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Ambivalent Family in *Angels in America*: A Redefinition of Family  
by Amy Ard, '96

Sociologists are still trying to figure out what happened in the 1980s. For the most part, the 80s seem to be a decade in which the individual raised his or her fists to the "system"--whether that be government, religion, education, whatever--and said, "I can do this better without your help." From the political and social trends of the decade, it appears these systems listened to the rallying cry of the people. Reagan's years in office were marked by an attitude of *laissez faire*, and religion in the 80s became increasingly secularized. Due in part to these separations, the rich and poor classes in America were pushed even further to the polar extremes; the middle class, an ever growing percent of the population, was defined as the political, economic, and moral norm. One significant impact the middle class made on America was the romanticization of the American family. Stephanie Coontz in, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, discusses family politics of the 1980s in conjunction with the national ethos of the time. Just as religion and politics were forced into their specific realms, family and family morals became a very private issue:

Middle class Americans elevated family values and private rectitude into the defining features of the Gilded Age morality [late nineteenth century]. Aside from attempts to convince rich and poor to adopt virtuous family values, they largely abstained from social reform, asserting that private morality and family life represented a higher and purer duty than did political or social activism (107).

Middle class families in the 1980s enjoyed widespread economic success and repeated a trend first demonstrated in the 1950s; they moved away from the cities and into suburbs where families were sheltered from the dangers of city life. Families during the 1980s had more expendable income than in earlier decades and were often able to afford larger houses and spend more money for the purpose of family entertainment. Although the political conscious of the nation was decidedly conservative, women and homosexuals slowly began to gain political voices. Sodomy laws in many states were overturned and while gay and lesbian marriages were not legal, homosexuals did not have to fear, in most states, that the "morality police" would barge in on them in the privacy of their own home. While the family became the moral center of the nation during the 80s, the definition of family became more obscure. In a poll taken in 1989, only 22 percent of those polled defined a family strictly in terms of blood marriage or



adoption. Seventy-four percent responded that a family "is any group whose members love and care for one another" (Coontz 21). These statistics seem to suggest that same-sex relationships may have been considered legitimate by many Americans.

However, the 1980s family had a darker side. While many strides were made for gender and sexual equality, the decade seems marked by a lack of fulfilling relationships:

Between the late 1970s and late 1980s, marital happiness did decline slightly in the United States. Some authors see this as reflecting our decreasing appreciation of marriage, although others suggest that it reflects unrealistically high expectations of love in a culture that denies people safe, culturally approved ways of getting used to marriage or cultivating other relationships to meet some of the needs that we currently load onto the couple alone (Coontz 16).

This feeling of alienation from family members and loved ones during the 1980s brings us to the discussion at hand, Tony Kushner's portrayal of familial relationships and roles in *Angels In America*. Kushner, in writing on "nationalistic themes" during the 1980s, could not glance over the importance of family and the changes that were occurring around the institution. What he says about the family, how he envisions the family, the role of family members and the state of love and commitment in modern times is intrinsic to the meaning of both parts of the play. Sorting through and analyzing the relationships in the plays through the framework of family can be confusing. Entering the text, we would expect Kushner to provide us with a picture of homosexual domestic tranquillity and devoted gay partners; America needs good, gay role models. What Kushner dishes out--most prominently in *Millennium Approaches*--are dysfunctional familial relationships and partners who run from each other when the going gets tough. Is Kushner, a gay playwright, doing a disservice to the gay community presenting homosexual relationships in this light? Do Americans need reenforcement of the already well established belief that homosexual relationships are not long term affairs?

David Savran writes of the ambivalence in *Angels*. "The opposite of everything you say about *Angels in America* will also hold true . . . *Angels* mounts an attack against ideologies of individualism; it problematizes the idea of community" (208). Yet Kushner nearly always manipulates this ambivalence to make his opinion clear to readers. Or, as Savran writes, "One side of the binary opposition is always favorable" (215). Kushner presents his readers with dialectical problems, but usually provides the reader with enough information to decide which side of the equation looks most promising. How does Kushner, then, answer the problems of "the family" in America, and most specifically, in the gay community? What about his vision seems troublesome? Art Borreca in a review of *Angels in America, Part One*:

*Millennium Approaches* writes, "Relationships crack apart simultaneously and we see, through the theatre's capacity to evoke simultaneously, something essential about America where selfishness and abandonment occur more frequently than love" (236). Is this what Kushner finally portrays? Does the ethic of self-aggrandizement popular in the 80s win out in *Angels*? We may come closest to understanding these questions through an analysis of three relationships in the play: Harper and Joe, Prior and Louis, and the characterization of Belize as an ultimate mother figure.

