# Angels in America

## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TONY KUSHNER

Tony Kushner was born to a family of Jewish musicians. He was a good student, and active in policy debate in high school. He attended Columbia University, where he was politically active, and received a B.A. in Medieval Studies in 1978. Afterwards, Kushner attended the Tisch School of the Arts, where he studied theater. For most of the 1980s, Kushner was active in the New York theater world, gaining a reputation for writing provocative, politically-oriented plays that mixed harsh commentary on economic inequality and the AIDS crisis with a fantastic, operatic style. In 1991, Kushner finished by far his most famous play, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes*. The first part of the play was first performed in San Francisco, and the second part was first performed in New York City in 1992. Kushner's work was universally regarded as a masterpiece: it won both the Tony and the Pulitzer Prize for the best play of 1992. Since the 90s, Kushner has continued to write plays prolifically, though none have ever rivaled the cultural impact of *Angels in America*. In addition to his work in theater, Kushner is a prolific screenwriter noted for his collaborations with Steven Spielberg. Kushner wrote the screenplays for both *Munich* (2005) and *Lincoln* (2012).

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The most important historical event referenced in *Angels in America* is the AIDS crisis of the 1980s. In the late 70s and early 80s, doctors discovered a "rare cancer" that destroyed patient's immune systems. This disease, eventually named AIDS, was (in America) most commonly found in the gay male community. By the mid 1980s, hundreds of thousands of American citizens—the majority of them gay, black, and/or Latino—had become infected with AIDS. During this period, President Ronald Reagan was widely criticized for refusing to mention AIDS in his public speeches or support federal funding for AIDS awareness education or medical research. It was even suggested that Reagan—a conservative icon—was wary of mentioning AIDS because he was afraid of alienating his Republican base, which was largely white and Christian. In essence, it was argued, Reagan was putting politics ahead of human life. Another important historical event in the play is the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 80s and early 90s. In the 80s, the U.S.S.R., a Communist nation, was in the grips of economic depression. By the end of the decade Vladimir Gorbachev, the president of the country, had instituted a series of political reforms that liberalized the country, opening it up to foreign business and thus, foreign culture. The collective term for these reforms, "Perestroika," gives Part Two of the play its title. Kushner also alludes to the McCarthy hearings of the 1950s. Senator Joseph McCarthy of New York rose to political prominence by suggesting that the federal government had been infiltrated by spies from the Soviet Union. With the help of the attorney Roy Cohn—a character in the play—McCarthy organized a series of public hearings designed to investigate the presence of Communists in government organizations, and later other institutions, such as the motion picture industry. To this day, Cohn and McCarthy are vilified for unfairly casting the subjects of their investigations as Communist spies, unjustly destroying many people's reputations. Finally, Kushner's play alludes to the history of Mormonism in the United States. In the 19th century, Joseph Smith, a New Yorker, claimed to have a vision of the angel Moroni, and took Moroni's words as a mandate that he should found a new religion. Smith organized a group of settlers, and together, they founded a new faith, Mormonism, in the American West.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Kushner alludes to two literary works frequently associated with the gay community: L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* (1900) and Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947). The flighty, delicate protagonists of both works—Dorothy Gale and Blanche Dubois respectively—have been hailed as gay icons, and at many points in the play the characters imitate the characters' mannerisms and speech patterns, as well as their most famous quotes. Kushner also riffs on the symbolism of *The Book of Mormon*, the holy book of the Mormon religion—the iconography of magical spectacles and angelic prophecy, around which *The Book of Mormon* is organized, has great literary value. Finally, Kushner has acknowledged his debt to the plays of Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), the great German poet, playwright, and critic. Brecht is celebrated for using theater as a political weapon. In works like *The Threepenny Opera* (1928) and *Life of Galileo* (1945), the characters in his plays will "break the fourth wall" and confront the audience for its political ignorance and lack of civic engagement. There's a similar breaking of the fourth wall at the end of *Angels in America*—one that, in Brechtian form, is designed to impel the audience to go out and begin the "great work" of political progressivism.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes. Part One: Millennium Approaches. Part Two: Perestroika.
- **Where Written:** New York City and San Francisco

- **Literary Period:** Contemporary queer theater
- **Genre:** Political theater, or self-described "Gay Fantasia on National Themes"
- **Setting:** New York City in 1985 and 1990, as well as Heaven
- **Climax:** Prior tells the council of angels that he wants to live

## EXTRA CREDIT

**Gay power couple:** Tony Kushner is one of the most influential openly gay men in America: a hugely important playwright and screenwriter. His husband, Mark Harris, is an equally influential journalist, who's written for Entertainment Weekly for many years (he recently published his second book on film history). Harris and Kushner were the first gay couple to have their wedding listed in the "Vows" section of the *New York Times*.

**The perfectionist:** In the theater world, Kushner is notorious for his perfectionism: even after his plays are performed, he continues reworking and revising his own material. When the legendary director Mike Nichols adapted Kushner's play as a miniseries in 2003, Kushner jumped on the chance to revise his own work, slightly altering hundreds of lines of his own dialogue. In all, there are more than half a dozen accepted (and virtually identical) versions of *Angels in America*, each of which Kushner has reworked ever so slightly.

## PLOT SUMMARY

Part One of *Angels in America* takes place in 1985. Shortly after the death of his grandmother, Sarah Ironson, Louis Ironson learns that his boyfriend, Prior Walter, has AIDS. Louis is devastated by this news. While he loves Prior, and has been living with him for years, he's afraid to continue doing so now that he knows he could be endangering his own life.

Meanwhile, Joe Pitt, a young, ambitious Mormon law clerk, meets with his mentor, the powerful New York attorney and conservative icon Roy Cohn. Cohn offers Joe a chance to work in the Department of Justice in Washington, D.C. When Joe proposes this idea to his pill-popping wife, Harper, Harper is reluctant to leave New York. She has long hallucinations about her imaginary friend, Mr. Lies, a travel agent who takes her around the world.

In one of Harper's hallucinations, she crosses path with Prior, who is dressed as a woman. Prior tells Harper that her husband (Joe Pitt) is gay. Shortly afterwards, Louis tells Prior that he's moving out of their apartment, despite his love for Prior. At the same time, Harper accuses Joe of being homosexual, and tells him that she's leaving him—he should go to Washington without her.

Roy Cohn then learns that he has AIDS—his decades of illicit homosexuality have taken their toll. Because Cohn has made his career denouncing liberals and homosexuals, he claims that he has "liver cancer." His nurse in the hospital—who recognizes that he has AIDS—is Belize, a former lover of Prior. Meanwhile, Prior is admitted to the hospital, where he's taken care of by Emily, a young nurse. In his dreams, Prior hears a voice telling him that he's a prophet, and that he will begin a "Great Work" soon.

As Cohn's condition deteriorates, he faces the prospect of being disbarred for his decades of bribery and professional corruption. He tries to convince Joe to take the job in Washington so that Joe can convince the Justice Department to back off the disbarment process. Joe, now living alone, is shaken by Cohn's corruption, and refuses to help Cohn. He's further startled when Cohn reveals that he unethically conspired to ensure the execution of Ethel Rosenberg for treason. In the hospital, Cohn is visited by the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg, who mocks Cohn for his corruption, and tells him that he'll be disbarred soon.

At work, Joe crosses paths with Louis, who works as a typist at Joe's firm. Louis recognizes Joe as a "fellow homosexual," and together they begin an unlikely romance. Late at night, Joe drunkenly calls his mother, Hannah Pitt, telling her that he's a homosexual. Hannah, who lives in Salt Lake City, decides to sell her property and come to New York to be with her son. Meanwhile, Prior has visions in which his ancient ancestors tell him that he'll be visited by an angel soon. At the end of Part One, an angel arrives through the ceiling of Prior's apartment, telling him that, "the Great Work begins."

In Part Two, we open in the Kremlin in Moscow: as the 80s draw to a close, the Soviet Union is collapsing, and it's unclear what will replace it. Meanwhile, Joe and Louis continue their relationship. Joe is attracted to Louis, and even says that he loves him. Nevertheless, he realizes that Louis is still devastated at having left his previous lover, Prior. In addition, Louis is confused and even disgusted by Joe's conservative politics and Mormonism.

Harper, who's descending further and further into fantasy, joins Hannah, who is now working at the Mormon Visitor's Center in Manhattan.

Prior has a vision of an angel, who describes herself as the Angel of America. The angel tells Prior that he'll fulfill the angel's prophecy, but Prior refuses. The Angel visits Prior again and again, giving him orgasms, and forcing him to carry a heavy **book** and wear a pair of magical **spectacles**. The Angel explains that the **angels** envy humans for their ability to change and be unpredictable. Over time, she complains, God has come to love humans more than he loves angels. As a result, Heaven—which apparently looks a lot like San Francisco after the Great Earthquake of 1906—is in a state of disarray. When Prior tells Belize about his dream, Belize suggests that Prior wants to return to Louis, and the angel is just his mind's way of reconciling his feelings. Prior acknowledges that Belize might

be right, but also suggests that he could be a prophet after all.

Belize treats Cohn's illness, despite the fact that they despise one another. Belize, who claims that he's looking out for Cohn as a "fellow fag," even gives Cohn advice to use his political connections to obtain as much **AZT**—a drug that can treat AIDS—as possible. Cohn takes Belize's advice and obtains hundreds of bottles of AZT, more than he could ever take in a lifetime. Despite his taking AZT, Cohn's condition worsens, and he comes closer and closer to death. He hallucinates Ethel Rosenberg again, and she tells him that he's been disbarred, just a few days before his death. Cohn says that Ethel doesn't scare him—he's in the history books, meaning that he'll never die. He pretends to think that Ethel is his mother, and convinces her to sing him a song. After Ethel finishes, Cohn bursts out laughing, claiming that he's "won." With these words, he dies. Belize uses Louis's help to steal Cohn's unused AZT, which he plans to use to help his friends with AIDS.

Louis tells Joe that he needs to sort things out with Prior before he can commit to Joe any further. Louis meets with Prior, whose condition is now so bad that he can barely walk. During their meeting, Louis tells Prior that he's seeing Joe, and Prior is horrified. Prior and Belize sneak into Joe's office to catch a glimpse of Joe. There, Joe recognizes Belize from Cohn's hospital, which leads Prior to assume that Joe has had sex with Roy Cohn. Belize tells Louis about this, and Louis in turn confronts Joe—he'd had no idea that Joe worked for such a famously homophobic man. Louis yells at Joe, and Joe angrily defends his beliefs, becoming so furious that he kicks Louis in the face.

Joe meets his mother at the Mormon Visitor's Center, where he admits again that he is homosexual—news that devastates Hannah. At the center, Prior confronts Joe. Afterwards, Hannah offers to take Prior to the hospital, much to Prior's surprise. In the hospital, Prior has another vision of the Angel of America. The Angel—visible to both Hannah and Prior—takes Prior with her to Heaven, while also giving Hannah an intense orgasm.

In Heaven, a panel of angels confronts Prior and asks him to spread their prophecy of sameness across the world. Prior refuses, arguing that the angels' real problem is with God, not humanity. Prior goes on to ask the angels to bless him with life. The angels have no idea how to cure Prior's AIDS, but they bless him anyway. Prior reminds the angels of the inherent value of life, even if it is life lived in pain, and leaves Heaven.

Prior awakes to find himself in the hospital. Louis visits him and tells him that he wants to make up. Prior admits that he loves Louis, but tells him that they can't be together. Prior also gets a visit from Belize, who provides Prior with AZT. Meanwhile, Harper tells Joe that she's leaving him to go to San Francisco.

The Epilogue takes place five years later, after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Hannah, Louis, Belize, and Prior gather at the **Bethesda Fountain** in Central Park—Prior's favorite place in the world. Prior, speaking directly to the audience, says that he's lived with AIDS for five years now, and plans on living far longer. He tells the audience about the Mormon prophecy that in the new Millennium, the Bethesda Fountain in Jerusalem will flow again, curing the sick. The play ends, "The Great Work begins."

## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Prior Walter** – Arguably the protagonist of *Angels in America*, Prior Walter is a young homosexual man who contracts the AIDS virus. As his condition deteriorates, Prior faces a series of external and internal challenges. Prior's boyfriend, Louis Ironson, leaves him out of fear for his own health, and Prior begins to experience a series of "visions" in which he's confronted by the Angel of America. Throughout the play, Prior experiences intense self-doubt: he's not sure whether his visions are mere hallucinations, a side effect of his AIDS, or proof that he's a genuine prophet, meant to send the Angel of America's message around the world. In one of the central scenes of *Angels in America*, Prior makes a long, impassioned plea for the inherent value of all life, whether it's life lived in pain or in pleasure. As the play concludes, Prior has been living with AIDS for five years, but looks forward to the future with a strong sense of optimism, despite his uncertainty about what lies ahead.

**Louis Ironson** – A young, intelligent homosexual man, and the grandson of Sarah Ironson. Louis struggles with his feelings for his boyfriend, Prior Walter, throughout the play. Louis has been living with Prior for years, but when Prior contracts the AIDS virus, Louis decides to abandon him. Louis then begins a relationship with Joe Pitt, but breaks it off when he realizes that Joe is a friend of Roy Cohn, whom he regards as a horrible human being. This brings up Louis's defining characteristic: his enthusiasm for politics in general and progressivism in particular. Kushner has stated that Louis is a "moderate progressive," however. In part because of his white, secular identity, Louis tends to underestimate the role of race in the political sphere, whereas characters like Belize have a more realistic view of its importance. As the play draws to a close, Louis learns to balance his broad, abstract political views with a concern for living, breathing human beings—whether it be Prior or any of the other victims of the AIDS crisis.

**Joe Pitt** – Joe Pitt is another character who could be considered the protagonist of *Angels in America*. As the play begins, Joe is a successful law clerk, mentored by the legendary conservative attorney Roy Cohn. Despite a promising career, Joe—a devout Mormon—has frequent arguments with his unstable wife, Harper Pitt. As the play goes on, Joe begins to

reject the instructions of Roy Cohn, a mentor whom he increasingly comes to see as corrupt and cruel. More seriously, Joe comes to realize that he's either gay or bisexual—a realization that prompts Harper to abandon him. Throughout the play, Joe struggles to reconcile his natural sexual attraction to men with his strong beliefs, both in the Mormon religion and the Republican ideology. In the end, his beliefs are rather unclear—it's not revealed whether Joe comes out to his conservative colleagues or remains "in the closet." In its very indeterminateness, Joe's internal struggle illustrates the experience of many homosexuals in the age of AIDS, without ever suggesting how closeted homosexuals *should* behave.

**Harper Pitt** – Joe Pitt's wife, Harper Pitt, is a mentally unstable woman who, thanks largely to her ingestion of large amounts of Valium, has vivid hallucinations. And yet because this is a Tony Kushner play, Harper's hallucinations don't alienate her from reality; instead, they put her in touch with a "higher truth," giving her an insight into life and humanity that many of the play's more rational characters lack. Harper, a Mormon, feels confused and betrayed when she learns that her husband is homosexual. And yet in many other ways, she seems like the most progressive character in the play: she stands up for women's rights in the Mormon religion and, in the climax, inspires Prior Walter to deliver a passionate speech on the value of human life. In the end, Harper leaves New York to go to San Francisco, where, it's suggested, she'll embark on a journey of self-discovery just as significant as the one her husband has experienced.

**Roy Cohn** – Roy Cohn, both a character in the play and a real-life attorney and political figure, is an elderly lawyer and a mentor to Joe Pitt. Cohn has made his career on smearing his political opponents, as as a friend to Joseph McCarthy, he ruined many prominent Americans' reputations by accusing them of being Communists or homosexuals. As the play begins, we learn that Roy, in spite of his decades of homophobia, is a closeted homosexual himself, and has contracted the AIDS virus. Furthermore, Cohn has been corrupt throughout his career, even conspiring to ensure the execution for treason of Ethel Rosenberg—a woman who appears before Cohn as a ghost. While it would be easy for Kushner to portray Cohn as a clear-cut villain—the very embodiment of conservative hypocrisy—instead he tries something subtler. Cohn is a cruel, sadistic, hypocrite, but he's also a human being suffering from a hideous disease, and therefore he merits our sympathy. In his dying days, Cohn becomes more pathetic than terrifying—a small, petty man, overly concerned with winning fights that don't matter.

**Belize / Norman Ariago** – Belize is an openly gay black man who is fond of transvestism (dressing as a woman), and who also works as a nurse at the hospital where Roy Cohn spends his final days. Belize is intelligent and highly insightful, and there are many points throughout the play where characters go to Belize for interpretations of their dreams and visions. Like Louis and Prior—the latter of whom was once his lover—Belize is extremely liberal in his politics. Yet in part because of his racial identity, Belize seems more concerned with the day-to-day realities of the human experience than with lofty political rhetoric or "grand theories." He's an intensely loyal man, especially to other gay people—indeed, he even helps out Roy Cohn, an openly homophobic man, simply because Cohn is secretly gay.

**The Angel of America** – The Angel of America is the symbol of all that is fantastic, imaginative, and otherworldly in *Angels in America*—in other words, most of the play. The Angel—a hermaphrodite, but for the purpose of this summary, a "she"—appears before Prior Walter shortly after Prior is diagnosed with AIDS, suggesting that the Angel may not, in fact, be real, but only a hallucination Prior is experiencing. Nevertheless, as the play continues, the Angel shows up to frequently, and speaks with such a unique voice, that we have no choice but to regard her as a character in the play—independent, complex, and real. It is the Angel who tells Prior that Heaven is in a state of disarray, thanks to God's preference for human beings. The Angel, jealous of humanity for distracting God from her fellow **angels**, wants Prior to spread the message "Stop moving" around the world. In other words, she wants to compel human beings to stop being human. While the Angel doesn't seem to like human beings much, she also seems sympathetic to Prior's AIDS, and—it's suggested—saves Prior's life by blessing him with health and life.

**Hannah Pitt** – Joe Pitt's mother, Hannah Pitt is a devoutly Mormon woman, disliked by many of her neighbors and friends, who moves to New York City after Joe comes out to her as gay. Hannah doesn't approve of her son's sexuality, and yet she seems more in touch with her imagination and her creative side than many of the other characters—this means that Hannah is capable of changing her mind about things and broadening her perspective on life. In this way, Hannah comes to befriend Prior Walter, another openly gay man, in spite of her religious beliefs. In the play's epilogue, we learn that Hannah is still spending time with Louis, Belize, and Prior five years after the events of the play, suggesting that she may have come around to the gay community after all.

**Ethel Rosenberg** – A real-life Soviet spy who in the 1950s was convicted for treason, along with her husband, Julius Rosenberg, and sentenced to death by electrocution. Ethel Rosenberg is often considered a symbol for the barbarism of America's involvement in the Cold War: Ethel was killed for her espionage (and even this was never definitively proven) despite the fact that she was a mother of two children. In the play, it's revealed that her death was ensured by Roy Cohn. As a result, Ethel's ghost—perhaps just one of Cohn's hallucinations—haunts Cohn during his final days of life. (It

should also be note that Kushner specifies that this character is to be played by the same actor who plays Hannah Pitt.)

**Aleksii Antedilluvianovich Prelapsarianov** – An elderly Bolshevik who appears at the beginning of Part Two to ask what will succeed the Soviet Union. His name is a play on words, as "antediluvian" means "before the flood" (usually the Biblical Flood of Noah) and "prelapsarian" means "before the fall" (before the Biblical Fall of Man). Both these ideas relate to some event that drastically changes the course of human history, and from which society must rebuild itself.

### MINOR CHARACTERS

**The Stranger** – A man with whom Louis Ironson attempts to have rough sex in Central Park after he abandons Prior Walter. (Kushner specifies that this character is to be played by the same actor who plays Prior, suggesting just how futile Louis's attempt to "escape" Prior is.)

**Mr. Lies** – The "imaginary friend" of Harper Pitt, who leads her into a make-believe world whenever she's upset with her life with Joe Pitt. (Kushner specifies that this character is to be played by the same actor who plays Belize.)

**Emily** – Prior Walter's nurse. (Kushner specifies that this character is to be played by the same actor who plays the Angel of America, further complicating the idea of whether or not the Angel is just a hallucination.)

**Rabbi Isador Chemelwitz** – A Jewish Rabbi who presides over Sarah Ironson's funeral, and later fails to give Louis Ironson advice.

**Henry** – Roy Cohn's doctor.

**Martin Heller** – A powerful political colleague of Roy Cohn.

**Sister Ella Chapter** – A Mormon woman who helps Hannah Pitt sell her house in Utah.

**Prior I** – A distant ancestor of Prior Walter.

**Prior II** – A distant ancestor of Prior Walter.

**Mormon Mother** – A figure in a diorama at the Mormon Visitors' Center in Manhattan, who comes alive in one of Harper Pitt's hallucinations and gives her advice about Joe Pitt and God.

**Sarah Ironson** – The grandmother of Louis Ironson, whose death from old age marks the beginning of the play.

**Ronald Reagan** – The 40th President of the United States, an icon of the Republican Party, and a symbol for the heightening conservatism and—according to some—bigotry of the 1980s.

**Colonel Oliver North** – An American colonel convicted of treason (probably as a "fall-guy") after the Iran Contra Affair, during which the Reagan administration sold weapons to American enemies in Iran in order to finance a war in Nicaragua. The Iran Contra Affair is considered to represent the secret corruption of the era.

**The Homeless Woman** – A seemingly-insane woman who talks to Hannah Pitt when she first arrives in New York, and directs her to the Mormon Visitors' Center.

## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

### HOMOSEXUALITY IN THE AIDS ERA

One of the key facts about *Angels in America* is that it was written during, and is largely about, the AIDS crisis in the U.S. During the 1980s, hundreds of thousands of Americans, many of them gay men, contracted the HIV/AIDS virus, a deadly disease that destroys the human immune system and typically results in death. (For more information on the AIDS crisis, see Background Info.) It's impossible to understand *Angels in America*—not just its plot and context, but also its tone—without understanding a few things about the AIDS crisis in America.

One of the most important points about the AIDS era was that it brought a new urgency to questions of homosexuality and "the closet," and encouraged members of the homosexual community to be upfront and vocal about their health. In the 1980s (and still today) there were many Americans who were "in the closet"—i.e., people who were gay but hid their true sexuality and led heterosexual lifestyles. AIDS then made it difficult, and in some cases impossible, for homosexuals to remain in the closet. In some tragic cases, AIDS, with its painful lesions and bruises, left a literal mark on the bodies of closeted gays, making it impossible for them to hide their sexuality any longer. This was particularly noteworthy, given that the Reagan administration (see Progressivism, Conservatism, and Change theme) didn't mention AIDS in public until nearly 6 years into the AIDS crisis—the contrast between the invisibility of AIDS in political rhetoric and the visibility of AIDS itself was chilling. Gay rights activists encouraged AIDS victims to speak out about their disease—speaking out could be painful and humiliating, but it was also the only way to pressure the White House into acknowledging the AIDS crisis and hopefully funding medical research that could end it.

Thus, in a more abstract, political sense, the AIDS crisis forced all homosexual people to "choose sides." According to Larry Kramer, one of the most important gay rights activists of the era, it was impossible for gay people to be neutral in the 1980s. By remaining in the closet, gay people weren't just concealing their own sexuality from other people—they were also making it more difficult for the gay community as a whole to get

recognition from the general public, and thus get the medical treatment it desperately needed. In short, if you weren't a part of the solution to AIDS, you were a part of the problem. Kushner reinforces this idea via the character of Joe Pitt, a closeted gay man who is, quite literally, part of the problem. As a law clerk in New York City, mentored by the famous conservative homophobe Roy Cohn, Joe spends a decade writing legal opinions that punish homosexuals, undermine their rights, and generally make their quality of life worse. Not coincidentally, Joe only begins to move away from his legal career after he comes out of the closet. It could even be argued that there are no "neutral" characters in *Angels in America*—even when characters aren't sure how they feel about the AIDS crisis, Kushner goes out of his way to show how their indecisiveness actually contributes to this crisis.

It might sound melodramatic (i.e., over-the-top, excessively emotional or sentimental) to argue that closeted homosexuals were contributing to the deaths of their "fellow" homosexuals during the 1980s, but this is precisely Kushner's point. The cultural conversation over AIDS was incredibly "melodramatic": the stakes were so high that inaction became a form of action. During the AIDS crisis, formerly abstract debates about gay rights and sexuality became immediately concrete. This partly explains the tone and style of Kushner's play. The plot of *Angels in America* is extremely melodramatic: characters fall in and out of love; experience betrayals and rivalries; make grand, show-stopping speeches, etc. Yet the play is *also* extremely political: the characters debate about the state of race, gender, and sexuality in the U.S. as eagerly as most people argue about sports or their favorite TV shows. In short, the messianic, political, over-the-top tone of *Angels in America* makes it the perfect play for the AIDS era: a time when the personal was intensely political, and when the stakes of political action (and inaction) could literally be measured in human lives.

## PROPHETS AND PROPHECIES

Right away, it's clear that *Angels in America* is a play about prophecies and the people who make them (or refuse to make them). The play's protagonist, Prior Walter, is a reluctant prophet being forced to spread a "great work" around the world. Another main character, Joe Pitt, is a Mormon: Mormonism is a religion based on the Angel Moroni's speech to Joseph Smith, a prophecy that impelled Smith to lead a group of settlers across the country. Then there are more subtle allusions to prophecy; for instance, Communism (frequently discussed in *Perestroika*) is based on Karl Marx's "prophecy" of a worldwide proletarian revolution. Even the Reagan presidency was celebrated with the slogan, "It's morning in America," suggesting that an old prophecy had been fulfilled and a new age had dawned. How should we understand these different kinds of prophecies?

