

The Tale of Moke Greenerby

Moke Greenerby was once a tale-less, little-known author who lived in the Essex area and wrote meticulously planned short stories for little children. The stories combined farmyard animals – mainly geese – with indecipherable romantic symbolism. It was pleasant rubbish – and that’s being polite. Anxious because he was only ever appreciated by under-9s, he had always dreamed of making it big in the literary world. He joked to his friends that all he wanted was to have a book printed in a font size smaller than fifteen. What they didn’t see were the emotional negotiations that took place, through the medium of shout, between him and his agent.

But one day Moke Greenerby found he had a gift. The only problem was that it was stolen property.

Quite on a whim, Moke dedicated his weekend to Woody Allen. Rather than setting up an Allen shrine and collecting money for stray Allens, Moke decided it’d be best just to have an indulgent Woody reading fest. It was just one weekend, he reassured himself. It seemed he was getting a pretty steady flow of weekends and nobody would complain if one was abused and exploited in the name of comic literature. He informed his friend Toby.

“You’re writing comics now?”

“No. Comic literature. Like, maybe, Woody Allen.”

“Oh, comic ha-ha. Monk, do whatever you like with your time. Christ, all I’m doing this weekend is buying a Gollywog themed cutlery set from a man in St. Andrews. I wasn’t going to tell you. It was going to be a surprise.”

“Oh,” sighed Moke, “why did you tell me then?”

“Because now I don’t have to do it. It’s the thought that counts, and you found me out.” Toby relaxed in his armchair.

“But don’t you want the cutlery set?”

“Not really. I don’t think it’s very tasteful. Anyway, I’m not getting it now. You ruined it. Go and read your bloody Woody Allen.”

So he did. Moke stayed in his room, absorbed in Allen, engaged for many hours assiduously reading, making sure he didn’t miss one laugh-out-loud nonsense-joke. Half a day in, he remembered that somebody had once told him you could only take so much Allen at one time, but he quietened any fears by occasionally looking out of the window. He continued in this lapping up of Allen with sheer military precision, until Sunday officially came to an end. By then he’d read nearly all of Allen’s prose, many a screenplay and script, and collections of extracts from Allen’s stand-up material. He was attacking Allen chronologically, knowing full well that time is the

enemy of all of us. He was up to 1990, about to read 'Without Feathers'.

Moke laid his book on his bedside table, having been glutted with silly comedy. The thoughts running through his mind all looked like Woody Allen, talked like Woody Allen and, when out of breath, walked like Woody Allen. Moke knew he needed to rest his burning, overused eyeballs. But the myriad mental Allens caused sudden sparks of imagination and soon he was sitting up in his bed, frantically grabbing for a jotter so he could scribble down ideas for a play.

He wrote and wrote and wrote, so fluidly you couldn't tell where one wrote stopped and another wrote began. On the stroke of three o'clock, Moke put his pen down and put his hand to his forehead. Never before had he written so efficiently and so... so maturely. It would surely be written on proper pages and without illustrations! He was understandably ecstatic. Maybe it would be put on the stage! Maybe he would usher in a new era of inspired playwrights!

By this time, Moke was so sleepy he could well have been sleeping. In a minute's time he was asleep.

In the morning, Moke reassessed his young masterpiece. He had vague memories of nightmares involving personified delusions of grandeur and his old favourite, geese. Maybe he had dreamt it all up or written it in a stupor, or worse, it was just a bit pants. But it was just as funny and toothsome as he'd remembered, and he was still proud. He needed to show Toby, who would always tell him if his work was god-awful or OK or better. Though Moke considered him an amateur reader – he couldn't see past the veneer of 'Farmer Ronald and Derek the Horse's Trip to the City', so the delicate sexual metaphors were lost on him – he was an honest one. After typing the script up, Moke disturbed Toby's solo game of tiddlywinks,

"Can you tell me what you think of this?"

"Sure, after this decider..."

"..."

"..."

"Just wink it!"

"It's tense, shut up!.. Give me the goddamn thing, you've sabotaged the game." Toby snatched the script and then looked at Moke with mock hurt, "You've become such a destroyer, monk."

Moke went to have a glass of summer fruits squash and a quick inspection of the fridge. On his return, only a few minutes later, Toby was back at tiddlywinks.

"I thought you said you'd read it."

"Monk, I *have*. I've done my selfless act of the day, now let me finish the match!"

"You're playing yourself!"

"What, you want to take me on?" suggested Toby.