Kushner wastes no time in presenting his audience with a dysfunctional, "heterosexual" marriage. From the first time they appear together, Harper and Joe are evidently not a happily married couple. When Harper suggests that they not move to Washington because they are both happy in New York, Joe replies, "That's not really true" (1:23), and the relationship deteriorates from there. Harper accuses Joe of having "secrets and lies" (1:27) and being the cause of her emotional problems (1:27). Not only does their emotional relationship seem lacking, their sex life is miserable for both of them; Harper tells Joe, "You think you're the only one who hates sex; I do; I hate it with you; I do" (1:37). Perhaps no line in the play portrays their relationship more clearly, however, than Harper's, "It was wrong of me to marry you. I knew you . . . It's a sin, and it's killing us both" (1:37). Indeed, the relationship does seem to be pulling the life out of both Harper and Joe. Harper, a delusional woman addicted to Valium, staggers from scene to scene, one moment fighting to keep her sanity and the next, slipping into fantasy. Joe admits, "I'm a shell. There's nothing left to kill" (1:40).

By Act One, scene eight, we understand why the marriage between Harper and Joe has not succeeded; Joe is a homosexual. Kushner presents us with scenes from an unhappy marriage--which should look familiar to us; they are common enough on soap operas and film--and then gives a non-traditional explanation. The marriage was doomed from the start; as delusional as Harper appears, Joe has played his own game of "pretend." Unable to express his desire for men, Joe has accepted the role society expects of him and fights to repress his erotic feelings towards men. Had Joe been able to express and act on his homosexuality, this marriage would have never occurred. In an environment where homosexual unions were legal and condoned, both Joe and Harper might have found themselves in much happier relationships. Joe is perhaps incapable of love because he has never been given the opportunity to express it as it is natural to him. Borreca writes in his review, "Kushner is saying we don't love enough because we have become terribly uncertain of our responsibilities to ourselves, let alone each other" (236). This seems to be precisely Joe's problem: he has failed himself; therefore, he fails Harper, whom he cannot love romantically. As readers, we must not judge Joe for walking away from his marriage; our society demands that he live in a state of false consciousness; we have abandoned him



as well.

There are troublesome aspects, however, to Kushner's portrayal of this family, particularly in the character of Harper. Kushner has drawn a dynamic and, at times, deeply moving character, but despite her depth, she retains many of the stereotypical "hysterical wife" characteristics. David Savran writes, "Harper may be crucial to the play's structure but she is still pathologized, like so many of her antecedents on the American stage . . . With her hallucinations and 'emotional problems' (1:27) she functions as a scapegoat for Joe" (215). While Kushner makes bold statements about redefining the family, the roles within heterosexual families are hardly bold. Harper remains dependent on Joe long after he has gone, appearing in his dreams and begging for him to return (2:20-21). She finds herself exchanging places with the mute Mormon wife in the diorama (2:71), a symbol of her own feelings of voicelessness. When she is finally able to assert her independence and leave, she asks for Joe's credit card, almost a comical parody of wives who leave their husbands and take the credit cards with them. In Harper's most outstanding moment, she is thrust back into the role of the money spending, financially dependent, wife.

Harper and Joe's marriage is set up as a foil to the relationship between Prior and Louis at the beginning of *Millennium*. Where Joe and Harper have such trouble communicating with each other, Louis and Prior seem to speak openly and honestly with one another. Where Joe and Harper's sex life is unfulfilling, Prior accuses Louis of being "oversexed" (1:38). While Joe and Harper are decidedly separating, Prior and Louis seem to be working hard to stay together, in spite of the fact that Prior's having AIDS is extremely difficult for Louis. From the outset, we expect Kushner to put the relationship between two devoted, monogamous gay men on a pedestal; in effect, to show America that such relationships can, and do, exist. Kushner does the opposite. Louis leaves Prior dying of AIDS, has sex with a stranger in the park (1: 57) and eventually enters into a relationship with Joe. Isn't Kushner doing a disservice to the gay community with such a portrayal of homosexual relationships?

