed upon him. They are the vigilantes. He is the killer. Everyone is part of, and limited by, the plan. As is demonstrated repeatedly throughout the play, there is no room for individualism. Either you're with us or you're against, only two roles to choose from

Kleinman's last words color the entire play: only God is the enemy. God, in the context of the play, is the irrational force that denies the individual. Fittingly, Kleinman also calls for men to cooperate. This too requires individualism, as cooperation requires governance and accountability. One cannot hold a puppet accountable, not so long as someone else is pulling the strings.

# The Early Essays

## The Early Essays Summary

An unnamed narrator introduces the supposed early essays of Woody Allen, noting the similarities of the works to those of Bacon. The narrator suggests that there are no later plays by Allen simply because Allen ran out of observations.

In "On Seeing a Tree in Summer", the fictional Allen humorously considers the motivations and characteristics of a stately elm. "On Youth and Age" has Allen, digressing briefly to ponder mortality, considering the appropriateness of certain behaviors at different stages of life. Next, the author offers financial advice in "On Frugality," where he asserts that money, while it perhaps can't buy happiness, is preferable to being poor, even if one has their health. Allen tackles the topic of romantic love in "On Love" where he concludes that true love requires tenderness, general proximity, a perception of beauty, and a modest quantity of raw physical strength. Finally, in "On Tripping Through a Copse Picking Violets" the author suggests that tripping through a copse picking violets is a complete waste of one's time.

## The Early Essays Analysis

As the introduction perhaps suggests, these works are parodies the type of written philosophical observations common of Nietzsche, Kant or Bacon, among many others. Such literary tradition is associated with thoughtfulness and profundity, but Woody Allen replaces these concepts with absurdity and silliness. In doing so, he draws attention to the convention itself, challenging the reader to consider the form as separate from the ideas conveyed with that form. The effect is diminished somewhat if the reader is unfamiliar with the discourse that Allen is parodying, as the humor is dependent on contrast.

# A Brief, Yet Helpful, Guide to Civil Disobedience

## A Brief, Yet Helpful, Guide to Civil Disobedience Summary

The author begins by describing the two sides of a revolution: the oppressors and the oppressed. The oppressors, who enjoy happiness at the expense of the oppressed, want to maintain status quo. Allen describes oppressive behavior in humorous, if not entirely unrealistic, terms. The oppressed, wishing to enjoy the fruits of their own labor rather than be exploited by the oppressors, want change. The author cites several real-life examples of revolutions, adding humorous fictional details and embellishments. The author notes that, post revolution, the oppressed often become a new generation of oppressors.

Allen lists and describes several methods civil disobedience, or methods of resisting an oppressive regime without resorting to violence. First is the hunger strike, an attempt by the oppressed to shame their oppressors through willful starvation. If the regime can tempt the protesters into eating, usually by offering food, the insurrection is ended. Allen humorously suggests that a hunger strike might involve just giving up a certain type of food or activity, such as chives, or possibly the act of standing on one leg. Protesters could also try a sit down strike, forcing the government to address their concerns by making an obstacle of themselves. Allen warns, however, that must one sit down completely, for crouching isn't nearly as effective as true sitting. Finally, Allen describes the methods of demonstrating and marching, a highly visible form of protest that involves signs and shouted slogans.

## A Brief, Yet Helpful, Guide to Civil Disobedience Analysis

While much of this piece is purely for the sake of humor, it might prove surprisingly informative for readers who were unfamiliar with the concepts of revolution and civil disobedience. While many of the details are fictionalized, some of them unabashedly silly, the overarching concepts are intact. Through the veils of humor and absurdity, one can just make out a different face of Woody Allen, one of social awareness and civic responsibility. Nevertheless, this too is a work of parody, appreciatively imitating the writings of ethicist authors such as Henry David Thoreau.

# Match Wits with Inspector Ford

## Match Wits with Inspector Ford Summary

This work features a collection of short mysteries, each featuring the character Inspector Ford. In each tale, the detective solves the mystery and reveals the culprit. The reader is then invited to explain how it is that Inspector Ford solved the case. The actual solution is then revealed.

In "The Case of the Murdered Socialite" determines that Clifford Wheel, murdered in his study, was struck from behind by a croquet mallet. After questioning Wheel's manservant, Ives, Ford decides that Ives is the killer. The solution is that the layout of the house would prohibit Ives from sneaking up behind Wheel, requiring that he approach from the front, at which point Wheel would have stopped singing and would have, as he often had done in the past, used the mallet on Ives.

In "A Curious Riddle" Mr. Walker corpse is found inside of his television set, apparently dead from an overdose of sleeping pills. A suicide note explains that he killed himself because his woolen suit itches. After speaking to Mrs. Walker, Ford learns that her son is home from college, at which point he realizes that the son is the murderer. The solution is that Mr. Walker was found with cash on his person. A man who was going to commit suicide would pay with credit or check.

The Bellini Sapphire is stolen from a museum in "The Stolen Gem" by a thief who apparently entered via the skylight and walked down the wall with suction shoes. After talking to the witnesses and hearing a detailed account of the sapphire's history and allegedly curse, Ford declares that one Leonard Handleman, of Handleman Delicatessen, is a thief. The solution is that, the previous day, Handleman was overheard saying that having a big sapphire would help him get out of the delicatessen business.

Mrs. Freem confesses to accidentally shooting her husband while hunting in "The Macabre Accident." After hearing Mrs. Freem's story and questioning her, Ford identifies Mrs. Freem as the killer. The solution is that Mr. Freem, an experienced hunter, would have never gone hunting in his underwear. Mrs. Freem bludgeoned him to death and dragged him out into the forest to stage a hunting accident. In her haste, she forgot to dress him.

In "The Bizarre Kidnapping", Kermit Kroll returns home shortly after his parents pay a large ransom. After reading the ransom note and talking to Kermit Kroll himself, Ford concludes that Kroll was in on the kidnapping and likely split the ransom with his captors. The solution is that Kermit Kroll is sixty years old. No one would kidnap a sixty-year-old child. It makes no sense.

# Match Wits with Inspector Ford Analysis

The Inspector Ford stories are parodies of the classic fair-play whodunit, written in the style of Ellery Queen. This style of writing suggests that the facts will be presented to the reader in the same manner that they are presented to Inspector Ford. This would allow the reader to, as the title suggests, match wits with the detective. A convention of the fair-play whodunit is that the story pauses at the end in order to give the reader an opportunity to reach his or her own summation. Then, the story resumes so the reader can see whether the summation is correct. Allen sticks to the script just enough to trigger the reader's expectations based on genre convention.

Ford's stories, however, are anything but fair. Whereas in a classic whodunit the details would provide a body of evidence that a discerning reader might use to mentally reconstruct the crime, such is simply not the case here. Here, the details are worse than misleading; they are as ridiculous and completely irrelevant. The author isn't trying to create a puzzle, unless the puzzle lay in realizing that there isn't a puzzle to solve.

None of the solutions is supported by the evidence and, in fact, each violates the fair use convention by referring to one or more details that were not part of the story. Inspector Ford's conclusions, meanwhile, are spurious and, at times, based on circumstance. In the first tale, "The Case of the Murdered Socialite," the solution actually describes why the accused couldn't have committed the crime.

# The Irish Genius

## The Irish Genius Summary

An unnamed critic considers a poem called "Beyond Ichor," by fictional Irish poet Sean O'Shawn. The critic suggests that O'Shawn, his work infamous for being difficult to grasp, can only truly be understood in the context of his life. What follows is a poem that seems, on the surface at least, a chaotic ramble of poetic pretense. Interspersed throughout are the names, disconnected images, and situations without context, references to unknown events, and the odd mythological allusion.

The critic performs a line-by-line close reading of the poem, seizing primarily on the many names present throughout the text, explaining who each person is and explaining what he or she meant to the author. O'Shawn was fond of sailing but afraid of sharks. He refers to the man who encouraged his poetry and two mentally slow twins. He lived in a tower only six feet tall and was afraid of getting contaminated gifts after learning about the Trojan horse. O'Shawn also refers to a wacky mystic and a weird political fanatic, who believe that collecting string and ventriloquism, respectively, are salvation. What seems, in the poem, a profound unknown answer turns out, according to the critic, to be "tin." O'Shawn refers to his podiatrist, T.S. Eliot, Celtic myths, a desire to change humanity, William Blake, and the man who introduced him to his wife. The poem also includes references to a mountain his fiancé fell off. The final line refers to his mother, who wanted him to be a vacuum-cleaner salesman.

## The Irish Genius Analysis

As the poem ranges from invading Troy to retrieving underwear, from refusing appetizers to generational samba lessons, the experience of the poem might best be described as humorously absurd. Occasionally an idea will span a few lines of the poem, but generally, the work itself is so non-sequitur that each line seems to exist separately from the poem itself.