"No, I just wanted you to read the whole script."

“Monk, I have. I read it about a year ago. It’s classic Woody Allen, isn’t it? Yeah, yeah, yeah, it’s funny stuff but I’ve got more important stuff on my mind. I’m in the game.”

While Moke’s body was then quite still, his mind was particularly fiery. So fiery that it was very unpleasant. He always got that same feeling when his intricate dramas were labelled as ‘nursery rhymes’.

“N-no,” stuttered Moke, picking up the script and handing it back to Toby, “it might be in the *style* of Woody Allen, but I wrote it myself.”

“You wrote ‘God, a play?’” said an unbelieving, smirking Toby.

“Yes! I did it last night and I just typed it up! Honestly!”

“But this is a famous little *Woody Allen* play. Take a look at it, and you’ll realise you gave me the wrong one or something.”

Moke held his script in his hand. It was definitely, without a single doubt in his mind, the script he’d whacked out from twelve to three earlier that day. It must have been Toby who was mistaken.

“Read more of it, and you’ll realise it’s different.”

Toby slammed a tiddlywinks on the table, groaned, and started to read. Soon he was visibly frustrated and flicking through the pages, shaking his head.

“Monk, trust me, this is Allen’s play. It’s in one of his books. I haven’t read many so it must be in that ‘Complete Prose’ thing. Quite near the beginning, I think.”

Moke was already out of the dining room door, fumbling through the pile of books on his bedside table in a panic. He found the book and raced back to Toby.

“This?”

“Yeah, monk, don’t get so panicked, you’ve just typed up a story or something.”

But Moke wasn’t listening because he was sub-vocally repeating, “God, God, God, God, God” and then he found it in the contents page, “God! A play!”

“Surprise sur-fucking...prise,” said Toby, clapping.

Moke thumbed his way straight to the right page and then, as his eyes scanned over that page, and the next, and the next, and the next ten, his face went turquoise (for all the writers who have written about people turning white and green, I have never seen one person’s face actually, distinctly change colour, so to this storyteller turquoise is just as imaginable as any other colour, like burgundy). He was dazed, having just been hit with a stick of horrible realisation, and was starting to jibber.

“Bu-wha- I mean, I wrote this, Toby.”

“Yeah, after Woody Allen! My friend, my friend...”

“No, *I* wrote it... OK, maybe after Woody Allen but I still did it! I hadn’t read ‘Without Feathers’ – that was my next book. That was today’s book! I got an idea for a play so I wrote it down and I knew it was blatantly Woody Allen – he’s a character in it for crying out loud! But it was my material!”

“Monk, tell Woody Allen that!”

“Toby, I swear I never did read that script. Never!... Apart from a few hours ago, when I read it after I wrote it. But that was a different script, really, because it had a different author. I’m going to sit down and compare these scripts. You may go back to your tiddlywinks.”

Toby did not reply.

Moke Greenerby compared the two texts for a good half an hour. It was actually a spectacular half an hour and he was awe-struck throughout. The two scripts were paginated differently, in different font-types – Moke was filled with joy when he noticed Allen’s copy was in a font size lower than eleven – and they smelt differently. Other than that, they were the same. Word for word, comma for comma, gag for gag. It was *exactly* the same script as *God (A Play)* by Woody Allen, part of ‘Without Feathers’, published in 1990. And Moke had consciously, unknowingly, scarily, perfectly replicated it that very morning in 2001.

“Toby, it’s *exactly*, I mean *exactly* the same!”

“I thought we’d already established that, pal.”

“Well, I made sure. There’s no difference. Neither of us made any typos, neither of us made any different... Toby, it’s Woody Allen!”

“You’re comparing yourself to Woody Allen, listen to yourself!”

“But for those three hours,” Moke semi-cried at his best friend, trying to make him understand just how freakish the situation was, “I might as well have *been* Woody Allen!”

“OK, monk. So what? I mean, you wrote the same as Woody Allen did a long time ago, so what? Do you want a copy-cat medal or something?”

“Toby,” said Moke, in utter seriousness, so serious it looked like he was trying to turn his face into concrete, “What do I do now? What do I do with this?”

And Toby stared from the red tiddlywink to the blue tiddlywink and back to the red one.

“Monk, shut up and write your own frigging script.”

But Moke Greenerby was not happy with that.

The next week of Moke’s life was an odd one. It seemed to him like a long one, but really it was exactly the same length as any other week. That’s the nature of weeks and part of their job as a stable measure of time.