AIDS presents its victims and those who love them with a series of tough decisions. Unless we have experienced the death of a partner to AIDS, it might be difficult to rationalize Louis's decision to leave Prior. We find that it is not an easy decision for Louis to live with either. Kushner, in fact, portrays a relationship between two men that is multi-layered and full of complexities. Had Louis stayed by Prior throughout his sickness, perhaps the relationship would have become simplistic and one-dimensional. In reality, familial relationships are fraught with pain and suffering: homosexual relationships must not be overlooked as incorporating these emotions as well. The "bruises" that Louis carries with him--internally and externally--are symbols that Louis still loves Prior deeply despite his

decision to leave. There is a love that transcends the familial roles they found themselves acting out, however non-traditional those roles may have been. The idea of family as represented in the 1980s is not the institution that serves the needs of Louis and Prior. Its expectations are not relevant to their situation and they find they must abandon it entirely. In the final analysis, however, it is clear that selfishness and abandonment do not win out over love. Near the end of *Perestroika*, when Louis returns to Prior this transcendent love and failure of family, as Louis and Prior recognize it, this is evident:

LOUIS. I really failed you. But . . . this is hard. Failing in love isn't the same as not loving. It doesn't let you off the hook, it doesn't mean . . . you're free not to love.

PRIOR. I love you, Louis.

LOUIS. Good. I love you.

PRIOR. I really do.

But you can't come back. Not ever.

I'm sorry. But you can't (2: 143).

Throughout the play, Kushner gives familial relationships a new spin. Hannah takes on the role of mother to Prior in *Perestroika*, taking him to the hospital and sitting by his side. Roy's discussion with God in Act Five, scene seven of *Perestroika* posits God as a dead-beat dad who has abandoned his children. Even the Reagan family is analyzed and deconstructed (1: 71). One of the most interesting characterizations, however, is that of Belize, an ex-drag-queen-turned-nurse. Belize takes on the role of mother to all who pass through his care. The best characteristics (although perhaps stereotypical characteristics) of motherhood are bestowed on him. Savran writes of Belize, "He becomes the purveyor of truth. He is cast in the role of caretaker" (222). He advises Louis, teaches him, and reprimands him when he finds Louis making racist remarks (1: 95). He teaches Louis through storytelling, a traditional method of passing knowledge used by African parents (1:96).

Belize's most motherly tendencies shine through in his care for the sick. Belize tells Prior, "Whatever happens, baby, I will be here for you" (1:61). As readers we already know that spouses cannot be counted on unquestionably. The ideal mother, however, we would expect to continue loving and supporting her son, through even the worse circumstances. Belize not only stands by Prior, an ex-lover, he patiently cares for Roy despite Roy's unabashed lack of concern for anyone but himself. Belize continues to care for Roy, even after he is dead, forcing Louis to say the Jewish prayer for the dead over Roy's body (2:124).

The character of Belize is not, however, without his share of ambivalence. Kushner creates in Belize a character who is more "feminized" than any of the other gay men. Drawing Belize as a mother



figure and an ex-drag queen seems to suggest that only someone who has developed the feminine characteristics of oneself is capable of nurturing and caring for others. The gay "masculine" men turn away from this role time and time again. Again, Kushner seems to be playing into a stereotype.

Finally then, what do these "familial" relationships boil down to in the end? What is Kushner's vision for the family in *Angels*? David Savran points out that, "Prior and Louis, Louis and Joe, Joe and Harper have all parted by the end of the play and the romantic dyad (as primary social unit) is replaced in the final scene of *Perestroika* by a utopian concept of (erotic) affiliation and a new definition of family" (209). Perhaps a clue to Kushner's vision lies somewhere between Savran's notion stated above and his discussion of Mormon family ideals mentioned in the same article. Kushner's repeated emphasis on Mormonism begs us to take a look at the ideal as represented by this religion. Faced with oppression, not unlike the gay community, the Mormons fled towards a land of "milk and honey" (1:66) guided by a prophet. Once they arrived in Utah, they developed a strong sense of community, where the needs of the community were considered above those of the individual. Perhaps in the light of 1980s individualism, this is what Kushner proposes--family molded as a community. For at the end of the play, we see a diverse and needy community gathered together in hopes of being healed. This new family, created out of pain and love, must work together so that the "Great Work" can begin.

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