One of the ironies of prophecies—and the cultures that arise around them—is that although they're visions for the future, they also encourage people to look back to the past. More often than not, a prophet's vision for the future is designed to restore an old *status quo*—a "second" coming. As Kushner demonstrates, one of the best examples of this paradox is the Reagan presidency itself. Reagan presented himself as an energetic, forward-thinking leader, committed to realizing his "vision" for America. And yet Reagan himself (more than 70 years old for most of his time in the White House), was the very embodiment of old-fashioned, "traditional moral values."

This tension in the nature of prophecy—the tension between looking ahead and turning back the clock—can be dangerous. Prophets don't just ask their followers to wait passively for the future; they urge their followers to make big changes in their lives and *work* to achieve this future (or avoid a prophesized apocalypse!). In other words, prophecy always comes with strings attached: the price for a happy future is often limiting human happiness, here and now. As Louis Ironson insightfully points out, most prophets and their followers function like cults: a heap of arbitrary laws and rules that supposedly lead to a big reward in the future. As Kushner sees it, Christianity—Mormonism in particular—is a perfect example of this problem. Christianity teaches people to fight their sexual feelings (in particular, their homosexual feelings), so that God will reward them in Heaven. Such a big restriction on human freedom can only lead to suffering, and during the play, we see Joe Pitt, a closeted homosexual man, go through this suffering. The most extreme example of prophecy gone wrong is the restriction on *all* human freedom that the Angel of America wants Prior Martin to pass on to humanity: "Stop moving" (in other words, die).

Although it's important to look ahead to the future with optimism and excitement, humans can't limit their lives in the ways that prophets often demand. Kushner's play suggests that prophets should question and challenge their supposed prophecies, just as Prior Martin does in the play's climax. Prior challenges the **angels**' mandate that mankind should stop moving, ultimately convincing them to change their minds about their own prophecy. In the play's epilogue, we see an example of how humans can look to the future without actually obeying prophecy at all. Prior, addressing the crowd directly, explains that while he looks forward to a great, wonderful future, he has absolutely no idea what this future holds for him. It can be comforting to subscribe to a prophecy, because prophecy gives life a sense of order and structure. And yet by questioning (or outright rejecting) prophecy, humans earn themselves a new sense of freedom, which is arguably far more valuable.

## PROGRESSIVISM, CONSERVATISM, AND CHANGE

*Angels in America* takes place at the height of the "conservative revolution" in American politics and culture. After the liberal era of the 1960s, the United States "swung back" in the direction of conservatism under the leadership of President Ronald Reagan. As Kushner understands it, conservatism is the belief that change should be greeted with skepticism, and that, by default, life is best the way it is: when it's structured around "traditional" ideas and values. Liberalism or progressivism, on the other hand, argues that change is a quintessential part of the human experience: change should be welcomed, and "traditional" values should be questioned and revised. Because Kushner is an overtly political author, it's important to unpack the differences between conservatism and progressivism a little more carefully.

The great strength of conservatism, Kushner acknowledges, is that there's peace, comfort, and stability in keeping things the way they are. Society itself operates on the principle that, all things held equal, life should remain the same—essentially the law of inertia. Partly to prove this point, *Angels in America* is partly set in the law office where Joe Pitt and Roy Cohn work. The law functions on the assumption of *stare decisis*, which is the principle that things should stay the way they are until proven otherwise. This is the principle that Joe energetically defends when his homosexual lover, Louis Ironson, confronts him about his politics.

But as Joe's closeted homosexuality suggests, the big problem with conservatism, at least for Kushner, is that it perpetuates injustice for no good reason. The "traditional moral values" that Reagan, Roy Cohn, and other conservatives touted were partly based on the traditional heterosexual family. Gay people simply weren't welcome in conservative culture—indeed, their homosexuality was regarded as perverted or evil. Kushner reinforces the groundlessness and hypocrisy of this notion by depicting Roy Cohn, arguably the most conservative, homophobic man in America, as a closeted homosexual and a corrupt lawyer who accepts massive bribes. If a man like Roy Cohn—the very embodiment of conservatism—can be gay and an embezzler, then anyone can. Ironically, the people who most publicly and emphatically celebrate conservative values are often the same people who secretly have no respect for these values in their personal lives.

The reason that conservatism gets bogged down in its own contradictions, *Angels in America* argues, is that it denies the most basic aspect of the human experience: change. As the Angel of America tells Prior Walter, all human beings feel an inherent desire to move, change, and exercise free will. This desire impels people to embrace change—sometimes for better, sometimes for worse. Instead of celebrating tradition for its own sake, the progressive ideology encourages people to explore, make mistakes, and embrace uncertainty. This is the crux of the speech that Prior Walter delivers to the angels in the climax of *Perestroika*. This way of living life, Prior admits, can be scary, but it's still preferable to the conservative alternative: living every day the same way.

There's one unshakeable "fact" in *Angels in America*: to be human is to change. In response to this reality, conservatism tries to "gag" change by celebrating tradition. In this way, Joe Pitt spends most of the first half of the play in the closet, stubbornly refusing to acknowledge his homosexual nature simply because it's not "traditional." Progressivism is better and more realistic, but also more challenging: it encourages humans to live their lives however they see fit—gay or straight—but without the empty comfort of tradition. On this uncertain note, *Angels in America* comes to an end.

## FANTASY, ESCAPE, AND TRAGEDY

In a key scene from Act Two of *Perestroika*, Prior Walter and Belize attend a **funeral** for a drag queen they both knew. The funeral is a lavish, gaudy affair—the attendees, many of whom are gay or transvestites themselves, sing and dance joyfully, blurring the line between fantasy and reality. After the funeral, Prior complains that the attendees shouldn't be so cheerful about dying—they have nothing to look forward to but death, after all. Belize takes a different point of view, arguing that people should celebrate life, even when they're commemorating death. Prior's criticism of the drag queen's funeral could be—and has been—applied to *Angels in America* itself. In other words, one could argue that there's something indecent about making such a vibrant, lively "fantasia" about such a serious topic. In general, Kushner is fascinated by the relationship between tragedy, playfulness, and fantasy.

It would take pages and pages to classify all the different kinds of fantasy in *Angels in America*. But as the funeral scene in *Perestroika* suggests, many of these fantasies, especially in the play's beginning, are "defense mechanisms" that the characters fashion for themselves. One of Kushner's most important ideas is that people rely upon fantasy and imagination to escape from the tragedies of the real world. After her husband Joe Pitt comes out as gay, Harper Pitt hallucinates a vivid "escape" in which her imaginary friend, Mr. Lies, helps her run away from Joe and move to Antarctica (in reality, just Prospect Park in Brooklyn). One of human beings' greatest strengths is that when the real world becomes too painful to endure, they can create shelters for themselves in their own imaginations.

And yet as the play goes on, it becomes apparent that there's a lot more to Kushner's idea of fantasy than mere escapism. More often than not, the characters' fantasies don't take the form of escapes *per se*; rather, they're designed to reunite them with people they've lost touch with, or (more surreally) to introduce them to characters they don't even know yet. After

Louis Ironson leaves Prior, Prior has a long dream in which he imagines dancing with Louis—reuniting with the man who refuses to see him in real life. In an even stranger dream sequence, Harper hallucinates that she's meeting Prior Walter, who's also having a dream—in other words, Harper "sneaks into" Prior's dream, just as Prior finds his way into Harper's hallucination. There's no "psychological" explanation for Harper and Prior's meeting—somehow, almost supernaturally, these two strangers have met each other in the realm of fantasy.

This points us to broader point about fantasy in *Angels in America*: fantasy doesn't conceal harsh truth so much as it points us toward a higher truth. In the play's climax, Prior Walter appears before a panel of **angels**—a panel that may, in fact, be a product of his feverish imagination. Whether or not Prior's appearance is, strictly speaking, "real," he uses it to make an impassioned plea for the value of human life—one of the most compelling and, it must be said, truest speeches in Kushner's play. In the end, then, Kushner seems to side with Belize's opinion about the funeral, not Prior's. There's nothing indecent about celebration and fantasy in the face of tragedy. By writing a big, over-the-top play about the AIDS crisis, Kushner reveals some profound truths (about not only AIDS, but morality, love, and the Reagan era) that a more modest, "realistic" work wouldn't have dared to touch.

### THE CLASH BETWEEN PEOPLE AND PRINCIPLES

One of the reasons that the AIDS crisis was so historically significant was that it put longstanding debates about politics, religion, and morality into a terrifyingly real-world context. Proponents of liberal and conservative values, religion and secularism, faced a challenge: how to treat the victims of AIDS, most of whom (at least at first) were homosexuals. It's one thing for a Christian pastor to condemn homosexuality as an abomination, but it's quite another for the same person to look a gay person dying of AIDS in the face and tell him that he deserves his death. On the other hand, it's one thing for a progressive politician to say that he loves homosexuality and respects homosexuals, ands it's another for him to shake hands with a gay person dying of AIDS. These are tough questions, and Kushner tries to answer some of them in *Angels in America*. In particular, Kushner poses a clash between principles and people; in other words, between morality, religion, and philosophy on one side, and living, breathing human beings on the other.

In general, Kushner is skeptical of principles and "big ideas," because they're too removed from real life. One of his play's most important arguments is that people are always more impactful than principles; i.e., people decide what they believe based on the people they've interacted with, not the other way around. Joe Pitt spends his entire life a closeted homosexual, denying that he's attracted to the same sex. And yet when he meets Louis Ironson, he sacrifices his religious and political beliefs and begins an affair with another man almost overnight. An especially important illustration of the relationship between people and principles comes when Belize, a gay nurse, tends to Roy Cohn, a notoriously homophobic man who's secretly gay. Although Belize despises Cohn in almost every way, he gives Cohn some crucial advice about how to proceed with treating his AIDS. When Cohn asks Belize why he's helping his sworn enemy, Belize explains that he's doing it because Cohn is a fellow homosexual—he's just "looking out for his team." In short, Belize is more concerned with what Cohn *is*—i.e., his identity as a human being—than what Cohn *believes*—i.e., his principles.

For characters like Belize, principles always come second to people. An interesting variation on this idea comes in the character of Hannah Pitt, a devoutly Mormon woman with a gay son (Joe). When Hannah learns that her son is gay, she's devastated, and weeps. And yet when Hannah meets Prior Martin, a gay man dying of AIDS, she volunteers to take him to the hospital and spend the night with him, in spite of her lifelong aversion to the homosexual lifestyle. Five years later, Hannah is still living in New York and spending time with Prior and Louis. It's not that she's abandoned her Mormonism entirely—Kushner suggests that she still believes that homosexuality is a sin—and yet Hannah doesn't let her principles interfere with the way she interacts with other people. Even if she hates Prior's lifestyle, she still treats him with respect and even love.

As Kushner's play suggests, there will always be a conflict between what people believe and what they experience interacting with other people. The world is simply too complicated to be summed up with any belief system. The question then becomes, "What do we do when there is, inevitably, a clash between our principles and our life experiences?" The AIDS crisis is so serious, and its stakes are so high, that most of the characters in the play have no choice but to sacrifice some of their political and religious beliefs in favor of their natural sympathy and compassion for other human beings—or vice versa.

## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

### THE "BOOK OF LIFE"

When the Angel of America visits Prior Martin, she gives him a heavy metal book containing a prophecy—the "Book of Life." As the play goes on, Prior learns that the prophecy he's been instructed to spread concerns the fate of mankind: to "stop moving" and die. The weight and austerity of the Angel's book symbolizes the severity of Prior's

prophecy—a prophecy that, understandably, he's reluctant to disseminate. It's also darkly ironic that the "Book of Life" is actually about the opposite of life—death.

## THE ANGEL'S SPECTACLES

The Angel of America also provides Prior Martin with a pair of magical spectacles, which supposedly allow Prior to see the world in its true form. The symbolism of the spectacles explicitly recalls the iconography of Mormonism: according to the Book of Mormon, the Angel Moroni gave Joseph Smith a pair of magical spectacles, without which he couldn't read the Book of Mormon at all. And yet while Smith's spectacles were symbols of emancipation and enlightenment, Prior's spectacles are symbols of pain and suffering—it literally hurts Prior to wear his spectacles. Like the **Book of Life**, Prior's spectacles represent the terror and danger of prophecy, and the sometimes-horrifying reality of life.

## ANGELS

Angels are among the most explicit and evocative symbols in Kushner's play. To begin with, it's important to note that angels are hermaphrodites, neither male nor female. This is important because Kushner's play centers around questions of sexual identity: just as many of the play's characters waver between homosexual and heterosexual behaviors (and masculine and feminine personae), the angels exemplify the ambiguity in all sexual identity. But paradoxically, in representing a kind of "ideal humanity" (neither masculine nor feminine, neither gay nor straight), the angels also come to symbolize the *absence* of genuine humanity. Angels are immortal, have glorious orgasms, etc., and yet Kushner's angels are also bored, joyless, and—most importantly—incapable of making free decisions. The angels' very perfection renders their lives dull—only human beings themselves can experience the joy of uncertainty. It's also important to keep in mind that the angels in the play might be completely imaginary—the product of Prior Martin's feverish imagination. In this way, we might say that angels symbolize humanity's potential to be perfect—to imagine or aspire to perfection—and yet they also end up symbolizing the futility (and undesirability) of actually realizing that potential.

## AZT

In Kushner's play (and in real life, at least in the late 80s and early 90s), AZT is a "miracle drug," rumored to be able to save AIDS patients from death by staving off the effects of a ravaged immune system. Although AZT seems to be effective for some AIDS patients, such as Prior Martin (who's still alive five years after contracting AIDS), it's useless for others, such as Roy Cohn (who takes AZT around the clock but dies anyway). In this sense, AZT is a poignant symbol of the uncertainty of life, but it's also a symbol of how power, wealth, and privilege affect every aspect of life, even issues (like healthcare) that should be universal. Thus the powerful, conservative Ray Cohn is able to hoard a huge supply of AZT for himself, while thousands of "outcasts" from society (particularly poor, gay minorities) are denied access to this same "miracle drug."

## THE BETHESDA FOUNTAIN

At the end of the play, we learn that the Bethesda Fountain in Central Park was inspired by another Bethesda Fountain, in Jerusalem. According to legend, the **angel** Bethesda blessed the fountain, so that all sick people could bathe there and cure their afflictions. After the Romans sacked Jerusalem, the fountain stopped working—but some people believe that when God comes to Earth, the fountain will flow again. By ending his play with this "prophecy," Kushner establishes a tone of uncertainty and yet optimism. The notion of "curing the sick" has obvious relevance to the AIDS victims in the play—and in this sense, the characters' prayer that the Bethesda Fountain will one day flow again symbolizes their hope that they'll one day be cured of AIDS, or be able to live with AIDS, unafraid.

## PERESTROIKA

In the late 80s and early 90s, the President of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, instituted a series of liberal reforms in his country, which were collectively referred to as "perestroika." These reforms allowed for greater freedom of speech, more international business investment, etc., and were hailed as proof that the Soviet Union was finally embracing the "Western values" of freedom and democracy. In a broader sense, perestroika could also be said to symbolize change in all its excitement, uncertainty, and danger. While many were optimistic about Gorbachev's reforms, it was pointed out that perestroika wouldn't necessarily "cure" Russia of its human rights problems. By titling the second half of his play "Perestroika," Kushner sets the tone for a play about precisely this combination of excitement and danger: we get the sense that *something* is about to happen (some prophecy, some cure for AIDS, some resolution to the plot), but we don't know—and don't know if we *want* to know—what this something is.

## FUNERALS

It's only appropriate that *Angels in America*, a play about the devastation of the AIDS crisis, include a few scenes centered around funerals. It's clear enough that funerals symbolize the effects of the AIDS crisis in

America—and yet, out of the three funerals in the play, only one is held for an AIDS victim. Kushner isn't specifically concerned with AIDS, so much as he is with the broader question of how we should respond to death and tragedy: should we weep for the victims or celebrate them with song and dance? Some of the funerals in play are somber, quiet affairs, while others are big, glitzy spectacles. This suggests the myriad ways humans are equipped to cope with sadness and the inevitability of death.

## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Theatre Communications Group edition of *Angels in America* published in 2013.

### Millennium Approaches: Act 1, Scene 3 Quotes

Harper Pitt: I'm undecided. I feel . . . that something's going to give. It's 1985. Fifteen years till the third millennium. Maybe Christ will come again. Maybe seeds will be planted, maybe there'll be harvests then, maybe early figs to eat, maybe new life, maybe fresh blood, maybe companionship and love and protection, safety from what's outside, maybe the door will hold, or maybe . . . Maybe the troubles will come, and the end will come, and the sky will collapse and there will be terrible rains and showers of poison light, or maybe my life is really fine, maybe Joe loves me and I'm only crazy thinking otherwise, or maybe not, maybe it's even worse than I know, maybe . . . I want to know, maybe I don't. The suspense, Mr. Lies, it's killing me. Mr. Lies: I suggest a vacation.

**Related Characters:** Harper Pitt, Mr. Lies (speaker), Joe Pitt

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 18

**Explanation and Analysis**

Here we're introduced to Harper Pitt, the frustrated Mormon housewife who spends most of her day high on Valium. Although Harper isn't exactly a model human being, she brings up one of the most important themes of the play. Harper has a constant sense that *something* important is about to happen: it's almost the year 2000, and it seems reasonable to think that some major event is going to occur as the millennium approaches.

Harper's belief that "something is going to happen" has an obvious religious flavor--she frames her belief in traditional Christian terms. Her naive optimism is both admirable and strangely pathetic--it's as if by focusing so exclusively on the future, Harper is turning her back on the "here and now."

And as Mr. Lies--the imaginary character Harper sees when she takes too many pills--implies, Harper's desire for a second coming is a kind of "vacation" from the real world. Harper fantasizes about the future so that she doesn't have to face the consequences of her actions in the present.

### Millennium Approaches: Act 1, Scene 5 Quotes

The truth restored. Law restored. That's what President Reagan's done, Harper. He says: "Truth exists and can be spoken proudly."

**Related Characters:** Joe Pitt (speaker), Ronald Reagan, Harper Pitt

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 26

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Joe Pitt interacts with his wife, Harper Pitt. Joe is a Mormon and a closeted homosexual, but he's also a loyal Republican and a disciple of Ronald Reagan, the current president of the United States. As Joe tells Harper about his admiration for Reagan, his words take on an ironical, messianic fervor: it's as if Joe believes Reagan to be the embodiment of the second coming.

Joe's faith in Reagan might seem absurd, and yet Joe speaks for many during the Reagan years who saw the president as the savior of the United States. Reagan framed his presidency in terms of "traditional moral values"--thus, for many, especially conservatives and Christians, Reagan was returning America to its utopian past.

There's an interesting contradiction in Joe's speech: he conceives of Reagan as a prophet, bringing America into the future. And yet Reagan himself claimed to do just the opposite, bringing America back into its (supposedly) glorious past. Such contradictions seem to illustrate some of the flaws in Reagan's presidency--the way he claimed to speak for the Americans of the 1980s (including immigrants, homosexuals, etc.), and yet really only acted on behalf of white, straight, Christian Americans.

## Millennium Approaches: Act 1, Scene 7 Quotes

Harper Pitt: I don't understand this. If I didn't ever see you before and I don't think I did, then I don't think you should be here, in this hallucination, because in my experience the mind, which is where hallucinations come from, shouldn't be able to make up anything that wasn't there to start with, that didn't enter it from experience, from the real world. Imagination can't create anything new, can it? It only recycles bits and pieces from the world and reassembles them into visions . . . Am I making sense right now?
Prior Walter: Given the circumstances, yes.
Harper Pitt: So when we think we've escaped the unbearable ordinariness and, well, untruthfulness of our lives, it's really only the same old ordinariness and falseness rearranged into the appearance of novelty and truth. Nothing unknown is knowable.

**Related Characters:** Prior Walter, Harper Pitt (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 32-33

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Harper Pitt experiences a bizarre, vivid hallucination in which she crosses paths with Prior Walter--a homosexual man whom she's never met before, and who's *also* having a vidi hallucination. During their hallucinated encounter, Prior and Harper discuss the nature of hallucination itself. Harper claims that hallucinations are just rearranged versions of the real world--in other words, one can't hallucinate anything that isn't already in the real world to begin with.

Harper's observations complicate the way we should interpret the dream sequences throughout the play. On one level, Kushner implies that the characters' dreams are just hallucinations and imagination--they're opportunities for the characters to mull over their real lives and reach surprising insights (many of the characters' epiphanies arrive in dreams, not waking life). This fits in with Harper's statements here. But on another level, there is a real fantastical element to the dream scenes. Harper and Prior have never met in real life, but they meet in this hallucination--the dream *is* producing something that didn't exist in either character's mind before.

Harper's observations about dreams also act as a kind of thesis statement for *Angels in America* itself. Kushner's play may be a work of fiction, and yet it's also a distillation of American culture during the age of AIDS. By watching the "fantasia" of the play, audiences can come to some surprising insights about their culture and their country.

## Millennium Approaches: Act 1, Scene 8 Quotes

Harper Pitt: I'm going to have a baby.
Joe Pitt: Liar.
Harper Pitt: You liar. A baby born addicted to pills. A baby who does not dream but who hallucinates, who stares up at us with big mirror eyes and who does not know who we are.
Joe Pitt: Are you really ... ?
Harper Pitt: No. Yes. No. Yes. Get away from me. Now we both have a secret.

**Related Characters:** Harper Pitt, Joe Pitt (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 41

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Joe has a fight with his wife, Harper. Joe and Harper have been trying to have a child for some time now, and they've failed--in part because Joe is gay, and so doesn't want to have sex with Harper, and in part because Harper seems not to want a child. Here Harper claims that she's pregnant, then contradicts herself again and again--still clearly living half in the world of fantasy, and half in reality.

The exchange between Joe and Harper might symbolize the state of American society during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s. For many, AIDS threatened the continued survival of the human race--the untreatable disease could wipe out America. And for many in the gay community, AIDS only reinforced familiar themes of survival and reproduction, since homosexual couples couldn't have children. For the gay community, and America as a whole, AIDS prompted a lot of questions--What will happen after we die?; will our community survive, or will it disappear forever? Harper's ambiguous answer to such a question (Yes. No. Yes.) reflects the grim uncertainty of American society at the time.

## Millennium Approaches: Act 1, Scene 9 Quotes

I don't want you to be impressed. I want you to understand. This is not sophistry. And this is not hypocrisy. This is reality. I have sex with men. But unlike nearly every other man of whom this is true, I bring the guy I'm screwing to the White House and President Reagan smiles at us and shakes his hand. Because *what* I am is defined entirely by *who* I am. Roy Cohn is not a homosexual. Roy Cohn is a heterosexual man, Henry, who fucks around with guys.

**Related Characters:** Roy Cohn (speaker), Henry, Ronald Reagan

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 46-47

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this famous scene, Roy Cohn--a closeted homosexual Republican who supports Reagan--claims that he's not homosexual at all. Cohn has just found out that he has AIDS, and probably won't survive much longer. And yet Cohn insists that he's not gay--he just has sex with men from time to time. (In real life, Cohn was diagnosed with AIDS, but insisted that he had a rare "liver cancer" right up to the end of his life).

Cohn's argument for why he isn't gay is fascinating and contradictory. Cohn claims that homosexuality is not an act, but rather a label and a state of mind--an inability to be accepted within the American establishment. For Cohn to be accepted by Ronald Reagan is proof that he's straight and "respectable"--even if Cohn has homosexual sex.

Cohn is in denial, of course--he can't accept the fact that he has AIDS, or that he doesn't fit his own conservative ideal. Up until now, Cohn has had an easy time denying his homosexual behavior: his prominence in the Republican community expunges him. But now, Cohn has been "marked" with an undeniable proof of his homosexuality--a disease that (at least at the time) is almost exclusively a homosexual disease. Even after he's diagnosed, however, Cohn continues to cling to his old strategies of denial.

## Millennium Approaches: Act 2, Scene 2 Quotes

In the whole entire world, you are the only person, the only person I love or have ever loved. And I love you terribly. Terribly. That's what's so awfully, irreducibly real. I can make up anything but I can't dream that away.

**Related Characters:** Harper Pitt (speaker), Joe Pitt

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 52

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Harper Pitt tells Joe that she's leaving him. Harper seems to sense that Joe is gay, and definitely senses that Joe doesn't really love her romantically. And yet Harper continues to love Joe--indeed, Joe was the only person she ever really loved.

In many ways, the passage is a critique of the culture that would lead a homosexual man like Joe to pretend to be heterosexual. Joe has spent most of his life deluding himself into believing that he's straight--in the process, causing misery to many, including Harper. And yet Joe isn't to blame for Harper's misery--he, too, is a victim of the heteronormative culture that forces gays to stay in the closet, and so the person being caused the most misery is arguably Joe himself.

The passage also reinforces the relationship between dreams and reality. Dreams aren't really an escape from the real world at all--on the contrary, dreams just intensify the joys and pains of reality. Thus, Harper's dreams aren't a source of solace for her--whether she's awake or not, she's conscious that Joe doesn't love her, but she loves Joe.