The critic speaks with the confidence of certainty, even suggesting that he might very well know the author's life better than the author itself. The critic's demeanor seems to imply that his interpretation is the true, complete and final understanding of the text. However, when one adds this critic's mountain of trivia to the already impenetrable work, the result seems all the more abstruse. Knowing that Fogarty's chin was an object of great ridicule, for example, doesn't explain why said chin is pointed at Alexandria, nor, for that matter, why Alexandria is mentioned at all.

# God (A Play)

## God (A Play) Summary

Two distraught Greeks, one an actor named Diabetes, the other a writer called Hepatitis, stand at the center of an empty amphitheater. They discuss the unsatisfying end to their upcoming play. The actor insists that the play must have an ending since everything in nature must have a beginning, middle, and end. The writer points out that this isn't true of a circle. The actor concedes this fact, but dismisses circles as not much fun. The two men discuss possible endings to the play, but can't seem to reconcile the audience's expectations with character and story continuity. The writer refuses to make his characters do anything on stage that they wouldn't do in real life.

The actor points out that he and the writer don't actually exist; they're both characters in a play on Broadway. The two Greeks stop for a moment to consider the audience, pondering the bizarre metaphysical implications of existing as a character inside a play. The actor proposes that idea that perhaps characters need not be limited by script or plot. The characters could then decide their own ending. The writer dismisses the whole idea as chaos, but the actor suggests that chaos in this case might equate to freedom.

Confounded by the many questions before him, the writer turns to the audience in search of a philosophy major. A girl, Doris Levine, is selected and invited to the stage. The writer introduces himself as Hepatitis, the actor as Diabetes. The writer, smitten with the girl's beauty, flirts shamelessly. The actor, however, angry at the play's interruption, threatens to call the author—the original author. Doris and the writer, meanwhile, discuss sex and the nature of reality.

The actor gets Woody Allen on the phone and complains of Doris's interruption. Hearing that Doris is attractive, Allen asks to speak to her. Doris, however, not a fan of Allen's work, flatly refuses. Stung by rejection, Allen suggests that they call him later to let him know how the play ended, and then hangs up. On hearing that Allen has washed his hands of the play, the actor does a double take. Doris asks the writer if she can have a part in the play. Her interview is cut short, however, when Trichinosis, another Greek, enters from the wings to share his idea of how the play might be ended.

Much to the writer's annoyance, Trichinosis's attraction to Doris momentarily distracts him from finishing his thought. Trichinosis eventually calls for a machine to be wheeled out onto the stage, explaining that elaborate device will allow an actor to descend from the heavens as Zeus. At the darkest moment of the play, Trichinosis explains, when all hope is lost, Zeus can swoop in and save the day. The actor loves the idea, but the writer does not, insisting that having God save the day would diminish man's responsibility for his own actions.

The characters discuss God, whether or not he exists, and what his existence means to humanity. The writer falls into a fit of agnostic angst while Doris, apparently aroused by

the idea of a universe made meaningless by God's non-existence, polls the audience for people willing to have sex with her. Suddenly, Lorenzo Miller appears from the wings. He introduces himself as a writer and claims that the audience is his creation. Some of the audience members argue the point, but Miller steadfastly insists that he wrote each and every one of them. Lorenzo then banters with members of the actual audience, commenting on how he chose to dress them and what he has planned for their characters in the near future.

Everyone has something to say about what it means to be fictional. The writer despairs at thought of being written, but Doris refuses to accept the idea. Lorenzo asserts that Doris having never experienced an orgasm is proof of her unreality. It occurs to them that none of them can die unless the playwright chooses to kill them off. The writer wonders aloud why the playwright would do such a thing. Just then, the character Blanch DuBois from A Streetcar Named Desire enters from the wings and joins the conversation. She explains that she has escaped her own play and is seeking refuge in this one. DuBois says that needs a play where God exists, where she can rest at last. She begs the writer to allow Zeus to triumph with his thunderbolt.

A demonstration of the god machine ensues. Bursitis descends from above, strapped in the Zeus machine, hurling thunderbolts. Everyone, including the writer, is held in awe by the religious spectacle. The writer rejoices that he is now sure to win the Athenian Drama Festival. He anxiously departs to perform some rewrites, asking Lorenzo to introduce the play in his absence. Everyone exits, save for Lorenzo. The chorus enters. Lorenzo introduces the play to a cheering audience. The play begins.

The actor Diabetes, in the role of slave Phidipides, discusses politics with a friend when his master interrupts to put Phidipides to work. The chorus laments Phidipides' enslavement, but Phidipides argues with chorus. He'd rather be a slave than be free. Slaves are taken care of, he explains, know what's expected of them, and need never make a decision. The chorus boos Phidipides. Doris, playing a fellow slave, arrives to join Phidipides in his labor, but shies away when Phidipides tries to kiss her. She explains that they are too different. He enjoys being a slave. She wants to be free. Phidipides argues that freedom is dangerous. So long as there is a need for heavy cleaning, Phidipides explains, slaves are safe.

The fates intervene. Bob and Wendy Fate, dressed like American tourists, ask Phidipides to carry a message to the king. In exchange, they offer him freedom. Phidipides refuses. The Fates offer to extend the offer of freedom to one other as well. Doris begs Phidipides to take the offer for her sake, but Phidipides continues to hesitate, prompting even the chorus to complain. Finally, the phone rings. It's Woody Allen insisting that Phidipides take the message to the king. Phidipides finally agrees.

Months pass as Phidipides travels, enduring hunger, thirst and harsh elements. Finally arriving at the palace, Phidipides meets a woman who was stabbed on the BMT while sixteen people looked on and didn't help. The woman warns Phidipides that the king will kill him if he brings bad news. Phidipides, very distraught, calls Doris up from the audience to complain about his situation. After considerable delay and reluctance, the

king eventually gets the answer out of Phidipides. The answer is yes. The question, the king reveals, was: Is there a God? Phidipides is relieved, thinking that news must indeed be good. The king, however, now certain that he will be punished for his many crimes, sentences Phidipides to death.

Phidipides calls to the heavens for divine intervention, but at first, the heavens are silent. Hepatitis, the writer, looks up and demands that they lower Zeus. Trichinosis complains that the machine is struck. Finally, actor portraying Zeus is clumsily lowered into view, hanging by the neck and quite dead. Everyone is stunned. The writer insists that everyone ad-lib the ending. The king tries to resume the execution, but Phidipides disarms his majesty and turns the weapon on the king himself, claiming that, with the ending unwritten, he is free to kill rather than be killed. Unfortunately, the sword is a prop, so Phidipides only succeeds in tickling the king. The king and his guard complain that Phidipides is ruining the play. The king leaves the stage to call his agent.

As the stage descends into chaos, the writer despairs that his message will go unheard by the audience. A woman in the audience berates the writer, insisting that the theater is for entertainment, and if the writer wanted to send a message, he should have used Western Union. On cue, a Western Union delivery boy rides up on a bicycle. After some fumbling, he reads aloud the author's message to the audience: God is dead. You're on your own. Inspired by their newly won freedom, most of the characters leave the stage. Only the writer and the actor remain. As the two discuss the ending of the play, everything cycles back to the opening conversation, the play ending as it began.

## God (A Play) Analysis

The writer Hepatitis worries that the existence of God undermines man's responsibility for his own actions. Ironically (or perhaps appropriately), Hepatitis is an excellent example of this very problem. Everything Hepatitis says or does over the course of the play is dictated by a script. Hepatitis can't take responsibility for his own actions because his actions literally aren't his own. Indeed Hepatitis is only a writer in the sense that he is cast as such. The play within a play that he claims as his own work is, much like Hepatitis himself, the work of Woody Allen. Hepatitis did not create and cannot create. He exists entirely as words on a page.

The play continually draws attention to its own artifice. The actors talk to the audience. The characters talk to the author. This self-reflexivity suggests that the play's reality, one in which people are without free will, doesn't stop at the end of the stage. Rather, Allen identifies that the audience as characters as well, suggesting that they too follow scripted lives. In light of the author's final message to the audience, the source of this artifice likely refers to the relationship between man and religion. Just as characters are bound by a script, Allen seems to say, man is bound by his faith in God.

Ultimately, the character Phidipides (played by the character Diabetes) makes Allen's argument for an atheistic self-governance. A willing slave, Phidipides allows the plot to cajole him into doing something that he knows is a bad idea, landing him in

circumstances unlikely for a free-willed individual. The plot railroads Phidipides in exactly the manner that the author, Hepatitis, promised it would not. Faced with imminent doom, Phidipides does as the plot demands, calling upon divine aid. When Zeus turns up dead, however, Phidipides realizes that he is now, at long last, unscripted. With God's dead and the script broken, freedom is possible.

