**BOOK ANALYSIS**

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**ANGELS IN AMERICA**

**1. What is happening in the play?**

Part I focuses primarily on two couples struggling in the wake of the AIDS crisis. Gay couple Louis Ironson and Prior Walter are tested when Prior contracts AIDS, a diagnosis and reality that Louis cannot withstand. It also follows Mormon lawyer Joe Pitt and his wife, Harper, who is addicted to Valium and suffers from hallucinations. Joe is gay, an unspoken truth that Harper struggles to extract from him. Joe’s mentor and friend, right-wing and secretly gay lawyer Roy Cohn, also contracts AIDS, but asks that the doctor make the official diagnosis liver cancer. Roy tries to convince Joe to take a job in Washington, which Harper at first strongly resists. After an encounter in a bathroom with Louis crying, Joe and Louis become friends. The play culminates in Joe going home with Louis to have sex. Harper and Prior are connected by a shared dream in which Prior suggests to Harper that Joe is gay, leading her to confront him. With Louis gone from Prior, Belize, an ex-drag queen, cares for him. Prior shares with him about the voice of a messenger who visits him. Joe eventually drunkenly admits his sexuality to his mother, Hannah, who brushes the confession aside but plan to go to New York to make things right again. When Joe is finally truthful with Harper, she tells him to leave. Louis officially leaves Prior. Prior is then visited by ghosts who have been sent by the “messenger” whose voice visits him. When Joe turns down the Washington job, Roy berates him and reveals that he interfered in the espionage trial of Ethel Rosenberg to guarantee her execution. Her ghost later visits Roy. Part One ends with Joe going home with Prior for sex and with an angel appearing to Prior in his hospital room.

**2. Where is the crisis in the play?**

With the characters fighting for their very lives from the onset of the play, the work is almost a continuous crisis…Harper’s Valium addiction and hallucinations spiraling out of control, Roy’s declining health and refusal to admit his sexuality, Louis’s lack of strength, Joe’s battle with his sexuality and the morals imbedded in him by his Mormon faith, Prior’s heartbreak over Louis and his brutal battle with AIDS. However, the crisis comes to a head when Joe finally reveals his feelings, or rather lack thereof, to Harper and she tells him to leave. In the same scene in an overlap, Louis officially leaves Prior, unable to weather the realities of his illness.

**3. Where is the play taking place?**

The play takes place in New York City in 1985.

 

**4. What time is it – season, year, day, time of day? Of what importance is time?**

Act I takes place October-November of 1985. Act II takes place December 1985-January 1986. Act III takes place in January 1986. The action takes place over the course of four months, which at first strikes me as a relatively long time period for one work. However, the entire fabric of these characters’ lives unravel in that time period. For all that happens, it is a short amount of time. It takes only four months for AIDS to break Louis, bring Prior to his knees, drive Harper deeper into madness and addiction and finally bring the long-suffocated truth out of Joe. The two relationships that the work begins with, fragile as they may be, unravel fully by the end of four months. Time is a daunting opponent for the characters. It is an excess of time that drives Harper mad—the years of pretending to not notice and of not asking and the countless tedious hours she spends alone at home dreaming up demons and swallowing pill after pill. Prior is running out of time, it seems, as his condition gets worse and worse. Every day brings a new legion, a new pain or disgusting sympotom to humiliate and weaken him. It, in effect, brings the end of his relationship with Louis. Time ticks against Joe as well—how much longer can he ignore his feelings and who he is? How much longer can he avoid giving Roy an answer about Washington? Even Roy, as brave as he acts, cannot beat time as his “liver cancer”/AIDS takes its toll on him. Yet, time, under the surface, brings change. It brings cracks in the characters facades that slowly let light break through, however painful it is what it exposes.

**5. What themes are dealt with in the play?**

Identity

Mortality

Fear

Ethics

Isolation

Religion

Addiction

Betrayal

Political corruption

Inequality

Limits of love

Self-discovery

Political party divides

The scariness of truth

**6. In what time period was the play written? How are the themes especially relevant to the audience of that time? How might it differ for a contemporary audience?**

This work was written in 1993. The themes could not have been more relevant for this audience living in the prime of the AIDS epidemic. The historical context is key to understanding the relevancy of these themes. AIDS was still very much a taboo issue. Major public figures had just begun to come public with their struggles with AIDS. Queen singer, Freddy Mercury, died in 1991 from AIDS complications. In the same year, Magic Johnson announced that he was HIV-positive. In 1992, AIDS became the number one cause of death for U.S. males ages 25 to 44. With those statistics, I would guess that AIDS somehow impacted everyone in the US, whether it was a family member, neighbor or coworker struggling with the disease. The political climate was hostile for the issue of gay rights and the country was not ready to make strides towards equality. Patients with AIDS faced uncertainty and isolation and the diagnosis was fatal in many cases-not only physically but for a person’s reputation. However, the arts world was making strides to address the issue head-on from a place of humanity. The film “Philadelphia” was released in 1993, starring Tom Hanks as a lawyer with AIDS. It was the first major Hollywood film on AIDS. Kushner’s play was critically extremely well-received. It won the Tony Award for Best Play and the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. It was GROUND BREAKING and brilliantly brave.