## Millennium Approaches: Act 2, Scene 7 Quotes

Louis: It's not really a *family*, the Reagans, I read *People*, there aren't any connections there, no love, they don't ever even speak to each other except through their agents. [...] I think we all know what that's like. Nowadays. No connections. No responsibilities. All of us... falling through the cracks that separate what we owe to ourselves and... and what we owe to love.

**Related Characters:** Louis Ironson (speaker), Ronald Reagan

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 74

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Louis Ironson meets Joe Pitt, who works at the same law office. Louis, who was recently in a gay relationship with Prior Walter (i.e., he's closer to being "out" than Joe is), claims that Ronald Reagan's family values are just a pathetic illusion. The Reagans claim to be a big, happy family on TV, but really they don't love one another at all.

Louis has a point. Reagan based his presidency on a return to traditional, "family values"--a phrase that, many believed, was a coded attack on the homosexual community. By attacking Reagan's own family, Louis is suggesting that "family values" aren't based on love at all; just a hateful desire to destroy those deemed as different or "other." But even if Louis has a point, perhaps he's too quick to condemn Reagan's wife and children--innocent people who shouldn't really be blamed for the president's politics. Louis is so intense in his political thinking that he disrespects others under the banner of ideology.

## Millennium Approaches: Act 3, Scene 2 Quotes

There are no gods here, no ghosts and spirits in America, there are no angels in America, no spiritual past, no racial past, there's only the political, and the decoys and the ploys to maneuver around the inescapable battle of politics...

**Related Characters:** Louis Ironson (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 96

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Louis talks to Belize, the friend of Prior Walter. Louis delivers a long, babbling, self-contradictory speech in which he condemns the state of contemporary liberalism in the United States. When Louis claims there are no "angels in America" (giving the play its title!), he's trying to say that race is a political issue, not a cultural or a religious one--i.e., America doesn't have a history of basing one's religious or cultural identity on one's race. Louis--rigid and abstract in his thinking--reduces all of life to a political struggle. Religious fervor, racial pride, and community solidarity are, in his view, just distractions from the basic political struggle for freedom and power.

Louis is, as always, reductive in his thinking (and being particularly insensitive given that he's preaching about race to an openly gay black man). Politics are important to American life, but they're not the only issue, as Louis believes. And yet the notion that there are no angels in America has many different interpretations beyond the one Louis offers. Louis statement implies that modern American life is immoral and ruthless--there are no kind, generous people left anymore. In the AIDS crisis, however, Louis's cynical wisdom is proven incorrect: AIDS brought out the kindness and selflessness in many people.

I've thought about it for a very long time, and I still don't understand what love is. Justice is simple. Democracy is simple. Those things are unambivalent. But love is very hard. And it goes bad for you if you violate the hard law of love.

**Related Characters:** Belize / Norman Ariago (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 104

**Explanation and Analysis**

At the end of his conversation with Louis, Belize offers his own take on modern America. Belize brushes aside Louis's babble about politics and justice--such matters are simple and "unambivalent," he claims. Belize is more interested in the nature of love--something that can't be so easily understood.

Although Belize doesn't go into much depth here, his words effectively rebut everything Louis has just said. Louis sees the world in vague, abstract terms like "right," "wrong," and "politics." Louis thinks his intelligence and grasp of law will help him navigate his way through the challenges of the AIDS era. But in doing so, Louis neglects the human side of the AIDS crisis. Belize--less educated but more sensitive--sees AIDS as a challenge to humanity's capacity to love. AIDS isn't a time for easy, rigid rules of right and wrong; on the contrary, AIDS provokes individual moral dilemmas, and Belize (a nurse) sees these moral dilemmas all the time. Is it right to show love and sympathy for an AIDS victim by hugging them and feeding them, even if such behavior endangers one's own life? Is it right to care for an AIDS victim who's spent his entire life condemning homosexuals? These questions have no easy answer, and yet they're clearly guided by the ambiguous principle of love--*not*, as Louis believes, the hard and fast rules of politics and law.

## Millennium Approaches: Act 3, Scene 5 Quotes

Yes. Yes. You have heard of Ethel Rosenberg. Yes. Maybe you even read about her in the history books. If it wasn't for me, Joe, Ethel Rosenberg would be alive today, writing some personal-advice column for *Ms.* magazine. She isn't. Because during the trial, Joe, I was on the phone every day, talking with the judge— Every day, doing what I do best, talking on the telephone, making sure that timid Yid nebbish on the bench did his duty to America, to history. That sweet unprepossessing woman, two kids, boo-hoo-hoo, reminded us all of our little Jewish mamas—she came this close to getting life; I pleaded till I wept to put her in the chair. Me. I did that. I would have fucking pulled the switch if they'd have let me. Why? Because I fucking hate traitors. Because I fucking hate communists. Was it legal? Fuck legal. Am I a nice man? Fuck nice. They say terrible things about me in the *Nation*. Fuck the *Nation*. You want to be Nice, or you want to be Effective? Make the law, or subject to it. Choose.

**Related Characters:** Roy Cohn (speaker), Ethel Rosenberg, Joe Pitt

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 113-114

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Roy Cohn reveals the truth about his career. As a young man, Cohn was instrumental int he execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg--the two Soviet spies who were executed for supposedly stealing American secrets about nuclear technology. Cohn conspired with the judge to ensure that the Rosenbergs would be sentenced to death for their actions (the only time in American history that spies were executed during peacetime).

Cohn's pronouncement is devastating for Joe, to whom Cohn is speaking. Joe has always thought of Cohn as a hero--the very embodiment of Joe's faith in law, justice, and traditional moral values. Now, Joe sees that Cohn isn't anything of the kind: he's an immoral, bloodthirsty man who's perfectly willing to break the law to ensure the death of a mother of two children (whose guilt was in question in the first place). As a supposed defender of family values and wholesome conservatism, Cohn instead shows himself to be morally bankrupt.

## Millennium Approaches: Act 3, Scene 6 Quotes

Prior: Are you... a ghost, Lou?
Louis: No. Just spectral. Lost to myself. Sitting all day on cold park benches. Wishing I could be with you. Dance with me, babe...

**Related Characters:** Louis Ironson, Prior Walter (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 119

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this famous dream sequence, Prior Walter reunites with his boyfriend, Louis Ironson. Louis has abandoned Prior because Prior has been diagnosed with AIDS, and Louis is frightened of contracting the disease himself. But in the realm of dreams, Louis is no longer afraid of Prior. Prior dreams of dancing with Louis--death and AIDS are no longer a danger for either one of them.

The passage is also a good example of how dreams can help humans escape from the pain of their day-to-day lives. At times, dreams help the characters confront reality with a new depth of insight. But here, the point isn't that Prior is gaining some new insight (although what Louis says about cold park benches is true)--rather, Prior dreams about Louis so that he can feel happier. Of course, it's tragic that Prior and Louis cansafely engage in an act as simple as dancing *only*in the world of dreams. The very simplicity of their reunion reinforces how greatly AIDS has fractured and endangered the gay community.

## Millennium Approaches: Act 3, Scene 7 Quotes

I think, if you touch me, your hand might fall off or something. Worse things have happened to people who have touched me.

**Related Characters:** Louis Ironson (speaker), Joe Pitt

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 122

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this scene, Joe and Louis tentatively begin a relationship. Joe has spent his entire life in the closet, despite the fact that he feels gay desires. Louis is more open about his homosexuality, but he's clearly wracked with guilt at having abandoned his boyfriend, Prior Walter, after Prior was diagnosed with AIDS. We can see Louis's guilt as he warns Joe about touching him. The last person to "touch" Louis was Prior--who's been diagnosed with AIDS and abandoned by his friends and family.

The irony of the passage is that Louis is behaving like an AIDS patient, despite the fact that he doesn't have AIDS at all. It's as if Louis is blaming himself for Prior's having contracted the AIDS virus. Louis seems to think of his own selfishness as a hideous disease--a more dangerous, toxic disease than AIDS itself. Louis is attracted to Joe, but on some level, he thinks that he doesn't deserve to begin a relationship with Joe--he knows he's not strong enough to stand by his boyfriend's side.

Greetings Prophet;
The Great Work begins:
The Messenger has arrived.

**Related Characters:** The Angel of America (speaker), Prior Walter

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 125

**Explanation and Analysis**

At the end of the first part of *Angels in America*, Prior Walter is visited by a mysterious figure, the Angel of America. We still have a lot of questions: why the Angel has come to Earth; why she's visiting Prior specifically; whether the Angel is "real," at least within the world of the play, etc.

In spite of the uncertainties surrounding the Angel's visit, her appearance reinforces the sense of prophecy and hope that's been a guiding theme of the play so far. Many of the play's characters feel a strong sense that *something* is going to happen, even if they have no idea what. So it's entirely appropriate that the play should end with "something" happening--an angel coming down to Earth, apparently from Heaven--even if we don't know what the angel's message will be.

Furthermore, the angel's presence reminds us of the ambiguity in Kushner's use of dream sequences. At times, dreams represent an escape for the characters; elsewhere, dreams help the characters address the problems of their waking lives with greater clarity and conviction. Which kind of dream is this? Or is it a dream at all? Kushner leaves us to wonder whether the angel is real and what effect it will have on Prior's life--and he also encourages us to feel the same vague sense of anticipation we've felt all along.

## Perestroika: Act 1, Scene 1 Quotes

❝ The Great Question before us is: Can we Change? In Time? And we all desire that Change will come.

**Related Characters:** Aleksii Antedilluvianovich Prelapsarianov (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 137

**Explanation and Analysis**

At the beginning of Part II of the play, we're introduced to a strange, comical figure, Aleksii Altedilluvianovich Prelapsarianov, who presides over the Kremlin in Moscow. In an ironic call-back to the opening scene of the play, Aleksii seems to be organizing a funeral--but this funeral is for the Soviet Union, not an individual person. By the late 1980s, it was clear to many that the Soviet Union was on its last legs: after decades of instability, it was finally going under.

What, we might well ask, does the collapse of the Soviet Union have to do with Kushner's play--a play about the AIDS crisis, the Reagan Administration, and the state of modern America? Without ever saying so explicitly, Kushner suggests that the collapse of the Soviet Union--just like the other major historical events of his play--was greeted as an opportunity for grand, historical change. For decades, the Soviet Union--a country founded on left-wing values--had been a rallying point for leftists in the United States, but after the 1950s, when news of the country's brutality became widely known, the left in America stopped praising Russia. With the collapse of the U.S.S.R., the question on everybody's mind was--what will become of left-wing values in the world?

In short, the opening scene of the play establishes a sense of uncertainty, both for the world and for liberals in particular. As millennium approaches, the characters in the play sense that a great change is coming--but nobody can agree on what this change will look like.

## Perestroika: Act 2, Scene 1 Quotes

❝ That ludicrous spectacle in there, just a parody of the funeral of someone who *really* counted. We don't; faggots; we're just a bad dream the world is having, and the real world's waking up. And he's *dead*.

**Related Characters:** Prior Walter (speaker), Belize / Norman Ariago

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 158

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this scene, Prior and Belize have just come from a funeral for an AIDS-diagnosed drag queen they both knew. In contrast to the funeral in the first part of the play, the drag queen's funeral is glitzy, glamorous, and defiantly optimistic--despite the tragedy of the occasion. Prior finds the spectacle of the funeral to be disgusting and indecent--how dare the mourners sing and have a good time?

Although Prior dislikes the funeral, Kushner evidently doesn't agree with him (as is shown in Belize's response to Prior). For Kushner, the only appropriate response to the misery unleashed by the AIDs crisis is to defy it--to respond to misery and death with life, love, and laughter. The funeral is, in short, a stand-in for Kushner's play itself: a big, over-the-top spectacle that uses humor and fantasy to address

deadly serious social issues. The very fact of Kushner's play's existence proves that Kushner favors the "ludicrous spectacle" that Prior criticizes.

## Perestroika: Act 2, Scene 2 Quotes

*Bored* with His Angels, *Bewitched* by Humanity, In Mortifying imitation of You, his least creation, He would sail off on Voyages, no knowing where.

**Related Characters:** The Angel of America (speaker), Prior Walter

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 170

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, the Angel of America paints a bizarre portrait of the supernatural world. The Angel claims that God created humans long ago, and immediately became enamored with them. Instead of paying attention to his angels, God spent all his time with human beings. The reason that God loved humans better than angels, the Angel claims, is that humans have the power of free will: they can choose who to love, where to go, and how to spend their time. Angels lack free will, and thus simply aren't very interesting.

The Angel's speech to Prior is an early sign that the Angel's message for Prior might not be an entirely friendly one. On the contrary, the Angel seems rather antagonistic to Prior and Prior's species. Thus, the Angel's behavior in this passage challenges some of the naive optimism that the characters felt earlier in the play (as well as the general idea that angels are trustworthy messengers of God--in fact these angels seem to be going behind God's back). Yes, an angel is going to deliver a great message to humanity--but there's no guarantee this message will be good.

It wasn't a dream. [...] I think it really happened. I'm a prophet.

**Related Characters:** Prior Walter (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 159

**Explanation and Analysis**

Here, Prior tells Belize about his visions of the Angel of America. Although Prior acknowledges that his visions might just be hallucinations, brought on by his lack of sleep and his ingestion of various painkillers, he also suggests that he really is a prophet, summoned by the angels to deliver an important message to the people of the world.

Prior's speech is important because it shows him struggling to believe in his own dreams. Prior isn't a fool--he admits to Belize that he might just be hallucinating the Angel of America. And yet Prior clearly *wants* to believe that he's a prophet--in a time of great misery and loneliness, he wants to believe that he's special; that the gods have chosen him to complete a great task. In short, Prior both does and doesn't believe in the Angel of America. One could say the same about the audience of Kushner's play: we of course acknowledge that the play is just a fiction, and yet we connect with the play's emotional and political insights, almost as if *we* are meant to be prophets, passing on Kushner's message.

## Perestroika: Act 4, Scene 2 Quotes

PRIOR: I have a hobby now: haunting people. Fuck home. You wait here. I want to meet my replacement.
*(Prior goes to Joe's door, opens it, steps in.)*
Oh.
JOE: Yes, can I—
PRIOR: You look just like the dummy. She's right.
JOE: Who's right?
PRIOR: Your wife.
*(Pause.)*
JOE: What?
Do you know my—
PRIOR: NO.
JOE: You said my wife.
PRIOR: No I didn't.
JOE: Yes you did.
PRIOR: You misheard. I'm a Prophet.
JOE: What?
PRIOR: PROPHET PROPHET I PROPHESY I HAVE SIGHT I *SEE*.
What do *you* do?
JOE: I'm a clerk.
PRIOR: Oh big deal. A clerk. You *what*, you file things? Well you better be keeping a file on the hearts you break, that's all that counts in the end, you'll have bills to pay in the world to come, you and your friend, the Whore of Babylon.
*(Little pause)*
Sorry wrong room.

**Related Characters:** Joe Pitt, Prior Walter (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 224-225

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Prior Walter tracks down Joe, the man with whom Louis has been conducting an affair after leaving Prior. Prior is understandably upset to be meeting his "replacement"--the fact that Louis has left him for a healthier, AIDS-free man just reinforces the fact that Prior doesn't have much longer to live.

The passage also emphasizes the connection between Prior's visions of the Angel of America and his relationship with Louis. As Belize has already pointed out, Prior seems to be imagining the Angel as a way of reconciling with Louis. As Belize suspected, Prior seems to be using his visions as a way of condemning Joe (he even calls Joe a "whore of Babylon," a reference to the Biblical embodiment of sin and sexuality), however clumsily. The scene--like so much of the play--is both tragic and comic: Prior's line, "Sorry, wrong room," is like the punchline of a joke, and yet the passage's message is deadly serious.

## Perestroika: Act 4, Scene 3 Quotes

I hate America, Louis. I hate this country. It's just big ideas, and stories, and people dying, and people like you. The white cracker who wrote the national anthem knew what he was doing. He set the word 'free' to a note so high nobody can reach it. That was deliberate. Nothing on Earth sounds less like freedom to me. You come with me to room 1013 over at the hospital, I'll show you America. Terminal, crazy and mean. I *live* in America, Louis, that's hard enough, I don't have to love it. You do that. Everybody's got to love something.

**Related Characters:** Belize / Norman Ariago (speaker), Louis Ironson

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 230

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Belize tells Louis that he hates America. Belize is speaking somewhat metaphorically--he certainly doesn't seem to despise the *idea* of America; the idea of a country in which everybody is free and equal, protected by the same laws and the same authorities. But Belize knows perfectly well that such an idea is just that--an idea, an illusion. Where Louis naively believes that America's courts and congresses protect all races and sexual orientations equally, Belize knows better. The law does *not* apply equally to everyone, contrary to what patriots claim: heterosexuals are better taken care of than homosexuals; whites are better protected than blacks, etc. The idea of America is a sinister fable, designed to hide the concrete facts of racism and homophobia in the country--and nobody who's in touch with the real world, Belize implies, could believe in such an idea.

## Perestroika: Act 5, Scene 3 Quotes

He was a terrible person. He died a hard death. So maybe... A queen can forgive her vanquished foe. It isn't easy, it doesn't count if it's easy, it's the hardest thing. Forgiveness. Which is maybe where love and justice finally meet. Peace, at last. Isn't that what the Kaddish asks for?

**Related Characters:** Belize / Norman Ariago (speaker), Roy Cohn

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 265-266

**Explanation and Analysis**

Here, Belize mourns the death of his patient, Roy Cohn. At the end of his life, Cohn continued to deny his homosexuality and condemn liberals and homosexuals of all kinds--including Belize himself. And yet Belize asks Louis to say a Kaddish for Roy--a Jewish prayer designed to honor his life and his soul.

Previously, Belize has taken care of Cohn out of a sense of obligation (his Hippocratic Oath as a nurse). But now, Belize is going above and beyond, honoring Cohn for the purely moral reason that he wants to wish Cohn well and forgive Cohn for his evildoing. In many ways, Belize is the most loving and compassionate character in the play: he has the strength to show love and respect for people like Cohn, whom he has every reason to despise. Where other characters respond to the AIDs crisis with selfishness and cruelty, Belize responds by showing his courage and capacity to love others--living out his philosophy that life is about people, not principles.

## Perestroika: Act 5, Scene 5 Quotes

❝ If [God] ever did come back, if He ever *dared* to show His face, or his Glyph or whatever in the Garden again. If after all this destruction, if after all the terrible days of this terrible century, He returned to see... how much suffering His abandonment had created, if all He has to offer is death, you should *sue* the bastard. [...] Sue the bastard for walking out. How dare He.

**Related Characters:** Prior Walter (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 275-276

**Explanation and Analysis**

In the climactic scene of the play, Prior Walter is summoned (or perhaps just dreams he's been summoned) before a council of Angels. The Angels want Prior to spread death and disease all over the world--in other words, one could say, they want AIDS to wipe out the human race. The angels hope that by killing humans, they'll be able to summon God back to Heaven--he's been missing for some time.

Prior responds to the angels' pleas by telling them that their real "beef" is with God, for walking out on them, not human beings. But Prior does more than simply re-direct the angels' anger. By expressing his own anger with God, he's condemning the universe itself for allowing something as awful as the AIDS crisis (and other horrors of the 20th century, like the Holocaust, the Great Leap Forward, the Holodomor, etc.) to occur. More subtly, Prior's comments could be interpreted as a criticism of organized religions, especially Christianity, that argue that everything happens for a reason. *If* there is a God, Prior suggests, and *if* everything is a part of God's plan, then God should be sued.

By the same token, Prior's words suggest his exasperation with the very notion of prophecy--with the idea that people can be "chosen" by the angels and ordered to work God's plan on Earth. Prior no longer seems to believe that there's any pre-determined order to life. Things don't happen for any particular reason, and so the belief that prophecies must be fulfilledno longer holds any currency with Prior.

## Perestroika: Act 5, Scene 8 Quotes

❝ I want the credit card. That's all. You can keep track of me from where the charges come from. If you want to keep track. I don't care.

**Related Characters:** Harper Pitt (speaker), Joe Pitt

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 282

**Explanation and Analysis**

At the end of the play, Harper finally summons the courage to walk out on Joe Pitt, her mostly-closeted gay husband. She's suspected that Joe is gay for some time now, but the strength of her convictions--not to mention her love, and her fear of change--has kept her from leaving him behind. Now, however, Harper is ready to make a change in her life. Unlike many of the other great "changes" in the play, Harper's decision to abandon Joe isn't part of any lofty plan--she has no idea what's going to happen to her now.

Harper greedily asks Joe for his credit cards, however--proof that she's not entirely ready to live on her own. Evidently, Kushner doesn't try to glorify Harper's decision--she's brave, but not perfect.

## Perestroika: Act 5, Scene 9 Quotes

❝ Nothing's lost forever. In this world, there is a kind of painful progress. Longing for what we've left behind, and dreaming ahead. At least I think that's so.

**Related Characters:** Harper Pitt (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 285

### Explanation and Analysis

After Harper tells Joe that she's leaving him forever, she offers a strange explanation for her actions. Harper doesn't know exactly what's going to happen to her now, but she feels that it's vitally important that she keep moving forward somehow. Harper characterizes her desire to keep moving as a basic human emotion--the desire for "painful progress." All people, she suggests, experience the pains of change as they move through life, simultaneously mourning what they've lost while also looking ahead to the future.

"Painful progress" might as well be the name of Kushner's play. Kushner is quick to criticize those who look forward to the future *too* eagerly (Louis, perhaps); i.e., those who believe that life has a predetermined direction to it. Yet Kushner is also critical of those like Reagan and Cohn who look back to the past with too much nostalgia. In the end, Kushner offers a compromise: we must look to the future while *also* mourning individual suffering and the passage of time, remaining optimistic without ever allowing optimism to blind us to reality.

## Epilogue Quotes

❝ This disease will be the end of many of us, but not nearly all, and the dead will be commemorated and will struggle on with the living, and we are not going away. We won't die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come.

**Related Characters:** Prior Walter (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 290

### Explanation and Analysis

In the Epilogue to the play, Prior speaks directly to the audience. He claims that he's been living with AIDS for several years now, and doesn't know how much longer he's going to last. And yet Prior refuses to cower before the possibility of death. Instead, he speaks out--bravely and boldly--about his condition and his sexuality.

By having Prior speak directly to the audience (in an homage to the theater of Bertolt Brecht), Kushner suggests the political ramifications of his play. Kushner wants to use his play to make political points and provoke political engagement in the audience. Prior seems to urge the audience to go out and fight for AIDS research and homosexual rights--a mandate that many fans of the play have taken up. At the same time, Prior's speech seems to sum up many of the play's key themes. Prior has no idea what the future holds, but in spite of his uncertainty, he looks forward to the future with a cautious optimism. In the meantime, Prior will not hide behind fantasy or delusion. Instead, he will be a *citizen*--he and the other members of the gay community will use political methods to fight for themselves and their allies.

# SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## MILLENNIUM APPROACHES: ACT 1, SCENE 1

In the year 1985, a group gathers in a New York synagogue for a **funeral**. Rabbi Isador Chemelwitz delivers a eulogy for Sarah Ironson, who was "devoted" to her husband Benjamin Ironson, also dead, and to her children and grandchildren, including Louis Ironson. The Rabbi admits that he didn't know Sarah at all, though he knows her final years in the Bronx Home for Aged Hebrews were sad and lonely.

*We open the play on a note of tragedy—a sense that life is at its end. Funerals will be an important symbol in the play, starting with this first scene. Here the characters must face the inevitability of death, but at the same time they seem alienated from one another—Louis clearly hasn't visited his grandmother in many years, and even the Rabbi admits that he barely knew Sarah.*

The Rabbi continues to describe Sarah Ironson, based on what he's learned about her. He talks about how Sarah traveled across the ocean from Eastern Europe to immigrate to America—struggling for her own happiness and for her "Jewish home." The Rabbi insists that Sarah's children don't really live in America—in fact, no such place exists. Instead, they are the heirs and heiresses of an "old world," which Sarah carried to the U.S. There are simply no more voyages left like the one Sarah made.

*The most important theme introduced in the Rabbi's eulogy is the idea of movement or migration—Sarah's journey across the ocean—as a quintessential part of the human experience. At the same time, however, the Rabbi also suggests that such journeys simply don't exist anymore.*

## MILLENNIUM APPROACHES: ACT 1, SCENE 2

A lawyer named Roy Cohn sits in his legal office with a young aspiring lawyer named Joe Pitt. Joe Pitt sits uncomfortably while Roy Cohn takes a series of phone calls. Cohn wishes he were an "octopus."

*Roy Cohn was a real-life political figure: a high-powered lawyer and friend of the infamous Senator Joseph McCarthy. As it's connected to Cohn, the octopus here seems to be a symbol of corruption and control.*

Cohn talks to a client whose court date he missed. Cohn claims he missed the date because he has clients in Haiti.

*To audiences in the 90s, the mention of Haiti would have immediately recalled the AIDS crisis. Haitians were prevented from entering the U.S. because they were considered "AIDS carriers"—a restriction later found to be based on nothing but racist bias.*

Cohn next takes a phone call from a judge's wife—he tells Joe Pitt that the judge is a "geek" and a Nixon appointee. Cohn arranges theater tickets for the judge's wife. Cohn tells her that she wouldn't like the play *La Cage aux Folles*, but he also tells Joe that the play is the "best thing in Broadway." Pitt claims he hasn't seen it.