In the context of the play, there are several instances of writer-as-god. Hepatitis, the supposed writer of the play within a play, represents the imperfect god. He wants to do right by his characters, but his motivation is skewed by a desire for praise and recognition. Ultimately, his vision is compromised by the alluring flash and spectacle of the Zeus machine. The freshly rewritten play, once performed, forces Phidipides to act contrary to his own nature, which of course violates Hepatitis' principles as a playwright. The implication seems to be that Hepatitis has sold out by using the deus ex machina, thus negatively impacting his creation.

The character of Woody, forever off stage and out of sight, represents a more deist conception of God. With his play finished and on the stage, Woody doesn't want to be bothered with its execution. Having created the world, he's now content to let it develop on its own. Here again, however, it's important to remember that this is not the author, but rather a character representing the author. Woody himself is subject to the plot, which might explain why he calls Phidipides later in the play to insist that he continue with the plot. This might also be real Allen complaining that even a hands off deity might be tempted to interfere.

# Fabulous Tales and Mythical Beasts

## Fabulous Tales and Mythical Beasts Summary

A short foreword introduces samples from what it describes as an anthology of imaginative creations. Most of the samples describe ridiculous, fictional creatures, which it then places in some sort of historical or mythological context. A nurk is a tiny bird that refers to itself in the third person. The flying snoll is a lizard with four hundred eyes, divided among seeing near and far. Emperor Ho Sin dreams of having a better palace for less money. He ends up seeing Mendel Goldblatt, a plumber, in the mirror, and can't tell if he is a dreamer or being dreamed. A frean is a sea monster with the head of an accountant. The great roe is part lion and part lion, but two different lions. A magician changes a man into a dove, and the man's wife asks if he can change her brother into three dollars. The woman ends up going on a spiritual journey and then going on welfare. The weal is a large mouse with song lyrics on its belly that can be played like an accordion. The last entry tells of a distant, unknown planet named Quelm that once played host to a race of humans.

## Fabulous Tales and Mythical Beasts Analysis

Allen's "Fabulous Tales" is a parody of apocryphal or mythological texts. The obvious fabrication here underscores the crisis of credibility often associated with ancient texts of unknown authorship. Attempting to legitimize the works by linking them to existing history and mythology, meanwhile, speaks of revisionism. Allen's humor here, based largely on absurdity and hyperbole, and parallels the fantastic language of many mythological traditions.

# But Soft... Real Soft

## But Soft... Real Soft Summary

The essay begins by questioning the authenticity of Shakespeare's works, citing that many modern critics attribute his writing to other authors. The book of one such critic, the essay reveals, makes a strong argument that Shakespeare and Marlowe were the same person. The essay then descends into speculative chaos, positing that perhaps Anne Hathaway married Marlowe, not Shakespeare, and that she took up Marlowe's pen after his untimely death. From there, the essay marches through a series of wild theories and speculations regarding the identities and contributions of Sir Francis Bacon and Alexander Pope (who is actually Pope Alexander). It does its best to confuse the identities of Samuel Pepys, Samuel Johnson, Raleigh, and John Milton. The whole mess, the essay asserts, is caricatured in the tea party of Lewis Caroll's Alice in Wonderland.

## But Soft... Real Soft Analysis

The story "But Soft... Real Soft" is a parody of the academic who, in an effort to ascertain truth, creates a history of one part fact, three parts speculation. It speaks as to the entropic relationship between time and information. As the essay says in its conclusion, the relevant people are no longer living; they can neither confirm nor deny the essay's theories. Woody Allen seems to express the opinion here that, since history is itself a constructed concept, the objective truth of whether Shakespeare authored his own works is unknowable and therefore irrelevant.

# If the Impressionists Had Been Dentists

## If the Impressionists Had Been Dentists Summary

Vincent van Gogh, the dentist, writes to Theo that one of his clients is suing him because the bridge he made would not fit. She could not understand his artistry. He writes again that Degas criticized one of van Gogh's dental X-rays. Van Gogh is broke and asks Theo for money. He's run out of Novocain and put his patient to sleep by reading Dreiser.

Vincent writes again that he's sharing an office with Gauguin, but in the next letter, Vincent is unhappy with the arrangement. Gauguin is erratic and unwell, mentally. Vincent also feels sorry for Toulouse-Lautrec, who cannot be a good dentist because of his size. In the next letter, Vincent writes that he's in love with Claire Memling. He calls her in for a follow-up even though it's only been four days. After a fight, Gauguin heads off for Tahiti. Vincent asks Claire to marry him, and she rejects him, refusing to spit for anyone except an orthodontist. In the final letter, Vincent admits that he sent Claire his cut-off ear as a birthday present because all the shops were closed.

## If the Impressionists Had Been Dentists Analysis

Told in an expostulatory format, this work parodies a series of letters written from Vincent van Gogh to his brother Theo. Woody Allen's version, however, presupposes that Vincent van Gogh, along with several other famous impressionists, became a dentist rather than a painter. The effect is humorous, as van Gogh puts artistic expression ahead of dental health, an approach that proves ineffective for filling cavities. This fictional van Gogh complains to his brother about his choice of careers, financial woes, and being spurned by his heart's desire. He also comments on the other impressionists turned dentists, all of whom seem just as poorly suited to the vocation.

Allen says something about human nature in his parody of van Gogh's letters, suggesting that the self exists separately from circumstances. Even as a dentist, van Gogh is driven by aesthetics, and ultimately he has more or less the same relationships with the people around him. The context of dentistry, however, lends an absurdity to the narrative that strongly contrasts with van Gogh's tone of self-absorbed melodrama. The result is hilarious.

# No Kaddish for Weinstein

## No Kaddish for Weinstein Summary

Weinstein, overcome with angst, lies in bed contemplating his wasted life. At fifty-one, he never learned to drive. He recalls how, after a precocious childhood, he grew increasingly isolated due to the weight of "untold injustices," and how, later, he toyed with the idea of communism. This inevitably led him to face the House Un-American Activities Committee, where he, mostly due panic-stricken confusion, failed to incriminate anyone else.

After stumbling in the shower, Weinstein considers how bad the week has been, agonizing over a bad haircut received the day before. On his way to make his alimony payment, he thinks back upon his failed marriage. His wife, Harriet, was too much like his mother. Other women, like LuAnne, intimidated him with their accomplishments.

Weinstein rings the bell of Harriet's apartment. The two talk uncomfortably until Weinstein finally admits that he can't make his alimony payment. The mood turns to a mixture of anger and guilt. Aborted affections give way to an exchange of barbs. Weinstein bids Harriet farewell. Outside, Weinstein inexplicably begins crying from his ears.

## No Kaddish for Weinstein Analysis

The somber language of this piece contrasts with Weinstein's almost pedestrian-seeming problems. Weinstein agonizes over never having learned to drive, over a bad haircut. He, like half the Americans today, has a failed marriage. Since none of these issues seems to warrant the soul weary depression described in the narrative, the effect produces a sense of ridiculous ennui, a melodramatic parody of the slice of life vignette. The tears spilling forth from Weinstein's ears affirm both the intensity and the peculiarity of his emotion.

A sensitive reader might find the whole matter less than humorous, as depression of this sort could be clinical. In this light, Weinstein, while equally strange, is also tragic. The humorous elements only serve to deepen the sense of tragedy, making Weinstein seem the butt of some cosmic joke.

Weinstein seems to be a continuation of Allen's self-parody in "Selections." In the end of the story, Weinstein cries out of his ears, since he can't even seem to cry right. This also happens to Allen in "Selections." His sorrow is turned to comedy, almost against his will.

# Fine Times: An Oral Memoir

## Fine Times: An Oral Memoir Summary

An unknown authority introduces a collection of excerpts from the memoirs of Big Flo, supposedly one of the most colorful speakeasy owners of the American prohibition. Big Flo then takes over with a first person narrative, talking about the early years as a dancer working for a leg-breaker named Ned Small. Ned, long an admirer of Flo's sass, proposes marriage to Flo. She accepts and the two are married. Days later, Ned is killed by Al Capone's men, leaving Flo with a sizable inheritance that she quickly squanders. Flo goes to work for Ed Wheeler, where she dances on the same stage with President Hoover. When Ed Wheeler is also killed by Capone, Flo uses the money she has saved to buy the Three Deuces speakeasy, which then becomes the town's hot spot.

