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FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA

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GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

Sexual Identity, AIDS, and Prejudices in  
Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*:  
*Millennium Approaches* (1991)

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## ABSTRACT [EN]

Homosexuality has always been marginalized and stigmatized by society. Precisely, from certain moments on, such as the election of the conservative president Ronald Reagan and the outbreak of AIDS during the 1980s, provoked a notorious exclusion of homosexuality from the American society due to the invigoration of more traditional and heterocentric values. Thus, Tony Kushner chooses these two historically significant moments in order to introduce four homosexual characters with diverse points of view, who live directly or indirectly with AIDS. In this sense, the author allows the reader to have a greater insight into the oppression exerted from a heterocentric society upon divergent social realities such as the gay community. In this paper, I will analyse Tony Kushner's major play *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches* (1991) as an attempt to disrupt the stereotyped conception of homosexuality in order to create a new consideration of the homosexual identity aimed at normalization within society.

**KEYWORDS:** Homosexuality, society, AIDS, normalization, prejudices, *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches*.

## ABSTRACT [ES]

La homosexualidad siempre ha estado marginalizada y estigmatizada por la sociedad. Precisamente, a partir de momentos tales como la elección de un presidente conservador como fue Ronald Reagan y la aparición del SIDA durante la década de 1980 en Estados Unidos provocaron una notoria exclusión de la homosexualidad dentro de la sociedad norteamericana debido al fortalecimiento de valores más tradicionalistas y heterocentristas. Por esto, Tony Kushner elige estos dos momentos históricamente significativos para poder presentar cuatro personajes que viven su homosexualidad y su relación directa o indirecta con el SIDA desde diferentes puntos de vista. De esta forma, el autor permite que el lector tenga un mayor conocimiento de la opresión ejercida por una sociedad heterocentrista puede afectar a diferentes realidades sociales como la comunidad homosexual. En este ensayo pretendo analizar la mayor obra de Tony Kushner *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches* (1991) como un intento de interrumpir la concepción estereotipada de la homosexualidad para, así, crear una nueva perspectiva de esta sexualidad con el objetivo de normalizarla dentro de la sociedad.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Homosexualidad, sociedad, SIDA, normalización, prejuicios, *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches*.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Tony Kushner selects the onset of AIDS in New York during the 1980s so as to describe the personal situation of diverse characters through the juxtaposition of stories. All these characters have something in common: their homosexuality or the influence of homosexuality in their lives. By introducing the life of these characters, Kushner's major play *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches* discloses various social, racial, religious and sexual problems occurring at the same time AIDS was spreading across the United States.

In this paper, I will try to analyse how Tony Kushner's *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches* (1991) uses AIDS as a turning point to disrupt the stereotyped conception of homosexuality in order to create a new consideration of homosexual identity aimed at normalization within society. Hence, the play can be seen as a forum to denounce the unchanging American society, and its questionable tolerance of realities that go against what is socially established, such as AIDS and homosexuality.

## 2. AIDS, HOMOSEXUALITY, RELIGION AND RONALD REAGAN'S GOVERNMENT: A SOCIO-HISTORICAL APPROACH

The election of Ronald Reagan as President of the United States in 1980 meant a turning point within the American mentality characterized by a more traditional way of thinking. One year later, the emergence of an unknown disease, which affected mostly gay men, triggered a social crisis in which homosexuals were stigmatized and marginalized from this American society. After some research, scientists determined that this disease was AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) which raised a series of controversial issues in the public discourse referring to those affected by AIDS.

The first medical cases detected in the United States were in young gay men in cities recognized as having a homosexual population such as Los Angeles, New York, and San Francisco. The combination of an unknown disease without available medical treatment and investigation within a negatively-regarded social group such as the gay community provoked an even more negative reaction. In a first instance, researchers established its origin as a sexually transmitted illness, and the promiscuous gay sexual life was thought to be implicated in its fast spread across the United States.

