

Angels in america

[Media](#), [Television](#)



If we were to imagine what destruction is like, how would anyone of us portray it? Would our portrayals be as catastrophic and devastating as the word means? It depends on the person who imagines it. Now, if we were to imagine destruction from a psychological perspective this may be entirely different for each person. Why this would be the case is probably because of the unique personalities that each one of us has. Some of us may not be able to bear the uncertainties that destruction could bring into the world, hence, fearing it. Others may just ignore the details of chaos and live on with their ignorant, static lives.

Then, there is the remaining portion of us who know the bigger picture of destruction and are hopeful to change the world from the aftermath of it. In a similar perspective, these comparable portraits of characteristics correlate to one of the unique themes of Tony Kushner's play, "Angels in America": identity. In this theme, the identities of the characters in the play symbolize emotions of ambivalence, the static views of the gay community, and the hope for change in the chaotic era of the 1980s American society. Kushner subtly conveys Harper's character to represent the ambivalent emotions of the American society in the 1980s.

As a character suffering from psychological problems, Harper's personality is very complex. In one bizarre aspect of the play, she's having an interesting conversation with one of her hallucinations, Mr. Lies, to discuss her constructive, yet imaginative, plans to live a new life in Antarctica. While in a counter-perceptive view, Harper feels uncertain and fearful to move out off anywhere because of the paranormal threats that she's worry about. "A

man with a knife” that she speaks of is one of those dangers that she is strangely concerned about (Millennium Approaches 24).

The sort of ambivalence and fear that Harper’s identity carries in Kushner’s play somehow depicts the “apocalyptic anxiety” that is happening in the United States in the 1980s (Garner, Jr. 2). The “escalation” of this catastrophic concern is “reinforced by economic crisis, ecological disaster, overpopulation, the AIDS epidemic, and the fall of European communism” at the time (Garner, Jr. 2). In addition to all this build-up of chaotic events in the country, people begin to dread the nuclear annihilations that could potentially commence during the postwar moments of the Cold War.

In order to draw out the people’s sense of fear and uncertainty over the destructive events in the 1980s, Kushner tries to convey it through Harper’s paranormal concern of the ozone layer. After she explains to herself how the ozone layer is “a kind of gift, from God”, Harper then says, “But everywhere, things are collapsing, lies surfacing, systems of defense giving away. . . . This is why, Joe, this is why I shouldn’t be left alone (Millennium Approaches 17)”.

Her ambivalent concern on the total deconstruction of the world correlates to Americans’ “Cold War anxiety” on the possible nuclear threats in the 1980s (Garner, Jr. 3). By illustrating Harper’s complex identity in the play, Kushner is able to portray the types of ambivalent emotions (fear, terror, and uncertainty) that people felt in the destructive events of history at that time period. As imaginative and abstract as this drama is, Kushner portrays the

stagnant identity of Roy Cohn in his play to figuratively allude the inert views of the gay community in the 80s society of America.

In his playwright notes, Kushner briefly explains how he makes use of the real Roy Cohn's attributions in history to develop his fictional Roy in his play. Based on what Roy has done in the past, his illegal maneuvers during the trial of Ethel Rosenberg make his overall identity cynical and egotistic.

Ideally, Kushner effectively make use of these two traits in his version of Roy. In a similar perspective, the fictional Roy knows how to get his way in almost anything throughout the story because of his possession of "clout" in society (Millennium Approaches 45).

He emphasizes his powerful stature by telling his doctor, "I can pick up this phone, punch fifteen numbers" and "in under five minutes", he can reach the First Lady on the other end of the phone line (Millennium Approaches 45). In this scene, Roy reasons with Henry about his social "image" as a heterosexual lawyer in New York. If his original diagnosis of AIDS has caught news to the media, then Roy's static identity will be destroyed. Yet, Kushner doesn't convey this. Instead, Roy says, "AIDS is what homosexuals have. I have liver cancer" to convince Henry that he must maintain his appealing status for the public (Millennium Approaches 46).

Ideally, Roy has no intention to reveal his homosexual self, nor does he show any sympathy for gays. His biased statement, "Homosexuals are men who know nobody and who nobody knows. Who have zero clout." intriguingly portrays his psychological denial of his true identity (Millennium Approaches 45). The selfish desire of social redemption that Roy is struggling to fulfill

represents the “disturbing symptoms of the larger culture’s inauthentic response to suffering” that Kushner is trying to convey in his play (Omer-Shaman 11).

Symbolically, Kushner illustrates Roy’s static identity of social redemption in order to depict the general public’s unchanging perspectives against the gay community in the 80s society of America. Interestingly, Prior’s enduring identity in Kushner’s play represent the hope for change in the American society at the time. Kushner makes Prior’s character very apparent and symbolic to his readers; he is a homosexual who is diagnosed with the AIDS at this particular time period – perhaps it’s a historical reference in Kushner’s part.

At some parts of his play, Kushner descriptively portrays Prior’s bloody wounds and entrails of his tormenting disease to represent foreshadowing moments of “Christian redemption” in the latter story of the drama – Prior’s meetings with the Angels (Ogden 6). Similarly, as one critic depicts, the blood lesions that Prior suffers through creates a slight correlation to Christ “bleeding wounds” and pains from a biblical viewpoint (Ogden 6). How these religious connections tie in with Prior’s enduring personality starts by his own fantasy with the Angel in his apartment.

Unlike Roy’s character, Prior openly says, “I can handle pressure, I am a gay man and I am used to pressure, to trouble, I am tough and strong,” as he courageously calms himself in the mist of the heavenly circumstances (Millennium Approaches 117). Ideally, this scene of the play does not only depict how brave Prior is, but also how strong and confident Prior is to reveal

his true self. Furthermore, the fact that he says, “ I am used to pressure”, depicts his enduring identity to overcome the social pressures he has as a homosexual.

Similarly, Kushner conveys this familiar perspective of Prior’s in his last meeting with the Angel in heaven. In this scene, Prior rejects the Angel’s prophet of stasis in the final scenes of the drama. He tells the Angel, “ We live past hope. If I can find hope anywhere, that’s it, that’s the best I can do... Bless me anyway. I want more life. ” to conclude his declination as he exits heaven (Perestroika 133). What Prior says to the Angel as he leaves heaven is ironic to what he has been through in the whole play.

Despite how much he has suffered from his tragic life, Prior’s enduring soul still wants “ more life” to essentially hope for better things to come in the world as it continues to spin forward (Perestroika 133). Remarkably, Kushner utilizes Prior’s enduring soul to symbolize the hope for change in America during the chaotic messes within 80s society. Although the character’s personalities portray an abstractive and imaginative perspective in the play, Kushner subtly make use of this unique aspect to correlate the realistic concepts conveyed in his play’s theme of identity.

In general, the dialogues in play may sound a bit fantasized – even strange. Yet somehow, Kushner is able to connect his fictional characters’ lives in his play to the lives of the 1980s society of America. Because of this ironic and interesting comparison between fiction and reality, Kushner is able to express the real, dramatic emotions that are felt during that time in history. By capturing the historical events and moments of the 1980s, Kushner subtly

reveals the sense of reality of his drama through the surreal identities of his characters.