

## Crimes and Misdemeanors (1989)

“The eyes of God are on us always.”

“God is a luxury I can’t afford.”

### Major Credits:

Writer and Director: Woody Allen

Cinematography: Sven Nyquist

Editing: Susan E. Morse

Cast: Martin Landau (Judah Rosenthal), Woody Allen (Cliff Stern), Mia Farrow (Halley Reed), Anjelica Huston (Dolores Paley), Alan Alda (Lester), Ben Waterston (Ben), Claire Bloom (Miriam Rosenthal), Joanna Gleason (Wendy Stern), Jerry Orbach (Jack Rosenthal), Caroline Aaron (Barbara)

### Background:

Culminating more than a decade of extraordinary filmmaking that begins with *Annie Hall* (1977) and *Manhattan* (1979) and includes *Zelig*, *Broadway Danny Rose*, *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, and *Radio Days*, *Crimes and Misdemeanors* became Allen’s first commercial success since *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986). Like that film, it is set in contemporary New York, mixes comedy with high seriousness, and includes a large cast of distinguished actors. Allen received Academy Award nominations for writing and directing, and Martin Landau was nominated for Best Supporting Actor. As an indicator of the director’s ambitiousness, for the first and only time in a feature film, Allen used the great Swedish cinematographer, Sven Nyquist, who was most famous for his many collaborations with Woody’s idol, Ingmar Bergman. The screenplay also displays Allen’s engagement with the philosophical and moral concerns of such classic texts as the Book of Job, Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, and Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. As in these enduring works, the characters struggle to define “a moral structure” within an absurd or indifferent universe.

### Cinematic Elements:

Appropriately for a film so concerned with ethical questions and problematic human relationships, Nyquist’s camera work and Allen’s directorial flourishes remain relatively restrained; nevertheless a few cinematic choices contribute to the overall effect:

- Music: As with nearly every Woody Allen film, music plays a prominent part in the emotional content of certain scenes, most conspicuously the Schubert String Quartet heard during Judah’s return to Dolores’ apartment. Note as well the song that plays as Ben dances with his daughter during the concluding wedding scene: “I’ll Be Seeing You,” first made famous by Billie Holiday.
- Set Pieces: The narrative is marked by several dialogue sequences—Judah’s “dark night of the soul” where he argues with Ben’s imagined presence, the Passover seder flashback, the “movie script” Judah describes to Cliff at the wedding—that allow the audience to reflect upon the film’s fundamental moral debates.
- Movies-Within-the-Movie: Similarly, Allen punctuates the story with several scenes from other movies—the old matinee Cliff attends with his niece, the documentary he is making of Professor Levy, the parody he constructs of his PBS film about Lester—that provide moments of self-reflexivity, reminding us that we are in fact watching a movie.

### Questions for Discussion:

1. The central question, of course, is debated around the Passover Seder table. Essentially, it is Job’s question, which might be paraphrased, “What is the good of being good?” Judah is gradually revealed to be a shallow man (like Yale in *Manhattan*, “too easy on “[him]self”) who ultimately becomes a monstrous hypocrite. But what are we to make of the alternatives to his moral relativism? The saintly Ben “lives in the kingdom of heaven,” as Judah correctly (according to Woody Allen himself) defines it, and Professor Levy (modeled after Primo Levi,

author of *Survival in Auschwitz*) frustrates faith by his final act. Where is the moral center of *Crimes and Misdemeanors*?

2. As he has before (in *Stardust Memories*, for example) and will later (in *Deconstructing Harry*), Allen complicates our initial perception of the character he plays, drawing on the outlines of his own persona. Thus, we initially root for the underdog Cliff in opposition to the pompous Lester. In depicting what Judah calls “the real world” as opposed “Hollywood,” however, Allen forces us to re-evaluate our judgments of these two: how do we reach a more balanced view of Cliff and Lester in the course of the narrative?
3. As in his earlier *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, Allen uses the film-within-the-film motif to explore the nature of movies in general. What seems to be his understanding of both the value of the cinema and the art of great filmmaking?
4. *Crimes and Misdemeanors* is the most explicitly *Jewish* of all of Allen’s films. What are the religious and ethical terms that mark the film’s Jewish perspective? Where do we stand in the debate around the seder table? In particular, do we—does Woody Allen—accept Sol’s declaration, “If necessary, I will always choose God over truth.”?
5. At the seder debate Judah’s aunt argues that might makes right and that, aside from power, “nothing’s handed down in stone.” In a very different context, Halley tells Cliff, “No matter how elaborate a philosophic system you work out, in the end it’s going to be incomplete.” Do these statements nullify or confirm the significance of the film’s philosophical inquiry?