He wrote prolifically, almost continuously, unconcerned with anything else in the world. He wanted to write a book. All he had was a title and one script. The title was, ‘Without Feathers’. The script was his, or Woody Allen’s, or whatever, it really didn’t matter. He crafted other short stories and plays, and notes, and suchlike, all very much in the same style as Woody Allen. He had, after all, just read all of Allen’s work up to that point.

The result of the week was ‘Without Feathers’ by Moke Greenerby. It was identical in every way to ‘Without Feathers’ by Woody Allen.

“So, what’s the trick, how do you do it, monk?” asked Toby, a little terrified that his friend had just written a complete replica book. Toby was also terrified that he’d been playing tiddlywinks for the last week, but in comparison to Moke he’d been the picture of normality.

“I just do it. I think I must have learnt Allen’s way of writing. I pick up little things like that he likes talking about Freud, and wives, and, you know, general derangement, and I just wrote things.”

“The same things as Woody Allen... exactly the same things,” said Toby, being nice to his gift-afflicted best friend.

“That’s precisely it. And it’s a talent, I think.”

“But it’s a bit of a poeey talent, monk.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, this stuff,” he wafted the many freshly printed pages of Moke Greenerby’s ‘Without Feathers’ in the air, “is useless. Because it’s already been published. Under the name of W. Allen.”

“I know. So what do I do?”

“Monk, you can’t do anything! Just pat yourself on the back, you’ve got a quirky talent, and leave it. And, seriously, write your own damn things.”

“I don’t think you understand,” said a sulky Moke, returning to his room.

Moke then wrote more. And more. And even more. It was all in the style of Woody Allen. All of it had been previously published by Woody Allen. Whatever Woody Allen had written, Moke could match. Exactly. Nothing more, nothing less. Where Moke thought he was adding something special, Allen had thought the same thing.

By now, Moke had slowed down. He had to attend to the writing with a bit more time and effort. He noticed that as he approached the present day, he slowed down considerably. He hit writer’s block after writer’s block – what silly writers left them there? – and realised he’d nearly written everything Woody Allen had written from 1990 to 2001. This was around three months past this tale’s opening.

The only problem was that Woody Allen was still publishing the odd screenplay or article. And, though Moke Greenerby could write them just as well – exactly as well – he was only able to write them *after* Allen had written and published or used them. He finished the scripts of ‘The Curse of the Jade Scorpion’ and ‘Hollywood Ending’ just weeks after they started to be used.

This is what Moke came to realise over the next year. He wrote too slow, Woody Allen too fast. He couldn’t keep up.

This did indeed make his talent a rather ‘poeey’ one, as Toby had put it. He couldn’t approach his agent and ask him to publish already published material. He would probably be put into an asylum, because that’s what they do to coherent, healthy people who have seen something too brilliant for others to comprehend, he thought.

But then, one day, a scraggly bearded, worn-out and flustered Moke came up with a plan that wasn't all that coherent or healthy, and this was the plan he explained to Toby.

"I've got to kill Woody Allen."

"I wish you'd stop talking about Woody Allen! Now you've added in a-whole-nother fucked up dimension. You can't *kill* Woody Allen."

"But Toby," whined Moke, a tad belligerent, "that's the only way I can possibly use my talent. Woody Allen. Woody Allen. All I can write is Woody Allen! But he gets there first!"

"He was woody Allen first!"

"Well... yeah! But-"

"But, monk, please, you can't kill him." This year, Toby was designing a hospital for clinically obese nosebleed sufferers (or victims, depending on your political stance), not contractually but rather for his own enjoyment. He wanted to get back to his technical pencil work.

"I'll explain it, I'll explain it. See, this stuff's good. Because it's like Woody Allen's stuff. It's all so hilarious it could only have been written by Woody Allen... but it's written by me! But if I beat him! If I can do it before him! I've got to go to America and kill Woody."

"You don't even know him."

"I wouldn't need to."

"Why don't you just get to know him and explain who you are, monk, tell him what you can do, you know? You can't just kill someone. Above all, Woody Allen, for fuck's sake." Toby put it as it is, or was, or forever shall be.

"But you don't understand!" Moke broke down, weeping, "This is all I can do!! I've been doing it for so long! I am the new Woody Allen!!" Toby ignored his friend's tears.

"You know, I've been thinking, monk. If somebody did, like, a Monet or something, then that'd probably be worth quite a lot because, if it looked exactly the same as Monet's, it'd look great and be worth something. But, monk, it doesn't work for you, does it? That's all I was thinking."

