

# Angels in america play exposes faulty politics regarding aids and homosexuality d...

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## **Reaganomics in Angels in America**

The Reagan era had a huge impact on American politics in the 1980's (during the AIDs epidemic.) President Reagan shaped the political scene in his own image, adopting a conservative stance on many issues, especially homosexuality. To this day, many believe Reagan's policies persist, with the ongoing debates of legalizing gay marriage. Tony Kushner's modern play *Angels in America* examines the complexity of AIDs and homosexuality in the midst of the Reagan administration. Through the use of medical vocabulary and imagery Kushner prompts the reader to think about the political immune system in the United States as a negative influence on social freedom.

Reagan's terms were often received with great optimism. During the Cold War, he hoped America would be seen as a beacon of light in the world. The United States was supposed to be the "good guy" in world politics. Often times Reagan referred to the Soviet Union as the "Evil Empire." To Reagan, America's role was that of a democratic superpower, directly contrasted with the Soviets. Therefore, its internal system had to be completely free of the "evil disease."

The virological/immune diction in the play allowed the audience to draw connections to the American political body and actual illness. Throughout the play, words such as "disease" and "infection" were used often. Although there were many actual diseases and disorders in the play, the only times the words were used were in relation to homosexuality and AIDs. In a split scene between Prior and Harper, Prior said. "I don't think there's any

uninfected part of me. My heart's pumping polluted blood. I feel dirty"

(Kushner. II. 34.) Because of AIDS, Prior does not have any self-esteem, loses his human dignity, and feels guilty about his infected body. The reason he feels his whole body is infected is also because of his homosexuality. When he said that " my heart's pumping polluted blood" he implies that the disease goes beyond AIDs and has something to do with his actual heart, which could mean his love interests. Even Prior, who is comfortable with his sexuality, is wired to link it with disease. This is resonant with Reaganite beliefs because it views homosexuality as an infection, ready to infiltrate American society.

AIDs is also a disease associated with homosexuals which is why Roy Cohn denied having it. Even after his doctor Henry told him he was infected because he was a homosexual, Roy claimed, " No Henry, no. AIDs is what homosexuals have. I have liver cancer" (I. 46.) As such a highly influential Republican in the midst of the Reagan-era, Roy must deny his own sexuality to avoid being seen as the virus. He believes homosexuals have no power and are on the same level of treacherous as communists and Jews. Roy Cohn is an important character because he is a living extension of the Reagan administration even though he himself is Jewish and gay. He is best portrayed as anti-Semitic when he brags about his involvement in Ethel Rosenberg's execution. He referred to the judge ruling her case as a " timid yid Nebbish," which is also derogatory for Jews. Even Roy, who seemed to be such a strong character was brainwashed by the Reagan administration into thinking homosexuals and Jews were invasive to the " American body

politic.” The ghost of Ethel Rosenberg however, reminds him that he is “ a very sick man” (III. 112.)

In the eyes of the law, (religious and social) homosexuality was seen as an offense and a result of being a sinner. Joe felt ashamed of his sexuality and often tried to repress it in order to live up to societal and religious standards. He and Roy were both major Republicans, which meant they were automatically anti-gay. Even though they were both gay, they saw homosexuality as being a disease that had to be eliminated if they wanted to remain in their line of work. Joe loved Harper because he felt she was the one who was sick, and that if he couldn't save himself at least he could save her. But Kushner portrays Harper as being truly sick. She was a valium addict and often experienced hallucinations. Addiction and mental illness are actual diseases. Perhaps this juxtaposition was to show the reader the difference between an actual disease and the one Reaganomics wanted everyone to believe was a disease.

Moreover, Roy Cohn's character prompts the audience to think about the relationship between law and individual freedom. Cohn spends his whole life thinking he has the freedom to do as he pleases. He brags about how he can have the President's wife on the other end of the line with the press of a button. Of course, his power comes from his position as a popular lawyer who was present in many famous cases such as the Rosenberg trials. He says he fears no one but at the end of the day he hides in the closet. He is not free to accept his sexuality and actually denies it constantly. He is perhaps the character most closely associated with Reaganomics and he

seems to lack the most morale. His character seems to lack empathy and sincerity because he always has to play up to his façade. This, Kushner prompts, is not freedom. He is socially shackled and also attempts to infect Joe by feeding him his ideas.