The announcement of different groups that were most likely to acquire AIDS strengthened the association between AIDS and homosexuality. This classification identified gay men as a high-risk group, and as consequence, it “reinforced the notion that all gay men were diseased or at risk of being so” (Padgug and Oppenheimer 254). Therefore, the constant identification of gay men and AIDS continued the vision of this illness as a problem mainly affecting gay men, and therefore, attaching negative connotations to this population.

In addition, it is important to mention that the identification of gay men and AIDS was strongly reinforced by right-wing ideologies (Padgug and Oppenheimer 254). It seemed that



this type of ideology, which promoted Christian values and conventionalisms, was not prepared to take actions against a disease that mainly affected a minority community, such as the gay community. Moreover, in the case that a right-wing government spent additional funds to investigate would mean a reversal of their political and moral values. Thus, Ronald Reagan's government was really absent or even tried to divert this social crisis by creating campaigns such as Nancy Reagan's anti-drugs campaign "Just Say No".

Regarding the expense of general funds allocated to diseases control during Reagan's period, AIDS was under-funded. As Michael Bronski explains "when doctors at the Centers for Disease Control and the National Institutes of Health asked for more funding for their work on AIDS, they were routinely denied it. Between June 1981 and May 1982, the CDC spent less than \$ 1 million on AIDS" (Bronski). Nevertheless, this lack of funding for AIDS research was not only during Reagan's time but also, throughout the governments that followed. Hence, the lack of funding and attention given to AIDS crisis by the American government allowed more than 46,000 people to die by the end of 1989 (Johns 221). In addition, the rising population of sick and dying gay people by AIDS-related causes and their resulting social stigmatization prompted the creation of different organizations and associations. These were staffed by gay individuals who worked as a forum for this gay collective in order to raise their voices and demand more social action to achieve a normalization in society such as San Francisco AIDS Foundation or AIDS Project Los Angeles (Omoto and Crain 189).

Nevertheless, the AIDS crisis did not only remain as a political and social problem but also became a religious issue. Religions had an unquestionably negative vision of homosexuality as a sin and the vision of homosexuals as sinners, as well. For example, in the United States, the reception of AIDS can be divided into two referring to religion. On the one hand, AIDS was a plague in order to punish the liberal gay's-sexual life, which was against

the Scriptures. On the other hand, there were different trends of Christianity, Mormonism, and Judaism which accepted the tragedy of this disease as a call for attending to the needs of those affected by AIDS (Silken 53).

### 3. REVISING HOMOSEXUALITY IN TONY KUSHNER'S *ANGELS IN AMERICA: MILLENNIUM APPROACHES*

The socio-historical approach that I have briefly introduced comes into play with the analysis of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches*. The author creates a wide range of characters from Roy Cohn, an aggressive lawyer and closeted homosexual to Prior Walter, an openly gay man affected by AIDS. The purpose of presenting different views of living and understanding homosexuality in New York during the first years of the AIDS crisis was to employ this dramatic device as the turning point in his play in which to reveal his own views on homosexuality aimed at normalization against a conventionalized vision of gayness.

#### 3.1 Sexual Labelling and Roy Cohn's Homophobic Identity

In 1980s societies, such as the American one, social labels were mainly attached to correctness, social success, and heterosexuality. For this reason, new social groups such as homosexuals were rejected from society and categorized as incorrect, lacked of social connections, and affected by AIDS. Therefore, Tony Kushner's *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches* is the perfect example to show how the oppression that society exerts upon homosexuals might force them to use masculinity and homophobic attitudes towards themselves as a disguise to be able to survive. This intention is accurately represented by Roy Cohn, a powerful lawyer but closeted homosexual who will never publicly accept his homosexuality.