Moke shivered for a while, wiped away his tears, and composed himself.

"I know you're just trying to help, Toby."

Toby was caught off guard. Was he?

"Have you even read anything else, monk? Other than Woody Allen?"

"I haven't even read Woody Allen, other than the stuff I'd done before-slash-after, that was the same," replied Moke.

"Why don't you relax then? Or go back to your kiddie stories."

"*Kiddie* stories," said a disgusted Moke, "how can I go back to kiddie stories?"

"Monk, I have a plan," said Toby, who genuinely did have a plan, "why don't you read loads of some other author."

"And get stuck in another one of these nightmares?"

“No, monk, read a dead author. Then, the killing’s already been done for you. Then, you can release great new books in that author’s style. Do you hear what I’m saying, Moke my man?”

“I think,” said Moke, rising, “I think I do. Who shall I read?”

“I don’t know. Dickens? People like Dickens.”

“Dickens... Dickens... Dickens was good. Dickens was good... I’m going to Waterstone’s.”

“Can you pick me up a book on nosebleeds?”

“Anything specific?”

“Nah. Anything.”

“OK. I’ll see you in a bit, Toby,” said Moke, patting the hospital designer’s shoulders, “you’ve been a good friend.”

Along with ‘Nosebleeding Through the Ages’, Moke bought every Dickens book he could find. Anything written by Dickens, he purchased. He wanted to mimic his own actions that weekend, so many months ago, and in the process mimic Dickens’ actions, so many years ago. He decided to devote at least a week to Charles, for it was obviously denser, thicker, and generally heavier than Woody Allen. Also, Moke had never read any Dickens before.

After reading various short stories, articles, and ‘Sketches of Boz’ he already felt the urge to replicate take hold of him. He just needed to start gushing material. It would be a lie to say it happened in a flash. Nobody, not even Moke Greenerby or Victorians, could write serious Victorian prose in a flash. It’s more like a long series of many, many very dull flashes.

This series took about three weeks, straight onto the computer, and he was exhausted by the end of it. But there, on his own computer screen, created by himself, Moke Greenerby, was a splendid rendition of ‘The Pickwick Papers’.

He had to check if it was the very same.

It was.

From that point on, Toby noticed a slight change in Moke’s behaviour – only a very slight, but distinct, change. He wouldn’t answer to his name. He would only answer to ‘Dickens’ – and even then the answer wasn’t always right.

“So... Dickens... what are you going to do now?” enquired Toby, surprised Moke Dickens had taken his suggestion so seriously.

“Well, I think that if I just keep writing book after book, just like Charles, it’ll take some time, and it’s not really necessary. So, I will simply read all but the last book, ‘The Mystery of Edwin Drood’, and then finish that last book as a check – as a masterpiece in itself – and... and go beyond. Beyond Charles. I am the future, not Charles!” he joked, but his jokes were increasingly annoying – his personality had been gradually abraded by his new studious, room-bound lifestyle.

“So... how did the first book go?” said Toby. Toby was picking his nose as part of a scientific experiment into the aetiology of nose bleeding. He had never had one and had always wondered why.

“The first book was dead on. I did some nice work on comic-caricature-characterisation and Greeneryan society. A real oppressive, dark class system, that sort of thing. You’ve go to read it one day.”

“I think I might have read it in Eng. Lit., monk.”

“Yeah, I wonder what Eng. Lit. will do about this. It’s all out of context. They won’t know what to do.”

Toby took a second off picking to ask a very significant question, “Monk, how can you have such a consistent, insightful understanding of the society as Charles Dickens did? Since you’ve never experienced it?”

“I don’t know, I guess I’ve built it up over the years, and from his other books, and I just fudge some bits. It must have been what he did too.”

“What, Dickens?”

“Yeah, Charles. Obviously he made up some contextual elements for the sake of entertainment.”

“I suppose. Shit happens. But...” Toby was just about to talk about how only somebody who had had the exact upbringing and experience as Dickens could write exactly like Dickens, but he didn’t want to ruin his lazy-boy image. And it seemed a ruddy silly thing to say, all considering.

“It feels the same as with Allen. I just get into their style and write and, randomly, or by a really anal fate or something, it always turns out the same.”

“It’s been going on for a long time though, monk.”

“True. But what have you been doing in that time?”