*This section adds another allusion to homosexuality.* La Cause aux Folles *is a famous play about gay people pretending to be straight—a fitting work to bring up in* Angels in America, *which is partly about hiding one's sexuality from view.*

In between calls, Cohn asks Joe how he likes the appeals court. Joe says he enjoys the responsibility. Cohn yells at one of his young employees over the phone, cursing him out. To Cohn's surprise, Joe tells Cohn not to take the lord's name in vain, since Joe is a Mormon. Cohn laughs and says, "Only in America."

*Cohn's relationship with Joe is that of the mentor to the student. And yet Joe isn't just a humble pupil—he has strong personal convictions of his own, and isn't afraid to call out Roy for his "sins." Cohn's worldview seems to be centered on the U.S.—in other words, one's "true" identity is a nation, not a religion.*

Cohn offers Joe Pitt a "big" job in the Justice Department in Washington D.C. Joe is stunned—he tells Cohn he appreciates his generosity, but that he'll have to ask his wife about it.

*Joe seems like the embodiment of "family values" (a common phrase in 80s political rhetoric)—he's religious, has a wife, and puts "family first."*

## MILLENNIUM APPROACHES: ACT 1, SCENE 3

Joe Pitt's wife, Harper, sits in her apartment, talking to herself. She takes some pills and finds herself staring at a travel agent man named Mr. Lies—a man who materializes on the stage out of thin air.

*Mr. Lies is plainly an imaginary character—the association between the pills and Harper's vision makes this clear enough.*

Mr. Lies tells Harper that he, like all travel agents, has the power to send people anywhere in the world. Harper asks Mr. Lies for the chance to go to Antarctica to that she can see the hole in the ozone layer—something she's heard about on the radio. Harper also tells Mr. Lies that she's not safe in her home, as she hallucinates people, Mr. Lies himself included.

*Mr. Lies' glib pronouncements about travel seem to confirm what the Rabbi was saying: travel has become cheap and easy, the antithesis of the quest that Sarah Ironson took nearly a century ago. And yet there's an urgency in this scene that undercuts the Rabbi's point: the modern world faces a new set of challenges and dangers, whose scale are far greater than any before (climate change and—we might be able to guess by now—the AIDS crisis).*

Harper complains that Joe, her husband, "stays away," and Mr. Lies advises her to keep moving. Harper wonders if Christ will come again in 15 years, when it's the year 2000. She says, "the suspense is killing me."

*Here, we get something like a prophecy: a belief that some big event is about to happen. Harper's sad, lonely life (so lonely she has to invent imaginary friends) shows us how some people live with prophecy—instead of taking control, they're just waiting for someone to come along and save them.*

Suddenly, Mr. Lies vanishes, and Joe Pitt walks into the apartment—he's early, Harper points out. Abruptly, Joe asks Harper if she'd like to move to Washington.

*Joe's question to Harper is something of a punch line. Harper has been fantasizing about moving and traveling, and all of a sudden Joe comes to give her a chance to travel.*

## MILLENNIUM APPROACHES: ACT 1, SCENE 4

Outside the synagogue, Louis Ironson (Sarah Ironson's grandson) and a man named Prior Walter stand and talk. Louis never visited Sarah, he admits—she looked too much like his mother. Louis apologizes for not introducing Prior, his lover, to the rest of his family. He says he always gets "closet-y" around his relatives.

*Louis hides his sexuality (presumably a very important part of his identity) from his own family, who are seemingly more traditional or conservative.*

Prior tells Louis that Louis's cousin Doris is a lesbian, and Louis is amazed. Prior laughs and tells Louis that he's been doing an impression of Shirley Booth (an actress from the movie *Come Back, Little Sheba*), and notes that his cat, Little Sheba, has run away recently. As Prior says this, Louis notices a "burst blood vessel" on Prior's body. Prior explains that this is a mark of "disease." Prior tries to joke about his condition, but Louis begins to cry. Prior explains that he's known about his condition for a while—he didn't tell Louis because he was frightened that Louis would leave him. Louis then abruptly leaves, saying that he has to "bury my grandma." He promises to come home to Prior later.

Come Back, Little Sheba, *by William Inge, was the most popular play by Inge, a closeted homosexual himself. By impersonating a character from this play, Prior distances himself from his own sadness: it's as if he adopts theater as a kind of defense mechanism in times of misery. This relates to the larger theme of fantasy as a way of dealing with pain, so it's rather appropriate—though a bit disarming as well—that Kushner jumps from jokes about Little Sheba to a heartbreaking conversation about Prior's AIDS. There's nothing inherently "visible" about AIDS, but it weakens the immune system so much that bruising and bleeding is common, often "marking" its victims as somehow "contaminated."*

## MILLENNIUM APPROACHES: ACT 1, SCENE 5

Back in their apartment, Harper is telling Joe Pitt that she's not sure if she wants to go to Washington D.C. Joe is upset, since he's eager to go, and he claims that it's "time to make some changes." He's a highly overqualified legal clerk, who makes less money than any of his friends.

*We return to the scene in Joe's apartment—Kushner does lots of jumping back and forth. Joe emphasizes the importance of change—something that seems to contradict his professed ideals of conservatism.*

Harper claims that she has too much to do in New York City—she has to paint the bedroom (something she's been working on for over a year). She claims that she's afraid to go in the bedroom alone, and she can only walk inside when Joe is with her. She compares their apartment with the apartment from the movie *Rosemary's Baby*. Abruptly, Joe asks Harper how many valium pills she took. Harper at first claims she took none, but then admits to taking three.

*Ironically, Harper—who just a few minutes ago was contemplating taking "a vacation"—is now reluctant to leave New York. She makes a series of silly excuses for staying in the city. From our perspective, it's clear that Harper doesn't have any good reason to stay in New York other than her own fear of the unknown, or her unhappiness with Joe.*

The scene cuts to the aftermath of the **funeral**. As he buries his grandmother, Louis approaches Rabbi Chemelwitz. He admits to having ignored his grandma in her final years, and adds that he doesn't even speak Yiddish—he's not much of a Jew. Louis asks the Rabbi for some advice—he wants to know about abandoning "a sick person" he loves in a time of need. The Rabbi pauses for a moment, and then he eventually says that the Holy Script has nothing to offer Louis on this subject. He teases Louis that if he wants to confess, he should become a Catholic.

*The Rabbi's behavior in this scene contrasts markedly with the authority he projected in the first scene of the play. Now, he's forced to admit that the problems of modernity exceed (or at least are different from) anything the "old world" had to deal with. Religion—indeed, all traditional knowledge—isn't prepared to deal with the AIDS crisis, an enormous, traumatic era of American history.*

Back in the apartment, Joe Pitt tells Harper that things are changing in the U.S.—President Ronald Reagan has inspired people to embrace truth and optimism. Joe thinks that he can be part of that change. Harper is more cynical, and she points out that the ozone layer is getting wider and wider. Joe angrily tells Harper that she has "emotional problems," and frets about imaginary things. Harper shoots back that Joe has too many "secrets and lies."

*The contrast between Louis's pessimism and Joe's optimism is so blatant that it's hard not to notice it. Joe, a conservative man, idolizes Ronald Reagan, who is the very symbol of the conservative Renaissance in America (see Background Info). The mention of "secrets and lies," especially just after Louis talks about being "closeted," makes us wonder if Joe is hiding his own sexuality.*

Joe tries to apologize to Harper. Harper tells him that she's been researching how to give "a good blowjob." Joe finds this unnerving. Harper shrugs and resumes talking about the ozone layer.

*Harper refuses to buy Joe's idealistic conservatism, and becomes obsessed with how serious the world's problems really are. This scene also suggests that there are problems with intimacy in the couple's marriage.*

## MILLENNIUM APPROACHES: ACT 1, SCENE 6

A short time later, Joe Pitt is working at his legal office. He walks into the bathroom and comes across Louis crying. Louis explains that he's a word processor—the "lowest of the low." Joe offers Louis a tissue, and asks him if he's all right. Louis calls Joe a "nice man," and Joe immediately replies, "Not so nice."

*Louis and Joe's scene has a strange, flirtatious intimacy that's difficult to convey in this summary. Joe's tenderness and sensitivity—he offers a stranger a tissue—is surprising to us: up to this point, nobody in the play has been quite so gentle.*

Louis explains that he has a sick friend, and he adds that Joe's other friends, whom he calls "Reaganite heartless assholes," have ignored him. Joe claims that he voted for Reagan twice, and Louis laughs about "gay Republicans." Joe shoots back, "I'm not gay." Louis grins and claims that Joe "sounds like a … Republican." He kisses Joe on the cheek and walks out of the bathroom.

*Louis doesn't dance around the issue—he calls Joe gay. Joe's response comes so quickly that it sounds almost reflexive (as if he's so afraid of being accused of being gay that he has a response ready at any time). If anything, Joe's denial only seems to confirm the suggestion that he's trying to suppress his true feelings.*

## MILLENNIUM APPROACHES: ACT 1, SCENE 7

Prior walks alone through a strange, dreamlike environment. He's dressed in women's clothing (similar to the Shirley Booth dress he described for Louis earlier). There are candles and kitschy curtains lining the stage.

*There are many kinds of fantasy sequences like this one in the play. It's also worth noting that Kushner specifies that nothing be too "realistic" or high-tech—the fantastical scenes should also remind us that we're still watching a play.*

Prior, speaking in a woman's voice, comes across Harper Pitt. Harper demands, "What are you doing in my hallucination?" Prior laughs and tells Harper that *she*'s the intruding in *his* dream. Prior and Harper introduce themselves. Harper says that she has "emotional problems," and takes too much Valium. She says, "I'm a Mormon," and Prior replies, "I'm a homosexual."

*One of Kushner's most important points is that fantasy (or, if you like, hallucination) isn't just an escape from the real world. Fantasy, in other words, doesn't always just pull people apart or detach them from each other and reality—it also brings them together in surprising new ways. Here, for example, two utter strangers have a mysterious meeting in a dream—one a few scenes that question how much of the play's "fantasy" is actually real.*

Harper points out that her hallucination isn't really that strange. Even though she's in an unfamiliar place, this reality is still based on things she's already experienced in the real world. Prior nods sadly and says, "It's all been done before."

*This is one of the most famous passages in* Angels in America. *Harper and Prior agree that imagination is, in some profound way, impotent and bankrupt: there's "nothing new under the sun." This should remind us of the Rabbi's eulogy for Sarah. And yet Prior and Harper react to the "nothing new" in two different ways. Harper seems more willing to play with her world—even if she can't encounter new things per se, she can still put together old things in interesting new ways. Prior seems less intrigued by this possibility.*

Harper asks Prior if Prior can see anything about her. Prior says that he can: Harper is amazingly unhappy. Furthermore, he says, Harper's husband is gay. Harper immediately dismisses this as a lie. Then, she starts to realize that Prior is right. "Something just fell apart," she says tearfully.

*This reiterates Kushner's point about the value of fantasy. Somehow, Harper's meeting with Prior gives her an epiphany that will translate into her life in the "real world"—the knowledge that her husband is gay.*

Prior then tells Harper something about himself: deep inside him, there's a tiny part that's entirely free of disease. Prior tells Harper, "That isn't true." Suddenly, Harper disappears. Frustrated, Prior calls himself "polluted," and smears the makeup on his face.

*Prior carries his despair into his dream—even when he's asleep, he can't stop thinking about his AIDS infection. This suggests that there's no "wall" between reality and fantasy, or between the interior (disease) and exterior (makeup)—one influences the other, and vice versa.*

Suddenly, a bright light fills the room. A small grey feather falls from above, and a voice booms, "Prepare the way." The voice begins to murmur in Hebrew and English, though what it's saying is difficult to decipher.

*This is the first sign of the prophecy that Prior will later receive from the Angel of America. It's not clear (and will never be entirely clear) if this prophecy is supposed to be "real" or one of Prior's hallucinations (perhaps from the painkillers he's been given). For this reason, Kushner's play doesn't quite qualify as magical realism (a genre in which "magic" is treated as banal truth).*

## MILLENNIUM APPROACHES: ACT 1, SCENE 8

Joe Pitt comes home to his apartment, where he finds Harper waiting for him. Harper asks, "Where were you," but Joe doesn't have a good answer. Harper mutters that she's behaving exactly like a pill-popping, sex-starved housewife "should" behave.

*Everyone in this play struggles with some kind of stereotype: they know how society expects them to behave.*

Joe angrily asks Harper if there's something she wants to ask him, but Harper replies, "Tell me without making me ask you." She goes on to say that Joe's face has changed over the years—she can barely believe he's the same man she met years ago. She also complains that she hates having sex with him.

*Harper's anger and frustration with Joe builds quickly. Clearly, she's been frustratedly thinking about these things (sex, love, her husband) for many years now.*

Harper asks Joe, "Are you a homo?" She threatens to burn their apartment to the ground if Joe doesn't answer her. Joe whispers, "No."

*Harper's experience in her hallucination has inspired her to confront her husband.*

In another apartment, Louis and Prior sit in their bed, talking about Judaism and the law. The law, Louis tries to explain, should mirror the complexity of life. In Judaism, on the other hand, things are only "right" or "wrong"—a huge oversimplification of the universe.

*Kushner has a clever way of juxtaposing scenes within scenes. Here, Louis is talking to Prior, but he seems to be commenting on the* other *scene between Joe and Harper: the simplicity of religious law (which forbids homosexuality) just can't address the complexities of human* desire, *in Joe or in anyone else. This is also an important aspect of the theme of people vs. principles—no set of dogma or principles can contain the reality and value of all human life.*

Prior tells Louis that his condition is deteriorating quickly—he has new lesions, kidney problems, and diarrhea. Louis says, "I really hate this," and Prior asks him to keep talking about the law.

*Prior's condition is so huge and horrifying (essentially a long, slow death sentence) that Louis can't handle discussing it directly—even if Prior himself now seems cynically realistic.*

Reluctantly, Louis asks Prior if Prior loves him, and Prior says that he does. Louis asks Prior what he'd do if Louis walked out on him. Prior says that he'd hate Louis forever.

*We can sense that Louis is thinking about leaving Prior, and it's hard to be totally unsympathetic to this reaction. Louis is being selfish and abandoning his lover in a time of need, but he's also trying to survive and to pursue his own happiness in safety.*

Back in the Pitts' apartment, Joe tells Harper that it's time to pray. Harper asks God if her husband is gay, and Joe explodes. He yells that it makes no difference whether or not he "was" gay—provided that he's worked very hard to be "decent and correct." Harper sneers at Joe's "Utah talk." Joe accuses Harper of trying to destroy him.

*Joe doesn't deny his homosexuality as he did before; he just says that he's worked hard to repress it. Harper seems to want Joe to admit what he is—while Joe interprets her goals as destructive, they're actually pretty productive and healthy for them both. Harper is forcing her husband to "out himself," but she's also forcing him to stop denying his own nature. This is the tragedy of trying to force oneself to fit a preordained set of rules—whether it's "decency" and conservatism or a religious law—when such rules cannot contain all the diversity of human life and potential.*

Harper tells Joe that she's going to have a baby—a baby who'll turn out just like her. Joe asks Harper if she's telling the truth, and Harper replies, "No, yes, no, yes." Harper leaves the bedroom, leaving Joe to pray.

*We end on a note of ambiguity (yes, no, yes). We don't know what kind of future Joe and Harper will have together.*

## MILLENNIUM APPROACHES: ACT 1, SCENE 9

Roy Cohn sits in a doctor's office with his doctor, Henry. Henry tells Cohn about the causes and effects of AIDS: the body's immune system shuts down, making the body vulnerable to all sorts of diseases and infections. Henry points out Cohn's lesions and throat problems as examples of AIDs-related complications. Cohn laughs and says, "Very interesting."

*Not only is Joe a closeted homosexual, but it appears that Roy Cohn, his aggressive, ultra-masculine boss, is gay too. Cohn seems oddly calm about the news of his AIDS—he's so used to being in control that he seems not to recognize genuine danger when he sees it.*

Henry tells Cohn that he's running tests on Cohn. Cohn dares Henry to suggest that he's homosexual, threatening to destroy Henry's career if he does so. Henry calmly tells Cohn that he's been treating him since 1958—he knows that over the years, Cohn has had various diseases that only a homosexual man could have, and now, Cohn clearly has AIDS.

*This is an important scene from a political standpoint, because it shows how political the medical community's response to homosexuality was. A doctor's only job should be to cure disease—but here, Kushner suggests that in the AIDS era doctors were pressured into burying some of their research, or else treating AIDS as some kind of moral "punishment."*

Cohn dismisses Henry's focus on "labels." Labels, Cohn explains, are only a way of fitting humans into a "pecking order." Cohn insists that he's not a homosexual simply because he has sex with men—homosexuals, he explains, are "weaklings" with "zero clout." Cohn concludes, "I am a heterosexual man who fucks around with guys." Therefore, Cohn cannot possibly have AIDS—instead, Cohn decides that he has liver cancer. Henry tells Cohn that he doesn't care what Cohn calls it—the bottom line is that Cohn needs treatment immediately.

*Cohn's speech is chilling, and one of the first good signs of the way he sees the world. For Cohn, the only reality is power: he's been a highly influential political player for decades, and likes it that way. Cohn's emphasis on power is so extreme that he thinks power can mask or even reverse other parts of his identity, such as his sexuality. This is called denial—the attitude of "I'm not gay, I just have sex with guys." In real life, Cohn also refused to admit that he had AIDS, and went to his death claiming that he had liver cancer.*

## MILLENNIUM APPROACHES: ACT 2, SCENE 1

We open on Prior crawling on the floor of his apartment. Louis sees him and yells that he's going to call an ambulance, but Prior refuses to go to the hospital. Louis calls for an ambulance using his landline. While Louis does so, Prior begins bleeding, and evacuates his bowels. Prior loses consciousness, with Louis weeping next to him.

*It's important that Kushner doesn't censor the gritty details of the AIDS crisis. He balances out elaborate fantasy sequences and heady debates about politics and religion with scenes like this one: a less bodily approach would be dishonest.*

## MILLENNIUM APPROACHES: ACT 2, SCENE 2

Joe Pitt walks into his apartment and finds Harper sitting on the couch in the dark. Harper explains that she heard someone in their bedroom, with a knife. Harper tells Joe that she's thinking of "going away," but Joe insists that he can fix whatever problem they've been having.

*The stranger's knife seems to have some phallic symbolism here, as Harper is apparently starved for sex and companionship in general: Joe has only given her these things reluctantly. Nevertheless, Joe's commitment to an image of "family values" is so great that he wants to remain married to Harper.*

Harper asks Joe what he's been praying for, and Joe explains that he wants God to crush him into tiny pieces. Joe remembers a book of Bible stories that he read as a child. In one story, there was a picture of Jacob wrestling with an **angel**. The picture—the only thing about the story that Joe remembered—shows Jacob as a beautiful young man, touching the angel's golden hair. Joe still dreams about the angel, and thinks of himself as Jacob.

*The homoeroticism of this story is painfully clear: Joe has had homosexual feelings ever since he was a child, despite belonging to a religion that strongly forbade these feelings. But there's a more complex point here: Joe's religious identity is also inextricably* tied *to his sexual identity. This explains why Joe is so reluctant to give up on Mormonism, despite the fact that it's made him miserable.*

Harper tells Joe, "You are the only person I've ever loved." Then, she tells Joe that he should go to Washington by himself. She tells Joe that she's not sure if they'll have a baby or not—in any case, she's leaving him.

*It's characteristic of Kushner's play that there's no clear villain or hero here. We can sympathize with Harper for loving a man who doesn't love her back, but we can also feel sorry for Joe for being born into a religion that won't accept him as he is. Perhaps the real villain in this scene is rigid ideology: religion or politics that would condemn someone for their biology.*

## MILLENNIUM APPROACHES: ACT 2, SCENE 3

In a hospital, Prior lies in bed. Louis stands close by, talking to a nurse. The nurse, whose name is Emily, tells Louis that Prior "looks cute." Louis explains that Prior's family is old and highly respectable. The Priors came to the U.S. on the Mayflower, and before that they were respectable English lords.

*This is an interesting detail about Prior, to which we'll return. Prior's long, impressive ancestry should make him "American as apple pie," and yet Prior, as a gay AIDS victim, is a symbol of everything the Reagan administration condemns as un-American.*

Louis tells Emily that he needs to go for a walk in the park to think. He tells Emily to tell Prior, "I had to go."

*Here, we see Louis as a coward, unable to face his sick lover. We can condemn Louis's actions, but we can also sympathize with them—he's facing a choice more difficult than anyone should have to make. One of the tragedies of the AIDS epidemic was that it made such choices all too common—there was no way to stay "on the fence" when human lives were at stake.*

## MILLENNIUM APPROACHES: ACT 2, SCENE 4

Joe Pitt and Roy Cohn sit in a bar. Joe, totally sober, explains that Harper, his wife, is mentally disturbed, and takes too many pills. Cohn, drunk, listens closely. God's rules, Joe claims, are very strict—Harper has always had a hard time living up to them.

*Joe seems so close to outing himself before Roy—a man he regards as a close friend and confidant. Little does Joe know that Roy is also (seemingly) a closeted gay man.*

Abruptly, Joe apologizes to Cohn for opening up about his personal life. Cohn puts his hand on Joe's back and says it's all right. Joe continues telling Cohn about his desire to be one of the "elect"—the good, moral people of the world who are chosen to go to Heaven. Although he loves Harper, Joe is most attracted to the part of Harper that's farthest from the "light." Cohn tells Joe that he's "the best divorce lawyer in the business." Cohn wants Joe to divorce his wife and go to Washington.

*Cohn's behavior toward Joe now seems almost sexual (touching his back, etc.). Indeed, Cohn seems to pushing Joe to give into the very feelings that Cohn's ideology condemns—he wants Joe to give up on his marriage to Harper. The notion of being "far from the light" is interesting, and suggests that Harper too has struggled with the rules of Mormonism.*

Outside the bar in a park, Louis meets a stranger. Louis asks the Stranger to have sex with him, saying that he's been a "bad boy." Louis tells the Stranger that they can't go to Louis's place to have sex. The Stranger tells Louis that they can't go to his place—he lives with his parents.

*In Kushner's stage directions, the same actor plays Prior and the Stranger, reinforcing the point that Louis is looking for a replacement for Prior—and also showing just how futile his attempt is.*

In the bar, Cohn tells Joe about his long career as a lawyer, working for Joseph McCarthy. He describes his relationship with McCarthy as being "close" and "tender." Joe replies that his own father was "difficult and cold."

*Cohn's description of McCarthy seems very sexual—something especially ironic considering just how "conservative" and "traditional" both McCarthy and Cohn were supposed to be.*

Outside in the park, the Stranger has rough sex with Louis. As the Stranger penetrates Louis, he tells Louis that he's broken his condom. Louis shouts, "Keep going, infect me." This makes the Stranger uncomfortable. He tells Louis that he's going to go.

*Louis seems to want to punish himself for abandoning Prior. Indeed, in this moment of despair and passion he seems to almost want to contract the AIDS virus, perhaps so that he can be with Prior again without being guilty and afraid.*

Cohn and Joe leave the bar. As they walk outside, Cohn gives Joe some startling news: he's dying of cancer. Cohn explains that he's unafraid of death. He tells Joe not to let anything stand in his way.

*Instead of revealing themselves to each other, Joe and Cohn maintain their respective lies, with Cohn telling Joe about his "liver cancer." Cohn seems so proud and aggressive in his day-to-day life that it's almost believable that he has no fear of death.*

## MILLENNIUM APPROACHES: ACT 2, SCENE 5

In the hospital, Prior—now awake—gets a surprise visit from an old friend, a drag queen named Belize. Belize offers Prior an ointment—"not Western medicine," Prior mutters. Belize claims to be a health professional. He rubs the ointment on Prior's back.

*From the beginning, Belize is portrayed as someone on the outskirts of American society—he's black, he's gay, and he dresses in drag. (Even his name is that of a foreign country.) His immediate connection to "non-Western" medicine highlights this outsider status, which also gives Belize a special insight into aspects of America that the play's white, more traditionally masculine characters miss.*

Prior asks Belize if he's heard from Louis. Prior explains that it's been a long time since Louis has been to see him. Prior weeps, and Belize embraces him tenderly. Prior tells Belize that the painkillers he's on make him hear a strange voice in his head. Belize asks Prior what the voices say, but Prior doesn't answer.

*Belize's behavior around Prior is just the opposite of Louis's. Belize is tender, and even touches Prior. Kushner suggests that it is possible, and even necessary, to be tender with AIDS victims, especially when the stigma surrounding the disease is lifted—Prior can't possibly infect anyone just through everyday contact and proximity.*

Prior tells Belize that he's attracted to one of his male nurses—the nurse gives him an erection. Belize remembers when he and Prior were lovers. Abruptly, he tells Prior that he has to go—he can't be "looking after white people all the time." Belize tells Prior not to get "crazy," and to eat more. With these words, he walks out.

