

A Queer Identity?

Historically, queer people have been grouped under a unified banner. Stereotypes have been borne from the generalisation of tropes and characteristics that all LGBTQ+ must hold true to. My research examines the broad implications of Tony Kushner's 1991 play *Angels in America* in order to understand how it demolishes this generalisation. This study understands queer identity to be the way one defines themselves in relation to their sexuality and gender identity, making them the person they live their everyday life as. As such, a homogenous queer identity is viewing the queer community as one group under the same identity. This makes queer people a group which are easy to discriminate against.

'Homosexuals are not men who sleep with other men...Homosexuals are men who know nobody and who nobody knows. Who have zero clout.'

AIDS and Performance

The first cases of Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) were diagnosed in 1981. Over the following years, it would become synonymous with the queer community. *The New York Times* dubbed AIDS the 'Homosexual Disorder' in 1982. From these early beginnings, gay men saw stigmatisation as filthy and promiscuous. American society turned their back on the LGBTQ+ community for their hatred of a marginalised community spreading the disease. In reaction to the prejudice enveloping the country, queer people turned to performance. Many of the earliest reactions to the AIDS Crisis were small community dramas. The struggle of an entire social group of people is carried out in all of its horror. Moments of horror acted on stage invoked a manifestation of AIDS' lethal grip on society and gave life to the faceless statistics ascribed to all queer peoples.

The History of (Homogenous) Sexuality

Through studying the field of queer theory, one can gain greater understandings of the social perception of queerness. For Foucault, homosexuality became stigmatised through categorising sexual preference as mental illness. Sedgwick built on Foucault's work to determine that heterosexuality depended on the subordination of homosexuality to maintain its power and meaning. Therefore, the 'closet' is the greatest form of gay oppression during the time of Kushner's writing. Judith Butler however views heterosexuality as an imitation for which there is no original and deemed this fear of unique queer identities to be the birthplace of prejudice.

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'deviance from the norm is the true basis of a queer identity' – Richard Goldstein

Homogeneity and Conflict

Angels pioneers an expert use of a collective protagonist. Within the play, no one character is the sole focus. However, when introduced to the characters, they are all aligned in perfect pairs. Republicans are with Republicans, Mormons with Mormons, gays with gays, and straights with straights. The pairings form unified identities. Yet this does not last. As secrets are revealed and tension tears relationships apart, *Angels* finds itself dealing with stark contrasts. Through a dialectical approach, Kushner brings unlike characters together to explore their identities. Conflict allows one to see how unique the queer identity is, and how it has been shaped in its daily struggle against a heteronormative society.

'I can handle pressure, I am a gay man and I am used to pressure, to trouble, I am tough and strong'



Heterosexual Gays

Within *Angels in America*, lack of acceptance of a queer reality greatly informs the identities of Roy Cohn and Joe Pitt. These two characters act as a representation of the archconservative American lifestyle of the 1980s. Joe and Roy are oppressed by the hegemonic grip of heterosexuality. Roy's infamous words that he 'is a heterosexual man, Henry, who fucks around with guys' signify the importance on the performance of a heterosexual identity in order to maintain power. Similarly, Joe is ashamed of his sexuality, repressing it for years to convey normality. Therefore, the closet which Sedgwick speaks of acts as both an oppressor and comforter, bringing inner torment but acting as a façade to the wider world.

'Does it make any difference? 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 to kill it...For God's sake, there's nothing left, I'm a shell. There's nothing left to kill.'



Angels in Society

Kushner's epic two-part play took the world by storm when it was released. *Angels in America* brought AIDS discourse to the mainstream in a humanising, empathetic approach. The echoes of Ronald Reagan's Christian fundamentalist presidency would prove a challenge to *Angels* spreading its wings. Along the National Tour production, cast members were met with protests and threats of legal action. In Charlotte, North Carolina, a judge was required to sign a warrant to allow the show to proceed. A student in Catholic University, Washington had his final assessment production threatened to be banned on campus, risking his degree. In spite of all this, *Angels* triumphed across America and the world, bringing the unspoken suffering of many to light. Kushner's play allowed for queer identity to be celebrated wherever it went. As such, *Angels in America* has become the quintessential depiction of forming one's own identity free of the scolding of others and defying historically prescribed homogeneity.

'Nothing's lost forever. In this world, there is a kind of painful progress. Longing for what we've left behind, and dreaming ahead.'

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