Toby took his finger out of his nose, placed it on the table and tried to remain calm while saying, “Monk, don’t bitch on my pastimes. Nobody should bitch on harmless pastimes.”

And he continued to pick away.

But he never did make it bleed.

And it always niggled him.

Moke Greenerby retreated to his literary lair. He had a lot of reading ahead of him. Less demanding than Shakespeare though, he thought, before looking up the place where crazy aspirations live,

“Shakespeare!”

But he knew he had to finish old Dickens first, before he could start churning out the new.

What if he wasn’t appreciated?! What if they didn’t believe it was up to Dickens standard?! How could he convince them? Maybe with experimental conditions... oh, they’d know!

He read and read and read. He was certainly getting used to doing things in threes. After reading and reading and reading, he had finished all of the Dickens but ‘The Mystery of Edwin Drood’. His favourite had been ‘Old Curiosity Shop’ but he didn’t want to boast.

Then, predictably, he wrote and wrote and wrote.

This was a true test of his talent. It was very laborious and time-consuming. Just as with how, when replicating Allen, towards the end it'd gotten hard, it was more and more gruelling. Once, a whole day went by where Moke sat at his computer, fingers flailing, mind failing him, unable to produce a single sentence. He came up with the word 'ecclesiastical' but that was all. In the evening of that day, he had quite a heated 'conversation' with Toby, the last few exchanges of which were:

"Yeah, well, monk, you've become a fucking doppelganger librarian beast, I mean fucking hell monk!"

"Yeah, well at least I can *create!*"

"It's *advanced* fucking *plagiarism!* You fucking *recreate!*"

"Well after this book I'm going to fucking *create!*"

"You're going to fucking *lose it*, you book-wank."

But he was determined. Obsessed. He was Charles Dickens. The second. He was like a king.

And reproduced literature was his kingdom. Yet one day... one day he hoped that would change.

Now, sometimes in the recounting of tales, tell-tales choose to omit many and various details of the protagonist's mundane, everyday life. However, I haven't omitted all that much. Moke Greenerby really didn't do much else than write 'The Mystery of Edwin Drood' for two and a half months. Strenuous, numbingly slow, mildly life-threatening though it was, to him it was necessary.

And then, one day, it was there.

'The Mystery of Edwin Drood' in its perfect (unfinished) entirety. Not that it was a perfect book – it had the same flaws as its (arguably older) twin brother. But it was a perfect twin, a perfect clone, a copy, a replica, the same.

He even got it printed and bound. After so long, it seemed the right thing to do. But it wasn't finished.

As per usual, Toby, sitting on the chair in the dining-room, read over randomly selected parts of it.

It was a cold day. Pathetic fallacy was in the air. Toby was constructing a suspension bridge made out of spaghetti – some dry, some cooked – to connect the top of the head chair to the top of its opposite.

"Next. Done. Fine, it's the same."

Moke Greenerby returned to his room. He shouted back,

"This is great! Finally! I'm here! I can finally write something of *use*, something I can get *published!* Something that shows I'm not just a photocopier!" Toby heard his cries, and, while attending to the spaghetti girders and not really thinking about what Moke was saying, called back,

“Monk, what did Charles Dickens do after *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* then?”

“That’s the whole point, Toby! He left it unfinished! I can solve the mystery and wet the pants of so many critics!”

“But what did he do after not finishing that?”

“You just don’t get it!” shouted an irate Moke, “He died!”

“He died?” said Toby, looking up all of a sudden.

“Monk.”

“Oh.”

“Monk.”

“Shit.”

And there, with a blank titleless chapter page on his computer, his hands ready at the keyboard, Moke Greenerby sat. Then, after mustering a yelp,

“Yelp!”, he became absorbed in the writing of a very interesting chapter of life.

As it were.

Suggested A-level English Literature Questions:

1. Doctor Johnson proposed that at the end of the story Moke died from '*ghastly fright that shook his soul*'. Do you agree with him, and to what extent is the ending ambiguous?
2. How important do you think it is for writers to be aware of their predecessors and the history of literature? Pay special attention to at least two chosen passages in the tale.
3. What is the effect of Toby calling the central character, his best-friend, 'Monk'. What does this tell us of their friendship? Further, how is the character of Toby used in the story?
4. What do you think are the central themes Joe Gordon has tried to explore, or encourage to explore, through this tale? To what extent does he succeed?
5. What style does Joe Gordon adopt for the narration of this tale? Base your answer on contextual information, and comment on the styles of both Woody Allen and Charles Dickens.