Three Deuces plays host to numerous names and celebrities. Flo tries unsuccessfully to help Babe Ruth win the affections of a dancer. She also claims to have helped Nick the Greek become "The Greek" even though, in the story she tells, Nick actually fails to win the title from fellow Greek Jake. Finally, singer Jolson insists on singing at the Three Deuces despite Flo's repeated refusals and threats. When Jolson sings anyway, Flo sells the speakeasy before Jolson can even finish the song.

## Fine Times: An Oral Memoir Analysis

Flo's story is an anecdotal first person narrative. The language is casual and prone to asides and digressions, told in the name-dropping style of gangland America during the time of prohibition. The story, however, is laced with Woody Allen's humor, including an abundance of nonsensical detail and the occasional inexplicable event (such as Ed Wheeler's head suddenly catching fire.) Since this is this is a firsthand account from an identified (and thus accountable) narrator, rather than an anonymous semi-omniscient voice, the story's peculiarities make it seem all the more surreal.

# Slang Origins

## Slang Origins Summary

While this essay claims it will reveal the origins of certain slang expressions, the author freely admits that he didn't bother consulting a credible authority, relying instead on his own common sense and the opinions of friends.

The author claims that the phrase "humble pie" comes from France, where the minister of justice once suffocated, dying in humiliation while attempting to eat a huge "jumbo pie." The word "jumbo" eventually became "jumble" and that eventually became "humble" due to Spanish influence. Across the channel, meanwhile, the phrase "take it on the lam" was born from an English game called "lamming" in which people affixed feathers to themselves using a tube of ointment. The relationship to its modern use is unclear to the author.

To "get into a beef" comes from the Renaissance when, the author reveals, slabs of meat were used in courting rituals. The meat was then kept by the couple and worn as a hat on special occasions. If the man was unfaithful, the woman would use the beef to publicly scorn her husband, and thus it was said that the couple was "having a beef." Also of courting origin, "to look down one's nose" came from Persia, where women with desirably long noses would look down upon their proposing suitors.

The word "spiffy" comes from a renowned fop of Victorian England named Spiffy, whose eccentric taste in clothes involved wearing thinly slice salmon. Similarly incredible, the phrase "beat the band," the author suggests, comes from a custom of attacking with clubs any symphony orchestra whose conductor smiled during Berlioz.

Using the term "fiddlesticks" began many years ago in Austria, when a noble exclaimed his indignation upon accidentally receiving a box of cello bows instead of his expected wedding gift. Finally, the phrase "the cat's pajamas" comes from an old German comedy routine in which one character, supposedly hard of hearing, mishears the phrase "that chap's pajamas."

## Slang Origins Analysis

Allen again touches on the entropic relationship between time and information, parodying those authorities who claim to "know" in the absence of verifiable truths. It's interesting to note that, though the author of this essay admits that he isn't a linguistic authority, he doesn't sort out which of his explanations are based on his friend's opinions and which are based on his own "common sense."

Once the author begins his discussion, he doesn't again call attention to the artifice of the essay. He presents each account as if it were a matter of historical fact, something which the reader could research on his or her own independently. The details, however,

are so incredible that they, literally, defy credibility, forcing the reader to recall, despite the authoritative tone, that this is fiction. This serves to kill the compulsory credibility that readers often grant to an authoritative tone, perhaps nurturing a healthier, more skeptical approach to academic reading.

# Characters

## Woody Allenappears in Selections from the Allen Notebook, God, and The Early Essay

In "Selections," Allen is little more than a parody of himself, a humorous performance of Woody Allen, as he is perceived by the public: as an absurd, hyperaware, worrying comedian. The idea that Allen is presented here as the private self is ironic considering that, clearly, this work is based on the impression he's given the world.

The character of Woody in "God," existing as nothing more than a largely indifferent disembodied voice, represents a deist conception of divinity. Like the deist God, Woody is content to not interfere with his now living and breathing creation. Instead, he tells Diabetes to let him know how the play turns out. This cosmology suggests that God created the created the Earth and, having turned it over to mankind, washed his hands of it entirely.

In "The Early Essays," Woody Allen isn't himself so much as he is a name. Allen is parodying the essays of venerated authors who are as much recognized for their famous names, as they are for the wisdom that they impart. Here again, as he does elsewhere in the Without Feathers, Allen drives a wedge between discourse and content, denying the compulsory credibility that comes with mere name recognition.

## Dr. Osgood Mulford Twelgeappears in Examining Psychic Phenomena

Twelge, a paranormal investigator, is the author of a soon-to-be-released book entitled Boo! Twelge, with three names and the title "Dr.," as well as the title of professor of ectoplasm at Colombia University, is presented as an authority and acts as the narrator of excerpts of his own book. Twelge's accuracy and intelligence are taken for granted because of his position and title, something that Allen purposefully makes fun of in his presentation.

Twelge is not a character, precisely, but instead a fictional author of a book on parapsychology. When excerpts of Twelge's book are presented, his presence behind the words of the work is clearly felt, and this shows how the writer presenting supposed facts creates reality through the presentation. Because the stories Twelge tells are ludicrous, his haughty title and position also, ultimately, are ludicrous.

## Sir Arthur Nurneyappears in Examining Psychic Phenomena

As chronicled in one of Dr. Osgood Mulford Twelge's case histories, Nurney's life is changed when he unexpectedly and spontaneously teleported from his bathtub to the string section of the Vienna Symphony Orchestra.

## J.C. Dubbsappears in Examining Psychic Phenomena

J.C. Dubbs, a man from one of Dr. Osgood Mulford Twelge's case files, saw the ghost of a brother who had died fourteen years previously.

## Albert Sykesappears in Examining Psychic Phenomena

Another subject of Dr. Osgood Mulford Twelge, Albert Sykes reports that he's experienced several instances of his spirit leaving his body.

## Leonidappears in A Guide to Some of the Lesser Ballets

In the ballet Dimitri, the young man Leonid falls for Natasha, who in turn falls in love with a puppet. Leonid attempts to murder the puppet, but fails on account of the puppet not being alive.

## Natashaappears in A Guide to Some of the Lesser Ballets

In the ballet Dimitri, Natasha is the young woman who spurns Leonid's affections. Instead she falls in love with a puppet named Dmitri.

## Yvetteappears in A Guide to Some of the Lesser Ballets

Yvette is a character in a ballet called The Spell. She is cursed by the magician Von Epps to exist as half human, half swan. She kills herself by running into a brick wall.

## Von Eppsappears in A Guide to Some of the Lesser Ballets

In the ballet The Spell, Von Epps curses Yvette to be half human and half swan.

## Prince Sigmundappears in A Guide to Some of the Lesser Ballets

Prince Sigmund is a character in a ballet who falls in love with Yvette, a woman who is cursed by the magician Von Epps to exist as half human, half swan. Sigmund, however, is engaged to someone named Justine. He first agrees to save Yvette, then decides to marry Justine, and finally leaves her when Yvette is found.

## Justineappears in A Guide to Some of the Lesser Ballets

In the ballet The Spell, Justine is Prince Sigmund's fiancé.

## Godappears in The Scrolls

In "The Scrolls," God behaves less like a divine creator and more like a drunken fraternity brother. This Biblical parody pokes fun at all of the characters of the Bible, especially the divine God. God mistreats Job merely to win a bet with Satan, and he refuses to admit to Job that he's doing anything but completing a mysterious divine plan. When Job finally calls him to task, God simply pleads that might makes right.

God also pranks Abraham into almost killing his son, and then he says that Abraham does not have a sense of humor and will follow any instructions given to him in a resonant voice. This depiction of God has more characteristics of an ordinary, fallible human (or even a particularly ignorant, annoying human) than of a divine creator, making him akin to the Greek and Roman portrayals of gods who were jealous, lustful, and arbitrary.

## Jobappears in The Scrolls

Job is tormented by God for reasons unknown to him, prompting Job to dare question God's judgment. By doing this, Job breaks out of the (miserable) life designated for him by God in order to exert free will. Rather than address Job's concerns, God instead dismisses Job as a foolish mortal, suggesting that Job couldn't possibly understand the will of God. The truth is that the will of God is irrational, just as it appears.

Job represents the common man who, having allowed himself to be defined by God's plan, is nevertheless subjected to pain and suffering. His reward for following God's directions is basically torture. Job's story harkens back to the ageless question: If God is both good and omnipotent, then why does he allow bad things to happen to good people?

## Abrahamappears in The Scrolls

Abraham is a dutiful follower of God who goes to kill his son, because God tells him to. God accuses Abraham of having no sense of humor for not realizing the command was a joke.

## Isaacappears in The Scrolls

Isaac is the son of Abraham, who God, as a practical joke on Abraham, demands as a sacrifice.

## Sarahappears in The Scrolls

Sarah is the Biblical mother to Isaac and wife of Abraham. She questions Abraham's assertion that God told him to sacrifice Isaac.