*It's telling that Belize and Prior used to be lovers but aren't anymore. Belize clearly loves Prior, but he also maintains a certain distance from him, which actually makes him more likely to express sympathy and compassion for Prior as an AIDS victim. Belize is presented as one of the wiser characters in the play, perhaps because his experience is so different from the others (Prior, Louis, and Joe are all stigmatized for being gay, but they're still white and seemingly masculine-presenting, unlike Belize).*

As soon as Belize leaves the room, the room darkens. A strange female voice fills the room. The voice tells Prior that she will reveal herself to Prior very soon. The voice claims that Prior will begin a "great work" soon—he's going to banish a "great lie."

*Kushner builds the suspense slowly and cleverly—we wonder what this "great work" consists of. The motif of religious prophecy and the fantastical also continues to grow.*

## MILLENNIUM APPROACHES: ACT 2, SCENE 6

Roy Cohn sits in a restaurant with Martin Heller, Cohn's friend in the Justice Department, and Joe Pitt. Martin claims that by the 90s, there will be so many Republicans on the courts that Republicans will be able to start striking down affirmative action, abortion, liberalism, socialism, etc. Joe tells Martin that this "sounds great."

*Martin presents Joe with an ironic political prophecy—in the near future, the "savior" will bring conservatism to the U.S. forever. Joe thinks this sounds great—and in the 80s, it seemed like a real possibility (and Reagan did indeed appoint some of the most conservative justices ever on the Supreme Court, such as Antonin Scalia. whose influence on U.S. law is still very present).*

Abruptly, Cohn tells Martin Heller to rub his back, calling him "darling." Martin obliges, saying that Cohn is a "saint of conservatism." Cohn tells Martin about Joe's wife—the reason that Joe is reluctant to go to Washington D.C. Martin urges Joe to accept Cohn's job offer. Joe claims that he can't discuss this with Cohn and Martin.

*Cohn reminds us of the distinction he made for Henry about homosexuals and powerful people. Cohn enjoys Martin's backrub (and the whole scene is erotically charged), but the enjoyment he gets out of it also seems to be rooted in a sense of power—clearly his sexuality is also connected with his lust for control and influence.*

Cohn shows Joe a legal document, explaining that his colleagues are going to try to disbar Cohn for borrowing money and not returning it. Cohn tells Joe that by working for the Department of Justice in Washington, Joe could protect Cohn, convincing Cohn's enemies to "ease up."

*Here, we see how corrupt and hypocritical Cohn really is. Cohn is a symbol of legal might and influence, but he's also a blatant criminal, who's been "borrowing" (i.e., stealing) money for decades. He's appointing Joe to the Department of Justice, not because he particularly admires Joe, but because he's trying to save his own skin.*

Joe is disturbed by what Cohn is suggesting—he claims that it would be illegal and unethical to interfere with Cohn's disbarment process. Cohn tells Martin Heller to leave the table. Alone, Cohn chastises Joe for embarrassing him in front of Martin. Cohn claims that "it's the end times." Politics, he suggests, is a dirty, "bloody" business—a business that Joe can't pretend to stand above. Cohn concludes that he himself will "always be a lawyer, just like my daddy"—no one can disbar him.

*Cohn seems like a horrible person through and through, and yet Kushner also makes us feel some sympathy for him. Not only is Cohn a victim of AIDS, but he's also desperate to keep his legal license because he wants to be just like his father—in other words, Cohn has let tradition and the past shape the course of his own life. He seems imprisoned by the very "family values" he's spent his life trumpeting. The reference to the "end times" further emphasizes the theme of prophecy.*

Martin Heller returns to the table, and Joe tells Cohn that he'll "think about" Cohn's plan. Martin tells Joe, "You can almost always live with the consequences."

*Martin's words to Joe are incredibly cynical. Essentially, he's saying, "Yes, this is a corrupt thing to do, but don't worry—one day you'll be able to look at yourself in the mirror."*

## MILLENNIUM APPROACHES: ACT 2, SCENE 7

Louis sits outside the courthouse where he works, eating his lunch. As he sits, Joe Pitt joins him. Joe asks Louis about his sick "friend" (whom we recognize as Prior), and Louis admits that he's getting worse and worse. Louis notices that Joe, like Louis himself, is eating hot dogs for lunch. Louis says that he "can't help himself."

*The phallic symbolism of the hot dogs is childish, but also rather funny. The message is clear enough: Louis "can't help" but indulge his desires.*

Louis talks about Ronald Reagan, and suggests that Ron Reagan Jr. is homosexual. Joe tells Louis that he shouldn't make these assumptions. Louis explains that it must be hard to be in the Reagan family—indeed, it's not a real family at all. Being Reagan's child, especially, must be exhausting. Joe seems oddly impressed with Louis's honesty and insightfulness.

*Louis sees through the thin veneer of respectability and family values in Reagan's idea of America: he senses that Reagan's conservatism is just a convenient, nostalgic illusion. Joe is predisposed to agree with Louis, since he's been thinking about his own concealed sexuality lately.*

Louis gets up to go back inside, but Joe stops him. He explains that yesterday—a Sunday—he went in to work, foolishly thinking that it was Monday. Walking through the hall of justice alone, Joe wondered what would happen if all the justice and love in the world disappeared. The result would be "heartless terror," but it would also be "great."

*Joe is so desperate for freedom—freedom from Cohn, from Harper, from Mormonism—that he can only imagine it in near-apocalyptic terms. At this point, he's willing to take a "leap of faith" and suddenly abandon his wife and his religion to be with another man.*

Joe tells Louis that he can't force himself to go back into the courthouse that day. Louis asks if Joe wants some company, but Joe doesn't reply. Louis tells Joe that people have to be willing to break the law in order to be happy. He goes on to say that he hasn't been sleeping well lately. Louis wipes Joe's lips for him, and then walks back into the courthouse.

*Louis's physical intimacy with Joe is a clear sign of budding attraction. Joe doesn't interfere with Louis's actions at all, even if he doesn't reciprocate, either. This suggests that he's cautiously interested in Louis, but has been sexually repressed for so long that he doesn't really know what to do when a man flirts with him.*

## MILLENNIUM APPROACHES: ACT 2, SCENE 8

It's late at night, and the stage is divided in half. On one side, Joe is drunkenly standing in a payphone near Central Park; on the other, Joe's mother (Hannah Pitt) sits in her home in Salt Lake City.

*So far all the scenes have been set in New York City. Kushner now adds Salt Lake City, a famously Mormon city, to the play.*

Joe calls his mother, and she asks, frightened, if he's all right. Joe tells Hannah that he wants to "try something out" with her. Joe's mother is amazed when he tells her that he's been drinking.

*Joe is clearly in a tough place. He's been drinking alcohol—forbidden in the Mormon religion—and he's obviously been contemplating his own conflicted sexuality.*

Joe tells his mother, "I come here to watch," but his mother doesn't understand what this means. Joe asks if his father loved him. Hannah sternly tells Joe to go back to his home and call him from there. She also says that she doesn't like their conversation—it's too "maudlin."

*Joe's mother doesn't understand what he means, but we do: Joe comes to the park to watch other gay men having sexual encounters. Evidently, Joe had a rough relationship with his father (it was also once thought that homosexuality was the result of the lack of a strong father figure in a child's life). Joe seems to finally be getting to the heart of all the things he's been repressing for years.*

Joe, now crying, tells his mother that he's a homosexual. Hannah pauses, and then says that Joe's father didn't love him at all. She says that Joe is being ridiculous—she urges him to go back to his wife, so that she can go to sleep. Hannah adds that drinking is a sin, and hangs up the phone.

*Joe's mother's non-response to Joe's coming out is almost amusing, but also tragically poignant: she's so ill-equipped to deal with her son's revelation that she has no idea what to tell him.*

## MILLENNIUM APPROACHES: ACT 2, SCENE 9

The stage is again divided into two halves. On one half, Prior sits in the hospital. Louis enters the room. On the other half, Joe enters his apartment, where he finds Harper waiting for him.

*This scene, like the one before, is "blocked" into two halves, emphasizing the distance between the play's characters, but also the surprising connections between them—which we as the audience recognize, even if they don't.*

Louis tells Prior that he's moving out of their apartment. "The fuck you are," Prior answers. Joe tells Harper that he still loves her, but he can't stay in a relationship with her. He tells Harper that he knows she's not pregnant—he's spoken to her gynecologist.

*Joe and Louis adopt the same "position" with regards to their lovers: a little embarrassed, a little selfish, but basically determined to cut themselves off. Harper has been lying about her pregnancy—something that isn't exactly surprising, but that might also symbolize the lack of any kind of future for Harper and Joe's relationship.*

Joe tells Harper that he's known about "this" for his entire life—he tried to change himself, but can't. He explains that he walks to the park, and he tries to stop himself from walking there, but he can't. Meanwhile Louis tells Prior that he can't be with him anymore. Prior threatens to "beat the shit" out of Louis.

*Prior, understandably, doesn't take Louis's news well—he'd already warned Louis not to leave him. Joe now reveals that he's been conscious of his own sexuality for decades, even though he'd tried to suppress it. Joe's abandonment of his wife, then, is both tragic and refreshingly honest.*

Joe admits that he has no sexual feelings for Harper. Harper tells Joe to go to Washington. She accuses Joe of "spinning a lie" his entire life. Meanwhile Prior accuses Louis of not loving him. Louis says "I love you," but Prior snaps, "Who cares?" He accuses Louis of "deficient love," and then screams. Prior closes his eyes and says, "When I open my eyes," you will be gone. Louis runs out of the room. Prior opens his eyes and finds himself alone. He says, "I wish I was dead."

*Kushner parallels two different kinds of love: one false, one true. Joe feigned sexual attraction to Harper for years—he may have loved her in other ways, but not the ways he pretended. It seems unfair to say that Louis's love is deficient—rather, Louis's example illustrates how fragile most love really is. Many couples never experience a real, life-threatening challenge to their relationship, and thus never have to "test" their love. That was the AIDS crisis in a nutshell—it challenged all the things people took for granted about love, religion, and sympathy.*

Joe tells Harper that she's suffered from hallucinations for her entire life—hallucinations of a dangerous man in their bedroom. Now, Joe and Harper realize, it's clear that this man is Joe himself. Harper screams for Mr. Lies to save her. She runs away from Joe, into another room of the apartment. Mr. Lies appears and asks Harper where she wants to go. She says, "anywhere." They vanish together.

*This scene represents an epiphany—Joe and Harper finally accept some harsh truths about their relationship. And yet Harper isn't strong enough to "face reality," so once again she barricades herself behind a wall of fantasy and delusion.*

## MILLENNIUM APPROACHES: ACT 2, SCENE 10

Joe's mother, Hannah Pitt, walks around her house, accompanied by another woman. Hannah addresses this woman as her friend, Sister Ella Chapter—a real estate agent who's going to help Hannah sell the house. Ella repeatedly tells Hannah that she has a wonderful property that will be worth lots of money. Hannah snaps and says that she's not so sure. She complains that she's moving to New York to see her son, whom she no longer understands. She also mentions that she finds Salt Lake City insufferable—there are too many dull people there.

*This is our first real look at Hannah Pitt's personality, and she's a rather intriguing character. She doesn't have the veneer of friendliness and "family values" that seems to characterize most of the Mormons in Salt Lake City, but she does have a deep and fierce loyalty to her son, no matter his "sins." Hannah is a good example of human compassion overcoming one's religious beliefs—she might think Joe is being sinful, but he is still her son and so she automatically wants to help him.*

As Hannah talks about New York, Ella tells Hannah that Hannah is the only unfriendly Mormon she's ever met. Ella advises Hannah not to go to New York, since it's frightening, sinful, and "cold" there. Hannah shakes her head—it's time for her to leave Salt Lake City and go across the country.

*Hannah takes on a dramatically ironic "quest," the exact opposite of the one that the first Mormons took in the 19th century. I.e., instead of traveling from New York to Utah, Hannah travels from Utah back to New York.*

## MILLENNIUM APPROACHES: ACT 3, SCENE 1

Prior is sleeping in the hospital. A man dressed in medieval clothing wakes him up and introduces himself as Prior's distant ancestor, Prior I—Prior himself is actually the 5th person to carry his own name. Prior corrects Prior I, saying that he's actually the 34th person with his own name. Prior I says that this is only true if you count "the bastards."

*We'd already heard about Prior's long, impressive ancestry. Now we see the extent of this ancestry, in a scene that references the many lists of ancestors in the Bible, further placing Prior as a kind of American prophet with a bloodline to prove it.*

Prior I tells Prior about the bubonic plague—the greatest disease of his time. Those who suffered from the bubonic plague were sent away from their communities to die. Prior I then introduces Prior to Prior II, who died from a mysterious disease in the 1600s. Prior asks his ancestors if he's going to die, but his ancestors claim they can't answer him. They warn him that the path to death is dark and "rocky." Prior is so terrified that he buries himself under his blankets and sings a song from "My Fair Lady."

*There's something strangely comforting in knowing that AIDS isn't the only deadly plague in history—although diseases have ravaged humanity many times before, humanity has always survived. Also, we're reminded of the way that Prior retreats into fantasy and performance (here, a celebrated Broadway musical from the late 1950s) in order to escape suffering.*

Prior's ancestors pull him out from under his blankets and tell him they're there to prepare him for an "unseen messenger." They begin to sing for Prior in both Hebrew and English—a chorus similar to the voice's pronouncements.

*We're still not sure about the message Prior is going to receive—what it is or if it's even real in the first place. The combination of English and Hebrew in the Priors' chants suggests a strange mixture of many different traditions, cultures, and religions.*

## MILLENNIUM APPROACHES: ACT 3, SCENE 2

Louis and Belize sit in a coffee shop. Louis is talking very quickly about the state of liberalism in America. As he speaks, the other half of the stage lights up, revealing Prior in the hospital, being treated by Emily.

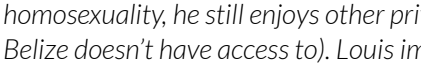
*This is one of Kushner's cleverest juxtapositions: on one half of the stage, an abstract, babbling conversation about liberalism; on the other, a living, breathing human being.*

Louis talks about the decay of property rights—a signifier of the "worst kind of liberalism." Nowadays, he claims, liberals focus too much on abstract ideals like freedom and inequality. The AIDs crisis proves that tolerance is worthless—it's not enough to "tolerate" gays, because one can both tolerate and hate gay people.

*Louis is a smart guy, but he doesn't really know what he's trying to say. There'd been so much debate about the future of liberalism during the 70s and 80s (after the crushing electoral defeats of Eugene McCarthy, Jimmy Carter, and George McGovern, Democrats were eager to disavow the label altogether). Here, it's as if Louis's loose, unmotivated theories are "shut down" by the AIDS crisis itself. This isn't the time for theories—it's time for action.*

Louis goes on talking, while Belize looks impatient. Louis claims that the U.S. is unique in the world, in that its view of race is far less significant than its counterparts in Europe. Belize asks Louis if he believes that America has no race problem. Race *is* important in the U.S., Louis admits, but it's important in a political sense, not a cultural or religious sense—this is the case because "there are no **angels** in America." Belize replies that Louis has said "7 or 8 things that I find offensive." Louis admits that he might be a racist. He suggests that Belize might hate him because he's Jewish. Belize denies this, and accuses Louis of hating black people. Louis shoots back that black people hate Jews. On the other side of the stage, Emily moves around Prior, treating his wounds.

*Louis has a point, but it's not quite the point he thinks he's making. Certainly, America has a special history of racial and class politics—the American emphasis on freedom and immigration allowed many different racial groups to prosper. But it's also incredibly naïve for Louis to argue that America has no race problem—a view that comes from his own privileged position as a white man (despite the fact that Louis is oppressed for his homosexuality, he still enjoys other privileges of whiteness that Belize doesn't have access to). Louis immediately gets defensive when he's called out for being narrow-minded, and so he lashes out at Belize as a potential anti-Semite. This scene also gives us the play's title, which is here presented as a cynical, limited view of the U.S.*



Louis suggests that Belize hates him because he's abandoned Prior. Louis claims that he still loves Prior—he's just "ambivalent." Belize ignores this and tells Louis about a book he read long ago, *In Love with a Life Mysterious*. The book is about a white Southern belle named Margaret who falls in love with a black slave named Thaddeus. At some point in the book, after Margaret's plantation has been burned to the ground, Margaret tells Thaddeus, "Real love isn't ever ambivalent."

*Like Prior Martin, Belize uses fiction and performance to get at a serious point. As maudlin and clichéd as Belize's book sounds, it also idealizes a form of love that Louis aspires to feel. It's easy to say that love shouldn't ever be ambivalent, but it's a thousand times harder to live one's life according to such a principle.*

In the hospital, Emily asks Prior how he's feeling. Prior tells her that he's feeling better, less nauseous, and more energetic. He also mentions that his friend Burt died of tuberculosis. Prior didn't go to the **funeral** because the funeral was open casket—Prior is frightened of catching a disease. Back in the cafe, Louis asks Belize how Prior's doing, and Belize tells him that Prior is doing horribly.

*AIDS essentially destroys a person's immune system, so Prior has to be especially wary of catching anything contagious (even something like a cold, which a healthy person would easily shake off, could be devastating for someone with AIDS).*

Prior tells Emily that he fears that something is "plummeting" to earth to hit him. Emily assures him that there's nothing to worry about. Then, she begins talking in Hebrew. Prior is confused. He asks Emily why she's speaking in Hebrew, but Emily laughs and says that she doesn't know any Hebrew. She tells Prior that he's one of the lucky ones—he'll probably live for years, even though he has no immune system. As Emily talks, Prior hallucinates the appearance of an enormous, flaming **book** bearing the Hebrew "aleph" symbol. Emily can't see it. Confused, Prior rushes out of the hospital room.

*Emily suggests that Prior is going to live for years (a strong foreshadowing of what will happen in Part Two), and Prior's hallucinations also become more vivid as the first part of the play reaches an end. The presence of Hebrew letters in this scene—and the aleph in particular, which is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet and a symbol of beginnings, newness, and a single all-encompassing sign—signals the scope of Prior's vision. This will be a prophecy of Biblical proportions.*

Louis tells Belize that he misses Prior horribly, but he's frightened of getting sick. Louis tells Belize to tell Prior that he loves him. Belize replies, "I don't know what love is." Together, Louis and Belize look at the stormy skies. Louis claims that the sky is purple, but Belize corrects him—it's mauve. As Belize walks away, it begins to snow.

*Belize idealizes a certain form of unambiguous love, but he's also too smart and practical to say that he really understands love as a concept—Belize is focused more on individuals than principles. Louis, by contrast, tries to understand everything in larger generalizations, and makes offensive or factually incorrect statements as a result. Belize's comment about mauve can be interpreted as a symbolic critique of Louis for his ignorance of the larger gay community: purple is a symbolically gay color, and so for Louis to be unable to distinguish different shades of purple suggests his un-nuanced understanding of the gay community.*

## MILLENNIUM APPROACHES: ACT 3, SCENE 3

Harper stands in a strange, snow-covered place. She claims that she feels better than she has in a long time. The snow smells like peaches, and she can feel delicious ice crystals in her lungs. Mr. Lies appears on the stage, welcoming Harper to Antarctica, the "bottom of the world." Harper loves her new home—she vows to make a new world for herself. "As long as it lasts," Mr. Lies says—ice has a way of melting.

*Now Harper seems trapped in her own delusions, showing how fantasy can be a prison as well as an escape. As Mr. Lies suggests, Harper can't hide from her problems forever. The melting ice also references Harper's preoccupation with the hole in the ozone layer—something that will eventually contribute to melting ice caps.*

Harper asks Mr. Lies if she's attracted to him—she's been craving male companionship for a long time. Mr. Lies reminds Harper, "This is a retreat." Harper isn't supposed to have feelings—she's supposed to feel frozen and cold. Harper asks Mr. Lies if there are eskimos in Antarctica. Mr. Lies says that there aren't, but as he says so, an eskimo appears on the stage. Mr. Lies reminds Harper that she was lying about being pregnant, but as he says this, Harper tells him she can feel her baby kicking inside her.

*Harper is so confused that she doesn't know why she's experiencing this fantasy. She wants to hide from her problems and her feelings, but she also wants to feel new feelings—these are two fundamentally contradictory impulses. As Mr. Lies keeps saying, Harper can't stay in this "limbo state" forever.*

## MILLENNIUM APPROACHES: ACT 3, SCENE 4

Hannah Pitt walks through New York City, carrying her bags. She sees a homeless woman sitting in the street, and she asks Hannah if she can help her. Hannah explains that she's arrived from Salt Lake City, and is trying to find Pineapple Street, Brooklyn. Hannah says that her son, Joe, was supposed to pick her up from the airport, but he didn't show up. The woman tells Hannah that she's in the Bronx, not Brooklyn.

*Hannah Pitt's outsider status in New York is obvious from the very beginning. She doesn't even know what part of New York she's standing in.*

The homeless woman begins yelling at herself, saying, "Shut up!" She then makes grotesque slurping noises, and tells Hannah a strange joke about the Polish. She asks Hannah if she's heard of Nostradamus, the prophet. Hannah angrily tells the homeless woman to stop and tell her how to get to Brooklyn. The woman pauses for a long time, then admits that she has no idea how to get to Brooklyn. She offers Hannah some soup.

*Allusions to prophecies abound in this play—here, for example, the homeless woman mentions Nostradamus, who is famous for prophesizing things. The woman, like other characters in the play, seems insane or delusional on one level, but also strangely insightful and prophetic on another.*

Hannah mentions that she's trying to get to the Mormon Visitors' Center in Manhattan. To her amazement, the homeless woman tells Hannah exactly how to get there—the woman goes there all the time. As Hannah walks away, the woman whispers, "In the new century, I think we will all be insane."

*The homeless woman's parting words are chilling but also strangely exciting—we've been given so many different ideas of what the future looks like (conservative, liberal, hot, cold, crazy, sane), that these ideas are starting to blend together.*

## MILLENNIUM APPROACHES: ACT 3, SCENE 5

At Roy Cohn's house, Joe tells Cohn that he can't go to Washington D.C.—he has to find his missing wife. His mother is waiting for him at the airport right now, he confesses, but he's been ill lately; in fact, he spent two days in the hospital with an ulcer.

*Joe's ulcer contrasts with Prior's AIDS in a grotesque or even darkly comic way—Joe's pain pales in comparison with Prior's.*

Cohn, who seems very drunk, tells Joe that he's a "dumb Utah hick" for turning down the Washington offer. Cohn tells Joe, "You broke my heart," to which Joe replies, "I love you." Joe claims that he wants to be a Washington "player," but he can't force himself to be unethical. Joe tells Cohn that he admires Cohn for his decency and strong sense of right and wrong. Joe concludes that he's not willing to sacrifice his own moral values to help Cohn.

*Cohn and Joe's relationship is quickly deteriorating, which makes it all the more poignant when Joe tells Cohn that he loves him. Joe is so pious in his religious and moral convictions, as we see here, that he's unable to put his love for Cohn before his love for the law.*

Cohn calls Joe a sissy. He keeps talking, very drunk and interrupting Joe. Cohn claims that his greatest accomplishment as a lawyer—even greater than making presidents or making a lot of money—was ensuring the execution of Ethel Rosenberg. If it wasn't for his legal intervention, Cohn claims, Ethel Rosenberg would still be alive. During Rosenberg's trial, Cohn claims that he violated the rules of the law by calling Rosenberg's judge. In this way, Cohn ensured that Rosenberg, a mother of two children, wasn't sentenced to life in prison, but rather executed for treason.

*We already knew Cohn was a liar and thief, but here it's suggested that he's essentially a murderer too. Ethel Rosenberg's execution is often interpreted as a symbol of the anti-Communist hysteria in the U.S. during the 1950s. Rosenberg was found guilty of espionage, but it was later found that witnesses, including Ethel's own brother, had lied about her, and it's another matter entirely to say that she deserved to be killed for her actions. In essence, Cohn is showing Joe the "dirty roots" of Reagan's conservatism in the 1980s—an ideology that was built on fear and an opposition to Communism.*

Joe is shaken by Cohn's claims, and he even suggests that Cohn could be guilty of murder. Joe confesses that he feels sorry for Cohn, since Cohn is dying of cancer. Cohn angrily shouts that this isn't true—he flatly denies that he's dying of cancer at all. Cohn pushes Joe and calls him "Joey boy." Joe is so furious that he pushes Cohn to the floor. Cohn mocks Joe, urging Joe to hit him, but Joe runs out of the house instead.

*Cohn comes close to expressing his own sexuality to Joe—although Cohn would never admit that he's gay, he's bullying Joe for being a "sissy" in a way that suggests Cohn's hatred for his own sexual identity. Notably, Cohn wants Joe to hit* him*—because part of Cohn seemingly knows that he's corrupt, and he can't stand for other people to be morally superior to him.*

Cohn lies on the ground. Suddenly, a woman appears before Cohn—Cohn greets this woman as Ethel Rosenberg. (Joe can't see her). Ethel says that Cohn looks sickly. She makes fun of Cohn in Yiddish, and Cohn slowly climbs to his feet. He tells Ethel that she can't scare him—he's much scarier than she is. "Better dead than Red," he shouts. Calmly, Ethel tells Cohn that she'll see him soon, and she adds that Julius sends his regards. Cohn falls to the floor again, consumed with pain. Ethel picks up the phone and calls 9-1-1, giggling about the "nifty" modern telephone. She then hangs up the phone and looks down at Cohn, who's still crawling on the floor. Cohn claims that he'll never die—he's worked his way into history. Ethel nods and says, "Millennium approaches."