Socially, homosexuality has always been treated as a threat to masculine norms and rejected in masculine cultures, such as the American one (qtd. Hofstede 167). Therefore, it

is possible that Roy's behaviours and attitudes are a result of his preoccupation with continuing the traditional notions of masculinity in the American culture and, as a result, he adopts this imposed heterosexuality, and hides his homosexuality in order to be able to be promoted in his job: "ROY: [To Joe]. . . I'm gonna be a goddam motherfucking legally licensed member of the bar lawyer. . ." (69). Furthermore, Roy's hypermasculine personality can be directly linked with what Greet Hofstede describes as "the fear of latent homosexuality in which men do not show their tender sentiments, making it impossible to see them as effeminate" (167); that is, Roy hides his homosexual attitudes behind a hipermasculinity brought out in being a dominant lawyer because he believes that behaving in this way will maintain the power and status identified with heterosexual individuals.

The struggle that Roy faces with society is mainly caused by his fear of disclosing his homosexuality and therefore being marginalized. This character has to fight against a social construction of what homosexuality means during the Ronald Reagan era. While Roy clearly recognizes that he has sexual relations with other men, he avoids the homosexual label and discriminates against them, calling them "nobody" (45).

Thus, the refusal of the homosexual label or everything related to homosexuality is determined as the origin of homophobic manifestations. In psychology, the emergence of homophobia in homosexuals is known as internalized homophobia and homonegativity. Internalized homophobia refers to the negative experience of gay men about their sexual identity, created by the imposed heterosexism, and the term homonegativity is "significantly related to avoidant coping strategies such as resignation or denial" (Williams 101-105).

Moreover, as Michael W. Ross states, the denial of the homosexual label derives from "an individual who is homosexual and sees society's reaction as anti-homosexual, he is more likely to internalize this reaction and to attempt to conform to non-deviant

expectations by hiding his homosexual orientation.” (158) This statement explains Cohn’s reaction when his doctor diagnosed him with AIDS, and labelled him as homosexual:

ROY: Like all labels they tell you one thing and one thing only: where does an individual so identified fit in the food chain, in the pecking order? Not ideology, or sexual taste, but something much simple: clout. Not who I fuck or who fucks me, but who will pick up the phone when I call, who owes me favors. This is what a label refers to. (Kushner 45)

As we can see in this quotation, after being diagnosed with AIDS, Roy defends himself against the negative associations that go with AIDS by always displaying a wide range of *clout*. Roy feels the need to place his heterosexuality on record for the American society. His behaviour is used as a tool to enact his male gender enforcing his self-perception as a heterosexual man to any potential doubters, including himself (Hagen).

Applying the aforementioned terms of internalized homophobia and homonegativity, to Roy, we can determine that his attitudes follow what the heterosexist American society imposes, which is power, dominance, and social connections: “ROY: Homosexuals are not men who sleep with other men . . . Homosexuals are men who know nobody and who nobody knows. Who have zero clout. Does this sound like me, Henry?” (45). According to Allen Gorney, “Roy is apprehensive about the categorization of his sexual preference as ‘homosexual’ because of the debilitating connotations with which he believes society endows gay men.” (67). For Roy, the homosexual label and all its consequences represent the loss of power and *clout*. His greatest concern is to be labelled as homosexual because it will imply the loss of all the social advantages and status from being an aggressive lawyer.

Therefore, by presenting Roy Cohn, an individual who will always deny his homosexuality in society, Tony Kushner denounces the social mistreatment of homosexuality and how this collective had to disguise their truth to be able to survive.

Moreover, *Angels in America Millennium Approaches* is a complaint about the attitude of closeted homosexuals as it also prevents them from normalization in society.

### 3.2 Homosexual Identity and Religion in Joe Pitt and Louis Ironson

The association between homosexuality and sinfulness is an important notion in relation to the appreciation of the AIDS epidemic. Consequently, in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches*, Mormonism and Judaism play an important role in the characters of Joe Pitt and Louis Ironson. Although, these two characters are in a way sexually restricted by their religions, both of them live their sexuality in different ways. Therefore, Kushner displays these two visions so as to disrupt the sinful vision of homosexuality in religion and to present a new vision of homosexuality aimed towards normalization.