## Jorgen Lovborgappears in Lovborg's Women Considered

Jorgen Lovborg is a neurotic playwright who, although he began writing at age fourteen, saw his first play produced at age sixty-one. His depiction of women is supposedly influenced by his own heartbreaking relationships with the opposite sex. The character based on his wife of eight years depicts a woman who is both abusive and emasculating. The theatrical proxy of Lovborg's mother meanwhile, Mrs. Sanstad, is cold and manipulative. If the parallels are true, this makes Loveborg analogous to Dorf and Henrick, the male characters in his play who are abused by the female characters.

## Berteappears in Lovborg's Women Considered

In Lovborg's "Mellow Pears," Henrick is the son of Mrs. Sanstad and lover to Berte. He doesn't appear in the provided excerpt, but his mother depicts him as foolish and neurotic. This character is likely a parallel for Lovborg himself.

## Mrs. Sanstadappears in Lovberg's Women Considered

In Lovborg's "Mellow Pears," Mrs. Sanstad is the manipulative mother of Henrick. She manipulates Henrick's lover into comitting suicide. She is thought to be based on Lovberg's own mother.

## Dorfappears in Lovborg's Women Considered

Dorf is a character in Lovborg's "While We Three Hemorrhage." Driven by wife Netta, Dorf hopes to claim for himself the disease inherited by his brother. Dorf likely represents Lovborg himself.

## Nettaappears in Lovborg's Women Considered

Netta is a character in Lovborg's "While We Three Hemorrhage." Netta is Dorf's abusive wife. She pushes Dorf to claim for himself the disease inherited by his brother. Netta is based on Lovborg's wife of eight years.

## Kaiser Lupowitzappears in The Whore of Mensa

Kaiser Lupowitz is a private detective in the style of Sam Spade. The story is a parody of noir detective fiction, and Kaiser is the penultimate noir detective. He is immune to the seductions (albeit intellectual) that ruin the men around him, and he is quick to follow leads into the underworld.

Kaiser is hired by Word Babock to bust a blackmailing madam. Kaiser is observant and clever, with an edge of street wisdom that allows him to infiltrate the intellectual whorehouse. His (correct) assumption that the brainy call girls are little more than trained pseudo-intellectuals shows that he is a skeptic by nature, always looking for the con.

Kaiser's many ruminations throughout the story, meanwhile, show him as a thoughtful man capable of stepping back to see, and appreciate, the big picture. These ruminations are part of the noir detective genre, what would become a voice over in film. Finally, Kaiser's willingness to con Sherry by pretending to be a police officer demonstrates that Kaiser is goal-oriented, more concerned with the end rather than the means by which it is achieved. His goal is always to solve the case, and no female attractions will distract him from that goal.

## Word Babockappears in The Whore of Mensa

A joy buzzer manufacturer and closet intellectual, Word hires detective Kaiser Lupowitz to assist him with blackmailer madame Flossie, who has threatened to reveal to Word's wife that he has been paying young women to discuss literature with him.

## Flossieappears in The Whore of Mensa

Flossie is the madame attempting to blackmail Word for ten thousand dollars. At the end of the story, Kaiser discovers that Flossie is a surgically altered transvestite with the body of a man but the voice of a woman.

## Sherryappears in The Whore of Mensa

Sherry is a young college student who discusses literature with men in exchange for money.

## Kleinmanappears in Death

Kleinman is pulled from his bed and conscripted by vigilantes to join in the hunt of a neighborhood killer. From German, the name Kleinman translates to mean "small one." Kleinman is the little guy, the average Joe. He hasn't heard of the neighborhood slayings because his world, too, is small. Kleinman's first concern, unsurprisingly, is with his job, his health, and his continued safety; he's no hero. Kleinman is reluctant to trade his warm bed for the cold city streets. He is afraid to be alone and afraid that he might actually find the killer he's supposedly looking for. In short, Kleinman behaves as any sane, ordinary man might behave if he were suddenly plunged into irrational circumstances.

While perhaps not brave, Kleinman is a rational force. He inquires about the killer's methods. He asks for more information about Hacker's plan. He wants to know what others expect him to do. Even as he is threatened by the killer himself, Kleinman's first instinct is to reason with the maniac. Throughout the play, however, Kleinman's many questions go unanswered or ignored, and his ideas are dismissed. Other characters see Kleinman's rational mind as a flaw, something deserving of scorn. This creates an atmosphere of inverted reason, where the illogical replaces common sense.

Intelligent or not, Kleinman puts his trust in an unknowable plan over and above his own reason. While his refusal to take the doctor's tragically poor advice shows that Kleinman is capable of independent thought and action, he nevertheless fails to give up on Hacker's plan. Kleinman has, for whatever reason, substituted his own rational self-interest for the interests of a complete unknown.

## Hackerappears in Death

While only briefly seen in the play, Hacker's presence is felt throughout. As the man with the plan, Hacker is the fulcrum for the entire story. However, since no one else can know the entirely of the plan, Hacker can't be held accountable for whether or not it works. This is doubly true once he's dead.

When Hacker orders Kleinman to join the vigilantes, he speaks as a man who expects obedience, as if contradiction were unthinkable. Kleinman isn't permitted to refuse, or to question. Hacker gives his orders, and moves on, secure in the certainty that Kleinman will comply. The fact that Hacker never leaves any instructions for Kleinman, however, raises serious doubts as to the wisdom of his leadership.

Once dead, Hacker represents the inaccessible God who, having created the context in which everyone operates, isn't available to answer questions about that context. The many splinter factions which arise from his death represent the many facets of religion, each one a separate sliver of Hacker's now shattered plan, each sliver perhaps confusing itself with the whole.

## Maniac (a.k.a. Killer, Murderer, Strangler)appears in Death

The maniac is the person responsible for the string of murders throughout the city. He doesn't kill out of desire, nor does he enjoy killing. The maniac kills simply, because he is the killer. He must kill. This sort of circular logic, coupled here as it is with violence, defines a triumph of the irrational.

The killer is a central character of the play in that all of the characters spend their time searching for him and trying to understand him. However, there's nothing further to understand about the killer. He's simply insane. This makes the maniac a non-person. He, like a character in a play, can't choose to be anything other than what he is.

## Doctorappears in Death

A member of the vigilante squad, the doctor wants to find the killer and dissect him for the sake of science. The doctor represents science and its desire to understand everything unknown, since the doctor hopes to understand the killer and his reasoning. By breaking apart people into pieces, like a machine, the doctor thinks he can understand them. This marks the doctor not only as a fool but possibly also as criminally insane. He cannot see that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

The most dangerous thing about the doctor is his veneer of credibility. As a man of science, he is assumed wise and rational, when in truth he is no less irrational than any of the other vigilantes. Simply because of the title "doctor," the doctor is assumed to have authority based on superior knowledge and abilities. The falsity of this is

particularly evident when the doctor tries to lead Kleinman into the dead end where he himself is killed.

## Manappears in Death

An unnamed man answers Kleinman's cries for help as the doctor is dying. The same unnamed character of "Man" later demands, at knife point, that Kleinman pick a side in the growing civil war. Man represents the sometimes irrational public. While Man is reasonably amiable under normal circumstances, he is prone to blind emotionalism when placed under duress. He is, in essence, a one-man mob.

## Hans Spiroappears in Death

Hans Spiro is a quasi-religious psychic who divines truth by way of smell. He nearly has Kleinman lynched on the strength of his word alone when, after smelling Kleinman up and down, he accuses Kleinman of being the killer. Hans represents an arbitrary religious authority whom people believe as a matter of faith.

## Ginaappears in Death

Gina is the young prostitute (and fellow vigilante) that Kleinman literally runs into while wandering the city at night. She seems intelligent and thoughtful, but also somewhat mercenary when she charges Kleinman six dollars for the kiss. Later, when Kleinman is accused of being the killer, Gina spontaneously testifies against him.

## Inspector Fordappears in Match Wits with Inspector Ford

A parody of Ellery Queen and other similar mystery detectives, Inspector Ford is a whodunit detective. As a parody, however, Inspector Ford lacks the intelligence and deductive ability that most fictional detectives supposedly have. Like many characters in Allen's writings, the inspector represents a kind of authority. Because he has a title, "Inspector," and a position that implies brains and capability, the reader assumes Inspector Ford has these qualities. The reader is quickly disillusioned.

Practically speaking, Inspector Ford's detective work is poor. His interrogation techniques are bizarre, and his conclusions are unfathomable. Woody Allen uses his patent silliness to make ridiculous leaps of logic in Ford's conclusions. Although Ford tends to make many "keen" observations at a crime scene, most are implausible or completely irrelevant. When the solution is revealed, it has nothing to do with the setup, and in one case, the "solution" proves that Ford's accusation was incorrect.