Today, AIDS is not a death sentence. It is treatable and a diagnosis doesn’t come with quite the same scarlet letter that it did back in the 1990s. Audiences are further removed from the AIDS epidemic. Yet, the themes are no less applicable today. Our political system is still up in arms over gay rights. Yes, progress has been made and gay marriage is legal in the United States, but only as of last year!!!! Being from the South, I can say that less has actually changed than we may like to think. Furthermore, audience members of any race, religion, gender and sexual orientation can deeply identify with the themes of isolation, struggling with what you believe and the limits of love. Addiction, betrayal and mortality are still very much things we all deal with at our core. I think that the themes of this work are 100% just as relevant to today’s audiences as they were to audiences in 1993. In fact, audiences today may even be more open to grappling with these themes than some audiences in 1993.

**7. What has happened previously that is the background of the play?**

Harper and Joe’s relationship has years of struggle with addiction, sexual frustration and religious restraints. They have a whole history together full of what we can only imagine what. Harper was abused as a child, perhaps explaining some of her addiction and anxiety. It is suggested that she has run away before or even tried to kill herself. Prior and Louis also have a relationship history, a relationship that used to have love and trust that they thought could endure such a trial. Before the play begins, Prior and Roy both have had sexual relations with someone infected with AIDS, since they both contract the disease.

**8. How does your assigned character help express the playwright’s dramatic purpose?**

Harper represents people stuck in the current of time, constantly being tugged back and forth between the forward flowing current of change and the painful ebbing of the past and deeply embedded beliefs. She is a victim of her circumstances…the abuse of her childhood, the unfair and self-inflicted expectations from her religion, the complications of addiction and the devastation of being married to a man who doesn’t, and cannot, love her. In Harper, we see a human being who, like the homosexual characters, is not who she is expected to be. She is not warm, well behaved, beautiful or hospitable. She cannot be what she is supposed to be and she is withering in circumstances that she does not want to confront. We see in her the crux of why the truth can be so scary. She wants to be seen and to see the truth in Joe, but she also does not for fear of what she will find. Harper, a religious and heterosexual person, struggles with the same feelings of isolation, loneliness, hopelessness and uncertainty about who she is and what she believes, that the gay characters with AIDS struggle with. In Harper, Kushner shows us that the human experience of AIDS, the way it struck people to the core, was not limited to the people with AIDS. The desperation and pain of that time could be found in people of any background or gender.

**9. Discuss how the writing affects you, and with which themes and characters you identify. How do those views influence your approach to the work?**

This work is, quite honestly, difficult for me to work through right now. But, I couldn’t be happier that I’m working on it. I come from a place (North Carolina) where everyone around me has quite different views on gay rights than every single person I know here. I have always loved and treated all people I know with the same kindness, something that I was raised to do. I could never do otherwise. But I can’t say that the beliefs I had on gay rights when I arrived at Michigan are what I believe anymore. I, like Joe and Harper, have struggled with how my faith and my undeniable gut feelings on the issue are at odds. Only a few nights ago, I was in tears over the issue because I no longer believe what I used to believe and, though it sounds strange, that terrified me. Over the past four years I’ve spent here, my own deeply-rooted beliefs have shifted. I’m lucky because I have such wonderful friends and family who remind me that this is what life is about---it is about change, about letting everything crack and break open so that truth can finally come through. When I worked on Angels in America, my freshman year, I felt very uncomfortable with the material. This year, I wanted to sit and weep as I read it. My heart has changed and it has been very emotional realizing that I am no longer who I used to be and that the things I used to say as my truths sound grossly wrong, ignorant and empty now. I’ve realized that it is ok to change. Just because I change where I stand on something that my faith has taught me does not mean I am no longer a Christian, that my faith is any less important to me. It means that I don’t have all of the answers, but that what it comes down to for me is love and that a God of love would not want any of his children to not be able to experience the painfully beautiful experience of human love. It has been a huge awakening for me.

On another note, one of the themes that most resonates with me right now is the scariness of truth. I’m in an actual relationship for the first time and I’m experiencing for the first time what it’s like to be truly seen by someone. It is this terrifying, free-falling feeling of wanting to be seen but also being afraid that what they see in you will be too much or that it won’t be enough—something that both Harper and Prior especially struggle with.

I think that the changes I’m going through in my life, the monumental shifting of my beliefs and the new experiences I’m allowing myself to have, give me an understanding of the themes and the work that I did not and could not have four years ago.