In order to understand this section, it is important to introduce a brief explanation of how Mormonism and Judaism comprehend the relationship between homoeroticism and religion. On the topic of gayness, Mormonism is very strict in its opinion, as its Law of Chastity condemns homosexuality "as a sinful behaviour . . . and stands with other faiths in maintaining that homosexuality is a sin" (What Mormons Believe). Therefore, the behaviour of gay Mormons is influenced by this sinful connotation and comes to a point where men are ". . . attempting opposite-sex marriage, fully disclosing themselves to their spouses, while still others leave the Church and opt for a homosexual lifestyle. Some continue to live conflicted lives as they struggle to reconcile their faith and their sexuality" (Reeve and Parshall 342).

For example, Joe Pitt cannot live with the contradiction of being homosexual and, at the same time, following the Mormon scriptures as there is no place for homosexuality in his religion. However, there are two important moments which show Joe's inner transformation from struggling with his sexuality to accepting it. The first moment is when his wife, Harper, asks him whether he is gay, demonstrating that he has suffered already to keep his homosexuality hidden from his circle:

JOE: [to Harper] No. I'm not. I don't see what difference it makes . . . That I might be one thing deep within, no matter how wrong or ugly that thing is, so long as I have fought, with everything I have, to kill it . . . For God's sake, there's nothing left, I'm a shell. There's nothing left to kill. As long as my behaviour is what I know it has to be. Decent. Correct. That alone in the eyes of God (Kushner 40).

This quotation highlights his frustration at living inwardly contradicted. His inner struggle is exposed in his emotions such as frustration and dissatisfaction. Firstly, Joe displays the notion in which homosexuality seems to be insignificant in his marriage as he considers more significant his correct behaviour with his wife (Hauge 65). However, he feels trapped in this correct behaviour that he performs with Harper, and more significantly, with Mormonism. He felt trapped in his struggle becoming a *shell* because he suppressed any homosexual trait or thought in his life merely not to disappoint Mormon laws since he knows that Mormonism would condemn his sexuality as sinful. Therefore, the whole quotation perfectly echoes what W. Paul Reeve and Ardis E. Parshall explained about how Mormon homosexuals make great efforts to reconcile their religion and their sexuality (342).

Then, the moment of revelation comes when he decides to disclose his real sexuality to his mother and his wife. He first confesses to his mother who seems to be disappointed as she does not reply Joe, later confesses to Harper in the following quotation: "JOE: [to Harper] . . . I don't know, I thought maybe that with effort and will I could change myself . . . but I can't . . . I don't have any sexual feelings for you, Harper. And I don't think I ever did." (78). The moment of coming out of the closet seems to be essential in Joe's personal development as his inner struggle is finally over. He breaks up with his mother, his wife and most importantly with Mormonism.

In relation with Mormonism, Judaism also has a similar response to homosexuality. According to Jeffrey S. Silken's explanations, "the Jewish religious law (Halakhah) prohibits male homoeroticism, based on passages from the Hebrew Bible in which it is classed as a particularly egregious sin and made punishable by separation from the people or even by capital punishment (5).

Louis Ironson's case is slightly different from Joe. Although Louis regards him as homosexual and has a relationship with a man, he acts in a contrast to Joe since he does not admit his sexuality in front of his religion or his Jewish family, "LOUIS: [to Prior] Sorry I didn't introduce you to. . . I always get so closety at these family things" (Kushner 19). This behaviour suggests a critique by the author as Tony Kushner is Jewish and gay, reinforcing the idea that being gay and Jewish may not be negative: ". . . Like most Jewish people in this culture, I come from a tradition of the proud declaration of my identity. Being Jewish taught me how to be gay and being gay taught me how to be Jewish." (qtd. Freidman). Then, Kushner seems to denounce the attitude of religion towards homosexuality, but at the same, he advocates for the normalization of homosexuality within society through the reconciliation of sexuality, religion, and society.