While Inspector Ford is the focus of the story, he isn't so much a character as he is a parody of an archetype. The parody shows the reader the author's significant role in the

drama. Inspector Ford can have no intelligence that isn't given to him by the author, and only the author can note what is "intelligent" and what isn't. In this case, intelligence is merely absurdity.

## Kermit Krollappears in Match Wits with Inspector Ford

Supposedly kidnapped, Kroll returns home after paying a large ransom. Detective Ford determines that Kermit colluded with his captors to con his parents out of money.

## Ivesappears in Match Wits with Inspector Ford

Ives is Mr. Wheel's manservant. Inspector Ford determines that Ives murdered Mr. Wheel.

## Sean O'Shawnappears in The Irish Genius

O'Shawn is a fictional Irish poet whose work is considered difficult to grasp. The sample of his work that the reader sees, a short poem, is so obscure and disconnected as to be ridiculous. In fact, the poem itself is a parody of poetry that uses obscure references and difficult to understand language. Allen's parody implies that O'Shawn's work isn't merely difficult but more probably absurd and meaningless. O'Shawn may be specifically a parody of James Joyce, who wrote the very difficult book Ulysses, but many examples exist of obscure poetry.

In the story "The Irish Genius," a critic tries to put O'Shawn's work in context by providing a litany of trivia about the poet. Each line is examined for connections to the poet's life and experiences. Instead of revealing meaning, the unnamed critic succeeds only in demonstrating that O'Shawn himself is just as difficult to grasp as his poetry. Based on the bizarre collection of anecdotes and trivia surrounding the poet, the reader must conclude that O'Shawn is neurotic, erratic and likely to blow chickpeas through a straw at those who offend him. Both O'Shawn and his work seem unknowable.

## Hepaitis (a.k.a. Writer)appears in God

Hepatitis is desperate to win the Athenian Drama Festival, but he can't think of a satisfying way to end his play. His ambitions are at odds with his principles. While Hepatitis wants to entertain the audience and win the contest, he also wants to preserve the sanctity of his characters by not forcing them to behave in a manner that is contrary to their nature. Unfortunately, he can't think of a plausible ending that will satisfy both requirements.

When Trichinosis first suggests the possible ending in which Zeus saves the day, Hepatitis doesn't like the idea. Divine intervention, he feels, only serves to cheapen the role of humanity. Once Hepatitis sees the impressive deus ex machina in action,

however, he is overcome with awe. The only thing he can think of his how impressed the judges will be by such a device. Hepatitis agrees to use the deus ex machina and immediately rewrites his play. When the play is finally performed, the protagonist is railroaded through the story in a manner that is contrary to his nature.

Hepatitis represents the complacency of great men. He knows right from wrong, and as a writer, Hepatitis has himself the powers of a God. Nevertheless, he willingly chooses to compromise his art for personal gain. As a result, his characters (and the actors who play them) are made to suffer. This is also akin to the idea of an imperfect god; the god who recognizes the existence of evil, but who is himself subject to it. Hepatitis's name, of course, is a bit of humor, as Allen picks medical terms as Greek names.

## Diabetes (a.k.a. Actor, a.k.a. Euripedes)appears in God

Although the actor Diabetes comes off as conservative early in the play, when he insists that the play have an ending and, later, that Doris not interfere, Diabetes also first proposes the idea of unscripted characters. When the play begins to unravel, Diabetes makes the unprecedented decision to take a bathroom break, something that would've been impossible in a tightly scripted context. This foreshadows the decision he will make later in the role of Euripides, when again the script fails.

Diabetes, especially in the role of Euripides, is the author's argument for self-governance. Because he is willing and able to act outside of a scripted context, Diabetes shows that he exists as an individual, someone who doesn't need a script to complete himself. It's interesting to note, however, that Diabetes is only able to achieve this freedom in the absence of a script. So long as the script is present, the actor is forced to act within its confines. This might be construed as the author's argument for atheism, since it appears that a man can only define himself if there are no definitions imposed upon him. Diabetes' name, of course, is a bit of humor, as Allen picks medical terms as Greek names.

## Bursitisappears in God

Bursitis is a Greek who is forced by Trichinosis to use the deus ex machina to play the role of Zeus in Hepatitis' play. The machine malfunctions and, rather than descending from the heavens as Zeus, Bursitis is instead accidentally killed. Bursitis's name is part of a joke throughout "God," where the author uses medical terms instead of Greek names.

## Doris Levineappears in God

Doris is the young, attractive philosophy minor that Hepatitis calls up from the audience to help him answer a few of his more nagging questions. Being from beyond the third wall, Doris represents a disruption to the play. She is, with her attitude as well as her beauty, the outside factor that throws the play off kilter. Doris is the only character in the

play-within-a-play who isn't assigned another name. This suggests that Doris, who exists outside the context of the play, also exists outside the context of the second play.

## Blanche DuBoisappears in God

A character borrowed from A Streetcar Named Desire, Blanche escaped from her own play in the hopes of finding a play where God exists.

## Bob and Wendy Fateappears in God

Bob and Wendy, together, serve as the hand of fate. They provide the largely ineffective impetus for Euripides to begin his journey. Ultimately it is the phone call from Woody Allen himself, not the fates, who sends Euripides on his way.

## Kingappears in God

The King in Allen's play "God" is King Oedipus. He tries to kill Euripides for delivering a message that affirms God's existence. The king fears divine punishment for all his crimes.

## Lorenzo Millerappears in God

Lorenzo Miller claims to be the author responsible for the audience attending the play "God." He also introduces Hepatitis's play-within-a-play.

## Trichinosisappears in God

Trichinosis is the inventor and marketer of the deus ex machina, a machine that will allow the god Zeus to come down at the end of a play and save the hero. He rents the machine to Hepatitis, but it fails horribly during the final act of the play, accidentally killing Bursitis.

## Vincent van Goghappears in If the Impressionists Had Been Dentists

Based on the real-life impressionistic painter of the same name, the Vincent van Gogh in Allen's short story is a mediocre dentist with the vocation-inappropriate sensibilities of an artist. He values the aesthetic over the practical and treats dentistry itself not as a craft or service profession but as an outlet for self-expression. The story is a collection of Vincent's letters, and so he serves as the narrator, depicting the trials and tribulations of an artist trapped in the life of a dentist, where no one appreciates his great and creative work. The complaints of the dentist are nearly identical to those of the artist.

Vincent van Gogh proves moody, anxious and perhaps a bit paranoid. He is passionately obsessed with a woman named Claire Memling until one day she rejects him, refusing to rinse for anything less than a fully licensed orthodontist. To prove his love to Claire, van Gogh cuts off his own ear and gives it to her as a birthday present.

Van Gogh's character pokes fun at the accepted temperament of artists, and by placing someone of artistic temperament into the everyday profession of dentist, Allen highlights the ridiculousness of van Gogh's behavior. At the end of the series of letters, van Gogh mentions that he should have become an artist, since the life would have been more regular. Allen seems to be indicating here that people are responsible for their fates. Van Gogh, whether a dentist or an artist, is the same tortured, dissatisfied soul. No change of profession would change his personality or his reaction to the world.

## Claire Memlingappears in If the Impressionists Had Been Dentists

Claire is Vincent van Gogh's obsession, based on the real Vincent van Gogh's love. Ultimately, she rejects him, prompting Vincent to try winning her affection by offering his own severed ear as a birthday present.

## Weinsteinappears in No Kaddish for Weinstein

Weinstein is a depressed man, deeply dissatisfied with his life. At fifty-one, he feels that it's too late to change course, and so Weinstein watches the world through defeated eyes, unable to hope for anything better. Weinstein's ennui is so deep that he becomes a parody of grief and depression themselves. In this way, Weinstein's depression is similar to Woody Allen's anxieties in "Selections from the Allen Notebooks."

Weinstein feels inferior to women. Attaining love seems impossible to him, since he can never feel worthy of a woman's attention. Because of this feeling, Weinstein is self-defeating. Still, Weinstein has a lover named LuAnne, showing that his feelings of inadequacy are perhaps unnecessary. He is both tragic and absurd in his grief.

At the end of "No Kaddish for Weinstein," Weinstein cries, but he can't even do that right. He cries out his ears (something Allen also mentions in "Selections"). This is the ultimate failure. As much as he's filled with passionate depression, Weinstein's emotions turn out to be comic. Weinstein's world is an earmark of Woody Allen's style, pathos overdone to the point of comedy, the very definition of bathos.

## LuAnneappears in No Kaddish for Weinsteain

LuAnne is Weinstein's lover. She unintentionally intimidates Weinstein with her sexual prowess.