*Confronted by a symbol of his dirty, murderous past, Cohn can only respond with the vacuous slogans of 50s McCarthyism, such as "better dead than Red." (Ethel also mentions Julius, her husband, also executed for treason.) We have to face the strong possibility that Cohn's vision of Ethel Rosenberg is just a hallucination (as any of the "fantasy" elements of the play could be). This would suggest that Cohn has been repressing his guilt for murdering Ethel for thirty years, and now—at the end of his life—he can't repress it any longer. Cohn's emphasis on power and prestige is also clear in this scene. He's so obsessed with prestige that he's not particularly intimidated about the prospect of dying, since he knows people will continue to celebrate his name.*

## MILLENNIUM APPROACHES: ACT 3, SCENE 6

Prior wakes up in his apartment to find Prior I and Prior II standing over him, illuminated by flames. They tell Prior that "tonight's the night"—the night that "she" arrives.

*Kushner has taken a long time building up to this moment—the moment that Prior receives his glorious prophecy, surrounded by his ancestors.*

Prior angrily tells his ancestors, "fuck off!" Instead, Prior I and Prior II urge Prior to dance. They tell Prior to close his eyes. When Prior opens his eyes, he finds Louis standing before him. Louis asks Prior to dance with him—Prior refuses, thinking that Louis must be a ghost. Louis tells Prior that he's spent all day wishing he could be with Prior. Amazed, Prior gets out of bed and begins dancing with Louis. As Louis and Prior dance, Prior I and Prior II agree that they don't like it here in the 20th century—they disappear.

*In this poignant moment, we see the restorative power of fantasy and fiction. Louis and Prior are separated by AIDS, and yet they're free to enjoy each other's company in their dreams. This raises an interesting question—whose fantasy is this, Louis's or Prior's, or both? Part of what's so unique about Kushner's idea of fantasy is that it can be shared; here, it's as if both Prior* and *Louis are dreaming of their reunion.*

## MILLENNIUM APPROACHES: ACT 3, SCENE 7

Prior wakes up in his apartment, terrified and alone. He crawls on the floor, too weak to stand. Suddenly, he speaks in a woman's voice, saying that "the angel" is coming, bearing the "**book of life**." Frightened, Prior covers his own mouth and says that he's talking nonsense.

*Prior's encounter with this angel has all the trappings of a typical Biblical prophecy—the angel, Prior's fear, and the book the angel is carrying. Divine writings that are presented as physical objects figure prominently in all sorts of religious stories—the Ten Commandments, Smith's vision of the Angel Moroni, etc. It's also important to note the hermaphroditic nature of the angel—it speaks through Prior with a woman's voice, though in itself it is not female.*

On the other side of the stage, Joe walks through Central Park. He sees Louis, sitting alone on a park bench. Joe asks Louis if he's heard of Lazarus. When Louis shakes his head, Joe talks about Lazarus, who was resurrected from the grave by God. He also admits that he comes to the park at night quite often, and that he followed Louis here. Joe touches Louis's face, but Louis warns that Joe could "suffer pain" if he touches Louis.

*Louis is clearly wracked with guilt for abandoning Prior, and it was this sense of guilt that impelled him to punish himself by having sex with the Stranger in the park. Joe is still nervous about pursuing an affair with another man—his religious convictions run deep, as his mention of Lazarus indicates. And yet Joe might be trying to use religion to rationalize his own actions: just as Lazarus was "born again," so Joe wants to be reborn as a healthy gay man.*

Slowly, Joe touched Louis's lips, whispering, "I'm going to hell for doing this." Louis shrugs and leads Joe "home." Louis kisses Joe on the lips, and Joe kisses him back. Louis smiles and says that he's never slept with "one of the damned" before. Joe admits that he doesn't think he deserves to be loved. Louis shrugs again and walks away. Joe follows him.

*Louis ironically reverses our expectations for this scene—in other words, just as Joe is afraid of sleeping with "the damned" (i.e., homosexuals), so Louis is equally nervous about sleeping with a Republican conservative.*

Back in his apartment, Prior begins to hear a strange sound—it's the sound of wings beating. He's frightened of the sound, but also sexually aroused.

*Sexual arousal as connected to fantasy and religion figures prominently in the second half of the play. Sometimes it's a barrier to enlightenment, while sometimes it's a path to prophecy.*

Suddenly, the roof of Prior's apartment caves in, covering Prior with plaster and dust. A beautiful **angel** flies in, smiling at Prior. The angel greets Prior, calling him a prophet. The angel says, "the great work begins."

*The first half of the play ends on a note of suspense—we still don't know what the great work will be, or why Prior has been chosen (or if any of this is even real in the first place!). Moreover, the play has presented so much contradictory information about the importance of prophecy that we don't know how Prior himself will react to the angel's news.*

## PERESTROIKA: ACT 1, SCENE 1

A voice shouts that we are in the Kremlin in Moscow. The scene opens in a strange room, at the front of which is an elderly man speaking from a podium. There is a huge red flag behind him. The man introduces himself as Aleksii Antedilluvianovich Prelapsarianov, the World's Oldest Bolshevik. Aleksii admits that Communism is coming to an end—it's dying a slow, painful death. Aleksii addresses a large crowd. He asks them what will come after Communism, and whether America truly has anything that can replace Communism. Finally, he asks, "Can we change?" As Aleksii falls silent, the red flag falls down.

*As the second part of the play begins, Aleksii (reversing the sentiments of the Rabbi in the first scene of Part One) looks forward to an uncertain, even terrifying future. Aleksii's name is also a play on words, as "antediluvian" means "before the flood" (usually the Biblical Flood of Noah) and "prelapsarian" means "before the fall" (before the Biblical Fall of Man). Both these ideas relate to some event that drastically changes the course of human history, and from which society must rebuild itself (not to mention more language related to the Bible and prophecy). All this also fits with the historical reality of the situation, in which the Soviet Union is on its last legs, and everyone is wondering: what will replace it? Moreover, can anything replace and better Communism? This is clearly an important question for Kushner, a lifelong socialist who supports the notion of a state owned by the workers, if not the particular state of the Soviet Union itself. In a broad sense, this opening scene sets the tone for the entire play—it's big, bold, weird, and looking forward to an uncertain future.*

The scene fades to Prior's apartment, where he's still being greeted by the Angel. The Angel roars that Prior is about to become a great prophet, who will spread "the great work" around the world. Prior shouts for the Angel to go away.

*We're back where we left off—with the angel greeting Prior and promising to deliver a message. Prior's dismissal of the angel, then, feels very frustrating: after 2 hours spent preparing us for a big climactic scene… nothing happens. Still, there's a serious point being made here amid the absurdity—sometimes, prophets don't* want *to receive their prophecies.*

## PERESTROIKA: ACT 1, SCENE 2

Louis leads Joe Pitt into his apartment—continuing the final scene of Part One. Joe tells Louis that he's feeling uncomfortable, and he remembers Louis's boyfriend being sick. Louis claims that they can practice safe sex—he says he'd coat his entire body in latex for Joe. Joe insists that he can't stay. As Joe hugs Louis goodbye, Louis smells Joe's cologne. Smell, Louis says, is sexy.

*In this seduction scene, Louis tries to get Joe to stay with him, recognizing that Joe is extremely unfamiliar with male sexuality. Louis's promise that he'd coat his entire body with latex (so as not to spread STIs like AIDS) is in and of itself pretty kinky, and was probably intended as such.*

Louis and Joe begin to kiss. Then Joe breaks away, insisting that he has to go. But Louis continues to touch and kiss him, and Joe tells Louis that he's going to stay after all.

*Joe conquers his fears of his own sexuality surprisingly quickly. In part this is because of the economy of the play (Kushner has to "condense" a lot of psychology and history), but it also suggests that Joe is finally acting on his own true desires, and so everything feels better and more natural for him.*

## PERESTROIKA: ACT 1, SCENE 3

We are in Harper's imaginary Antarctica. Mr. Lies sits on the ground, playing an oboe—the instrument of "ducks." Harper enters the scene, dragging a huge pine tree, which she claims she chopped down with her teeth, "like a beaver." Harper complains that she's cold and hungry, and Mr. Lies repeats his earlier advice—"snow melts." Harper tells Mr. Lies about the feeling of heartbreak. Even after the heart "breaks," she claims, every other part of the body remains intact—even the genitals.

*The sexual imagery in this scene (ducks, beavers) is crude but unmistakable, and Kushner admits that he has a childish sense of humor. The notion of "snow melting" is meant to symbolize Harper's inability to run from her problems forever—although she wants to forget about Joe, she finds that she can't.*

As Harper and Mr. Lies talk, Joe Pitt approaches them, claiming that he's been looking all over for Harper. Harper asks Joe what he's been up to, and Joe admits that he's been "having fun," though his fun has been frightening. Harper asks Joe if she can come with him, but Joe refuses to allow this. He walks away, and Harper yells, "You fell out of love with me."

*There are times where we're unable to tell whether something is "real" or not. Joe's appearance in this scene is a good example of this—perhaps Joe and Harper are "sharing a dream," as Harper and Prior did, or perhaps Joe really is talking with Harper.*

Harper realizes that she's standing in Prospect Park, Brooklyn—not Antarctica. She took the tree from the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens—not a pine forest. Harper sees a homeless man (in some productions, played by the same actor as Mr. Lies), who reminds her "there are no eskimos in Antarctica." Suddenly, a police car pulls up to Harper, and she puts her hands in the air, surrendering.

*Sure enough, Harper can't keep hallucinating forever. She hasn't gotten very far from Joe at all—in fact, she's still in New York City. The fact that the homeless man is played by the same actor as Mr. Lies reinforces Harper's earlier point about how imagination doesn't create anything new; it just dresses up reality in a new way.*

## PERESTROIKA: ACT 1, SCENE 4

Hannah Pitt enters Joe Pitt's apartment, accompanied by Joe's landlord. She's just come from the Mormon Visitors' Center, and seems not to know where Joe is. The phone rings, and Hannah answers it.

*Kushner again emphasizes the distance—both emotional and physical—between Hannah and her son.*

Hannah learns from a police officer that Harper has been arrested in Prospect Park for stealing a large tree. Hannah snaps at the officer—who seems to be laughing loudly over the phone—and assures him that this is no laughing matter. She orders the officer to tell Harper that she's coming to take care of her.

*Hannah is strict and not particularly friendly, but she also has a strong sense of duty and loyalty to her family. Joe might be leaving Harper, but Hannah clearly still considers Harper to be family, and so worthy of Hannah's concern and action.*

## PERESTROIKA: ACT 1, SCENE 5

Immediately after seeing the Angel, Prior wakes up in his bed. Prior calls Belize—working late at a hospital—to tell that he's had a wet dream—a rarity, given his medical state (and even stranger given that the source of the wet dream was an Angel). Belize is confused, especially when Prior claims that he's feeling energetic and excited—as if something great is about to begin. Prior asks Belize to come visit him soon. Belize promises that he will, and he sings Prior a hymn—"Hark the Herald Angels Sing." As Belize finishes the hymn, Henry (Roy Cohn's doctor) walks into the hospital, and Belize hangs up.

*Prior's bodily condition has deteriorated to the point where any sign of sexual arousal is a sign of health—indeed, of life itself. This complicates the play's interpretation of sex in an important way. For many people during the AIDS crisis, sex became almost synonymous with danger and death. Here, however, Kushner gives sexual stimulation the opposite connotation.*

Henry shows Belize the paperwork for a new, emergency patient. Belize says that Henry has made a mistake—this patient should be sent to get treatment for liver cancer. Henry angrily orders Belize to give him a different treatment, adding that this is a very important patient. Henry leaves Belize to study the paperwork. Belize is amused when he looks at the patient's name, murmuring, "The lord moves in mysterious ways." Alone, Belize calls Prior back and tells him that Roy Cohn—a conservative icon—is being treated for AIDS.

*Belize knows enough about history and politics to know that Roy Cohn is a homophobe—the embodiment of everything Belize hates about America (with its "big ideas"). In some performances of the play, Belize isn't really surprised when he reads that Roy Cohn has AIDS—it's as if he was already so convinced of Cohn's hypocrisy that Cohn's condition barely qualifies as new information.*

## PERESTROIKA: ACT 1, SCENE 6

Belize goes to treat Cohn, who's lying in bed in the hospital. Cohn yells for Belize to get out, and calls him a "queen," a "negro," a "communist," and other nasty slurs. Belize ignores Cohn's insults, and calmly takes care of Cohn, hooking him up to an IV, taking his blood pressure, etc. Belize murmurs that Cohn looks very ill, and implies that he could cause Cohn enormous pain by interfering with his IV. Cohn stops insulting Belize. Nevertheless, Cohn boasts that he's immune to pain, and so powerful that he can make anyone do anything he wishes. When Belize is finished with his duties, he gets up to leave the room. Suddenly, Cohn shouts for Belize to stay—he admits that he doesn't want to be alone right now. Belize hesitates, then turns back to stay with Cohn.

*Cohn can't stand being in the hospital because it's a situation in which Belize, and not he, has all the real power—Belize can literally control whether Cohn lives or dies. Cohn's call for Belize to stay by his side, then, is surprisingly tender and moving. Cohn may be a horrible human being, but he's also a human being, and that means that he gets lonely and needs human companionship. It's telling that Belize keeps Cohn company—for all his hatred for Cohn, he's still a good nurse.*

Belize stands over Cohn, listening as Cohn talks about his life and his experiences. Cohn boasts that he's an honest man, capable of being realistic about the most terrifying things. He asks Belize, point-blank, if he's going to die soon, and Belize calmly responds that he probably will. Belize adds that if Cohn wants to live longer, he should avoid the radiation therapy he's scheduled to receive, as this will only weaken his immune system. Belize continues that Cohn should find a way to get out of the double-blind study that the hospital is conducting—some of the patients in the hospital are being given placebo pills instead of **AZT**, a potentially lifesaving AIDS drug. Cohn seems suspicious that Belize is so knowledgeable about medicine. Belize shoots back that Cohn should trust a fellow homosexual, not his WASP doctor.

*Here Belize not only fulfills his duties as a nurse; he goes above and beyond his duties and gives Cohn advice on how to save his own life. Belize implies that Cohn's doctor isn't as objective and fair-minded as Cohn seems to think—his own homophobia might impair the way he treats Cohn. (This was a common theory at the time—in particular, it was argued that AIDS research was underfunded because few people in power genuinely cared about the homosexual community.) The big question is—why would Belize help out his sworn enemy?*

Cohn listens in amazement as Belize tells him how to survive. When Belize falls silent, Cohn asks, "Do you hate me?" Belize replies that he does. Cohn asks Belize why Belize is helping him live. Belize replies that that he "looks out for fags," and leaves the room. Cohn yells after Belize, furious that Belize has implied that Cohn is gay.

*Belize hates Cohn for what he's done with his life, but also acknowledges that on some level, the two are still on the same "side." This isn't just because they're both gay (or bi) in a world that condemns such a lifestyle, but also because they're both human beings, and thus deserving of the dignity of life. This also exhibits the "people vs. principles" theme, and shows how Belize (and seemingly Kushner himself) comes down firmly on the "people" side. Belize's principles go against everything Cohn stands for (and vice versa), but Cohn is still a person deserving of compassion.*

Alone in his hospital room, Cohn grabs the telephone and calls Martin Heller. Cohn asks Martin Heller to arrange for Cohn to receive an immediate dosage of **AZT**. When Heller pauses, Cohn tells Heller that if he doesn't cooperate, he'll tell "the world" about Colonel Oliver North's connection to Heller's "secret congressional slush fund." Cohn hangs up the phone.

*Here, Cohn is in full "octopus" form—he pulls a few strings here and there, and gets what he wants. (Oliver North was the very symbol of Reagan-era corruption and hypocrisy.) For the time being, Cohn seems to have as much power as he ever did, but it's important to remember that he is still totally helpless in the face of AIDS.*

## PERESTROIKA: ACT 1, SCENE 7

On one half of the stage, we're in Joe's apartment. There, Hannah stands with Harper. Harper babbles about Antarctica and her depression and her need to take pills. She confesses that she misses Joe's penis. Hannah scolds Harper for discussing such things in front of her, Joe's own mother. Hannah tells Harper that they need to go to the Mormon Visitors' Center—there'll be work for them there, and Harper will be able to calm down.

*Hannah isn't the nicest woman, but she makes it her duty to take care of Harper, long after Joe has abandoned her. Kushner resists easy equivalencies between goodness and secularism, or between goodness and homosexuality. He disapproves of the homophobic aspects of Mormonism, but also shows that Mormons themselves can be very good people whose natural compassion outstrips their religion's dogma.*

On the other half of the stage, Louis and Joe lie in bed together in Louis's apartment. Louis challenges Joe on his politics—how is it possible that Republicans can live in a democratic society? Joe, not fully awake, doesn't answer, but says that lately he's been feeling as happy as he's ever felt in his life. He brushes off Louis's criticisms of his politics.

*At this point in the play, Louis doesn't know that Joe is a Mormon, though he recognizes that Joe is very conservative. Joe and Louis don't let politics get in the way of their romantic feelings for each other—an idyllic state that probably won't last long.*

Louis and Joe fall asleep slowly. Louis tells Joe that he's been feeling guilty for causing someone he loves a lot of pain. Joe is silent, but when Louis appears to be asleep Joe tells Louis, "I love you." Louis doesn't answer. Suddenly, Joe looks up and sees Harper standing next to the bed—she's walked over from the other side of the stage. Harper tells Joe that she's only a dream. Harper yells at Joe for abandoning her, and tells him that there's nothing he can do to make Louis happier.

*In this section, Kushner implies that the romance between Joe and Louis isn't perfectly "balanced"—Joe likes Louis more than Louis likes Joe. Joe is behaving like the proverbial immature teenager—falling in love with the first person he dates because he has no one else to compare him with. Louis, by contrast, is more experienced, and still has feelings for Prior. Joe's dream is elegantly symmetrical, as it parallels Harper's hallucination of Joe in "Antarctica."*

Louis wakes up, having heard Joe talking to "Harper." Louis tells Joe that he dreamed that Joe was a member of a mysterious cult—like the Mormons. Joe tells Louis, "I am a Mormon." Louis doesn't reply.

*Joe and Louis just don't know each other that well—Louis is only now finding out that Joe is a Mormon. This makes Joe's love for Louis seem all the more naïve and desperate.*

## PERESTROIKA: ACT 2, SCENE 1

The scene opens at a **funeral**, where Prior and Belize are in attendance. Many of the other attendees are dressed in drag or flamboyant clothes. A priest says that the deceased was a drag queen. There is singing and dancing, and Belize joins in, smiling and cheering.

*There are several funeral scenes in this play, and this one contrasts markedly with the funeral that opens Part One. Here, members of the gay community celebrate life even as they mourn death.*

Outside the church, Belize and Prior walk away. Belize reminisces about the deceased, whom he describes as "divine." Prior is less optimistic—he calls the spectacle "ludicrous," and complains that there's nothing to be happy about these days except not being dead. Prior confesses to Belize that his medical condition is uncertain.

*Belize and Prior's debate could be said to apply to the entire play they're in. Like Prior, critics have questioned Kushner's aesthetic choices (filling a play about AIDS with glitzy, fantastical scenes and spectacles). But like Belize, Kushner seems to see these life-affirming set pieces as an appropriate reaction to such overwhelming tragedy.*

Prior reminds Belize of his wet dream—i.e., his encounter with the angel. Prior claims that his encounter with the angel was real, and that he's received a physical **book**, containing a glorious prophecy. The book has disappeared, Prior admits, but it's still inside him.

*Once again Kushner connects angels to sexuality and orgasm. Prior isn't sure how to interpret his own dream, so in perfect Biblical form, he goes to a "wise man" (Belize) for advice. Prior seems to believe that he now "is" the word of the angels—echoing the Bible's description of Jesus Christ as the embodiment of the Word of God.*

## PERESTROIKA: ACT 2, SCENE 2

Scene II transitions from Scene I: it's a flashback to three weeks before, when Prior had his first encounter with the angel. The Angel tells Prior that she's the Angel of America: here to make Prior an American prophet. Prior is terrified of the Angel, and he begs her to leave him in peace.

*The notion of an American prophet recalls Joseph Smith, the Mormon prophet who supposedly had a vision of an angel in New York City in the 19th century. And yet Prior, unlike Smith, isn't willing to listen to the angel—he just wants to be left alone.*

The Angel of America pays no attention to Prior's complaints. She tells Prior to remove the "sacred implements" from their hiding place. Prior says he has no idea what this means. [Note: for the purposes of this summary, we identify the Angel as a "she." Nevertheless, the angel is described as having hermaphroditic qualities.] The Angel is confused, as Prior was supposed to have seen the implements in his dreams. She coughs, embarrassed, and asks Prior for "a moment, please." The Angel then rises farther above the stage and has a strange, whispered conversation with someone. Then she returns and tells Prior to look under his sink—he'll need to tear up the tiles. Prior is reluctant to do so, but the Angel yells, "Submit to the will of heaven!"

*In this comic section, the Angel of America is clearly surprised that Prior is "talking back" to her. She falters in her prepared remarks, and has to "go backstage" to consult with her peers about what to say next. Even as Kushner presents us with an impressive supernatural figure, he then immediately undercuts the authority of this figure and its words. This is very important, because a crucial part of prophecy is the idea that it's inevitable or unbreakable—a law of the universe. By contrast, this prophecy seems to be entirely arbitrary—just the angel trying to get what she wants.*

The tiles in Prior's kitchen break. Prior complains that the Angel is releasing fluorocarbons into the air, which is "bad for the environment." The Angel dismisses Prior's complaints and yells that she's made a "revision in the text"—she's helped Prior find the implements, since he's too physically weak to find them himself.

*If the text can be revised, then the idea of a "prophecy" becomes much more fluid. Prior's interaction with the angel suggests that there is no rigid order even in something as seemingly divine and preordained as prophecy—prophets can refuse to prophesy, and prophecies themselves can be changed.*

In his now-ruined kitchen, Prior finds a leather suitcase. Inside the suitcase, there's a pair of **spectacles**. Prior puts on the spectacles, noticing that there are rocks where there should be lenses. When Prior wears the spectacles, he shouts, confused by what he's seeing, and takes them off immediately.

*The imagery in this scene recalls Mormonism—Joseph Smith, the Mormon prophet, was said to have worn a pair of magical spectacles that allowed him to interpret the Book of Mormon. But once again Prior isn't as willing to play along with the angel as Joseph Smith was.*

The Angel orders Prior to remove a **book** from the suitcase. Prior finds a large, shiny book that appears to be made from metal. The Angel explains that Prior is now an earthly prophet, meant to pass on Heaven's message to the rest of the world. The Angel orders Prior, "open me." Prior asks the Angel why he has an erection, but the Angel ignores his question. She adds that prophecy is based on "ecstatics, not physics," and as she says this, Prior seems to become even more aroused. The Angel approaches Prior, and as they near each other, they both begin to moan with sexual ecstasy.

*There's actually a tradition of sexual encounters between humans and angels, so this scene isn't as blasphemous as it might seem. Saint Teresa was said to have had an encounter with an angel, during which she was "penetrated with delicious fire"; Joe already mentioned enjoying the idea of "wrestling" with a male angel, based on the Biblical story of Jacob; and the "fallen angels" were said to have had children with human women in the early days of humanity (according to the Bible).*

Back outside the **funeral**, Prior explains that **Angels** have eight vaginas—they're hermaphrodites—and they live in Heaven, which is a city much like San Francisco. Angels envy humans because they have defined genders: either male or female. Because of their gender, human beings have the potential to create true randomness: unlike Angels, humans are truly free. Furthermore, human freedom has consequences for Heaven: when humans move and explore the world (celebrating their inherent randomness), it causes earthquakes in Heaven.

*As the Angel sees it, gender—precisely what angels lack—is the source of all freedom and uncertainty in life. This is a provocative point, and not just because gender is increasingly less "rigidly defined" and more of a fluid concept—yet it could be argued that desire for another is a quintessentially human trait, and the source of humans' most unpredictable and surprising behavior. There's also an interesting idea here that humans' actions have ramifications for angels. When humans explore the world—when they move around, going on quests for the new—the angels are hurt.*

Back in Prior's apartment in the flashback, the Angel of America explains that God has abandoned the **angels** because of his greater love and interest in human beings. In 1906—the year of the San Francisco earthquake—God left angels altogether. Thus, the Angel wants Prior to spread a prophecy that will force humans to stop "mingling," thus creating a state of calm in Heaven and bringing God back to Heaven.

*It's been suggested that 1906 was the beginning of the "new" San Francisco—the world-famous gay haven, the home of Harvey Milk (the first openly gay elected official in U.S. history), etc. This is important in and of itself, as the rise of homosexuality in the U.S. parallels the fall of the angels' way of life. This suggests a subtle antipathy between the angels and the gay community. Indeed, much like the Reagan administration, the angels want homosexuals to "stop moving"—to stop exploring new places and having sex with other people.*

Back at the **funeral**, Belize tells Prior what he thinks of Prior's dream-prophecy. Belize suggests that Prior is projecting his feelings for Louis onto his "visions." Just as Prior wants Louis to come back to him, so the Angel of America wants God to return to Heaven. Prior admits that Belize could be right, but suggests that the Angel has a point—humans have to "settle down" or else create a state of total chaos and "fields of slaughter."