Thus, by introducing two different views, Kushner disrupts the relationship between homosexuality and sin setting a new boundary in which gayness is no longer synonymous with immorality, but becoming synonymous with normalization.

### 3.3 The Meaning of AIDS in Homosexuality: Prior Walter as a Symbol of Hope

It is now important to consider how these popular ideas have affected the social understanding of AIDS and the governmental response. AIDS can be described not only as a biological disease but also as a cultural disease, one that affected the population as a whole. It is important to note that scientists were the first to classify this disease as homosexual due to

the emergence of the first cases in gay men. In addition, a disease such as AIDS was not only comprised of symptoms but also of social and political influences whose conservative values hardened the negative conceptions of being a gay male in that decade. Therefore, Kushner chooses Prior Walter, a man who comes from an old family and affected by AIDS in order to blur the identification of homosexuality with sickness and to create a figure of hope and positivity related to homosexuality.

The evolution of AIDS in Prior can be studied along with his inner development. In the first part of *Millennium Approaches*, Kushner employs a language in the use of which Prior connotes sadness and suffering. Prior's self-conception is of dirtiness and death as identified in the following quote, "PRIOR: I don't think there's any uninfected part of me. My heart is pumping polluted blood. I feel dirty." (34). This behaviour declares a lack of hope which is implicit in the AIDS crisis at that time due to the limited medical treatment, the lack of governmental response and the rejection of the issue by society. Nonetheless, Prior's evolution starts when Harper declares in his dream that there is a part of him, the most inner part, entirely free of disease (34). At the last moment, Prior has a series of visions of his ancestors that predict what he would become: "PRIOR 2: [To Prior] We two come to strew rose petal and palm leaf before the triumphal procession. Prophet . . . Revelator" (88). This quotation clearly shows that Prior is designated the status of prophet, a prophet for those who are affected by AIDS and a signal of optimism and hope.

In *Perestroika*<sup>1</sup>, Prior's inner development is more obvious, even though he is still in conflict with having AIDS. The beginning of the second part starts with a funeral and describes it as ". . . a parody of the funeral of someone who really counted. We don't; faggots, we're just a bad dream the world is having" (qtd. Hauge 76). Prior's speech can be

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<sup>1</sup>Perestroika refers to the second part of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* created in 1991 which focuses on Prior Walter and his development as a major character. The word *Perestroika* comes from Russian and its meaning is restructuring.



interpreted as Kushner's intention to criticize how homosexuals with AIDS are marginalized as people who don't count in society. Prior being a prophet seems to dismiss his new status, but he later realizes his function for the gay community and claims: "It's 1986 and there's a plague, half my friends are dead and I'm only thirty-one . . . Maybe I am a prophet. Not just me, all of us who are dying now" (qtd. Hauge 76). Here, Prior does not only act as an individual prophet, he shares his status with every individual affected by AIDS trying to spread the possibility of hope in spite of AIDS.

Hence, this evolution from death to hope reveals Kushner's intention to depict Prior as a figure of resistance against the negative portrayal of AIDS and homosexuality. By converting Prior into a glimmer of hope, salvation, and empowerment, Kushner expresses his personal critique about the repressed gay community, the lack of governmental response in the 1980s and the need of a new conception of homosexuality aimed at normalization.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Tony Kushner's major play *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches* mirrors the negative social situation in America during the 1980s in which homosexuality was neglected from society and consequently social oppression was exerted upon this collective. In doing so, Kushner not only as a playwright, but also as a Jewish homosexual American citizen, raises his voice in order to present an attempt to interrupt the prejudiced vision of gayness. Likewise, the author tries to make his audience aware of the necessity of change and progression, providing a new vision of homosexuality as a normalized element within society.

Therefore, as exemplified in *Angels in America: Millennium Approaches* and as an extension, by this paper, the oppression and suffering exerted upon the LGTB community must be transformed into tolerance and respect. Therefore, the importance of educating

society to become more receptive and sympathetic to issues related to sexuality must be primordial, not only for current generations but also for the following generations.

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