## Big Floappears in Fine Time: An Oral Memoir

Dancer and speakeasy owner Big Flo takes great pride in having been there and done that. She makes a point of knowing everyone who's anyone and never lets anybody push her around. This gives Big Flo, also, a type of self-appointed authority. She claims that she knows what's going on and that she knows everyone who's anyone.

As happens throughout Allen's stories, this authority turns out to be false. When Big Flo claims to tell the story of Nick the Greek's victory over Jake the Greek, the story she tells has the opposite ending. Does Big Flo even know the truth? Many of Big Flo's stories, even the ones which are set up as victories, end in failure. This suggests that she values her losses as much as her gains.

## Nick the Greekappears in Fine Times: An Oral Memoir

A regular at Big Flo's speakeasy, Nick wins the title "The Greek" from Jake the Greek. Big Flo says that she will tell the story of how this happens, but in the story, Nick does not win the title, which Jake the Greek keeps.

## Jake the Greekappears in Fine Times: An Oral Memoir

Jake the Greek is a regular at Big Flo's speakeasy. He holds the title "The Greek" before Nick the Greek.

## Jolsonappears in Fine Time: An Oral Memoir

Jolson, a name borrowed from the famous singer Al Jolson, is a singer who wants to perform at Big Flo's speakeasy. Big Flo sells the property just to keep Jolson from finishing a song in her establishment.

## Ed Wheelerappears in Fine Times: An Oral Memoir

Ed Wheeler is Big Flo's second boss. Ed dies when his head suddenly catches fire. Al Capone is believed to be responsible for Ed's death.

## Ned Smallsappears in Fine Times: An Oral Memoir

Ned Smalls, speakeasy proprietor and resident leg-breaker, is Big Flo's husband until he's rubbed out by Al Capone just a few days after the wedding.

# Objects/Places

## Pig Bladderappears in collection

Woody Allen's brother has a habit of beating him over the head with a pig bladder. This is an example of one of Allen's absurd prop references, often involving animals.

## Vienna Symphony Orchestraappears in collection

Sir Arthur Nurney suddenly appears in the string section of the Vienna Symphony Orchestra.

## Boo!appears in collection

Boo! is the title of the book by Dr. Osgood Mulford Twelge about psychic phenomena.

## Ferris Wheelappears in collection

Leonid and Natasha meet when Leonid falls out of a ferris wheel.

## Shirtsappears in collection

The merchant sells shirts. Taking God's advice, he eventually adds a little alligator over the pocket to become successful, making his competitors miserable at the same time.

## Henhouseappears in collection

The henhouse of I Prefer to Yodel, roofed with inferior mortar, collapses.

## Hunter College Bookstoreappears in collection

The bookstore is a front for Flossie's call girl service.

## The City at Nightappears in collection

Gina and Kleinman discuss the city at night and how its empty stillness resembles outer space.

## Copseappears in collection

Woody Allen discusses the futility of tripping through a copse to pick violets.

## Boston Tea Partyappears in collection

The essay gives a peculiar account of the Boston Tea Party, where after the Americans dump the tea off the ships, Indians dump British people into the water and then British disguised as tea dump each other.

## Television Setappears in collection

Mr. Walker's body is found inside of his television set.

## Trojan Horseappears in collection

O'Shawn's poem has Agamemnon refusing to open the gates for the Trojan Horse.

## Deus Ex Machinaappears in collection

The Deus Ex Machina, also referred to as the Zeus suit, is the machine that will allow Zeus to save the day at the end of the play.

## Nurkappears in collection

A nurk is a tiny bird that refers to itself in the third person.

## The Flying Snollappears in collection

The flying snoll is a lizard with four hundred eyes, divided among seeing near and far.

## Freanappears in collection

A frean is a sea monster with the head of an accountant.

## The Great Roeappears in collection

The great roe is part lion and part lion, but two different lions.

## Wealappears in collection

The weal is a large mouse with song lyrics on its belly that can be played like an accordion.

## Quelmappears in collection

Quelm is a legendary, far away planet which once played host to a strain of humankind.

## Bakeryappears in collection

Marlowe is supposedly killed (or merely whisked away) after an argument in a bakery.

## Dentist Chairappears in If the Impressionists Had Been Dentists

Much of the narrative takes place in, around, or just above a dentist's chair.

## Bedappears in No Kaddish for Weinstein

Weinstein's bed represents his feelings of inner deadness and is related to his sexual insecurities.

## Three Deucesappears in Fine Times: An Oral Memoir

Three Deuces is Big Flo's speakeasy, where much of the later story takes place.

## Jumbo Pieappears in Slang Origins

The French minister of justice suffocated while trying to eat a jumbo pie.

# Themes

## The Plan

From Hacker's plan, to the tyranny of the script, to God's demand that Abraham sacrifice Isaac, the plan is a force that limits individuality and free will. Woody Allen equates this force to that of religious faith, even though God, as God, only appears in the "The Scrolls." Elsewhere in the collection, the plan is depicted as a human failing, a willingness to be defined rather than to define oneself. This is true of Kleinman, who, despite all common sense, followed the plan to his death. It is also true of Euripides, who so loves being a slave that he fails to exercise his free will until it is almost too late.

To surrender oneself to the plan, Allen suggests, is to trade one's own interests for the interests of another. Kleinman doesn't want or need to be up and outside in the middle of the night. As Kleinman repeatedly says, his business is at the height of the season, and he needs to be up early. Hacker's will, rather than Kleinman's, makes Kleinman join the vigilantes. Similarly, Euripides doesn't want to deliver the message to the king, but the writer wills him to do so in order to further the plot.

The plan has a certain collectivist quality in that it asks an individual to put his or her own needs second. The assumption is that the sacrifice is made for a higher purpose, for the betterment of society. In practice, at least here, this is not the case. Hacker's plan, even if it exists, is not revealed. It can't be judged and thus neither can its risk or reward. Euripides, meanwhile, is placed in danger for the sake of Hepatitis's ambition. Nevertheless, misery loving company, people who are following the plan expect others to follow the plan as well, all for the sake of a false higher purpose.

## Unknowability

Allen depicts a number of instances in which characters strenuously, and sometimes humorously, attempt to untie the impossible knot. In "But Soft... Real Soft." the author tackles the question of whether or not Shakespeare truly wrote all (or even any) of the plays attributed to him. Unfortunately, there isn't enough information to say with certainty whether he did or whether he didn't. In the absence of verifiable fact, the author fills the gaps with wild speculation, proving that, as nature abhors a vacuum, so too does a writer. This calls into question the truth of accepted history.

In "Death," the doctor wants to learn about the maniac by dissecting him, as if a man were nothing more than the sum of his parts. Similarly, Kleinman, confronted with maniac face to face, is also driven to understand the killer, to make sense of who and what he is. Neither Kleinman nor the doctor can accept what the maniac represents: the unexplainable. The maniac isn't rational and thus doesn't adhere to familiar reasoning, and to reason with something irrational is itself irrational. The maniac represents the border between science and chaos, the point beyond which knowledge becomes

impossible. Like a celestial black hole, the maniac can be defined only in terms of what he is not.

## Authority

Allen's parodies show many keen insights into the nature of definitive authority. In both "Irish Genius" and "Lovborg's Women Considered" an anonymous critic offers an exegesis of the author's work. O'Shawn's critic claims to possess a better understanding of the poet's life than the poet had himself. Similarly, Lovborg's critic confidently asserts knowledge not merely of Lovborg's life, but also his most intimate feelings. This is Allen poking fun at the self-proclaimed authority of scholars who present mere educated guesses as if they were fact. It also shows the danger of basing an opinion on one authoritative text.

Authority, Allen suggests, is the product of a social contract. Hacker has the right to control, influence, and direct people because those people have agreed to his rule. This agreement need not be conscious and may be compulsory. Kleinman, for example, doesn't seem to understand that he could have just refused Hacker's invitation, returned to bed, and have still gotten a good night's sleep before work. Instead, Kleinman seems compelled, or even conditioned, to instantly agree to whatever authority presents itself. Since Kleinman is the everyman of the story, this paints mankind as a herd of gullible sheep.

Authority, however, does not equate to power. Therefore, when enough people disagree with Hacker's rule, Hacker is killed. Since he lacks the power to legitimize his authority, Hacker's reign is subject to the whim of the mob. In Hacker's absence, however, the vestigial plan remains, and this plan, too, might serve man as an authority. In this way, Hacker represents God. Both are dead. Both are powerless. Both have left behind an authoritative idea, and perhaps the best thing to do is simply ignore this idea.