Roy Cohn was also known famous for his influence in the second Red Scare during Senator Joseph McCarthy's investigation into the Communist activity in the United States. During this time, everyone was under surveillance by the government and consequences would include imprisonment and sometimes even death. Daryl Ogden, a professor at John Hopkins, claims that, "The American body politic... operated as a kind of large-scale human immune system, placing under surveillance and effectively eliminating citizens suspected of foreign sympathies that might weaken internal American resolve" (Ogden, 2000.) Reagan's term continued the belief that America had a civic responsibility to remove infectious outsiders. Among these outsiders, were any misfits to society that did not meet Christian standards of model citizens. There was no separation of church and state which led to the conclusion that homosexuals too could be viewed as "foreign sympathies that might weaken internal American resolve."

Gay men were also ostracized in American society because the introduction of AIDs gave rise to a double meaning that just because one contracted the disease he had been excessively promiscuous, and that the body was pushed to its limit with unnatural intercourse (Ogden, 2000.) In the 1980's men who had tested positive were treated like and felt, like the "expendable cells" the human body rejected in response to disease. Kushner prompted

the reader to think about American politics as a sort of response system to the “ threats” imposed by anyone who did not fit the schematic Republican model. It was obvious however, that Kushner felt it was the conservative Republicans who played the villainous role in the play. For instance, he often gave subtle criticisms of President Reagan himself. In the play Louis states, “ What’s it like to be the child of the Zeitgeist? To have the American Animus as your dad?” (II. 71.) During the 80’s Ronald Reagan was highly accepted by the American people. Even Joe, who struggled with his own sexuality and had suffered a great deal because of Reagan’s views defended him by saying, “ The truth restored. Law restored. That’s what President Reagan’s done, Harper. He says “ Truth exists and can be spoken proudly” (I. 38.) Although Joe’s own truth had to be hidden and contained. Kushner then allowed his own political voice to be heard through Louis’s character that isn’t very fond of Reagan.

In particular, Louis resents Reagan for his political inaction during the AIDs epidemic. When the disease was first introduced, the Reagan administration did nothing to address the issue. In fact, Reagan spoke on the issue of gay rights by saying, “ my criticism is that [the gay movement] isn’t just asking for civil rights; it’s asking for recognition and acceptance of an alternative lifestyle which I do not believe society can condone, nor can I.” Ronald Reagan was against homosexuality not only on a political scale but a societal scale as well. Accepting this different lifestyle would impede on his vision of a model American society. Kushner’s political interjections allow characters like Louis to speak more fervently on the issue.

Louis is especially critical of the idea of political tolerance towards the gay rights movement. He rants, “ that’s just liberalism, the worst kind of liberalism, really, bourgeois tolerance, and what I think is that what AIDS shows us is the limits of tolerance, that it’s not enough to be tolerated, because when the shit hits the fan you find out how much tolerance is worth. Nothing. And underneath all the tolerance is intense, passionate hatred” (III. 90.) Louis hates tolerance because to be tolerant of something does not mean one accepts a notion much less considers it as being equal. Tolerance in itself is such a cold word. According to the Oxford dictionary it means, “ allowing some freedom to move within limits.” However, as Louis claims, to be simply tolerant of gay rights is not enough. There must be social acceptance and a desire to promote true freedom and equality.

Overall, the play shows that the disease does not lie within the realm of homosexuality. In the split dream scene, Harper tells Prior, “ Deep inside you there’s a part of you, the most inner part, entirely free of disease. I can see that” (I. 32.) The disease is among those who refuse to take social action and refuse to act based on honesty and selflessness. Reagan-era influenced so much of the way society thought about certain issues. The conclusions republicans reached at this time however, were so inaccurate. It is so plain in the novel how skewed these views actually were. The two biggest Republicans in the play, Roy and Joe, ended up being the most discredited characters. The reader, whether religious or political, is prompted to look at these issues from a different standpoint. It causes Americans to question the

social construct we have been taught to believe and perhaps challenge them because they are not the whole truth.