*While Belize could be absolutely right about Prior's psychological projection, it's important to think about the Angel's words in more general terms. In its simplest form, the problem the angel proposes is the problem of conservatism versus liberalism. Conservatism argues that humans need to "settle down" or else risk chaos and violence. Some notable conservative figures, such as the Reverend Jerry Falwell, even tried to argue that AIDS was proof that liberalism (free love, homosexual liberty, etc.) just doesn't work.*

In the flashback, the Angel tells Prior to spread this prophecy: "Stop moving." Prior asks the Angel if she wants him dead. The Angel says yes, then no, then yes again. The Angel admits that she's going off-script now. Frustrated, Prior yells for the Angel to leave him alone. The Angel smiles sadly and tells Prior that he can't run from her forever—she'll always be waiting for him. Indeed, the Angel has written "The End" in Prior's very blood.

*The Angel's indecisiveness further reinforces the flimsiness and the amateurishness of her prophecy. (It also reminds us of Harper in Part One, trying to decide whether she's pregnant or not.) The notion of an end being written into Prior's blood unmistakably alludes to the AIDS virus: Prior's blood is "tainted" with disease now, and his entire body contains death, which is as inevitable as prophecy.*

Back at the **funeral**, Belize tells Prior that he's frightened for Prior: he's not thinking clearly. Belize also disagrees with the Angel's prophecy, noting "Some of us didn't *choose* to migrate." Prior admits that Belize is right—he might be losing his mind. And yet Prior suggests that he might, in fact, be a prophet after all. Prior tells Belize that he might be going blind, as all prophets do. With these words, Prior leaves Belize.

*Prior's response to the Angel ("Some of us didn't choose to migrate") is a good answer to bigots like Jerry Falwell who wanted the gay community to "Cease and desist" its behavior. The gay community can't just stop behaving a certain way, Prior suggests—people don't* choose *their sexuality.*

## PERESTROIKA: ACT 3, SCENE 1

Roy Cohn sits in his hospital bed, yelling on the phone. He seems to be having an argument about turning in his records to a "shitty little committee." As Cohn claims that his records were "lost in a fire," Ethel Rosenberg walks into the room. Cohn keeps arguing with the person on the other end of the phone, claiming, "I've never killed anyone."

*We see Cohn exactly as he was at the beginning of Part One—yelling on the phone. The difference, of course, is that now Cohn's phone calls are more desperate and more urgent—he's about to lose his bar license, and he knows it. This explains Ethel's presence—she's like an angel of death, prepared to take Cohn to Hell (and her presence is also an ironic rebuttal to his claim that he's never killed anyone).*

As Ethel Rosenberg sits in the room, Belize walks in, ordering Cohn to put down the phone so he can take his pills. Cohn yells, "Suck my dick, Mother Teresa," and hits the pills out of Belize's hands. Furious, Belize slams down the phone. Cohn begins to cramp up, and jokes, "Now I know how women feel once a month." Cohn then asks Ethel Rosenberg about her friends in "Red Heaven." Ethel doesn't respond, and Belize doesn't understand whom Cohn is talking to.

*Cohn continues to show his hatred for Belize, even after Belize gives Cohn some useful advice about how to treat his condition. Cohn's remark about menstrual cramps suggests that he really is losing the identity of conservative "manly man" that he's crafted for himself. Ethel is another kind of "fantasy" in the play—she could really be there, or just a hallucination of Cohn's.*

Cohn boasts to Belize that he treats his disease with his own supply of **AZT**, which he keeps in a private fridge in his hospital bed. Belize is impressed—he points out that there are probably 30 people in the country who get AZT, even though there are 100,000 people who need it. Belize tells Cohn that he wants some of Cohn's pills to take care of his friends. Cohn smirks and refuses.

*Cohn smiles because Belize has just reminded him that Cohn still retains power and privilege that others (particularly most AIDS victims) lack. AZT is thus also presented as a symbol of how wealth and privilege affect every aspect of life—even proper healthcare, which should be something available to every human, but instead is denied to thousands of "outcast" AIDS victims.*

Belize asks Cohn again and again for pills, and Cohn refuses, calling Belize a "nigger" and a "cunt." Belize, furious, calls Cohn a "kike," and Cohn immediately replies that Belize can have some of his pills. Belize takes ten bottles and leaves the room.

*This scene suggests that Cohn measures power in his own way, and only gains some respect for Belize when Belize "sinks to his level" and uses racial slurs back at him.*

Cohn is now alone with Ethel Rosenberg. Ethel boasts that she's going to watch Cohn's disbarment hearing, which is coming up soon. Cohn laughs and calls Ethel a "bloodsucking old bat." Cohn complains that the problem with Americans is that they don't take care of the sick. For example, Ronald Reagan is in his 70s, but he's as healthy as a horse. Cohn concludes, "This is no country for the infirm."

*Cohn's remark about President Reagan has a sad poetry—as he sees it, America is a country about health, beauty, and strength. Cohn has spent his entire life helping the powerful stay powerful, but now he's on the other side of the fence, an outsider staring in. The line "no country for the infirm" is probably also a reference to a line from a famous W.B. Yeats poem, "Sailing to Byzantium": "This is no country for old men."*

## PERESTROIKA: ACT 3, SCENE 2

The scene opens in a strange room, filled with mannequins and dioramas portraying a family traveling in a covered wagon. A sign announces that this is the Diorama Room of the Mormon Visitors' Center, where Hannah volunteers. Harper sits in the room, eating candy and junk food. (The audience notices that one of the mannequins in the diorama is really Joe).

*Harper has regressed to a juvenile state of mind, as evidenced by her consumption of junk food. And yet she seems to be thinking of her husband at all times, showing that she hasn't entirely lost touch with her old life (we can surmise that the mannequin that looks like Joe is one of her hallucinations).*

Hannah and Prior enter the scene together. Hannah goes to start the diorama (a moving theater piece). A tape plays, welcoming visitors to the Mormon Visitors' Center. Suddenly, the tape speeds up, and Harper notes that they've been having trouble with the tape lately. Harper nonchalantly offers Prior some food, and asks him if they've met before. Prior says no, hesitantly. (He doesn't quite recognize Harper from his dream in Part One). Harper points out the mannequin and notes that it looks like Joe, her husband.

*This scene suggests that the hallucination in which Harper met Prior was actually "real" on some level—even if Prior can't quite remember it, both he and Harper seem to have had some kind of shared experience. The diorama (not the kind of shoebox project we make in elementary school, but a moving theater piece) is also a "meta" sort of reference to the play itself.*

Prior tells Harper that he's come here to conduct research on **angels**, since he's just had a dream about one crashing into his apartment. As he says this, he notices that Harper looks familiar to him.

*Prior continues to fret over the significance of the Angel's prophecy. But unlike other prophets, he doesn't just ask a "wise man" for help—he tries to conduct his own research.*

The diorama proceeds, with the mannequin people "performing" a play about the Mormons' journey across the country: there's a Mormon Father, a Mormon Mother, a Mormon Son, and a Mormon Daughter. The mannequin that resembles Joe tells his "family" to be strong and courageous as they wander across America toward Zion. Harper laughs and says that the Mormons will probably die on their trip. She also notes that none of the female mannequins "speak"—only the father and son have lines.

*Harper's commentary on the Mormon diorama is an odd combination of cynicism and insight. She's clearly bitter about Joe being gay, and she projects her bitterness onto the diorama. And yet she also has a keen eye for latent sexism in the Mormon religion, and therefore notices right away that the women in the diorama are put in passive positions, while the men represent the "action." (This could also be another self-commentary on the play, in which all the protagonists are men, and only the male "gay community" is represented).*

The scene fades, so that we can still see Prior and Harper looking at the stage. On the stage, however, we see Louis and Joe, arguing about Mormonism. Louis asks Joe how it's possible for Mormons to live in a pluralistic democratic society.

*Louis is still trying to come to terms with Joe's religious and political identity, particularly since his ideologies seem to deny the value of Louis's own identity.*

Prior is astounded to see Louis in the diorama, but Harper calmly tells him that Louis is always there. Prior calls Louis's name, and Louis hears Prior's voice, but says that he can't see Prior anywhere. Louis tells Joe that he needs to tell Joe about something. Prior weeps as he watches all this.

*This is another "shared dream," in which the characters interact across the barriers of space and time. It's important to note that these shared dreams usually take place when the characters have an important truth that they need to communicate, but can't find the courage to express.*

Hannah bursts into the room, and the lighting changes again—the diorama looks normal, and a regular mannequin has replaced Joe. Hannah criticizes Harper for being obnoxious, and suggests that Prior leave the room while she repairs the diorama. Prior suggests that he's seen Harper before. Harper tells Prior that he looks sick—he should go to bed. Prior tells her that he's afraid of dying in bed, but then he leaves.

*Prior and Harper come painfully close to recognizing each other in real life, but they don't. This suggests that there's a limit to the connection and efficacy of these "shared dreams." Although the characters may attain a kind of enlightenment in their dreams, they can't always bring this back to their waking lives.*

Harper stands alone in the diorama room. She turns to the mannequin of the Mormon Mother, and asks it to talk. The mannequin comes to life and tells Harper to follow her. She escorts Harper off the stage.

*In contrast to the male-dominated "real" diorama, Harper only hallucinates the Mormon Mother coming to life—the male characters remain passive.*

## PERESTROIKA: ACT 3, SCENE 3

Louis and Joe walk along the beach. Louis wonders aloud what he's doing with Joe—a married, Mormon Republican. He also laughs about Joe's "fruity underwear," which Joe claims symbolize his Mormon faith. Louis tries to tell Joe about the Republicans' problems—that Republicans are zealots and "McCarthyite cowboys"—while Joe tries to convince Louis that he's not his enemy. He tells Louis that the world isn't "perfectable," and urges him to accept his own happiness instead of trying to help other people.

*One of the amusing things about this scene is the way that Louis exposes the repressed sexuality in Mormonism itself—the "fruity underwear" is a good example. This also marks one of Joe's most articulate explanations of conservatism (as a life philosophy, not necessarily a political platform)—it's impossible to make the world perfect, so why try?*

Joe tells Louis that Louis is a good man, whom he admires deeply. Louis shakes his head—he can't forgive himself for abandoning the people he loves. Joe insists that for his part, he's not guilty for abandoning Harper. He never has nightmares about Harper, or any dreams of any kind, for that matter. Joe claims he loves Louis. Louis abruptly tells Joe that he wants to see Prior again—he can't forgive himself for leaving Prior behind.

*Joe forgives Louis for abandoning Prior, but it seem likely that Joe does so to assuage his own guilt about abandoning Harper (and because Joe's never even met Prior himself, so the whole issue is detached from him). If it's okay for Louis to leave his lover, Joe thinks, then surely it's okay for* him *to leave his wife.*

Joe seems heartbroken by Louis's need to see Prior. He tells Louis that he'll do anything for him. He begins to take off his clothes, despite Louis's protests. Joe strips naked, removing his Mormon underwear, and tells Louis, "I want to be with you." Silently, Louis helps Joe get dressed again. Joe tells Louis that Louis should "be brave" and do whatever he needs to do. Then, Joe says, Louis should "come back to me."

*Joe seems ready to entirely give up his faith (remove his Mormon underwear) for Louis's sake, but the scene still ends with a separation. Here Kushner also alludes to the idea of a quest—Louis has to make a great journey (both literal and spiritual) before he can be with Joe.*

## PERESTROIKA: ACT 3, SCENE 4

In the hospital, Belize wakes up Roy Cohn so that he can take his pills. Cohn cusses out Belize with ethnic slurs. Belize only replies, "You're flying"—Cohn has been prescribed a large dose of morphine. Cohn asks Belize, "What's the afterlife like?" and Belize replies, "Hell or Heaven?" When Cohn doesn't answer, Belize tells him that the Afterlife looks a lot like San Francisco. There's a gritty wind and a sky "full of ravens." There are piles of trash everywhere, and voting booths as far as the eye can see. Everyone wears red corsages and dances to giddy music. There's racial impurity and gender confusion everywhere: everyone's creole or mulatto. Cohn asks, "And Heaven?" to which Belize replies, "That *was* Heaven."

*This is one of the most famous passages in the play: a description of Hell that could also be a description of Heaven. Kushner's point is a little subtler than "One man's trash is another man's treasure." Rather, he suggests that the conservative ideal is fundamentally different from its liberal counterpart. Belize's idea of Heaven emphasizes the ideals that he enjoys and that the world around him condemns—diversity, choice, frivolity, and theatricality.*

Cohn, still high on morphine, raves and mutters, and Belize doesn't try to stop him. Belize only says, "I'm the shadow on your grave." At the same moment, Ethel Rosenberg appears onstage, standing beside Belize.

*Belize seems to be savoring his experience of watching Cohn lose all his power and die, but this is left ambiguous in the play, and different productions handle Belize's tone differently.*

## PERESTROIKA: ACT 3, SCENE 5

Harper and the Mormon Mother from the diorama are walking through Brooklyn Heights, but everyone from the previous scene (Joe, Louis, Cohn, Belize, and Ethel Rosenberg) is still onstage. The Mormon Mother points out the skyline of Manhattan, calling it "the Great Beyond." She talks about God's love—something that, unbeknownst to most people, is highly painful. God has the power to cut people open with his thumbnail, she says. He fills people up, and it's their job to "stitch themselves" back together.

*Kushner portrays an idea of religion that isn't so much about rules as it is about ecstasy, love, and sacrifice. Kushner suggests that God's love (as it ought to be at least) isn't about condemning gay people or not drinking alcohol—it's about entirely giving up one's self to something supernatural. This is more like mysticism than religion, and it's a better fit for Kushner's worldview and the politics he espouses.*

On the other half of the stage, Prior walks into his apartment. The Mormon Mother tells Harper that Joe will return to Harper soon.

*Again, it's left unclear if Harper is hallucinating the Mormon Mother or not—if so, then Harper is projecting her own desire to see Joe again.*

Another part of the stage lights up: it's Louis, standing with Joe on the beach. Louis walks away from Joe, to a phone booth. He calls Prior, who's still in his apartment, and tells Prior that he wants to see him.

*The plot has been set in motion: after trying to flee from Prior, Louis is finding his way back to his old lover—he's unable to live with his guilt.*

## PERESTROIKA: ACT 4, SCENE 1

Roy Cohn sits in his hospital bed, Joe Pitt standing over him. Cohn claims that he represents "the heart of modern conservatism." He rambles about "sinful people," vanity, and the impossibility of being what we want to become. He concludes that he's lost touch with the real world.

*Cohn has lost none of his old arrogance (imagine describing yourself as "the heart" of* anything*). And yet there's also a sadness and loneliness in his monologue—he acknowledges that his time has come and gone.*

Joe confesses that he was afraid that Cohn would be angry with him for turning down Cohn's plan to call off the disbarment hearing. Cohn shakes his head and talks about the "treacherous bitch" who's watching Cohn's hearing right now. Joe asks, "Who?" but Cohn doesn't reply.

*Cohn's relationship with Ethel is fascinating—Ethel is like the angel of death, calmly waiting to take Cohn away to the afterlife. And yet Ethel is also the projection of Cohn's own guilty conscience—he knows he's a hypocrite.*

Cohn asks Joe if Joe's father ever gave him a blessing, and Joe says no. Cohn remembers a passage in the Bible in which Jacob, a "ruthless motherfucker," blesses his father, Isaac. He asks Joe to kneel before him and bless him, as Jacob blessed Isaac. Joe does so, remembering that he read the same Bible stories when he was a child.

*This is yet another reminder that religious identity is another important part of one's self, as the Jewish Cohn and the Mormon Joe bond over their similar upbringings.*

On the other half of the stage, Louis meets up with Prior in a park. Prior, now dressed all in black and walking with a cane, tells Louis, "Fuck you." Louis tries to tell Prior that he wants to make up with Prior. He explains that he's been seeing another man, a lawyer. Prior shakes his head with fury.

*Prior looks like the grim reaper with his black outfit and cane (at least in some productions). To his credit, Louis doesn't lie to Prior: he owes Prior the truth, even if the truth is hard to hear.*

Joe tells Cohn the truth: he's abandoned his wife to live with another man. Suddenly, Cohn climbs out of bed and tries to walk out of the room. As he walks, the IV pulls out of Cohn's arm, dripping blood onto the floor. Joe tries to help Cohn, and Cohn seizes Joe, dripping blood all over his shirt. Cohn orders Joe to return to his wife and avoid thinking about men.

*Here, Joe essentially admits that he's a homosexual to Cohn (whether he understands that Cohn is also gay is unclear but unlikely). It takes great strength for Joe to admit this to Cohn, whom Joe thinks of as a strong, righteous father figure. There's also some frightening dramatic irony here, as we know how dangerous Cohn's infected blood is, but Joe has no idea.*

Belize rushes into the room and pulls Cohn off Joe. He instructs Joe to throw away his bloody shirt, and not touch the blood. Cohn shouts, "Get the fuck out of here," to Joe, and Joe leaves, weeping.

*The scene is vaguely sexual, and has the qualities of an ironic sacrament or a bloody baptism. Joe is literally covered with his mentor's blood, and yet this blood is deadly, and his mentor seemingly disavows him.*

Back in the park, Prior is still furious with Louis for seeing another man. Louis tries to explain: he feels a strong sense of "companionship" with this man. This makes Prior even more furious. He gets up to leave, shouting that Louis shouldn't try to see him again until he has "real bruises."

*As Prior sees it, human contact can only be truly intimate when both people have suffered equally, or have a shared experience they can truly understand. This echoes Louis's earlier encounter with the Stranger in the park, in which he seemed to be* trying *to suffer like Prior.*

Back in the hospital, Cohn asks Belize for his real name. Belize explains that his real name is Norman Ariago. As Belize cares for him, Cohn tells Belize that lawyers are America's "high priests." The law, Cohn continues, was the only club he ever wanted to join. Now, he's going to die—just before he's disbarred.

*This is one of Cohn's most sympathetic moments—it reminds us that Cohn, for all his power, is also a slave to his own conservative ideology. Cohn has always been obsessed with the idea of belonging to a club—and now he's about to be expelled from that club.*

As Cohn speaks, Ethel Rosenberg materializes in the hospital room, smiling faintly. Belize cannot see her.

*Cohn's time on Earth is nearly at an end.*

## PERESTROIKA: ACT 4, SCENE 2

Prior and Belize stand in Joe Pitt's office building. Belize suggests that they leave, but Prior tells Belize to leave if he's "chicken." Prior explains that he wants to meet Joe, his "replacement."

*As the play goes on, the characters who don't know one another seek each other out. Prior, still in love with Louis, wants to know whom Louis has been seeing.*

While Belize waits outside, Prior confronts Joe. He tells Joe, "I'm a prophet." Joe is confused, but Prior continues to talk. He compares Joe to the dummy he saw in the Mormon Visitors' Center. He warns Joe of the dangers of stealing other people's loves, and then leaves abruptly.

*Kushner further confuses the idea of fantasy, as (to Harper at least) we have seen that Joe really* was *the dummy in the Mormon Visitor's Center. Prior becomes an increasingly volatile, unpredictable character as the play continues—because of his disease, he has nothing to lose, and he seems to be embracing his identity as a prophet.*

Joe rushes outside, where he finds Prior and Belize. Joe immediately recognizes Belize as Cohn's nurse—something Belize denies unconvincingly. Prior and Belize try to run away from Joe, but Joe outruns them. Prior claims that he's a mental patient, trying to "contest a will." He calls Joe a pig. Joe hesitantly asks Prior if this is about Louis. Prior continues yelling at Joe, rather than answer Joe's question. Belize, speaking in French, tells Prior that it's time to leave, and together they walk out of the building.

*In this amusing sequence, Belize and Prior do what they do best: they play roles. One thing that unites many of the characters is their talent for impersonation—from dressing in drag to reenacting theatrical roles. Performance and camp are important parts of life for the male gay community, especially as Kushner portrays it.*

## PERESTROIKA: ACT 4, SCENE 3

We're at the **Bethesda Fountain**—the huge **angel** statue in Central Park. Belize stands with Louis, and Louis notes that the fountain is Prior's favorite place in the park. Louis asks Belize how Prior is doing, and Belize says that he is taking care of Prior. Belize tells Louis that he's unimpressed with Louis—he's been hanging out with Joe, Roy Cohn's gay lover. Louis is shocked. He had no idea that Joe knew Cohn, whom he calls "the polestar of human evil."

*The plot is tightening quickly—Louis knew that Joe was conservative, but he had no idea that Joe was a friend of Roy Cohn. This lack of knowledge between the two men seems to make their relationship even more tenuous.*

Belize begins to walk out. Louis shouts that Belize is just jealous of Louis for stealing Prior away from him. Louis then screams that he hates himself, and begins to cry. Belize tells Louis what his problem is: he's full of shit. Louis thinks about big ideas too much, like America and **angels**—Belize, on the other hands, hates these big ideas, which are always out of reach of human beings. Belize also says that he's never been in love with Prior, and has "a man uptown," anyway. On this note, Belize leaves Louis.

*Belize has already voiced his opposition to the notion of "big ideas"—he finds them repressive, inhuman, and disconnected from reality. For this reason, Belize finds fault in Louis's worldview—Louis is too eager to talk about abstract topics, and as a result Louis loses sight of real people, such as Belize himself.*

## PERESTROIKA: ACT 4, SCENE 4

We're at the Mormon Visitors' Center, and Joe is standing with Hannah, his mother. Joe tries to explain why he abandoned his wife, but Hannah refuses to listen. Joe asks Hannah why she's come to New York, but Hannah claims that she doesn't even remember. She criticizes Joe for his cruelty and insensitivity—he's left Harper to spend all her time with dioramas.

*Hannah's criticism of Joe is both well founded and ironic, since Hannah herself has left Harper with the dioramas, too. Joe's decision to return to his mother reflects the growing distance between him and Louis.*

Joe tells Hannah that he's come to take Harper home. Hannah says this is a foolish idea—and anyway, Harper isn't at the Visitors' Center. Heartbroken, Joe tells Hannah that he's spent his entire life running—first he ran from Utah to New York, and now he's running for no discernible reason. Hannah tells Joe his problem: Joe has always lived his life according to what he wants, not what God tells him to do. Joe tells Hannah that she should never have come to New York, and he should never have called her that night. With these words, Joe leaves.

*Movement is one of the key themes of this novel—the characters feel a strong desire to migrate, or, more abstractly, to progress and change their way of life (it's this second sense of the word "movement" that Joe is describing here). While Hannah sees Joe's behavior as sinful, the play doesn't—Joe is merely exercising his natural human instinct. There is nothing more quintessentially human than the desire for change—this is exactly what the Angel of America told Prior.*

After Joe leaves the Visitors' Center, Prior walks in. He exclaims, "He's a Mormon, too?" Hannah asks Prior if he knows Joe, and Prior nods. Hannah asks Prior other questions—if Prior is a homosexual, if he's stereotypically gay, etc. Prior begins to cry. He asks Hannah, "Do I have a fever?" and Hannah feels his forehead, nodding. Prior tells Hannah to warn Joe what in store for him: when Joe gets sick, he'll become weak, fat, and flabby. Prior, weak and weeping, falls to the floor. Hannah helps him up, and tries to help him to a cab. Prior asks Hannah to take him to the hospital, and she nods.

*We should keep in mind that Prior is the first openly gay man Hannah has ever met, excluding Joe. This is important, as Prior is a kind of "test" for Hannah—how will she treat a gay man she's never met before? We'd already seen evidence that she's an intensely moral person (someone who'd never deny help to someone in need, gay or straight)—but her behavior still comes as a surprise, and here it's proven that she is another character (like Belize) who seems to put people above principles—a quality Kushner elevates.*

## PERESTROIKA: ACT 4, SCENE 5

The scene opens on a harbor. Harper walks along the harbor, barefoot and dressed in a frail-looking blouse. Joe enters the scene. He asks Harper, gently, where her shoes have gone. Harper answers that she's thrown them in the river. She says that Judgment Day is coming soon, and when God's judgment comes, everyone will be insane, not just her.

*Harper's words at the end of this section echo those of the homeless person Hannah met in Part One of the play. Harper continues to look forward to a "second coming," though she sees this coming as destructive more than anything—and both she and the homeless woman associate "judgment day" with a kind of mass insanity.*

Joe tells Harper that he's come back for her. Harper doesn't answer. Then she says, "Let's go."

*This scene points to a broader uncertainty at this stage of the play—we don't where any of these characters are headed.*

## PERESTROIKA: ACT 4, SCENE 6

In a hospital, Prior is sitting with his nurse, Emily, and Hannah. Emily tells Prior that he's losing weight fast—he needs to slow down and do breathing exercises to make sure he stays healthy. Prior doesn't pay attention, and instead mutters about Hannah, his "ex-lover's Mormon mother."

*Prior is consumed with hatred and envy—he can't believe that Louis has betrayed him for another man, let alone a Republican.*

Emily leaves Prior with Hannah for a moment. Prior confesses to Hannah that he saw an **angel**—he's afraid he might be insane. Hannah shakes her head and tells Prior that he's had a vision. She tells Prior about Joseph Smith, who saw an angel in New York, just a few miles from where Prior is sitting right now. Furthermore, it was Smith's prayer and faith that made the angel appear before him. Prior protests that Mormonism is repellant to him—after all, Mormons believe that homosexuals are evil. Hannah tells Prior, "Don't make assumptions about me, mister, and I won't make 'em about you." Prior laughs and agrees to this truce.

