

# The supernatural in kushner's play angels in america

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The supernatural is defined as manifestations or events that are beyond scientific understanding and that cannot be explained by man. Some examples of supernatural beings are ghosts, gods, angels, visions, and auras. They can also be figments of people's imagination due to an extreme amount of trauma or stress. This can be seen quite clearly in the Aids epidemic in the 1990s. According to <http://treatmentactiongroup.org/>, in 1994 up to 60 percent of gay men had reported losses of loved ones or other important people in life annually. By 1998 gay males had, on average, lost six lovers, friends, and/or family members. A Lot of these men have gone through mental health issues, such as PTSD, general anxiety and depression.

In the play *Angels In America*, many of the characters described are experiencing trauma, since they are seeing hallucinations and are in different situations that are not happening in real life. Some of these characters have interactions with spirits that reflect different aspects of their fears, or what they would like to do. The two main characters that experience supernatural occurrences in the play are Roy, and Prior. Other characters experience this as well, but it does not relate to the topic of AIDS. These spirits cause the characters they are affecting with sadness, guilt, and may even torment them from time to time. Mostly, however, they are there to reveal truths of death and send messages to inform them that big changes are occurring and that they should be ready for whatever hits them. This provides a small amount of comfort due to the fact that both Roy and Prior have AIDS.

The aspects of the supernatural in Kushner's play speak more towards the extensive, rough, and traumatic instances that the characters in this play have witnessed or been victim to, as well as people who have lived and experienced the AIDS epidemic that occurred in the 1980s. Many of these men have developed trauma, and have participated in drug use, self-mutilation, violent behaviors, and suicide during this difficult time. In *Angels in America*, we can also see these symptoms of trauma on the characters who loved or have loved people who currently have this illness, also with the few characters that we know have contracted this disease and are quite ill.

For example, Prior, who is one of the characters who experience most of the supernatural activity in the play and, one of the characters who also has AIDS. Many instances and confrontation occurred during the period of the first play after Prior was diagnosed by AIDS. As prior is being treated for his illness, he is visited by two spirits Prior #1 and Prior #2, who claim that they are Priors ancestors, are spirits that reveal to us that Prior, who is the main protagonist of the play is afraid to die, and is even more afraid to die alone. They are giving Prior a lot of honesty saying that he might die, and possibly die alone. He then sees an angel stating that he is a prophet and has a destiny awaiting him. We then move to a lot of betrayals. First off, with Louis breaking up with Prior because he was afraid that he might catch the disease, to his body which is slowly shutting down, to his mind, which appears to be deteriorating slowly. He struggles to hold on to sanity, and we see that at some points, we almost see him lose this last bit of reality he has.

In the play, Prior #1 and Prior #2 both stated that they have passed away, due to disease, which seems to give Prior some comfort that he is not alone in the situation anymore. These spirits are also someone for him to talk to since he feels quite lonely. In the play, Prior asks the two spirits after recovering from a severe reaction from his illness, " Am I going to die?" (Kushner 2014, 3. 1. 91-92). Prior #2 responds by saying " When you do, you do not get ancestors to help you through it. You may be surrounded by children, but you die alone." (Kushner 2014, 3. 1. 92). Prior responds to Prior #2 with the statement, " I'm afraid."(Kushner 2014, 3. 1. 92). These spirits not only tell him the truth and are honest, but they help alleviate these concerns by saying that there is good news for him ahead and something big is going to happen which will benefit him and give him some hope for the near future. This shows the reader that the ghost/ hallucination is hinting or explaining to Prior that the end of life is inevitable, and that this may be Priors thoughts and emotions of what he is currently experiencing or thinking about what might happen to him, in one big hallucination. It could also indicate that something much bigger is going to take place and that these figments of his imagination might be giving him the hope that he really does need.

The spirits reveal some of the regrets or poor decisions that some of the characters have gone through in the past and have guilt towards, as well as showing them that they need to end their life in a more positive way. An example of this is the main character of the play, Roy Cohn, and the spirit that pays him a visit, Ethel Rosenberg. Roy had played a prominent role in

the trials and he had originally addressed the Rosenberg's for execution due to their supposed treason of their country by spying on the Soviet Union and failed to commit to this. In *Angels In America*, Roy just finishes his altercation with Joe and doubles over in pain, since he was hiding that he was ill from Joe throughout the whole conversation. The ghost of Ethel Rosenberg, an American citizen who spied with others on the Soviet Union and eventually got caught, arrested and executed for this crime, comes in, and a long conversation occurs with Ethel telling Ron that he got what he deserved for doing what he did to her. She indicated that he could possibly do better and Ron basically saying that he is not afraid of her and that she can basically "fuck off". When his abdominal pain becomes too much to bear, Ethel calls 911 and Roy Reluctantly takes her help and his demeanor changes from angry, to a more calm and collected version of himself. This may be because, since Roy found out he was sick earlier on in the play, he may be reflecting on what he did with his life, and possibly felt guilty for some of the things he had done, especially with Ethel, causing him to feel some sort of guilt towards his actions causing him to hallucinate or see someone that he had done wrong too. This is the first hallucination Roy sees in the play and this is quite a significant one due to the fact that he sentenced the spirit to execution in the past and now his time is growing nearer since he now has Aids. Ethel mentions that millennium is approaching and that history is about to crack, signifying that something quite big is going to happen to Roy, or the world, signifying that Roy states he is immortal and has forced his way into history, meaning that he is never going to die. This may become unclear

since the millennium of the 2000s is slowly arriving since this story takes place in the 1990s.

In conclusion, the supernatural in Kushner's play is a big piece of the characters emotions and trauma from having AIDS, helping them get back on their feet and move forward in a more positive way. The supernatural represent their emotions and thoughts that the individual is experiencing and they give the realization of what they may have done, right or wrong, in the past. The supernatural creatures are a result of trauma, most likely not real and are instead hallucinations from the character's minds. Though this may be true, they played a big part in Prior and Roy's role similarly but differently, by giving them confidence, support, and in some cases, a chance to make things better. These two characters, Roy and Prior, are the only ones that experience AIDS-related supernatural visions. Even though they were not too fond of them when they first met, these entities actually helped the two characters see who they were for who they really are. These were the characters that we're dealing with the most amount of stress and trauma from the AIDS epidemic, which caused their behaviors and emotions to become more overwhelming for them. these entities although they may not be real, gave them the comfort that they needed to become stronger and more confident giving and gave them a sense of hope, and a better understanding of who they really are on the inside and the outside.