# Style

## Point of View

Allen uses a mixture of first and third person perspectives, occasionally utilizing both in the same story. In "Examining Psychic Phenomena" for example, each case is narrated by Dr. Twelge, who relays events in third person. The doctor, however, allows breaks in his narrative to accommodate the first person accounts of witnesses. This creates a mingling of perspective that lends a sense of credibility, reinforcing the idea that the reader is hearing the "whole story."

Allen prefers the third person omniscient perspective. His narrators, who are often themselves characters, speak with the authoritative voice of someone outside and beyond the context of a given story. There is a sense that Dr. Twelge, before he puts pen to page, is in possession of all the facts. He owns the history of his cases. The doctor therefore doesn't tell the story from the perspective of someone who is "in the moment," but rather, as one who is looking backward on events that have already transpired. As a narrator, this gives Dr. Twelge the benefit of understanding events in a significantly larger context than someone who is experiencing the story as it happens.

The writing of history, of course, presumes a certain amount of interpretation. This is also true of literary criticism. In "Lovborg's Women Considered" (and in the "The Irish Genius") Allen parodies the critic, demonstrating how a narrator's perspective imposes itself on the story, potentially changing how the tale is understood by the reader. When the critic suggests, for example, that Lovborg's personal life might have impacted his plays, this invites the reader to also consider this possibility. Just as Dr. Twelge's case files are indelibly colored by his perspective, so too is literature impacted by its critics. This relates to unknowability of history as demonstrated in "But Soft... Real Soft." Everything, even history, is a narrative whose meaning can be altered.

In a few stories, Allen uses first person almost exclusively. This is especially prevalent in works where the narrator is supposedly writing a letter or journal, such as "Selections from the Allen Notebooks" and "If the Impressionists Had Been Dentists." The idea of reading a first person account written in a private medium, such as a letter or journal, gives these works an intimate, almost voyeuristic quality. This sharply contrasts with "Whore of Mensa," which, although it is also written in first person, has a more collaborative feel, as if Kaiser were an old friend telling the reader of a particularly interesting case.

## Setting

From the bright stage lights of "God," which self-reflexively refers to itself as being "on Broadway," to the cold, vacant streets of "Death," Woody Allen undoubtedly has a penchant for urban settings, and New York City in particular. How he uses the city varies

by story and location. In "No Kaddish for Weinstein" Allen has his protagonist melodramatically break down in a flood of tears right in the middle of Union Square. The location, being very public, serves to heighten Weinstein's sense of humiliation while also suggesting that, even surrounded by so many people, Weinstein is all alone.

On the stage of "God," however, where the Broadway audience is not excluded from the play, there is a sense of New York as one large neighborhood. Doris talks about her home in Great Neck and her schooling at Brooklyn College. The actors discuss local restaurants. Everything refers back to the citizens of New York, reminding them, again and again, that the play is relevant to them. "New York," Woody Allen seems to say, "I am talking you."

While Allen's stories are peppered with references to New York City culture (such as plays, ballets, and restaurants), "Death" gives the reader a taste of the city's more primal side. Here, the city is not bright and busy, but cold and empty. Everyone is asleep, their doors barred, as Kleinman reluctantly wanders the streets in search of a killer. "Death" presents the city as something beyond human warmth or reason, something entirely uncivilized.

## Language and Meaning

Woody Allen often creates humor by substituting an expected word with something that means the opposite or, more often, with a word that is entirely ridiculous in context. Sometimes this takes the form of a long, overly specific sentence that adds no additional information. The humor here comes from the sentence's surprise turn in meaning, as the reader expects the idea to go one way, only to have it stop or turn in a new direction.

Allen frequently uses animals, or parts of animals, for comedic ends. In "Selections from Allen's Notebook" alone, he talks about a woodchuck trying to claim a raffle prize, a parrot being made secretary of agriculture, government officials dressed as hens, and his nephew wearing feathers. The humor comes from in the unexpected, as Allen contrasts the animals with something dignified or esteemed, such as, in the example above, a government official.

Both plays are allegories, as they are extended metaphors of how free will is diminished by faith. The message and meaning, in both plays, is communicated by symbolism and representation. In "Death" Kleinman represents the average Joe who, by putting his faith in the irrational, subverts reason. His death represents the triumph of the irrational. Euripides, as a slave, is defined on others terms. He represents any man who would allow himself to be defined by external means. The idea that Euripides cannot act until God is dead suggests that it was God's plan holding him back, represented in the story by the script itself. Breaking the script set Euripides free. This suggests that mankind can set itself free by divesting itself of faith.

## Structure

Nearly every selection is itself a collection of smaller works. Some of the selections are more like essays than stories, without characters or plots. Both "Selections from the Allen Notebooks" and "The Early Essays" are, for example, series of short works attributed to a character named for the author, Woody Allen. Others present snippets of imagined works. "Lovborg's Women Considered" and "A Guide to Some of the Lesser Ballets" both examine short excerpts from fictional theatrical works, plays, and ballets. Sometimes, the works will be prefaced by a frame, perhaps a fictional literary critic, who will introduce the work and provide a context for its consideration.

The longest works in the book are the two plays, "Death" and "God." The plays are not broken up into acts, but rather are continuous performances that are mostly dialogue. If the story is broken up by anything, it is the conversations. As characters come and go, ideas surface and are discussed. Once chunk of banter can seem very different from another chunk of debate, creating an ideological sense of "then" and "now."

If a transition is necessary, it is made explicit. In the case of "God", someone will directly call the audience's attention to the changing narrative. In "Death", a story transition occurs whenever someone new emerges from the night. This continuous style of storytelling makes for a more organic experience, as it doesn't break up the story into discrete elements.

# Quotes

"Thought: Why does man kill? He kills for food. And not only for food: frequently there must be a beverage." —"Selections from the Allen Notebooks," page 8

"How wrong Emily Dickinson was! Hope is not 'the thing with feathers.' The thing with features has turned out to be my nephew. I must take him to a specialist in Zurich." —"Selections from the Allen Notebooks," page 9

"C.N. Jerome, the psychic, of Newport, Rhode Island, claims he can guess any card being thought of by a squirrel." —"Examining Psychic Phenomena," page 17

"The curtain rises on a vast primitive wasteland, not unlike certain parts of New Jersey." —"A Guide to Some of the Lesser Ballets," page 19

"Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory. Thou hast a good job. Don't blow it." —"The Scrolls," page 26

"Everything in the house has been made to scale. You are only forty-eight inches tall." —"Lovborg's Women Considered," page 32

"For a hundred, a girl would lend you her Bartok records, have dinner, and then let you watch as she had an anxiety attack." —"Whore of Mensa," page 40

"Cooperate... God is the only enemy." —"Death," page 106

"Remember, everything is relative—or should be. If it's not, we must begin again." —"The Early Essays," page 108

"A modified form of the Hunger Strike for those whose political convictions are not quite so radical is giving up chives." —"A Brief, Yet Helpful, Guide to Civil Disobedience," page 112

"An experienced hunter like Quincy Freem would never have stalked deer in his underwear." —"Match Wits with Inspector Ford," page 119

"O'Shawn was fond of sailing, although he had never done it on the sea." —"Irish Genius," page 123

"As long as man is a rational animal, as playwright, I cannot have a character do anything on stage that he wouldn't do in real life." —"God," page 135

"The Emperor Ho Sin had a dream in which he beheld a palace greater than his for half the rent." —"Fabulous Tales and Mythical Beasts," page 192

"[I]f Marlowe wrote Shakespeare's works, who wrote Marlowe's?" —"But Soft... Real Soft," page 196

"Today I pulled a tooth and had to anesthetize the patient by reading him some Dreiser." —"If the Impressionists Had Been Dentists," page 200

"Hot salty tears pent up for ages rushed out in an unabashed wave of emotion." —"No Kaddish for Weinstein," page 210

"It's not easy for me to say these things, but I want you to be the mother of my children. And if you don't, I'll break both your legs." —"Fine Times: An Oral Memoir," page 212

"Unfortunately, time did not permit consulting any of the established works on the subject, and I was forced to either obtain the information from friends or fill in certain gaps using my own common sense." —"Slang Origins," page 217

# Topics for Discussion

Suppose that Kleinman somehow convinces the maniac to spare his life. How might this change the message of the play?

How does Allen portray the literary critic?

What is Allen's opinion of God, and what elements does he use to express this opinion?

What does Euripides have in common with Kleinman? In what ways do they differ?

Both Kaiser Lupowitz and Inspector Ford are detectives. How do they differ in their methods?

How would you characterize Woody Allen's humor?

How does Woody Allen portray himself in this collection?

What is Woody Allen's perception of free will and predestination as portrayed in his stories?

Why does Woody Allen choose to use parody in so many of his stories? What human traits does he poke fun at?

What makes authority legitimate or illegitimate in Woody Allen's writings?