*Prior doubts his visions of the angel and yet also wants to believe in them. Ironically, Hannah's comparisons between Prior's visions and those of Joseph Smith are exactly what Prior needs to hear at this moment—they reassure Prior that he's not losing his mind. Hannah is again portrayed as a good person at heart—while she has a hard time accepting homosexuality in her own son, she's willing to look past it and help others when they really need it. Kushner seems to take a negative view of religion in general, but likes it best when it focuses on people, rather than rules (i.e., "love the sinner, hate the sin").*

Hannah tells Prior about the experience of finding out that Joe was gay. She finds homosexuality odd and awkward—men are ugly enough as is, she says, never mind two of them together.

*Hannah's reasoning seems naïve but also rather harmless—she has absorbed the Judeo-Christian social worldview that homosexuality is something strange or ugly, but she doesn't seem to have any real problem with it on moral grounds. Her aversion to men also suggests something fluid or repressed in her own sexuality as well.*

Prior asks Hannah a question: can prophets refuse the missions God has given them? Hannah admits that there's precedent for this—when a prophet refuses his mission, God feeds him to a whale. Prior begins laughing and coughing. He tells Hannah that he's close to losing his life. He begs Hannah to stay with him for a little while, until his friend (whom we recognize as Belize) comes to pick him up. Hannah sighs and agrees. She tells Prior that an **angel** is "a belief," and shouldn't be feared.

*Hannah is a voice of calm and reason for Prior, since she's knowledgeable about religious history. When Prior's openly gay friends abandon him, it's Hannah, a Mormon, who's there to comfort him. Perhaps the message here is that one's political or religious affiliations are only of secondary importance—what really counts is what kind of human being you are; i.e., how compassionate you are with other people.*

## PERESTROIKA: ACT 4, SCENE 7

The scene opens with Joe having sex with Harper in their apartment. After they're finished, Harper asks Joe why he closes his eyes during sex—is he imagining men? Joe admits that he is. Harper laughs and tells Joe the irony of this: the only time in her day when she *doesn't* imagine fantasies is when she's with Joe.

*Although Kushner has shown how fantasy can bring together unlike people, here he suggests that Joe and Harper will always be separated by their respective fantasy-lives.*

Joe gets up and tells her that he needs to go and take care of some things. Harper, furious, tells Joe, "Look at me!" Joe looks and says, "I see nothing." Harper thanks Joe for telling the truth, and Joe leaves the apartment.

*Joe and Harper seem to reach something of a truce—they acknowledge that they can never really be romantic lovers, even if they love each other as people.*

## PERESTROIKA: ACT 4, SCENE 8

We're in Louis's apartment. Louis opens the door and lets Joe inside. Louis, who seems cold and distant, is surrounded by a stack of papers. He asks Joe, "Have you no sense of decency?"

*Louis's quote, from Joseph Welch, an opponent of Joseph McCarthy's, suggests that Joe has abandoned his fundamental human decency in working with Cohn.*

Louis explodes that he's been researching Joe's court decisions during the Reagan years. Louis finds these decisions barbaric. They've been used to favor big business, to prevent sick people from suing the corporations that made them sick, to ban gay people from the military and other organizations, and more. In one decision, Joe argued that homosexuals have no constitutional protection under the law—something Louis calls "legal fag-bashing." Joe protests that he's just following the law, not practicing morality.

*This is one of the most revealing interactions between Louis and Joe. Joe proves that he's a conservative through and through—he doesn't see himself as acting out of hatred against homosexuals; instead, he honestly thinks that he made the right legal ruling. This ties in with Martin Heller's remarks about packing the courts with conservative justices—because of the strong influence of conservatism on politics and the legal system, the country as a whole becomes more homophobic.*

Louis tells Joe that his "Have you no sense of decency?" quote comes from Joseph N. Welch, the lawyer who defeated Joseph McCarthy in court. Louis then attacks Joe for being friends with Roy Cohn, and asks him if he had sex with Cohn. Joe, furious, punches Louis, and when Louis continues to yell at him, punches him again and again.

*Louis already knew that Joe was conservative, and didn't seem to mind too much, but the knowledge of Joe's closeness with Cohn feels like a huge betrayal to Louis—not just because of Cohn's despicable politics, but also because Louis suspects that Joe was his lover.*

Joe stands over Louis, horrified with what he's just done. He asks Louis if he's all right. Louis mutters that he can't see, due to the blood on his face. When Joe offers to find Louis a towel, Louis tells him to leave immediately—Louis deserves to bleed anyway.

*Louis is now enduring pain, just as Prior told him to do. It's as if he's getting closer to his beloved Prior in finally suffering for his principles.*

## PERESTROIKA: ACT 4, SCENE 9

In the hospital, Roy Cohn lies in bed, singing softly. Suddenly, he notices Ethel Rosenberg sitting beside him. Cohn boasts that he's going to die soon—luckily, just before the disbarment hearing concludes, meaning that he'll still be a lawyer when he dies. Ethel tells Cohn not to be so confident—Cohn's panel has already disbarred him. Ethel gloats that one of the people on the disbarment panel said, "I've hated that little faggot for 30 years." As Cohn falls silent, Ethel Rosenberg tells Cohn that she's been looking forward to his death for a long time.

*In real life, Cohn was disbarred just days before his death from AIDS (or liver cancer, as the disbarment panel believed). Ethel seems to be trying to make Cohn as miserable as possible—rubbing Cohn's closeted homosexuality in his face. It's hard to argue that Ethel has good reason to want to see Cohn suffer, as Cohn boasts that he conspired to have her executed (in real life, Cohn was fond of telling this anecdote, though it's not clear that the anecdote is true).*

Cohn suddenly speaks up. He whispers, "Ma?" and seems to think that Ethel Rosenberg is his mother. He begs her to sing to him, saying that he's scared and lonely. Ethel refuses at first. Then, reluctantly, she begins to sing a Yiddish lullaby. Cohn's eyes close, and he becomes very still.

*Cohn seems vulnerable and frail in this scene, and Ethel kindly sings Cohn a lullaby, perhaps because she's sympathetic to all people in pain.*

Ethel Rosenberg calls Cohn's name. He doesn't answer. Then, suddenly, Cohn sits up and shouts, "I'm not dead! I won!" He claims that he fooled Ethel into singing for him, and laughs hysterically. Then, Cohn falls back into his bed. He finds Belize standing over him, and whispers, "In my next life, I wanna be an octopus." With these words, Cohn dies.

*This is a pathetic moment for Cohn. Cohn thinks that he's won, but his victory is shockingly shallow (keep in mind that this entire conversation could be playing out in Cohn's own mind, meaning that his only victory is one over a hallucination). Cohn's dying words about the octopus (reminiscent of the first scene he appeared in) are a final reminder of his corruption, his power, and his "slipperiness."*

## PERESTROIKA: ACT 5, SCENE 1

We return to the hospital, late at night. Prior wakes up to find Hannah sitting next to him. Prior tells Hannah that the Angel of America is nearby. There are loud noises, and suddenly, the ceiling breaks open. Hannah and Prior scream at this sight. Prior yells that he's rejecting his mission from the Angel.

*Prior again summons the courage to reject the Angel's mission, strengthened by Hannah's support. The fact that Hannah can see the Angel as well further complicates the issue of whether or not it's just a hallucination of Prior's.*

Hannah tells Prior to wrestle the Angel and say, "I will not go except thee bless me." The Angel and Prior wrestle intensely, with Prior challenging the Angel to bless him. The Angel tries to rise above Prior and float back to Heaven, but Prior continues pulling her back to Earth. Suddenly, a bright ladder materializes, and the Angel tells Prior to climb to Heaven. Hesitantly, Prior climbs the ladder. He asks the Angel if he'll be able to come back to Earth, but the Angel doesn't answer.

*Hannah and Prior have become surprisingly close in the last few scenes, partly because they're both lonely desperate people—and they both believe in and can see the Angel. Prior climbs to Heaven, not knowing if he'll be able to return to Earth or not. This reflects Prior's despair about his own condition—he doesn't know how much longer he'll be able to live.*

After Prior has climbed the ladder, the Angel of America turns to Hannah. Although Hannah is visibly frightened, the Angel begins to kiss her passionately. Hannah begins to shake—she's having a huge orgasm. As Hannah finishes her orgasm, the Angel rises back to Heaven, leaving Hannah in the hospital bed.

*Hannah has a great awakening of her own—for the rest of the play, she'll be a different kind of woman. The fact that Hannah not only experiences Prior's fantasy but also experiences an orgasm further blurs the lines of sexuality and fantasy in the play, and reminds us how Kushner mixes fantasy with the realistic, creating a surreal, uncertain, sexualized mood all his own.*

## PERESTROIKA: ACT 5, SCENE 2

This scene takes place in Heaven—Prior, now dressed in brightly colored robes, has climbed the ladder. Heaven looks a lot like San Francisco, as the Angel has suggested previously, but it's San Francisco immediately after the 1906 earthquake, with decayed buildings and dusty streets.

*Seeing Heaven in all its decay reminds us how urgent the Angel's mission is: humanity must stop moving soon, or the Angels will die. This Heaven also echoes Belize's description, however, suggesting that the new "Heaven" is for humans, not angels.*

As Prior walks through Heaven, he sees Harper, playing with Little Sheba, the cat Prior lost in Part One. Harper greets Prior and asks Prior if she's dead from overdosing on Valium. When Prior doesn't answer, Harper explains that she loves her life now, despite the fact that her husband has left her. She has a strong urge to move, though she doesn't know where she would go.

*Harper's brief speech about the importance of life comes at the perfect time—Prior has been experiencing profound doubt about the value of his own life and life in general. Harper's speech helps Prior remember, and gives him strength to stand up to the angels.*

Prior points out the scenery, comparing it with San Francisco. The real San Francisco, he tells Harper, is far lovelier. Harper says that she'd like to see it.

*For not the first time in the play, Prior and Harper have a profound conversation during a dream—a conversation that will influence how Harper and Prior behave in real life, too.*

Suddenly, the scenery fades—Prior is standing in a large room, facing the Angel of America, who greets him as a prophet.

*The scene is set for a big confrontation between Prior and the Angel.*

## PERESTROIKA: ACT 5, SCENE 3

Belize and Louis sneak into Cohn's hospital room. Belize tells Louis to keep his voice down—they're there to steal Cohn's enormous stash of **AZT** pills. Louis isn't sure why Belize is asking Louis for his help. Belize explains that he needs Louis to sing a Kaddish (Jewish funeral prayer) for Cohn's body. Louis admits that he's doesn't know the words to the Kaddish—his Jewish parents were extremely secular.

*Although Belize isn't Jewish, he recognizes the importance of religious ceremony. Religion, whether you believe in God or not, is partly about honoring other human beings in a time of need—and Belize is highly sympathetic to this notion. The way that Belize, seemingly a secular person, crosses over into religious territory is characteristic of the end of the play (compare it with the way that Hannah, the Mormon mother, "crosses over" to take care of Prior Walter).*

Belize forces Louis to try to deliver a Kaddish. Louis delivers one, very hesitantly. As he falters, Ethel Rosenberg appears in the room, visible to Louis but not Belize. Ethel delivers the Kaddish, and Louis repeats after her. At the end of the prayer, Louis says, tearfully, "You son of a bitch."

*In this "miraculous" scene, Ethel Rosenberg lives on in other characters' minds. There's simply no rational explanation for this experience—what's important, however, is that Ethel's appearance makes a kind of spiritual sense: Ethel was Cohn's enemy, but they are still bound together as people even in death.*

After Louis finishes his prayer, Belize crams Louis's bag with **AZT** pills and thanks him for his help.

*With Cohn's AZT pills, Belize could save thousands of lives—in this way, Belize's kindness to Cohn has paid off.*

## PERESTROIKA: ACT 5, SCENE 4

Joe sits in his apartment late at night. He calls Harper on the phone, but doesn't get an answer. Suddenly, Roy Cohn walks into the room, wearing black. Calmly, Cohn tells Joe that he's died.

*Cohn is the first major character in the play to die of AIDS—he's something of a guinea pig for the other characters.*

Joe angrily attacks Cohn for lying about his AIDS. Cohn shrugs and brings up the fact that Joe recently "beat somebody up." He suggests to Joe that Joe's victim deserved his beating. Joe begins to weep, and says that he'll never see Louis again. Joe orders Cohn to leave him. Before Cohn goes, he kisses Joe on the mouth, very gently. Cohn disappears.

*Cohn's bitterness and ruthlessness are laid bare in this scene. As we'd already seen, Cohn enjoys it when the people around him imitate his own cruelty and bullying manner—thus, Cohn is pleased when Joe beats up Louis. Cohn's kiss for Joe suggests that Cohn has been unable to censor his own homosexual urges. Cohn's kiss is remarkably tender and intimate—something strange for such a brutal character, but also disarmingly human.*

Harper enters the apartment. Joe is amazed to see that his wife has come back. He asks where she's been, and she says that she was in Heaven.

*Harper seems to remember her dream more clearly than she has before—this suggests that the real and spiritual worlds of the play are moving closer together.*

## PERESTROIKA: ACT 5, SCENE 5

We are in a strange room in Heaven. There are six **angels** sitting in the room. The angels listen to a radio, which reports on an upcoming disaster at Chernobyl, due to occur on Earth in 62 days. One angel, who claims to represent Antarctica, says he's looking forward to this event, since it will bring winter to the Earth. Together, the angels are trying to understand how to deal with humans in the absence of God.

*The angels seem to have a knowledge of the future, hence their ability to foretell the devastating nuclear accident at Chernobyl. Harper's paranoia about the environment, which may have seemed melodramatic at first, now becomes terrifyingly real: the Earth really could face an eternal winter, as she'd feared.*

Suddenly, Prior appears, accompanied by the Angel of America. The Angel of America announces that she's brought "the prophet" with her. Prior is carrying a heavy **book**—the same book he found in the leather suitcase. Prior shows the **angels** his book, and says that he's come to return it to them. He goes on to explain that he can't possibly abide by the angels' prophecy: mankind was meant to move and be unpredictable, not "settle down," as the angels want.

*Prior rejects the angels' prophecy because he values life and uncertainty too much. While there's a certain comfort in "settling down," there's also something inherently human about the alternative. This shows that Prior was moved bi Harper's speech in the earlier scene: life is about change. This is Kushner's way of siding with progressivism against conservatism: he sees the fundamental human attribute as the capacity for change and progress.*

Prior explains that God is never coming back, either to Earth or to the **angels**. God would never dare to show his face on Earth after all the suffering he's created. Prior recommends that the angels "sue the bastard" for walking out on them—"how dare he?" When Prior falls silent, the Angel of America murmurs, "Thus spake the prophet."

*Part of the comedy of this section comes from the way that Prior—and then the angels themselves—breaks down the formality of his encounter. Thus, Prior brazenly shouts out, "Sue the bastard!"—a vulgar proclamation that the angels (seemingly trying to uphold their solemnity and order) must accept as gospel.*

Prior tells the **angels** that he wants to be healthy again. He begs the angels to prevent mankind from falling victim to AIDS. The angels explain that they don't know how. The angels offer Prior a chance to live in Heaven with them, but Prior refuses. He turns to leave the room. Before he goes, he repeats his demand to the Angel of America—he wants to be blessed with more life. The Angel of America warns Prior that life is overrated. She reminds him of life's smallness and sparseness, but Prior will not be dissuaded—he claims that there's value in all life, whether it's spent in happiness or misery.

*The tragedy of this scene is that AIDS is too big and complicated for anyone—even an angel—to cure. And yet in the face of unspeakable tragedy, Prior makes the bold, reckless, and downright heroic decision to embrace life in all its uncertainty. Even though his life could be filled with pain and tragedy, Prior wouldn't trade life for anything—it has inherent value.*

The **angels** turn to look at one another, and as they confer, Prior walks away, slowly. While Prior walks away, the angels make a mysterious sign in Prior's direction.

*It seems that the angels are blessing Prior after all, but whether this will accomplish anything we can't say.*

## PERESTROIKA: ACT 5, SCENE 6

Prior walks through the decaying streets of Heaven. He notices Rabbi Isador Chemelwitz and Sarah Ironson playing cards. Isador and Sarah notice Prior—the Rabbi raises his hand, and a ladder appears, leading Prior back to Earth. As Prior begins to climb back to Earth, Sarah says something in Yiddish. The Rabbi translates: "Tell Louis I forgive him." She also tells Louis to keep "struggling with the Almighty."

*This scene is sometimes cut from productions of* Angels in America, *because it doesn't exactly "move forward" the themes of the story: we already knew that struggle was an important theme of the play, and, for that matter, that Louis has been struggling with guilt over neglecting his grandmother. At the same time, it's structurally satisfying to see Sarah again: we began the play at her funeral, and now—near the end of Part Two—she reappears.*

## PERESTROIKA: ACT 5, SCENE 7

Prior finds himself lying in bed, surrounded by Belize, Emily, and Hannah. He tells his friends that he's had a bizarre dream. Emily notes that Prior's fever has gone down, and Hannah complains that she's been sleeping in the same chair for a whole night. She claims she needs to go—she's also had a strange dream.

*Hannah seems dimly aware of what happened in her dream/vision, but nothing more—we can't help but wonder if she remembers the orgasm she had a few hours ago.*

Before Hannah can leave, Louis enters the room—he's still horribly bruised from his fight with Joe. Hannah pushes past Louis, and Prior calls to her, "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers." Hannah replies, "That's a stupid thing to do," and walks out the door. Belize also says goodbye to Prior—he offers Prior a "gift from a bad fairy": Cohn's stash of **AZT**. Prior studies the pills. He knows they can save his life, but they'll also make him weak and anemic. Belize assures Prior that they can discuss these matters in the future. He walks out the door.

*In this section, Prior alludes to the closing line of* A Streetcar Named Desire, *in which the tortured Southern belle Blanche Dubois is taken away to the insane asylum. Hannah's ignorance of this play—a staple of popular (and gay) culture—shows her ignorance of the gay community. AZT is once again portrayed as an ambiguous symbol—here both in its effects and in the way it's been procured.*

Prior and Louis are alone in the hospital room. Louis tells Prior that he wants to get back together with him. He explains that he's failed Prior—he's run away from Prior instead of expressing his love. Louis tells Prior that he loves him deeply.

*This seems like a reunion scene, with Prior and Louis finally professing their sincere love for each other—but as we'll see, this just isn't the case.*

## PERESTROIKA: ACT 5, SCENE 8

We're in Joe's apartment. Harper carries a big suitcase while Joe sits in his chair—it seems that Harper's getting ready to leave Joe. Harper tells Joe that she needs Joe's credit card. Once she has this, she'll never need to see Joe again. Joe tells Harper that he doesn't know what to do without her—she's the only one who loves him.

*Joe is feeling especially lonely right now. He's flirted with the gay community, but finds himself alienated from it because of his politics. He's also lost his ally and mentor in Roy Cohn. Joe's situation is one of the most tragic of anyone's in the novel—he comes out of the closet, but finds that he's lonelier than he was before. Perhaps this is meant to suggest the unpredictability of the social climate during the AIDS crisis—coming out of the closet was a big risk, and it would be dishonest for Kushner to suggest otherwise in his play.*

Reluctantly, Joe hands Harper his credit card. Harper accepts it, and tells Joe that he'll never hear from her again, except if there's a problem with his card. Before she leaves, Harper hands Joe some valium pills and tells him, "Go exploring." She grabs her suitcase and walks out.

*Harper is something of a prophet herself, urging the people around her to explore the world and embrace the "gospel of change."*

On the other half of the stage, we're back in the hospital with Louis and Prior. Prior pauses and says, "I love you, Louis, but you can't come back. Not ever."

*This is a quietly devastating scene—not "I love you," but rather, "I love you, but ..." Louis and Prior don't get a happy ending—Louis can't just "come back" from his betrayal. Even if Louis feels guilty about abandoning Prior, and wants to make up for what he's done, he can't simply erase his own actions.*

## PERESTROIKA: ACT 5, SCENE 9

Harper sits on a plane. She says to herself, "Night flight to San Francisco—it's been years since I was one a plane." She talks about flying through the atmosphere, just below the ozone layer, which has been torn by modern industry. She remembers a flight she took years ago, during which she saw the souls of the dead, rising to Heaven.

*Harper initially seemed like the most pathetic character in the play—a pill-popping housewife. Here, however, she gets the closest thing in the play to a happy ending: she's off on a glorious quest to San Francisco. The future holds a lot of danger and uncertainty for her, but Kushner presents this as a good thing.*

Harper talks about the "painful progress" of life on Earth. All humans have to learn how to savor their sense of longing for what lies ahead.

*"Painful progress" might as well be the title of this play. Humans aspire to a constant state of change, even when the change is painful and dangerous. This state of change is the essence of the human condition.*

## EPILOGUE

It is 1990, and Prior, Louis, Belize, and Hannah sit by the **Bethesda Fountain**, talking about the recent fall of the Berlin Wall. Louis claims that Mikhail Gorbachev is a genius for bringing democratic socialism to Eastern Europe, but Belize is skeptical of Gorbachev's political prowess.

*Louis's ideas about Gorbachev prove that he's still thinking in terms of big ideas, as Belize warned against. The fact that Hannah is still with Louis and the others suggests that she's come to truly accept homosexuals, if not homosexuality. Interestingly, Joe is nowhere in sight—we have no idea what happens to him. This open-ended fate reminds us that the future of the gay community in the age of AIDS is uncertain and unknowable.*

Louis points out that the Cold War is over: Gorbachev has brought in a new era of **Perestroika** and peace. Hannah is more skeptical, however. She wonders what's going to replace Communism in Yugoslavia and other European countries.

*Hannah is in many ways the wisest of these characters—unlike Louis, she doesn't think in heavy, abstract terms, but is practical like Belize. Hannah represents the skepticism and uncertainty with which we face the future.*

As Belize, Hannah, and Louis bicker, Prior stands up and addresses the audience directly. "This is my favorite place in the whole universe," he says. He points out the fountain's beauty, and the warmth of the sun. He notes that the trees in the park are barren and leafless. Prior says that he's lived with AIDS for the last five years—more time than he lived with Louis.

*Here, in the epilogue, Prior "breaks the fourth wall"—i.e., addresses the audience directly. This is an interesting dramatic strategy for Kushner to use (and it may be an illusion to the theater of Bertolt Brecht, whom Kushner admired). In hesitant phrases, Prior sketches out the current state of the gay community in America: living with AIDS in a dangerous, uncertain relationship.*

Louis tells Hannah and Belize that "big theories" aren't big enough to encompass the whole world. Hannah disagrees—you need some theories to understand the world, or you'll be hopelessly lost.

*To everyone's surprise, Louis finally turns on himself and denounces his big theories. Perhaps the point here is that Louis is still a mess of contradictions—like the U.S. as a whole.*

Prior points to the **angel** statue over the fountain. He notes that he loves angel statues more than he loves angels, because they commemorate death and yet never die. Prior "taps in" Louis to tell the audience about this angel statue. Louis explains that the Angel Bethesda landed in Jerusalem in the time of Ancient Rome, and a beautiful fountain materialized in the place where Bethesda appeared. When the Romans sacked Jerusalem, the fountain turned dry forever. Louis then "taps in" Belize to explain the history of the fountain of Bethesda: before the Romans sacked Jerusalem, suffering people could bathe in the **fountain of Bethesda** and cure their illnesses.

*Together, Prior, Louis, and Belize tell us about the significance of the Bethesda Fountain in Jerusalem. It's hard not to draw an analogy between the fountain and the various cures for AIDS, such as AZT. Or perhaps the better analogy is between the period before the Romans sacked Jerusalem and the period before the AIDS crisis, when gay relationships didn't carry such a close threat of death.*

Prior asks Hannah to tell the audience about the Millennium. When the "true" Millennium comes—not just the year 2000—the **fountain of Bethesda** will run again in Jerusalem. When this happens, Hannah will take her friends to bathe there. Louis and Belize bicker about the Israel-Palestine debate.

*This section brings the play back to the territory of prophecy: there's a prophecy that one day, illness will be cured in Jerusalem. This symbolizes the gay community's optimism that one day there will be an end to the AIDS crisis, and homosexuals won't have to live in fear of death and discrimination.*

For the second time, Prior steps forward from his friends and addresses the audience directly. He says that the **Bethesda Fountain** in New York is cold and gray now, but he'll live to see it in summer, when it's warm and sunny. "We won't go away or die secret deaths," Prior says. He reminds the audience, "the Great Work begins."

*In these stirring final words, Prior brings together the play's key ideas about prophecy, progressivism, and freedom. Prior and his friends look ahead to the future, but they have no idea what the future holds. In other words, they're rejecting the kind of strict, deterministic prophecy that the angels tried to institute on Earth. In its place, the characters embrace a politically minded worldview, rooted in the idea that man's most basic quality is the potential to travel, grow, and change. In short, Prior doesn't know what the future holds but hopes for the best, and is teaching himself to enjoy the feeling of uncertainty.*

## HOW TO CITE

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Kushner, Tony. Angels in America. Theatre Communications Group. 2013.

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Kushner, Tony. Angels in America. New York: Theatre Communications Group. 2013.